

“Handkerchiefs: A History,” Meghan Anderson, 2020. *Andalusia: The Home of Flannery O’Conner*. <https://assortedregards.com/2020/07/30/handkerchiefs-a-history/>

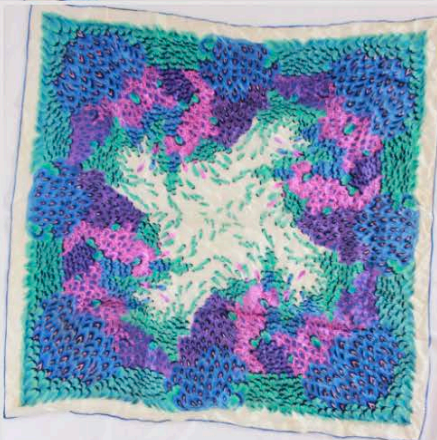
Handkerchiefs: A History

Handkerchiefs, items so essential that they became synonymous with Victorian Era damsels, Wild West cowboys, dapperly dressed gentleman, and the 1950s woman, have made a significant cultural impact across history.

In 2000 B.C.E. Egypt, high ranking members of society demonstrated their elevated status through the use of handheld bleached white linen cloths. A millenia later, in 1,000 B.C.E. China head-scarfs were used for the first time to protect scalps from sun exposure. Wealthy 1st century Romans dabbed their brows with “sudariums,” (from sudore, meaning to sweat). Fast-forward to 14th century France, ladies, carried “pleuvoirs,” from the French “pleurer,” or, “to cry.” The “pleuvoir” would become the “mouchoir,” translating to English as “handkerchief.” 16th century Italians expanded the look of their “fazzoletti,” to include gold thread, silk embroidery, and Venetian lace in a variety of sizes and shapes. The popularity of handkerchiefs increased exponentially into the 17th century. In 1603, the handkerchief served as a pivotal plot device in Shakespeare’s *Othello*, damning Desdemona to her demise. Two centuries later, Marie Antoinette did not like the variety in size claiming that, it hindered the fashion, so legend says, in 1785, Louis XVI decreed they must be square.[1]

Throughout the centuries, handkerchiefs have had a variety of uses. First and foremost, they have been used as hygiene products for clearing perspiration, dabbing a tearful eye, blowing noses, or covering a sneeze. A personal item, such as a handkerchief, was deemed a symbol of love and affection offered to battle-bound soldiers by their lady loves. Champion gladiators received the cloths as tokens of appreciation after well-fought competitions in the arena. And finally, they have been used in fashion. Louis XVI’s decree has stood the test of time, as handkerchiefs remain, for the most part, a standard 11”x11” square. They have also taken their place in high fashion.[2] Through the mid 20th century, both men and women could easily use them to enhanced their outfits with a splash of color or a simple lace for both. Women carried them in their handbags or tucked into their wristwatch or brassier, draped them across their shoulders, or tied them at the neck. Pocket squares for men became a staple of the “gentleman,” who wore them in the suit’s breast pockets.

The Andalusia Collection has more than a dozen handkerchiefs. Amongst them are vibrant silks, worn as stylish neckerchiefs, and delicate linens, for wiping noses or patting brows. During our COVID-19 closure, as we arranged these particular linens into boxes for long term storage, it occurred to us, they would be making a cowboy styled comeback as face coverings, thus adding another era to their history.



Flannery O'Connor found a use for a well-placed handkerchief within many of her stories. The children's mother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," is, "a young woman in slacks, whose face was as broad and innocent as a cabbage and was tied around with a green head-kerchief that had two points on the top like a rabbit's ears." [3] When detailed in such a casual way, the young mother contrasts with the grandmother's formal "lady-like" appearance, wearing a lace-trimmed dress, cotton gloves, sailor hat, and fresh violets on her lapel. The element of a red head-kerchief on Mrs. McIntyre at the tragic end of "The Displaced Person," [4] or the red scarf around the neck of the young evangelical preacher in "The River" [5] aids the powerful force of each of their character's narcissistic tendencies.

The most symbolic handkerchief in O'Connor's writing is also in "The River," belonging to Mrs. Connin. O'Connor first mentions the handkerchief when Mrs. Connin uses it for for hygienic purposes when she meets Harry (later, Bevel). "Wipe your nose, Sugar Boy," [6] she says. When the young boy moves to use his arm, the older woman chastises him for not having a handkerchief.

She took a red and blue flowered handkerchief out of her pocket and stooped down and began to work on his nose. "Now blow," she said and he blew. "You can borrow it. Put it in your pocket." [7]

Here Bevel, a young boy whose alcoholic and overly social parents often neglect him, experiences the rare instance of care and compassion from an adult. O'Connor further emphasizes the gift's meaning by acknowledging Bevel's "careful" placement of the fabric into his pocket. Later, when no one is looking, Bevel examines the gift's details before protectively hiding it in an inner lining of his coat. Throughout the story, Mrs. Connin shows love and protection for Bevel in ways he has rarely experienced. When he returns to his parents and they discover the handkerchief tucked away in his coat, his mother disregards it by throwing it to the floor. [8] The loss of the token, thus dissolving the fantasy of affection.

[1] Sue Aran, "Chic or Passé The Fabulous History of the Humble Handkerchief," *Bonjour Paris The Inside Guide* February 15, 2016, Accessed July 13, 2020, <https://bonjourparis.com/lifestyle/chic-or-passe-the-fabulous-history-of-the-handkerchief/> .

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] Flannery O'Connor, "A Good Man is Hard to Find," *The Complete Stories*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1971), 117.

[4] Flannery O'Connor, "The Displaced Person," *The Complete Stories*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1971), 234.

[5] Flannery O'Connor, "The Displaced Person," *The Complete Stories*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1971), 164.

[6] *Ibid.*, 158.

[7] *Ibid.*, 158-159.

[8] *Ibid.*, 158-170.