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CONTESTED FEMININITY

The Role of the New Woman in the Fin-de-
Siècle and Beyond



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Master's Degrees by Examination and Dissertation

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the idea of contested femininity; the nature of ‘woman’ is problematic and disputed, the ongoing debate invariably informed by fear, anxiety, and moral panic. The emergence of the New Woman, in the late nineteenth century, provides an interesting example of how the representation of ‘woman’ affords multiple ideological opportunities, as she was used as both a means of control against and empowerment for the advancement of women. The New Woman maintained a constant journalistic presence which, although her image was largely either lampooned or used to signify social degradation, undoubtedly underlines that she was pivotal to the period, thereby opening up a space in which her voice could be heard. However, by positioning her solely as a phenomenon of the Fin-de-Siècle, loses sight of her lasting cultural influence and literary worth. Feminist theory resites her in the literary tradition; there are important links made in relation to the earlier sensation fiction and an acknowledgement that she anticipates some of the narrative and stylistic innovations of the later Modernist movement. I explore the ways in which the New Woman writer capitalised on changes in the publishing industry and appropriated and innovated the emergent short story format as a means by which they could express the woman’s perspective, thereby subverting prevailing patriarchal (mis)representations. Finally, I focus on George Egerton who presents somewhat as a hybrid figure, distancing herself from the label of ‘New Woman’ but undisputedly serving as *the* representative example, a contradiction which underlines the multiplicity and complexity surrounding the figure. She is heralded as the most radical of the New Woman writers, perhaps due to the importance she placed on female sexuality as a source of creative energy and a means of uncovering the authentic self, anticipating French feminist theorists, in particular Hélène Cixous.

1. Who Was the New Woman?

Throughout history, and in the present day¹, the term and very concept of ‘woman’ and the nature of femininity has been contested and seen as problematic, and central to the debate as to just what constitutes womanhood has been an undercurrent of fear, anxiety and moral panic.² The Fin-de-Siècle³ was a significant point in history, when new social theories were being formulated such as psychology, socialism and eugenics, with debate surrounding the nature of sexuality and gender identity. Central to this period was the figure of the New Woman which largely grew out of the emerging women’s movement of the nineteenth century and, as such, was representative of the new generation of the modern woman, signalling a break from the prevailing stereotypes of the Angel in the House and the Fallen woman.⁴

Initially, I understood the concept of the New Woman to be a positive image of the forward-thinking militant go getter, forging ahead for her rightful place in the world, in effect, a forerunner of the suffragette. However, as with any cultural or literary phenomenon, this is too simplistic a perspective as, from the outset, the New Woman was a much more complex and contested figure, both within the women’s movement and the wider social context. The second half of the nineteenth century saw a greater

¹ As Judith Butler has recently commented, ‘The history of feminism dating back to the 19th century always posed the question: what is a woman, and why do we assume that women should be defined just by their reproductive capacities? ... the category of women has gone through many changes and hopefully will go through some more.’ Henry Mance, ‘Gender theorist Judith Butler: ‘What are they frightened of exactly?’’, *Financial Times*, 8 March 2024, Life & Arts, p.3.

² My usage of the term ‘femininity’ is informed by feminist theorists such as Toril Moi and Lyn Pykett who argue that it can be used as a means to disrupt and subvert the conventional patriarchal discourse, overturning the idea that we must subscribe to accepted ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’ codes of feminine behaviour. See Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* (London, Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1985) and Pykett, *The ‘Improper’ Feminine* (Oxford: Routledge, 1992). The wider gendered linguistic debate surrounding terms to denote ‘woman’ is beyond the scope of this essay; for further discussion, see Deborah Cameron, *The Feminist Critique of Language*, 2nd edn. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005) and Amanda Montell, *wordslut* (New York: HarperCollins, 2019).

³ Although it is commonly thought of as the decades 1880s and 1890s, it is difficult to definitively date this period as it is somewhat of a threshold, looking back to the Victorian era and forward to the next century. For a deeper understanding of the period, see Gail Marshall, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁴ The New Woman was largely a middle-class phenomenon; the changes brought about by the women’s movement had mainly impacted on education and professional opportunities and, although working class women were involved in overturning accepted attitudes towards women, it would not be until the next century that their lives would register significant change.

push for women's emancipation, which inevitably engendered fear and anxiety within the established order. As David Rubinstein notes, the New Woman was only one of several stereotypes that emerged from this period, establishing that the anti-feminist Eliza Lynn Linton had already written about the 'Shrieking Sisterhood' and the 'Wild Woman', reinforcing the idea that women stepping outside their conventional role was both disturbing and unnatural. And yet, as Rubinstein further notes, it was the New Woman that had more impact, arguing that, although the figure was widely and successfully caricatured, at the same time she represented the wider concerns of the women's movement, thus proving to be a powerful and useful symbol.⁵

The term originated in 1894, taken by Ouida (a pseudonym used by Louise Rame) from *The New Aspect of the Woman Question*, an essay by a fellow novelist, Sarah Grand, in which she addressed the sexual double standard that underpinned Victorian society, envisioning the New Woman to be a moral educator of men.⁶ Conversely, Ouida used the concept as a means to undermine the burgeoning women's movement, suggesting that the New Woman would reject her 'natural' role of maternal domesticity, thereby striking at the heart of the patriarchal order.⁷ Thereafter, the term was used extensively by the popular press to undermine the push for women's rights, tapping into the anxiety that this engendered. For example, *Punch* widely lampooned the New Woman, its frequent cartoons not only ridiculing the figure but also portraying her as mannish, degenerate, and unnatural, and hence as a danger and threat to the future of humanity. Thus, she quickly became a useful focus for those who were threatened by the modern woman. However, it was not just traditionalists who voiced their opinions regarding the New Woman, but also male radical thinkers and writers who were at the vanguard of change, such as Edward Carpenter, Havelock Ellis and Karl Pearson, reinforcing the

⁵ David Rubinstein, *Before the Suffragettes: Women's Emancipation in the 1890s* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), pp. 16-17.

⁶ Sarah Grand, 'The New Aspect of the Woman Question', *The North American Review*, 158.448 (1894), 270-76 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25103291>> [accessed 28 July 2024].

⁷ Ouida, 'The New Woman', *The North American Review*, 158.450 (1894), 610-19 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25103333>> [accessed 28 July 2024].

idea that she offered a platform from which to revision society.⁸ The fact that she was so prevalent in this period, and that the discussion surrounding her was about disrupting the status quo and challenging the sexual role (of women), underlines her importance and, thus, provides a useful and essential focal point through which to consider the Fin-de-Siècle in its grappling with gender and identity.

The New Woman was a divisive figure from the outset and proved to be problematic for the women's movement itself, with feminists such as Millicent Fawcett distancing themselves from her as they regarded her as a negative distraction and counterproductive to the cause. As Sally Ledger notes: 'by naming and defining the New Woman ... her critics were able to narrow the parameters of the debate on the Woman Question, so that the New Woman novel, and not the 'real' New Woman (that is, late Victorian feminists) became the centre of controversy'.⁹ As the New Woman proponents were quickly associated with advocating free love unions, it was widely believed that they were anti-marriage and feminists such as Fawcett feared that this would detract from their wider aims of reforming the educational, legal and financial status of women. Furthermore, so called New Women writers, such as Sarah Grand and George Egerton, also distanced themselves from the label, perhaps responding to the fact that the term was used indiscriminately by traditionalists to counter the rise of the modern woman.

Thus, it is evident that, as a concept, the New Woman is slippery, both problematic and multilayered: 'the semantic instability of the term 'New Woman' derives in part from the multiplicity of agents who had an ideological stake in constructing her'.¹⁰ However, as

⁸ See Edward Carpenter, *Towards Democracy*, 5th edn. (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1931) and *Love's Coming of Age* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1916); Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (New York: Random House, 1936); Karl Pearson, *The Ethic of Freethought and Other Addresses and Essays*, 2nd rev. edn. (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1901).

⁹ Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin De Siècle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p.9 and Ardis, Ann, *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1990), p.12.

¹⁰ Ann Heilmann, *New Woman Fiction: Women Writing First-Wave Feminism* (Hampshire and London: MacMillan Press Ltd., 2000), p.2.

Ledger argues, following Michel Foucault's model of reverse discourse¹¹, the term opens up a space in which the marginalized and suppressed voice has a platform on which to be heard, thus enabling a wider reach for their progressive ideas to be disseminated. It is estimated that over one hundred novels concerning the New Woman were published in the 1890s, coupled with widespread journalistic coverage and periodical discussion; and, although the spotlight on the New Woman was both negative and positive, it cannot be disputed that she was pivotal to the Fin-de-Siècle.¹² As she was firmly associated with the notion of sexual decadence, the New Woman was caught up in the Wilde trials of 1895, prompting *Punch* to gleefully herald her demise: 'THE END OF THE NEW WOMAN – the crash has come at last',¹³ the implied relief here indicating that she was thought to be dangerous and disruptive to the status quo.

Thus, the New Woman was a complex figure: on the one hand a journalistic and literary construction, variously portrayed as a degenerate or as a progressive modern woman; and on the other a political and social reformer, at the crux of radical ideas and movements that were at the forefront of a new societal vision. It is this sense of multiplicity that makes the New Woman figure an important and unique lens through which to explore the Fin-de-Siècle, for she is 'a vibrant metaphor of transition, the New Woman stood at once for the degeneration of society and for that society's moral regeneration'.¹⁴

Throughout the nineteenth century women had begun to question their subordinate position in society, arguing for reform across the political, economic, educational and social spectrum. They built on ideas and theories that had been developed by earlier reformers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Robinson and Robert Owen, who had

¹¹Foucault developed the concept of reverse discourse in relation to homosexuality and the fear that surrounded it in the Fin-de-Siècle and that this very anxiety brings the contested subject into view, thus giving it voice and validation. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: The Will to Knowledge* (London: Penguin Classics, 2020).

