Name _____ Class _____ Date _____

CHAPTER 9 Reading

Social Stratification

What Do You Wear to Work?

Ancestry, race, age, physical appearance, and gender are among the most common distinguishing characteristics that determine a person's social standing. Achieved statuses—such as educational attainment and occupation—also can be used to determine social standing. In the following article, "Pride, prejudice and the not-so-subtle politics of the working class," Pulitzer Prize winner Katherine Boo talks about how uniforms send an explicit class message.

Mr. Killens has spent that last quarter century wearing the Colonial Parking insignia stenciled on the chest of his green polyester work suit. But of course his uniform—like the work clothes inhabited by 250,000 other D.C.-area janitors, waiters, pipe fitters, and such—isn't really made for him at all. Rather, the working-class uniform is made for the rest of us. When Mr. Killens takes our car keys at a garage, when the gas man approaches the house, when the Burger King cashier brings forth the fries, their uniforms provide us with order, reassurance, split-second recognition. For the people living inside those work suits, though, the uniform provides something less comforting: daily instruction in the intricacies of social class in America. "Why must holding certain jobs involve restricting down to the drawers one of life's most intuitive freedoms—choosing how you will look to the rest of the world?" (asks Mr. Killens) In fact, so many working people are now asking that question that a backlash is quietly building—one that may in time upend America's tradition of forcing low-status workers to dress down to move up. In America, our sartorial class markers are pretty complicated ones. Seniors at Washington's Anacostia High School wear more gold jewelry than seniors at Sidwell Friends; Ralph Lauren and Donna Karan do grunge. The work uniform, though—nothing complicated about it. Long one of America's great status giveaways, it is today even more precise in what it reveals. During the past few decades, nurses, doctors, nuns, and other upscale uniform-wearers of old eagerly peeled theirs off for more flexible clothing, leaving the uniform largely the province of the trades and service classes.

Behind the gabardine twill and the soil release finish lies a great status hierarchy. Within most city office buildings in Washington, for instance, browns, greens, and blues mean maintenance workers, the bottom rung; a step up is gray, conveying technical skill and more substantial pay stubs. Similarly, across the spectrum of uniformed occupations, some uniforms—police and military garb, pilots' gear—are far more equal than others. Although UPS's brown shirts may top uniform dealers' list of ugliest outfits, to service-industry cognoscenti they signify a secure job that pays real money.

However, fashion anthropologists have repeatedly found that people in suits tend to be accorded more respect and better service than people in other clothes. Even nurses, who have sat at the top of the bottom of the heap in terms of social status, reported an increase in respect from doctors and patients after they shed their angel-of-mercy whites. But you really don't need social science or cultural criticism to understand why service- and blue-collar industry shorthand for moving into management ranks isn't "I'm getting a desk," but "I'm getting my tie."

"To wear a uniform," writes novelist Alison Lurie, "is to give up your right to free speech in the language of clothes. . . . In America, clothing is one of the more financially accessible means of masking one's social station. It's cheaper to buy Nikes than a Saab."

UNDERSTANDING WHAT YOU READ After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions in the space below.

1. Explain what Katherine Boo means by writing that the working-class uniform is not made for the person wearing the uniform, but "it is made for the rest of us." _____

2. How does Boo explain the meaning of the comment "I'm getting my tie"? _____

ACTIVITY Interview several people about what they wear, including someone who wears a uniform. Ask questions about the effects of clothes and uniforms on work based on Boo's article. Report your findings to the class in the form of an oral presentation.