

Baggy Clothes Don't Make the Man

Leonard Pitts

As a 13-year-old, did you have battles with your parents over how you dressed? Do you ever look back now and cringe at what you thought were fashionable clothes then? In the following essay, Leonard Pitts laments the popularity of "gangsta chic" among today's youth—his own son included—and argues that "saggin'" is a sad statement reflecting many young black males' need for self-esteem.

Pitts is a syndicated columnist for the *Miami Herald* where this essay first appeared in 1995.

1 Touch your thumb to your forefinger. That's the approximate waist size of my 13-year-old son.

2 Now put your index fingers together so that your arms form a circle in front of you. That's the size of the pants he tried to walk out of the house in the other day—with boxer shorts riding two inches above the belt line, no less.

3 Marlon was, let us say, reluctant to change his gear. His mother and I were obligated to explain—forcefully—that he would go out like this only over our cooling corpses.

4 Ordinarily, I'd support a child's right to make a fashion statement. As the former owner of platform shoes that could be mounted only by stepladder, I lack the moral authority to advise anybody on issues of style and taste.

5 But I draw the line at pants five sizes too big. Because saggin', as it's called, has less to do with fashion than with dressing down to the desolation of inner-city streets.

6 Not that that has stopped the boys in the 'hood—and for that matter, the boys in the 'burbs—from going with the flow. Gangsta chic, the look and style of inner-city thuggery, has seduced not only the children who must live there, but a generation of wannabe gangstas who've never been any closer than their MTV screens.

7 "You look like a little gangsta!" I yelled at my son. My anger surprised me.

8 "You can't judge a book by its cover," he replied, deftly using one of Father's aphorisms to entrap Father. And so Father was forced to sigh and concede that this was an exception.

9 Though it's foolish to draw conclusions about a person based on race, gender, sexual orientation or some other accident of birth, I told him, clothes are another

matter. Clothing reflects a conscious, personal choice. If you see a man in a clown suit, you can reasonably assume him to be a clown. If you see a woman in a business suit, it is not outlandish to think she might be a businesswoman.

10 And if you see a young man in a thug suit, might a person not fairly take that man to be a thug?

11 Yet so many boys rush to that identity. I've lost count of how many white suburban mall rats I've seen slouching through the food court in self-conscious imitation of people they've never met in a place they've never been.

12 A white boy who looks like a thug might—*might*—get the chance to correct that impression. A black boy is unlikely to be afforded even that opportunity. He is, as a comic once said, "born a suspect." In his case, clothes don't so much *make* the man as *mark* him, verifying for people who've never taken time to know him that they were justified in their prejudice.

13 No, it's not fair; but it is a fact.

14 That's a hell of a thing to explain to a 13-year-old who only wants to be stylish, a child for whom racial politics is a distant noise, faintly discerned.

15 Not that I worry for my boy, mind you. This is, as they say, a phase. He'll make it to manhood OK.

16 But I've seen and know too many other black boys in whom I don't have that confidence. Manhood is a less definite destination for them, a place they search for in violent ways, a cool stance, and in the folds of clothes that sag like a flag on a windless day. The words, the stance and the clothes are a way of asserting control, inciting fear, demanding respect and saying what they haven't the words for: I am somebody.

17 And a way of not hearing the whisper of doubt that replies, "No, you are not."

18 Their hurting makes a lousy fashion statement.

EXPLORING THE TEXT

1. Describe how Pitts's son dresses. How does Pitts "read" his son's fashion statement?
2. What seems to be the difference to Pitts between his own youthful taste—"as the former owner of platform shoes that could be mounted only by stepladder" (paragraph 4)—and his son's interest in "gangsta chic"?
3. What difference does Pitts see between white kids and black kids when it comes to wearing "saggin' "?
4. Summarize what Pitts is concerned about in paragraph 16.
5. Pitts argues that clothes present a "conscious, personal choice," yet also suggests that young men are dressing this way because it is "cool." Do you see baggy clothes in the same way as Pitts does—that is, as something that represents "thug life"—or simply as an MTV-inspired trend.