¹² Ann Ardis, *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1990), p. 4.

¹³ *Punch*, 109, (1895) p.297 <https://archive.org/embed/sim_punch_1895_109> [accessed 29 September 2024].

¹⁴ Heilmann, *New Woman Fiction*, p.1

pushed for the emancipation of women, arguing that equality between the sexes would bring about a better society.¹⁵ The separate spheres argument, the belief that men and women each had their own defined, natural place and assigned role, was the foundation through which mainstream Victorian society defined itself, and it was this that the early feminists sought to dismantle. Their reasoning was bolstered by men such as John Stuart Mill who argued against the continued patriarchal subjection of women. Furthermore, he amplified an idea formulated by Wollstonecraft almost a century before, namely the idea that femininity is a social construct:

What is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing – the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others ... a hot-house and stove cultivation has always been carried on of some of the capabilities of their nature, for the benefit and pleasure of their masters.¹⁶

The mid-Victorian period witnessed significant reforms in some areas, illustrated by several key Acts of Parliament. For instance, the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882 and the 1884 Matrimonial Causes Act, which introduced the idea of sexual consent but did not outlaw rape within marriage, meant that propertied women were gaining some notion of control over their own lives; and the Education Acts of 1870 and 1880, together with movement within higher education towards the admittance of female undergraduates, signalled that the scope for girls and women was slowly beginning to widen. Conversely, by excluding women from the franchise, the 1832 Reform Act instigated the suffrage movement; however, it would not be until 1928 that full suffrage would be granted, which illustrates that changes to any aspect of society is painfully slow.

Changes within both the workforce and population in the second half of the nineteenth century, perhaps partly due to the early reforms, are key to understanding the position

¹⁵ See Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), *A Letter to the Women of England on the Injustice of Mental Subordination* (1799), and Robert Owen, *A New View of Society* (1813).

¹⁶ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and The Subjection of Women* (London: Penguin Classics, 2006), p.155. The implications of gender as a social construct in relation to the ideas developed in post-1960s French feminist theory are considered later in this essay.

of women in Victorian society and any wider implications. It is estimated that women in the workforce almost doubled between 1851 and 1901 and the 1851 census records that there were in excess of 400,000 'surplus' (unmarried) women.¹⁷ These increases and subsequent changes to women's social and economic status, disrupted the separate sphere model, overturning fixed ideas that the woman's role was within the domestic space, to be provided for and protected by men; in effect, women were gaining agency and challenging the idea that they were the weaker sex.

The problem of prostitution and what became known as the 'White Slave Trade', in which young girls were procured for prostitution both in Britain and overseas, instigated an era of moral reform amongst some feminists. In 1869, the philanthropist Josephine Butler began her campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts (1864- 1884). She objected to the Acts as there was widespread abuse on the part of the police and doctors as any woman could be threatened with compulsory inspection and detention, and they also reinforced the hypocrisy of the sexual double standard as any infected men escaped inspection, the message being that women were the cause of sexual disease and social degradation. Following the repeal of the Acts, Butler and other likeminded philanthropists progressed into campaigning for social purity which rested on the idea that innocent (virginal) women were morally superior to sexually predatory men. Although this focus on social purity suggests a collapse back into the different spheres model, my understanding is that it indicates women were beginning to assume agency over what constitutes 'woman'.

In direct contrast, other feminists and reformers believed that sex education and control over their own bodies was the key to female emancipation. Annie Besant was an inspirational and passionate advocate of marriage reform, women's health promotion and universal access to contraception, later involving herself with causes such as the Match Girls' Strike of 1888 in which workers at the Bryant and May factory fought for better working conditions. In 1877 Besant, together with the MP Charles Bradlaugh,

¹⁷ Angelique Richardson and Chris Willis, eds., *The New Woman in Fiction and Fact* (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002).

were charged with obscenity, having published a birth control manual, *Fruits of Philosophy*, and selling it cheaply to reach the working classes who they believed would benefit most from such knowledge. The manual was written in 1832 by Charles Knowlton, an American doctor, who argued that the sexual act need not just be for procreational purposes and identified how pregnancy could be avoided. The trial, at which Besant represented herself, almost half a century before a woman was allowed to practice at the bar, caused a sensation as it not only highlighted the need for societal reform but, more importantly, it illustrated the anxiety caused by any such challenge; in effect, it indicated ‘the Establishment’s fear of the disruptive potential of female sexuality’.¹⁸

Thus, as is equally the case today, the emergent women’s movement in the nineteenth century was not single focused; there was no homogenous group with an agreed agenda, but the various factions were very much at the forefront of critical debate and began to make themselves felt throughout society. Feminists were variously interested in other causes and movements such as socialism, Marxism and anarchism which equally complicated the framework for advancement as, whilst there was a natural overlap, there was also division and opposing viewpoints.

Two important figures to consider at this point are Edward Carpenter and Havelock Ellis, sexologists or sexual liberationists, who were focused on affirming the importance of sex on both an individual and societal basis, and on exploring the variety of sexual relationships. Having met through their involvement in the Fellowship of the New Life group, they were equally progressive and experimental in their personal lives; Ellis had an open marriage, and Carpenter was living openly as a gay man at a time when homosexuality was being criminalized.¹⁹ The stance that they took was seemingly pro-

¹⁸ Michael Meyer, *A Dirty, Filthy Book: Sex, Scandal, and One Woman’s Fight in the Victorian Trial of the Century* (London: W Allen, 2024), p.141.

¹⁹ Carpenter developed the idea of androgyny, the ‘evolution of a *higher* type of humanity ... a superior form ... inclusive of the feminine as well as of the masculine’ Edward Carpenter, *Some Friends of Walt Whitman: a Study in Sex Psychology* (Norwood pa, 1977), p.14 and suggested the idea of a third, or ‘intermediate’ sex, Edward Carpenter, *Love’s Coming of Age* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1916) and Ellis theorized that everyone has a basic bisexual element and formulated the concept of intersexuality. Thus, they began to explore gender identity, arguing that gender need not necessarily be understood in binary

feminist in that it suggested the need to challenge sexual roles and constraints. Ultimately, however, both Carpenter and Ellis reaffirmed the biological differences between men and women, establishing that male and female characteristics are fixed and absolute, thereby, positioning female sexuality as secondary, passive and responsive to a more open and dominant male sexuality. Furthermore, despite focusing on the importance of recreational sex, they upheld the idea that women are essentially maternal, arguing that a free society would elevate motherhood, which would necessarily improve the standing of women. Thus, their outlook was ambivalent. As Jeffrey Weeks notes, 'Ellis recognized the necessity of women controlling their own sexuality but this was theoretically and practically hampered by a prior commitment to the sort of social role women should perform'.²⁰

Although it could be argued that such conflicting messaging was problematic for the feminist movement, overall, this was outweighed by the influence that such prominent and radical figures had on challenging the Victorian attitude to sexuality.²¹ Both Carpenter and Ellis were at the vanguard of social change and were very well connected, bringing together like-minded thinkers and activists, thereby indirectly progressing the cause, illustrated by Carpenter's vision of agency for the 'free woman ... let her insist on her right to speak, dress, think, act, and above all to use her sex, as she deems best ; let her face the scorn and the ridicule.'²²

Such widespread radical discussion and challenge to the status quo caused an overall sense of anxiety and moral panic, with the necessity for the establishment to keep things in check. There was a sense that the family, home and marriage were under threat; the Fin-de-Siècle was widely thought of as a period of sexual anarchy and women, together with other marginalized groups such as homosexuals, decadents and

terms but rather as a continuum. See Sheila Rowbotham and Jeffrey Weeks, *Socialism and the New Life: The Personal and Sexual Politics of Edward Carpenter and Havelock Ellis* (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977) for a more in-depth analysis.

²⁰ Rowbotham and Weeks, *Socialism and the New Life*, p. 178.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Carpenter, *Love's Coming of Age*, p.61. I recognise that Carpenter's vision of the 'free woman' somewhat contradicts the gender essentialist views discussed above, further reinforcing the internal ambivalences and shifting perspectives of figures such as Carpenter and Ellis.

aesthetes, were held to blame.²³ Reinforcement of the social order was bolstered by the medical establishment as prominent doctors such as William Acton argued that women's intellectual pursuits and social advancement would endanger their reproductive capabilities and, thus, would pose a threat to the continuation of the race. This viewpoint was widely echoed both in the popular press and in serious-minded periodicals and was also an argument used by anti-feminists such as Eliza Lynn Linton and Margaret Oliphant,²⁴ so the possibility that women could easily overturn social constraints and break free from their assigned role was negligible, indicating that any changes within the women's sphere was a threat which would be rigorously challenged and obstructed. It was on to this complex political, social and cultural landscape that the New Woman arrived, with writers tapping into the zeitgeist and using the figure to explore and formulate a different way of being and living.

The New Woman writers can largely be split into two groups which echo the factions within feminism and other radical movements of the time. On the one hand, there are the social purists, such as Sarah Grand, who focused on the idea of female purity and moral superiority. At face value, this focus does not appear to differ greatly from the Victorian stereotype, but the reasoning behind it was that purity could only come from sexual knowledge and experience, which was a shift away from conventional thought. For example, in *The Heavenly Twins* (1893), Grand addresses the hypocrisy of the sexual double standard through the differing lives of Evadne and Edith:

On the day following her children's party, Evadne went to see Edith. She always went there when she felt brainfagged and world-weary, and came away refreshed. Edith's ignorance of life amazed and perplexed her. She thought it foolish, and she thought it unsafe for a mature young woman to know no more of the world than a child does, but still she shrank from sharing the pain of her own knowledge with her, and had never had the heart to say a word that might disturb her beautiful serenity ... She and Edith were very different types of girlhood, and it

²³ Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (London: Virago Press Limited, 1992).

²⁴ See E. Lynn Linton, 'The Higher Education of Woman', *Popular Science Monthly*, 30 (1886), 168-180. <https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Page:Popular_Science_Monthly_Volume_30.djvu/194> [accessed 1 Dec 2024] and Joan N. Burstyn, 'Education and Sex: The Medical Case against Higher Education for Women in England, 1870-1900', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 117.2 (1973), 79-89 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/986058>> [accessed 1 Dec 2024].

seemed a strange coincidence that their opportunities should have been identical nevertheless ; but not singular that their action should have been the same, because the force of nature which controlled them is a matter of constitution more than of character, and subject only to a training which neither of them had received, and without which, instead of ruling, they are ruled erratically.²⁵

Whilst both are married to syphilitic husbands, it is only Evadne who escapes contracting the disease because she recognizes the symptoms from her covert reading of progressive literature, whereas Edith remains sexually naïve and consequently dies alongside her child.

In contrast to this group are the sexual liberationists, or ‘erotomaniacs’²⁶ as they were more dismissively labelled. By focusing on female sexuality, writers, such as George Egerton, were regarded as the more radical of the New Woman novelists, stepping outside the boundaries of what was deemed appropriate for women to write about. Egerton herself attested to the importance of exploring the female perspective: ‘There was only one small plot left for her to tell: the *terra incognita* of herself, as she knew herself to be, not as man like to imagine her – in a word to give herself away, as man had given himself in his writings’.²⁷ Furthermore, in her short story, ‘A Cross Line’, Egerton charges that men ‘have overlooked the eternal wildness, the untamed primitive savage temperament that lurks in the mildest, best woman ... the keynote of woman’s witchcraft and woman’s strength’,²⁸ thus fixing the idea that it is only women who have the necessary insight to write truthfully about themselves.

²⁵ Sarah Grand, *The Heavenly Twins* (New York: The Cassell Publishing Company, 1893), pp. 228 and 237.

²⁶ Hugh E. M. Stutfield ‘Tommyrotics’, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, 157.956 (1895), 833–45 (p.836) <<https://www.proquest.com/historical-periodicals/tommyrotics/docview/6577358/se-2?accountid=130472>> [accessed 15 December 2024].

²⁷ George Egerton, ‘A Keynote to Keynotes’ in *Ten Contemporaries: Notes Towards Their Definitive Bibliography*, ed. by John Galsworthy (London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1932), pp. 57-61 (p.58).

²⁸ George Egerton, ‘A Cross Line’ in *Keynotes & Discords* ed. by Martha Vicinus (London: Virago Press Limited, 1983), pp.1-36 (p. 22). Obviously, these kinds of statements could be wrongly interpreted as misogynistic ways of characterizing women, and yet, by appropriating and reclaiming loaded terms such as ‘witch’ and ‘primitive savage’, it could be argued that Egerton was knowingly disrupting the dominant ideology, offering a positive and authentic version in its place. For further discussion on the tropes of the ‘mad woman’ and ‘madness’ in relation to women’s writing, see Sandra M. Gilbert & Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984) and Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady* (London: Virago Press Limited, 1987).

As with any group or movement there are no clear boundaries; there is an inevitable overlap and blurring of interest. One of the main charges made against New Woman writers was that they were anti marriage, thus posing a threat to the bedrock of Victorian society.²⁹ However, it is interesting to note that the theme of marriage was a unifying one within this group of writers, and that, furthermore, most wanted a reform of marriage rather than its abolition, and many stayed within the conventions of society. Both Sarah Grand and Mona Caird wrote articles addressing the need to reimagine marriage on a more truthful and egalitarian basis.³⁰

It has been argued that New Woman fiction lacks literary merit, is didactic and one dimensional as Elaine Showalter notes: 'it looks as if the feminists had one story to tell and exhausted themselves in its narration.'³¹ Furthermore, it is often male writers who are associated with both the Fin-de-Siècle such as Joseph Conrad and Bram Stoker as well as the New Woman figure herself in the novels of Thomas Hardy, George Gissing and Grant Allen amongst others.³² This androcentric perspective overshadows any nuanced understanding of the complexities that the New Woman offers in terms of meaningful evaluation of the Fin-de-Siècle, as reflected by a shift within feminist criticism. As Heilmann establishes, the New Woman has been widely appropriated by various factions and for varying political and ideological reasons, so that 'its gynocentric, autobiographically informed and feminist origins became submerged in a complex process in which political homogeneity, articulated structurally through a diversity of forms, made way for gendered and ideological heterogeneity.'³³ Moreover,

²⁹ See Pykett, *The 'Improper Feminine' Feminine': The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (Oxford: Routledge, 1992), pp.143-153 for a detailed analysis of the 'Marriage Question' in New Woman literature. Pykett points to the stance taken by critics such as Margaret Oliphant and Hugh Stutfield who promoted the idea that the New Woman writer inevitably belonged to 'The Anti-Marriage League'.

³⁰ Grand, 'The New Aspect of the Woman Question' and Mona Caird, 'Marriage' (Independent Section), *Westminster Review*, 130.1(1888), 186-201 <<https://www.proquest.com/historical-periodicals/independent-section/docview/8028934/se-2?accountid=130472>> [accessed 15 December 2024].

³¹ Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, (London: Virago Press Limited, 2003), p.215. This viewpoint is echoed by other earlier feminist literary critics such as Patricia Stubbs and Gail Cunningham.

³² See Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* (1895), George Gissing, *The Odd Women* (1893) and Grant Allen, *The Woman Who Did* (1895).

³³ Heilmann, *New Woman Fiction*, p.6.

Ann Ardis highlights the marginalization of New Woman writers in the context of the development of feminist literary studies, 'I take the defensiveness of their arguments about the New Woman novel as a sign of feminist criticism's marginality in the academy in the 1970s. These early feminist arguments need to be recognized as compromise formations. The endorsement of traditional standards of literary value was the price these critics paid for getting the academy to take women's literature seriously.'³⁴

Thus, the New Woman is a significant literary and cultural phenomenon, revolutionary, progressive and central to a period in which so many radical ideas were being explored in the formulation of modern society. That she did attract widespread criticism and ridicule indicates the threat that she posed to the establishment. Furthermore, by pushing against boundaries and breaking new ground in terms of subject matter and experimental narrative forms, the New Woman writers were 'pioneers, ... consciously trying out new things'.³⁵

³⁴ Ardis, *New Women*, p.8. In the introduction to the second edition of *A Literature of Their Own*, (2003), Showalter echoes this by acknowledging she initially overlooked New Woman writers of the 1890s, pointing to the fact that they had fallen out of publication and that since she has given them more focus.

³⁵ Bjørhovde, Gerd, *Rebellious Structures – Women Writers and the Crisis of the Novel 1880-1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p.16.

2. The Fin-de-Siècle

Even though the New Woman writer was clearly a phenomenon of the Fin-de-Siècle, she cannot so easily be divorced from her literary predecessors in that there was a shared focus on the domestic role, with many writers foregrounding the themes of marriage and familial relationships. However, it was the way in which they chose to interpret these themes that signified a radical change. For example, whereas the domestic novel³⁶ had often culminated in the marriage of the heroine, implying this was a woman's highest achievement, many New Women writers changed the narrative positioning, thus affording them the opportunity to explore the marital relationship over the course of the novel, thereby changing the messaging from that of the happy ending to the idea that marriage itself may be problematic and not necessarily the ultimate goal of a woman's life.³⁷

A consideration of the place that the New Woman writer inhabits within the literary tradition allows us to grasp that there has been an ongoing textual challenge to the concept of 'woman', and that such questioning forms part of the landscape of fiction. Only associating the New Woman writer with the Fin-de-Siècle overlooks this point and places her with other marginalized groups of the period, thereby disregarding the singularities of New Woman fiction. In relation to this, Lyn Pykett focuses on two disparate genres from the late nineteenth century which 'were involved in a complex negotiation of the categories of the proper and improper feminine',³⁸ namely the sensation novels of the 1860s and New Woman fiction of the 1890s, establishing important parallels which I will make use of here.

³⁶ The domestic novel, or domestic realism, was a popular genre in the first half of the nineteenth century, largely associated with the woman writer as it detailed the minutiae of the domestic setting and the ordinariness of provincial life, reinforcing the idea that this was the 'natural' sphere for women: 'Rejecting the conventionally romantic love story for studies of human relationships in their subtler, more complex, but also more homely and real aspects ... the novel became at last universal and microcosmic. Its focus remained the individual within the domestic scene.' Vineta Colby, *Yesterday's Woman: Domestic Realism in the English Novel* (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1974), pp. 258-259.

³⁷ There were exceptions to the idea that the domestic novel ended with the marriage of the heroine. For example, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) by Anne Brontë is one such example, groundbreaking in that it dealt with the breakdown of marriage and alcoholism.

³⁸ Lyn Pykett, *The 'Improper Feminine'*, p.19.

As was the case with the later New Woman fiction, sensation novels, such as Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) and Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1862) were immediately popular with readers whilst generating significant concern within the wider society. The ban on the reporting of divorce cases had been lifted in 1857 and the sensationalists were able to draw on the widespread reporting of crime and adultery in the popular press for plotlines; the novels often focusing on bigamy, contested wills, murder, and arson. They also appropriated popular literary forms such as melodrama, the Gothic novel and the penny dreadful. However, beneath, or through, this superficiality Pykett demonstrates that these writers were firmly engaged in questioning social norms and disrupting the status quo. Thus, they were writing fiction that held wide appeal and, simultaneously, exploring the contradictions and complexities within the lives of women.³⁹ Developing this line of argument, Tara Macdonald claims that: 'the sensation novel's playful engagement with human complications and misconceptions ... made it an ideal form in which to disrupt gender conventions and challenge stable notions of identity.'⁴⁰

The sensation novels caused moral panic amongst conservative reviewers and critics, who regarded the subject matter as lurid and inappropriate for the, largely female, audience and to whom it would pose a corrupting influence. Furthermore, the fact that the novels were mainly authored by women caused further anxiety as many critics questioned how these middle-class women could be familiar with such source material. These novels generated much critical discussion, with perhaps the most significant article being Linton's 'The Girl of the Period' published in 1868, which lamented the passing of the subservient woman, 'the old English ideal ... the *most essentially womanly* in the world'⁴¹ and the arrival of the imperfect modern woman whose sole focus was the rejection of the domestic ideal, and, as such, echoes the

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Tara Macdonald, 'Sensation Fiction, Gender and Identity', in *The Cambridge Companion to Sensation Fiction*, ed. by Andrew Mangham (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 127-140 (p.139).

⁴¹ E. Lynn Linton, 'The Girl of the Period', *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art*, 25.646 (1868), 339-340, (p.340 my emphasis) <<https://www.proquest.com/historical-periodicals/girl-period/docview/9617696/se-2?accountid=130472>> [accessed 10 January 2025].

deviant heroine as portrayed in much sensation fiction. The anxiety that such articles identified, but also initiated, formed part of the dialogue concerning the nature of woman and is relevant for both the sensationalists and the New Woman writers for, as Pykett claims, the moral risk that the sensationalists posed was then passed on to the New Woman writer:

In many ways the critical debate on the New Woman novel picked up some of the main threads of the sensation debate, focusing on the (in)appropriateness of the fictional depiction of transgressive, independent heroines, and the representation of the female body and women's feelings.⁴²

Of further significance, to my line of argument here, is the way in which the sensationalists used the figure of the heroine to challenge the positioning of the woman in society and to engage in the contested discourse surrounding femininity. For example, in *Lady Audley's Secret*, Braddon not only provides opposing versions of femininity in the characters of Lady Audley (deviant and transgressive) and Clara (the Angel in the House) but complicates the narrative by constantly shifting the point of view between them, requiring the reader to repeatedly question their understanding of what is meant by 'woman', most notably in regard to the concept of 'female imposture and performance'⁴³ which was widely understood to be part of normative feminine behaviour. A recurring theme and important plot device in the sensation novels was the use of cosmetics and clothing to transform and disguise, which suggested the duplicity of the heroine. However, whilst this acknowledged the need to perform and masquerade in order to conform to convention, it also presented the sensationalists with the opportunity to disrupt this norm and to suggest a different narrative,

The sensation novel thus details how acts of imposture can be empowering performances of self-creation on the one hand, and acts of violent erasure on the other. These performances suggest a complex and sometimes contradictory understanding of what it means to enact womanhood.⁴⁴

⁴² Lyn Pykett, 'The Sensation Legacy', in *The Cambridge Companion to Sensation Fiction*, ed. by Andrew Mangham (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 210-223, (p. 216).

⁴³ MacDonald, 'Sensation Fiction, Gender and Identity', p. 129.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.132.

Braddon uses the trope of unmasking at various points in the novel to suggest that femininity is both unfixed and performative, as illustrated by the portrait scene in which Robert Audley gazes on the face of Lady Audley for the first time, and is struck by the idea that some underlying and hidden aspect has been unveiled, which later develops into the gradual revealing of her supposed madness,

It was so like and yet so unlike; it was as if you had burned strange-coloured fires before my lady's face, and by their influence brought out new lines and new expressions never seen in it before. The perfection of feature, the brilliancy of colouring, were there; but I suppose the painter had copied quaint mediaeval monstrosities until his brain had grown bewildered, for my lady, in his portrait of her, had something of the aspect of a beautiful fiend.⁴⁵

Most significantly, it is the complex characterization of Lady Audley that provides the opportunity to reinforce the related ideas of imposture and performance as she plays many roles throughout the novel, from demon through to angel. By drawing parallels between the two genres, Pykett establishes a direct line between the sensation heroine to the New Woman heroine, as 'the central female characters of each genre thus disrupted both fictional and social stereotyping',⁴⁶ thereby reinforcing the idea of a continuous cultural and textual dialogue surrounding the nature of 'woman'.

As with New Woman fiction there was a general dismissal of sensation fiction by critics who regarded it as 'low art', not only deeming it of no literary value but more significantly associating it with cultural and social degeneration. In reevaluating its value, feminist critics have shown the importance of bringing 'low 'genres' into critical view',⁴⁷ as it opens up space for discussion and identifies significant messaging that otherwise would remain lost. In their own way the sensationalists were radical, in terms of subject matter and the way in which the writers broke from narrative convention, so much so that Showalter claims sensation fiction was a form of protest fiction, and that, although

⁴⁵ Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret* (London: Faber & Faber Limited, 2020), p. 91.

⁴⁶ Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine*, p.10.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

the writers were still ultimately bound by Victorian convention they could nevertheless be seen as pioneers and, as such, as forerunners of the New Woman fiction writers.⁴⁸

Alongside the gradual changes affecting the legal, social and professional scope for some women in the second half of the nineteenth century, it was perhaps major developments in the publishing world that enabled the New Woman writer to inhabit a much more visible and, to some extent, more authoritative space than her literary predecessors. The last decades of the nineteenth century saw both the demise of the three-volume novel, or triple-decker as it was more commonly known, and the proliferation of magazines and experimental publishers which brought about a radical change in the literary field, a change which the New Woman writer was directly engaged with.⁴⁹

In 1842, Charles Mudie began a circulating library which allowed subscription paying members to borrow books instead of buying them which was beyond the reach of most people at that time. This innovation was to prove greatly influential on the trajectory of fiction published over the next fifty years. Although there were other libraries, such as W. H. Smiths, Mudie's was the most successful, allowing him to dictate to publishers both the price and format of books, using this monopoly to ensure that writers conformed to the three-volume model that became standard in the Victorian era. Furthermore, Mudie extended his influence over the both the style and content of the novel; by marketing his circulating library as 'select' he would only accept works which he deemed to be appropriate for the middle-class family, rejecting what he judged to be 'novels of objectionable character or inferior ability'.⁵⁰ Consequently, Mudie, by pressurising authors and publishers to conform to his rigid standards, exerted control over creative freedom, becoming a self-appointed moral guardian of the literary landscape.

⁴⁸ Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*.

⁴⁹ I discuss the ways in which the New Woman writer capitalizes on the changes in the publishing world and uses the new magazines at a later point in the essay.

⁵⁰ *Catalogue of New and Standard Works in Circulation at Mudie's Select Library* (London: Mudie, 1860) in *California Digital Library* <https://archive.org/details/cdl> [accessed 14 December 2024], contents page.

In her analysis of the sensation novel, Showalter comments on the limitations posed by the three-decker, arguing that conforming to a prescribed structure was a barrier to imaginative and progressive plot development, implying that without such constraints the authors may have developed their ideas differently. As she notes:

the first volume of a woman's sensation novel is a gripping and sardonic analysis of a woman in conflict with male authority. By the second volume guilt has set in. In the third volume we see the heroine punished, repentant, and drained of all energy.⁵¹

Thus, the impulse to challenge and disrupt the status quo is somewhat diluted by the constraints that the writers were placed under by the demands of the three-decker, so the style lacks necessary thrust in favour of a formulaic and tired pattern.⁵²

Although there had been earlier criticism of the control that Mudie and other circulating libraries exerted over the publishers, it was the withdrawal of George Moore's novel *A Modern Lover* (1883) from circulation on grounds of immorality that foregrounded the issue. Mudie's further refusal to stock his second novel, *A Mummer's Wife* (1884), for similar reasons propelled Moore to publish his pamphlet, 'Literature at Nurse or Circulating Morals' in 1885 in which he directly challenged the stranglehold that Mudie held over the publishers, authors and, consequently, readers, highlighting his role as an undue moral censor and commercial opportunist:

the character for strength, virility, and purpose, which our literature has always held, the old literary tradition coming down to us through a long line of glorious ancestors, is being gradually obliterated to suit the commercial views of a narrow-minded tradesman.⁵³

The impact that the circulating libraries had on the scope of fiction was deep seated, as evidenced by the fact such considerations continued to be debated in the critical press

⁵¹ Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.180.

⁵² This is not to say that the three-decker format placed such constraints on all authors or proved a barrier from groundbreaking and challenging works to be published. For instance, the Brontës, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot were initially published in this format. Furthermore, the three-decker was not the only model that was used at this time, the weekly serial widely used by Dickens was a viable and popular alternative.

⁵³ George Moore, *Literature at Nurse, or Circulating Morals: A Polemic on Victorian Censorship* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1976), p.18.

throughout this period. In 'Candour in English Fiction' (1890)⁵⁴, Walter Besant, Eliza Lynn Linton and Thomas Hardy not only reinforced Moore's argument against undue censorship but also developed the idea that there was a need for a greater freedom of creative expression, for a more realistic and honest depiction of human life, especially in terms of the portrayal of sexuality. The need to constantly bear in mind the sensibilities of the 'Young Daughter, the 'British Matron' and the ever present 'Mrs Grundy',⁵⁵ suppressed any such possibility of creative freedom and growth of the novel. Collectively, such figures formed the concept of the 'ideal' female reader, a stereotype which was used to exacerbate the anxieties posed by both the challenges to the position of women in society and by the threat to literary standards, mainly by French authors such as Balzac and Flaubert, and by, what were perceived to be, inferior literary genres such as the sensation novel. This illustrates the way in which the concept of femininity has been used at times as a means with which to resist and suppress challenges to the status quo, the implication being that if this 'ideal' female reader was under attack, so was wider society itself. And yet, as Kate Flint notes, the assumed gendered reader was male, it was only when she could be used as a critical tool was the 'ideal' female reader considered.⁵⁶ Significantly, by questioning the need to continually subscribe to this ideal, critics and writers opened up a space in which to examine the validity of this stereotype and the possibility to dismantle it, as it was increasingly felt to be a constraint on creative expression and realistic representation.⁵⁷

Such debate surrounding the nature of morality vs immorality within literary works and the subsequent challenge to censorship exerted by influential figures such as Mudie saw the lessening power of the circulating libraries and the resultant demise of the triple-decker. The widening literacy rates resulting from the 1870 Education Act created

⁵⁴ Walter Besant, E. Lynn Linton and Thomas Hardy, 'Candour in English Fiction', *The New Review*, 2.8 (1890), 6-21 <[https://www.proquest.com/publication/1980?accountid=130472&decadeSelected=1890+-+1899&yearSelected=1890&monthSelected=01&daySelected=&timeSelected=&issueNameSelected=01890Y01Y01\\$23Jan+1890\\$3b++Vol.+2+\\$288\\$29](https://www.proquest.com/publication/1980?accountid=130472&decadeSelected=1890+-+1899&yearSelected=1890&monthSelected=01&daySelected=&timeSelected=&issueNameSelected=01890Y01Y01$23Jan+1890$3b++Vol.+2+$288$29)> [accessed 16 February 2025].

⁵⁵ Originating as a character in the play *Speed the Plough* (1798) by Thomas Morton, the name 'Mrs Grundy' became a symbol for a rigid moral code and conventional propriety.

⁵⁶ Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader 1837-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁵⁷ Ibid.

both a higher and changing demand in the market with publishers subsequently moving away from the triple-decker in favour of the cheaper and more marketable single volume format, with such changes heralding the arrival of what became termed the 'new fiction'.⁵⁸ Thereafter, women started to gain more agency in what they were able to both read and write about, and it is this radical change that created the perfect storm for the emergence of the New Woman as both literary creator and creation.

The problematic position that the woman writer inhabited in the second half of the nineteenth century was part of the ongoing discourse surrounding the apparent feminisation of culture and the subsequent blurring of boundaries between 'high' and 'low' art. The widespread popularity of genres such as the sensation novel and the New Woman fiction, together with a more informal, gossipy and, thus, 'feminine', style adopted by the New Journalism, were indicative, for many writers and critics, that literary and cultural standards were being devalued by the 'irruption of the feminine into the novel'.⁵⁹ As Pykett argues, it was the way in which women began to experiment with narrative forms and utilize popular genres that generated such anxiety, as it disrupted the traditional division between high (masculine) art and low (feminine) art, thus posing a threat to cultural authority:

the New Woman novel, like the sensation novel before it, represented a threat to Art. Both types of writing were regarded as the agents and symptoms of a degenerative and improper feminisation of fiction and, indeed, of an insidious (ef)feminisation of the culture at large.⁶⁰

There was an acknowledgement by reviewers such as Laura Marholm Hansson and Margaret Devereux⁶¹ that this period saw a general shift in the direction of women's writing, namely, that authors were keen to use their unique insight as women to write about the female experience and, in doing so, overturn and correct prevailing literary stereotypes and conventional narratives. The importance and popularity of this

⁵⁸ The decade between 1885 and 1895 witnessed a battle between 'classic' realism and 'new realism', the implications of which are explored later in the essay.

⁵⁹ Penny Boumelha, *Thomas Hardy and Women* (Brighton: The Harvester Press Limited, 1982), p. 73.

⁶⁰ Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine*, p.9.

⁶¹ See Laura Marholm Hansson, *Six Modern Women*, trans. by Hermione Ramsden (London: John Lane, 1896) and Roy Devereux, *The Ascent of Woman* (London: John Lane, 1896).

authentic voice is noted by Ardis: 'women were writing with new authority about female experience after the downfall of the circulating libraries – and were receiving public attention for doing so.'⁶² For example, in an essay written in 1894, the influential journalist, W. T. Stead, highlighted not only was there a sudden wealth of literature being written by the New Woman, but that it was also written from their own perspective: 'The Novel of the Modern Woman is one of the most notable and significant features of the fiction of the day. The Modern Woman novel is not merely a novel written by a woman, or a novel written about women, but it is a novel written by a woman about women from the standpoint of Woman.'⁶³ However, the fact that Stead, although largely sympathetic to the New Woman writer, also echoed some of the reservations voiced by critics such as Stutfield, exemplifies that the impact made caused polarization and contradictory responses.⁶⁴

Inevitably, there was a consequent backlash amongst some critics and writers as they strove to devalue and marginalize the New Woman novel on the grounds that it posed a threat to the status of literature and the reputation of Art itself, the underlining fear being that, by assuming agency, such women were directly challenging male cultural authority. Prominent critics such as Arthur Waugh and William Courtney were quick to discredit the value of New Woman fiction and the legitimacy of the New Woman writer as they claimed that, as women were ruled by their emotions, they did not have the necessary objectivity to produce work of artistic value. Thus, it is evident that the discourse on realism in literature between 1885–1895 had a gendered dynamic; it was not only that there was a much greater emphasis on and franker exploration of sexuality in the 'new fiction' that was problematic for such traditionalists but, perhaps, the wider issue was the fact that it was women who were largely authoring this perspective, and, as such, stepping outside their 'natural' role.⁶⁵

⁶² Ardis, *New Women*, p. 45.

⁶³ W. T. Stead, 'The Novel of the Modern Woman', *The Review of Reviews*, 10 (1894) 64-74 (p.64) <https://www.proquest.com/historical-periodicals/book-month/docview/3915306/se-2?accountid=130472> [accessed 16 February 2025].

⁶⁴ Flint, *The Woman Reader*.

⁶⁵ Ardis, *New Women*.

An article that clearly illustrates this animosity towards the New Woman writer and the way in which she was frequently used as a symbol to denote the threat to social order is 'Tommyrotics' (1895) by Hugh Stutfield, which was published in the widely read periodical *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. The article focused on how the fast pace of modern life led to degeneration and decadence, which, he argued, was largely the result of the 'debased emotionalism apparent in so many of the leading writers and thinkers of our day'.⁶⁶ Stutfield regarded the trend in modern fiction for analysis and introspection as excessive and harmful, leading to mania and neurosis, hence his use of the terms 'neuropathic' and 'physilogico-pornographic school of fiction'⁶⁷, much of which, he claimed, was written by women. As with other like-minded critics, Stutfield judged the novels as promoting an anti-marriage agenda in which the figure of the 'Husband-Fiend' commonly occurred, but his main criticism was that they were overly focused on the subject of sexuality. Due to their enormous popularity and harmful influence on the, largely female, readership, Stutfield deemed it necessary to strongly denounce the novels as inferior and to ridicule and discredit their authors, which he did in a powerful diatribe, the underlying message being that the modern woman had no literary legitimacy:

In particular the New Woman, or "the desexualised half-man," as a character in 'Discords' unkindly calls her, is a victim of the universal passion for learning and "culture," which, when ill-digested, are apt to cause intellectual dyspepsia. With her head full of all the 'ologies and 'isms, with sex-problems and heredity, and other gleanings from the surgery and the lecture-room, there is no space left for humour, and her novels are for the most part merely pamphlets, sermons, or treatises in disguise.⁶⁸

As Ardis argues, the number of articles written in this period which position the emphasis of sex in the 'new fiction' as problematic attests to the fact that changing attitudes towards sexuality and gender roles was of central importance in the Fin-de-Siècle and that, furthermore, the New Woman writer was crucial to the discourse as she

⁶⁶ Stutfield, 'Tommyrotics', p. 834.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 836.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 837.

was able to bring her insight and perspective to the wider question of social and cultural change:

The question of where sexuality figures into the whole of human character is ... one of the most significant issues to emerge in the debate on realism and representation in the New Woman novel ... it also takes this fiction out of a strictly literary context and places it in the context of a growing interdisciplinary discourse on sexuality.⁶⁹

The strength of feeling felt by critics such as Stutfield and Waugh was testament to the significant impact made by the emergence of the New Woman writer in this period and, despite the huge barriers she faced in terms of acceptance and validation, 'it can still be said that many writers, women writers in particular, were empowered by the debate on 'candour' in English realism between 1885 and 1895.'⁷⁰

Thus, both the major developments in the publishing world and a redefinition of the role and purpose of fiction heralded an important shift in terms of opportunities and a widening of scope for the woman writer. The rise in the number of magazines, many with a feminist perspective, facilitated both increased visibility, in terms of output, and the development of what would become an important format for the New Woman writer, namely the emergence of the short story, with many writers such as George Egerton, Ella D'Arcy and Charlotte Mew choosing this as the most suitable vehicle for their creative expression.

As Flint notes, there were many periodicals that were marketed for women in the nineteenth century which either reinforced the 'ideal' domestic role or offered strong moralistic and evangelical guidance.⁷¹ From the mid-century onwards, magazines such as *The Englishwoman's Review* and the *Victoria Magazine* introduced a more progressive perspective for the reader, but it was not until the publication of *Shafts* in 1892 that radically signalled a break from the predominant prescriptive messaging which aimed to uphold Victorian convention. In contrast, the principles that *Shafts* was founded on were more freethinking and unorthodox, thereby posing a direct challenge

⁶⁹ Ardis, *New Women*, p. 50.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p.45.

⁷¹ Flint, *The Woman Reader*.

to the subservient position of women which was made evident in the first issue by its editor, Margaret Sibthorp, by claiming, 'our object is to encourage thought!'.⁷²

Priced at one penny, *Shafts* was aimed at lower middle-class women who had benefited from a better education following the 1870 Education Act. By focusing on issues such as women's suffrage, radical dress, higher education for women, vivisection, and birth control, this progressive magazine encouraged readers to strive for 'an education that might emancipate them from patriarchal assumptions'.⁷³ However, it went deeper than merely focusing on points of interest for the more forward thinking woman; by exposing the gender bias underlying language and thought, it highlighted the need to question and disrupt the male norm, offering the possibility of a fresh perspective. Encouraging women to read critically was perhaps the most significant contribution that *Shafts* made towards female empowerment, as it fostered resistance to the prevailing attitudes of conservative writers and reviewers such as Eliza Linton, Hugh Stutfield and Margaret Oliphant, who were intent on upholding the status quo.⁷⁴ As *Shafts* was published from 1892 until 1899 it was very much a product of the Fin-de-Siècle and was at the forefront of the various radical movements of the period, and, as such, was firmly aligned with the New Woman rationale, helping to promote the various ideas and concerns to their broad readership.

The publication that remains most closely associated with the Fin-de-Siècle is *The Yellow Book*, the first issue appearing on 16th April 1894, marking a radical break from the traditional periodical, both in terms of its bold and experimental content and its risqué illustrations. It was a collaboration between Henry Harland (literary editor) and Aubrey Beardsley (art editor) and was published quarterly in both Britain and America by

⁷² Margaret Sibthorp, 'What the Editor Means', *Shafts* 1(1892), p.8.

⁷³ Matthew Beaumont, 'Influential Force: *Shafts* and the Diffusion of Knowledge at the Fin de Siècle', 19: *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 3 (2006), p.8 <<https://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.449>>

⁷⁴ Oliphant serves as an interesting example of how women occupied a shifting and fluid space in the Victorian period. Ann Heilmann discusses how Oliphant was a professional writer who bridged the gap between writing for the conservative press but who also changed her attitude towards women throughout her long writing career. In her article, 'The Anti-Marriage League', she does restate her earlier view that a woman's foremost duty is her family, thus largely opposing the stance taken by the New Woman writer. See Ann Heilmann, 'Mrs Grundy's Rebellion: Margaret Oliphant Between Orthodoxy and the New Woman', *Women's Writing*, 6:2 (1999) 215-237, DOI: [10.1080/09699089900200064](https://doi.org/10.1080/09699089900200064).

John Lane and Mathew Elkin, and was a collection of essays, short stories, poetry and art. By naming it *The Yellow Book*, the founders knowingly aligned the periodical with French decadence, which was widely symbolized by the mention of the ‘yellow novel’ in many literary works from this period.⁷⁵ The predominantly outraged reaction of the reviewers to the first issue brought instant notoriety to *The Yellow Book* which undoubtedly increased its sales figures, and, with the later association with the Wilde trial in 1895,⁷⁶ it became the most discussed periodical of its time.⁷⁷

The concept underlining *The Yellow Book* was the editors’ belief in the creative freedom of the author which they believed would be facilitated by publishing whole stories, with no prescribed word count, rather than serialised fiction, the predominant model in traditional periodicals, which often relied on formulaic narrative conventions such as the cliffhanger ending, the implication being that commercial opportunity rather than literary standard was the most significant factor.⁷⁸ With its association with *The Yellow Book*, the short story became aligned with the more avant-garde and experimental forms of literature, marking a radical shift from its traditional form which placed emphasis on plot and character. The form itself became a key concern as it allowed for innovative ways for writers to explore and express psychological depth and intensity:

instead of shrinking down novelistic tropes and conventions, they experimented with more artful methods of omission, compression, aperture and ellipsis. Out went traditional methods of plotting and characterization, and in came a new roster of narrative concepts: implication, ambiguity, suggestion, dilation, and, above all, *plotlessness*.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ For instance, in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, the fact that Robert Audley reads ‘yellow novels’ is an indication of his languid lifestyle, and there was much fear of the corrupting influence of the yellow novel on many young female readers. See Flint, *The Woman Reader*, pp.287-289.

⁷⁶ At the time of Wilde’s arrest in 1895, the press reported that he was seen with a copy of *The Yellow Book* which effectively ended Beardsley’s editorship as he was sacked by Lane. Whether it was the actual periodical or not is unknown, but such was the fear of association with the fallout from the trial that Lane signalled a change in tone, not only withdrawing all of Beardsley’s illustrations but also changing from the distinctive yellow covering to a more anonymous grey. See Fraser Harrison, *The Yellow Book*.

⁷⁷ Dennis Denisoff, ‘Decadence and Aestheticism’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Gail Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁷⁸ Emma Young and Bailey, James (eds), *British Women Short Story Writers: The New Woman to Now* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

⁷⁹ Adrian Hunter, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Short Story in English* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 7.

Harland included a diverse range of contributors, with both well established and unknown writers being represented, and, although there was no overall theme or governing principle underlying the stories, the nature of feminine identity and sexuality was a recurrent topic in many of them.⁸⁰ Significantly, the fact that this was a focus not exclusive to the women writers included in *The Yellow Book*, supports the idea that the question of gender roles and identity was central to the critical and cultural debate during the Fin-de-Siècle.

However, the progressive gist of *The Yellow Book* does not belie the fact that it was not without its own contradictions. To some extent, Lane was as much a commercial opportunist as he was an experimental publisher, as Denisoff argues, 'Fitting smoothly into the marketing machinery of the Aesthetic and Decadent movements, Lane saw *The Yellow Book* not simply as another venture, but as a way to give readers exposure to authors already on his roster'.⁸¹ In addition, feminist critics such as Ardis have claimed that Lane was merely exploiting women writers, his 'stable of fillies', for financial gain rather than advancing their cause.⁸² In 1893, Lane and Elkin had published *Keynotes*, a collection of short stories by George Egerton, whose bold and frank content, together with the cover artwork by Beardsley, afforded it a certain risqué notoriety. Such was its success that Lane used the name 'Keynotes' for the publication of a series of short works by unknown writers, thereby deftly signalling to the reader the promise of scandal and titillation. Conversely, Egerton's focus was more serious minded; rather than alluding to mere sexual suggestion, she used the motif of the 'key' to signal that feminine identity is complex and multidimensional rather than superficial and simplistic:

few of them (men) have had the insight to find out the key to our seeming contradictions ... they have all overlooked the eternal wildness, the untamed primitive savage temperament that lurks in the mildest, best woman. Deep in through ages of convention this primeval trait burns, -an untameable quantity

⁸⁰ Fraser Harrison, ed., *The Yellow Book* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson Ltd., 1974).

⁸¹ Denisoff, 'Decadence and Aestheticism', p. 41.

⁸² Ardis, *New Novels*.

that may be concealed but is never eradicated by culture, the keynote of woman's witchcraft and strength.⁸³

Despite such underlying misogyny, it is evident that *The Yellow Book* championed and supported women writers in this period, offering them a platform from which they could not only challenge prevailing attitudes but also signal that their concerns were of equal relevance, that they too could be experimental and progressive. It was not only the fact that it included many stories written by women that gave the female perspective a voice, but also that the sub editor was a woman, Ella D'Arcy, who herself was a frequent contributor. Many of the women writers from the Fin-de-Siècle made the short story format their own, affording them the opportunity to explore and express feminine identity in a radical way, and allowing for the testing and disruption of literary conventions and, as such, is tied in with the challenge to political and social boundaries that the New Woman was experiencing.

⁸³ Egerton, 'A Cross Line', p. 22.

3. *The Short Story and the New Woman*

The short story seems to be the mode preferred by those writers who are not writing from within a fixed and stable cultural framework. It has also been favoured by writers who find themselves to be personally opposed to the society in which they live and for whom the idea of society and shared values is problematic.⁸⁴

Although alluding to a more generalized concept of displacement and alienation than was generated by the unrest and upheaval for certain sectors of society that underlined the Fin-de-Siècle, Clare Hanson's observation regarding the suitability of the short story format is pertinent to the positioning of the New Woman writer who sought to find a better narrative technique to represent the female experience.⁸⁵ As Showalter notes, 'in contrast to the sprawling three-decker, the short story emphasized psychological intensity and formal innovation,'⁸⁶ thus affording the opportunity to document uncharted territory, the 'terra incognita' (Egerton), in a startlingly radical way. The significance and necessity of finding a means of expressing what had not been done before but, also, of using the authentic voice to do so, is further reinforced by Egerton:

Unless one is androgynous, one is bound to look at life through the eyes of one's sex, to toe the limitations imposed on one by its individual physiological functions. I came too soon. If I did not know the technical jargon current to-day of Freud and the psycho-analysts, I did know something of complexes and inhibitions, repressions and the subconscious impulses that determine actions and reactions. I used them in my stories. I recognized that in the main, woman was the ever-untamed, unchanging, adapting herself as far as it suited her ends to male expectations; even if repression was altering her subtly. I would use situations or conflicts as I saw them with a total disregard of man's opinions. I would unlock a closed door with a key of my own fashioning. I did. My imitators forged theirs to a different end.⁸⁷

The New Woman writer appropriated the short story format, bringing many innovations to the genre, such as the development of the interior monologue, in order to overturn

⁸⁴ Clare Hanson, *Short Stories and Short Fictions, 1880-1980* (Hampshire, The MacMillan Press Ltd, 1985), p. 12.

⁸⁵ Hanson takes her lead on this point from Frank O'Connor's study of the genre, *The Lonely Voice* (1963) in which he suggests that the 'short story flourishes best in an incompletely developed culture ... still lacking total cohesion', *Short Stories and Short Fictions*, p. 12.

⁸⁶ Elaine Showalter, ed., *Daughters of Decadence: Women Writers of the Fin-de-Siècle* (London: Virago Press Limited, 1993), ix.

⁸⁷ Egerton, 'A Keynote to Keynote', p. 58.

patriarchal concepts and prevailing (mis)representations of femininity and provide a more nuanced understanding of woman's interiority. The concentrated and intense nature of the format necessitated a direct and stripped down narrative, a point reinforced by Egerton who claimed to be 'a short story writer. For years they came in droves and said themselves, leaving no scope for padding or altered endings'⁸⁸

However, the impact made by the New Woman writers on the development of the short story had been largely overlooked or dismissed until feminist critics such as Showalter, Bjørhovde and Hanson brought it into focus.⁸⁹ In a survey of criticism of the short story from the 1890s onwards, Emma Young and James Bailey argue that 'the tendency remains to prioritise male short story writing as *the* tradition ... [yet] there is a far richer tradition of women short story writers in this period (and beyond) than is readily recognized by these works.'⁹⁰

Showalter addressed this lack of literary representation with the publication of *Daughters of Decadence* (1993), an anthology of short stories written by women in the Fin-de-Siècle, thereby not only highlighting the wealth and variety of literary output by this group of writers but also elevating the genre itself. As she argues, 'one reason that the women writers of this period have been overlooked is that many of them were more interested in the short story than in the full-length novel',⁹¹ suggesting that the genre was accorded less literary value. Bjørhovde expands upon this point as she discusses how writers such as Olive Schreiner were criticized for their lack of literary output, *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) being her only published novel. In this way, the New Woman writer was often cast as an artistic failure, overlooking the fact that she was often experimenting with other forms, such as parables, fables and dream sequences, together with the short story, in order to convey what the novel could not. Such forms

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 59.

⁸⁹ For instance, in the introduction to *Short Stories of the 'Nineties* (New York: Roy Publishers, 1969), although Derek Stanford indicates that the short story afforded greater opportunities for women writers, he ultimately discredits their work in the light of their male contemporaries.

⁹⁰ Young and Bailey, eds., *British Women Short Story Writers*, p. 6.

⁹¹ Showalter, *Daughters of Decadence*, viii.

would later be seen as cutting edge and highly original in the Modernist movement; thus, Bjørhovde argues, these authors should be seen ‘as pioneers, as writers who were consciously trying out new things,’⁹² and their work judged accordingly, rather than being devalued and marginalized.⁹³ This reinforces the idea that it is important to place the New Woman writers in context as it signifies their importance, indicating that they have played their part and that they were not merely just of the moment which is often how they have been represented.

Furthermore, although the New Woman and the Decadent writer were frequently linked as figures of the Fin-de-Siècle, Showalter establishes that the Decadent movement was largely anti-feminist, with much of the writing depicting women as one dimensional, decorative objects, portrayed invariably as the fallen woman, the femme fatale or the aesthetic corpse and the woman writer as being deemed inferior and not attuned to higher aesthetic principles.⁹⁴ The short story offered women a chance to reclaim and rewrite these (mis)representations in a way that was original and imaginative, in effect, to convey a more authentic sense of identity.

One story which skillfully debunks such misrepresentation is ‘Passed’, by Charlotte Mew, published in the second volume of *The Yellow Book* (1894). The story centres on an account by a middle-class woman who, having ventured into a seamy part of London, encounters a destitute girl who takes her back to a squalid tenement room in which lies her dead, prostitute sister. The narrator is torn as to what she should do and ultimately flees the scene, back to her comfortable home. Months later, she meets the girl again, now herself a prostitute, but the moment for help has passed.

On one level, this story rests on the clichéd characters of the middle-class woman, destined to a life of inaction and boredom, seeking out a more meaningful life of

⁹² Bjørhovde, *Rebellious Structures*, p.16.

⁹³ Critics, such as Ardis and Pykett, have argued that the New Woman writers foreshadow the later modernists and that due recognition of this has been overlooked. Expansion of this point is beyond the scope of this essay. For further discussion, see Ardis, *New Women, New Novels* and Pykett, *Engendering Fictions*.

⁹⁴ Showalter, *Daughters of Decadence*.

philanthropy and good deeds and the doomed girl whose life can only lead to prostitution. However, Mew reworks this predictable narrative, enabling the reader to see the situation from both sides, not only detailing the life of squalor and social deprivation but also signalling that the privileged life can be problematic, thereby ensuring sympathy for the narrator rather than condemnation.⁹⁵ Thus, although she fails to act, the narrator is haunted by the image of the dead girl; at the end of the story, she has an epiphany, by owning her blame she knows she is bound up with the prostitute,

I heard a laugh, mounting to a cry ... I knew my part then in the despoiled body, with it's souls tapers long blown out. Wheels hastened to assail that sound, but it clanged on. Did it proceed from some defeated angel? or the woman's mouth? or mine? God knows!⁹⁶

Ledger has argued that 'Passed' can be seen as a response to 'Stella Maris', a poem by Arthur Symons, a key figure in the Decadent movement, that was included in the first volume of *The Yellow Book*.⁹⁷ Symons depicts a romanticised meeting with a prostitute, 'a Juliet of the night', in which he talks of sharing in 'your delicious shame' and recalls breathing 'in the perfume of your hair',⁹⁸ thus glossing over the transactional aspect of the encounter. In contrast, Mew presents a more realistic and naturalistic version, clearly detailing the squalor, deprivation and ultimate cost that such a lifestyle leads to, 'the void incorporate stare'.⁹⁹ There is an erotic charge in the meeting between the narrator and the girl which echoes the one in 'Stella Maris', 'she lay like a broken piece of mechanism in my arms. Her dark hair had come unfastened and fell about my shoulder ... I remember noticing, as it was swept with her involuntary motions across my face, a

⁹⁵ Julia Copus, *This Rare Spirit: A life of Charlotte Mew* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd, 2022).

⁹⁶ Charlotte Mew, 'Passed', in *Femmes de Siècle: Stories from the '90s: Women Writing at the End of Two Centuries* ed. by Joan Smith (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), pp. 80-99 (p. 99).

⁹⁷ Sally Ledger, 'The New Woman and Feminist Fictions', in *The Cambridge Companion to The Fin De Siècle* ed. by Gail Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁹⁸ Arthur Symons, 'Stella Maris', in *The Yellow Book: An Illustrated Quarterly*, 2nd edition, 1, (London: Elkin Mathews & John Lane, 1894) 129-131 *The Yellow Book: An Illustrated monthly Vol 1*. Pp. 130-132 in [The Stickley Museum Library : Free : Free Download, Borrow and Streaming : Internet Archive](#) > [accessed 19 April 2025], lines 5, 31, 43.

⁹⁹ Mew, 'Passed', p.99.

faint fragrance which kept recurring like a subtle and seductive sprite, hiding itself with fairy cunning in the tangled maze.’¹⁰⁰

‘A Cross Line’, the opening story of Egerton’s collection ‘Keynotes’ (1893), is a series of five sketches, in which the central character, Gypsy, meets a stranger whilst out fishing, leading her to imagine other un-lived lives and to contemplate escaping from her drab, staid marriage, only to ultimately return to it when she realizes that she is pregnant. Egerton’s use of the present tense, together with an episodic and fragmentary structure, conveys a sense of immediacy and fluidity, reinforced by the repeated use of ellipses, reveries and the pivotal fourth sketch which details Gypsy’s fantasies through a prolonged interior monologue, which, in turn, delivers the central message, namely, that woman’s nature is complex and multilayered, ‘She busies herself with questioning ... And she laughs, laughs softly to herself because the denseness of man, his chivalrous conservative devotion to the female idea he has created blinds him, perhaps happily, to the problems of her complex nature’.¹⁰¹

As Pykett observes, the story is essentially plotless, as Egerton prioritises ‘the shifting moods of its central female character, with the allusive evocation of the desires and frustrations of this ‘creature of moments’’.¹⁰² Bjørhovde also points to the significance of the ‘associations, suggestions, allusions, thoughts, dreams, fantasies which are inserted into the text, and which combine to make this story come across as a text both concerned with conveying a specific atmosphere and with analysing feminine psychology.’¹⁰³ Egerton uses the metaphor of crossed lines to suggest that it is not only that men and women are different but that women are different to what men ascribe them to be and the innovative way in which she exploits the short story format allows her to explore the multiplicity and psychological depth of women’s inner

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 87.

¹⁰¹ Egerton, ‘A Cross Line’, p.21.

¹⁰² Pykett, *Engendering Fictions: The English Novel in the Early Twentieth Century* (London: Hodder Headline PLC, 1995), p.63.

¹⁰³ Bjørhovde, *Rebellious Structures*, p. 138.

consciousness. Throughout the story, Egerton subverts the conventional gender roles, suggesting that they are not fixed but a patriarchal construct. Thus, it is Gipsy who assumes the more dominant 'masculine' role, both her husband and the stranger are in a subservient position. Both her behaviour, such as smoking, fishing, walking out alone, initiating sex and masturbating, and her indifferent attitude to conventional ideas of feminine beauty, as signalled by her brown hands, challenge values ascribed to women by Victorian society. Thus, in the first sketch, in which Gipsy meets the stranger, it is she who has superior knowledge of the 'male' pursuit of fishing, demonstrated over a conversation of fishing ties. In contrast, it is her husband who occupies the domestic space and assumes the caring role normally assigned to the woman. He takes Gipsy's shoes off, asks how she is and provides sustenance, displaying a sentimental and emotional sensibility. This role reversal is most clearly instanced in their differing reactions to the hatching chicks in the second sketch, Gipsy's revulsion being in direct contrast to her husband's enthusiasm, 'How you love young things'.¹⁰⁴ This incident allows Egerton to establish that the maternal instinct is not a biological given but learnt behaviour; at the end of the story, Gipsy takes the lead from the maid, Lizzie, who displays a more maternalistic outlook.

In a later story, 'A Nocturne' (1897), Egerton again subverts narrative convention, challenging the assumed superiority of the male view and foregrounding female agency. The story concerns the fate of a destitute young woman who is saved from throwing herself into the Thames by a bachelor who then lets her stay in his rooms overnight. At points through the night, he looks at the woman whilst she is asleep, reinforcing the idea that she is a passive object, subscribing to the concept of the male gaze. At the same time, we are given hints that he is not confident with women, that he can only enjoy a distanced, problematic relationship with them, idealized rather than actual, 'I like doing things for women, - any kind of woman almost, - they all interest me

¹⁰⁴ Egerton, 'A Cross Line', p. 9.

tremendously. I don't think I do them'.¹⁰⁵ At best his intentions are paternalistic and yet there are undertones of voyeurism and fetishism, evidenced by his collections of 'Eastern footwear' and penchant for 'little feet'.¹⁰⁶ However, the following morning sees a shift in the power dynamic between them; the man is clearly unsettled by the woman's self-assured nature, seemingly unsure how to relate to a woman who is not a prostitute. She tells her own story from which we realise that, far from being passive and helpless, she is an independent woman, temporarily struggling as a fledgling journalist. The end of 'A Nocturne' is in sharp contrast to the beginning, with the woman embarking on a life of professional vigour and the man lamenting that he only has the ashes from her cigarette and her fleeting interest in his first editions. Thus, Egerton uses the trope of role reversal to destabilise the legitimacy of the male gaze and to critique the (mis)representation of femininity. Hanson points to an essay by Edgar Allan Poe in which he established three principles regarding the value of the short story format, one of which is pertinent to 'A Nocturne', namely the 'immense benefit of *totality*'.¹⁰⁷ The fact that the story can be read as a piece, without interruption, is used for dramatic effect by Egerton; the shift in the power dynamic between the two characters is intensified and given more prominence by the brevity of the story.

'Irremediable', written by Ella d'Arcy and published in the first volume of *The Yellow Book* (1894), similarly dismantles the presumptions made by men on the nature of women. On the surface, the story is a simple take on the trope of romantic misalliance between the two main characters. Whilst on holiday, Willoughby becomes attracted to Esther whom he sees as 'a working daughter of the people';¹⁰⁸ he is drawn to her because of his superficial interest in Socialism and marries her quickly, only to be soon

¹⁰⁵ George Egerton, 'A Nocturne', in *Femmes de Siècle: Stories from the '90s: Women Writing at the End of Two Centuries*, ed. by Joan Smith (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), pp. 33-44, (p. 35).

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., pp. 36-37.

¹⁰⁷ Edgar Allan Poe, *Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. by Edward H. Davidson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1956) in *Internet Archive Books* <https://archive.org/details/internetarchivebooks> [accessed 20 April 2025], p. 448, original emphasis.

¹⁰⁸ Ella D'Arcy, 'Irremediable', in *The Yellow Book: An Illustrated Quarterly*, 2nd edition, 1, (London: Elkin Mathews & John Lane, 1894), 87-108 in <[The Stickley Museum Library : Free : Free Download, Borrow and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)> [accessed 19 April 2025], p.89.

disappointed by her apparent tendency for idleness and slovenly behaviour and, consequently, feels trapped. Through the reminiscences of his earlier life, we learn that Willoughby had been in love with a very different type of woman, the well-educated and sophisticated Nora, who rejects him. That he had pursued Nora 'with the wholeheartedness of the true fanatic'¹⁰⁹ shows that he is serially misguided in his understanding of women, and that he cannot use his own judgement, but is rather informed by traditional, masculinist attitudes. As Hunter observes, 'far from a straightforward story about an unfortunate misalliance that it first appears to be, 'Irremediable' develops into a complex study of male psycho-sexual discomposure'.¹¹⁰

As can be seen from the stories discussed, the short story format, allowing for narrative innovation and a focus on psychological intensity, provided the New Woman writer with the opportunity to challenge prevailing masculinist stereotypes of femininity, enabling them to explore and establish a more authentic, diverse and complex version of womanhood.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p.105.

¹¹⁰ Adrian Hunter, *Short Story in English*, p.37.

4. Focus on George Egerton

In this final chapter, I want to focus on George Egerton (née Mary Chavelita Dunne) who is often depicted as *the* representative New Woman writer of the 1890s. Thrust into the literary spotlight by the publication of her two short story collections, *Keynotes* (1893) and *Discords* (1894), she quickly became the embodiment of the ‘revolting daughter’ and the ‘erotomaniac’ for both the popular press and the conservative establishment, providing a means of highlighting the danger that the modern woman posed to the very foundation of late Victorian morality and stability.¹¹¹ However, Egerton is somewhat of a hybrid figure in that, although she does serve as a culmination of the New Woman writer, both in terms of her subject matter and stylistic innovation and her own uncompromising lifestyle,¹¹² she did not regard herself as such, distancing herself from writers such as Caird and Grand. It is possible that Egerton was wary of becoming too closely aligned with the label and the negative associations that came with it, and wanted to retain a degree of creative freedom, but, whilst such reservations are understandable, I feel that the label is a useful framework through which to explore her work.

Equally, Egerton did not identify as a feminist, standing apart from many of her contemporaries who were pushing for the advancement of women, stating that:

I am not greatly concerned in the social, so-called educational, or political advancement of women. They are exotics – what interests me is her development from within out as a female, briefly: that woman as a whole has begun to tell the truth about herself, or at least half the truth.¹¹³

It is this idea of uncovering the truth of female nature and experience, of validating the authentic self, that marks Egerton out as a singular, important writer from this period,

¹¹¹ See B. A. Crackanthorpe, ‘The Revolt of the Daughters’, *The Nineteenth Century: a Monthly Review*, 35.205 (1894), 424-9 <https://www.proquest.com/historical-periodicals/revolt-daughters/docview/2643754/se-2?accountid=130472> [accessed 15 December 2024] and Hugh Stutfield, ‘Tommyrotics’ for context of this terminology; they became widely accepted bywords for derision and ridicule in order to undermine the advancement of women.

¹¹² For instance, after a nomadic and tumultuous early life, Egerton elopes to Norway with a married man, whom she subsequently marries following his wife’s death.

¹¹³ ‘Women in the Queen’s Reign’, *The Ludgate*, 4 (1897), 213-217 (p.216) <https://www.proquest.com/historical-periodicals/women-queens-reign/docview/613726299/se-2?accountid=130472> [accessed 07 September 2025]

making her a key figure through which to explore the concept of contested femininity, as the nature and scope of her work addresses the complexities head on. As Pykett argues, of all the New Woman writers, it was Egerton who most readily exploited the shift towards the use of ‘polyvocality and [a] multi-perspective approach ... the effect ... [being] to problematise moral and behavioural categories and, more particularly, to problematise the category of women.’¹¹⁴ Thus, her writing offers a chance to look beyond the stereotypes and myths that surround the New Woman figure, to challenge the idea that she was one dimensional and of fleeting interest, and to highlight her relevance and influence on the later cultural, social and political landscape: ‘Her strident inconsistencies point to the instability of New Woman discourses whose subversive and reformist vision were all too often clogged by essentialism.’¹¹⁵

Although her work primarily focuses on female experience and identity, the stance that Egerton adopted often proved problematic for the wider women’s movement, as she often seemed to be at odds with the main principles, caring little for either intellectual and social parity with men, instead arguing for ‘not civil but sexual rights for women’,¹¹⁶ or for advancing the social purist, and later, imperialist, cause that many New Woman writers subscribed to, such as Sarah Grand and Olive Schreiner. The social purity campaign, which had grown out of the moral objective of protecting girls from the dangers of prostitution and sex trafficking, became subsumed into the wider debate surrounding the degeneration of the race, a debate in which the position of woman was central. As the New Woman figure became increasingly linked with the concept of decadence that defined the Fin-de-Siècle, she provided a convenient target on which to hang the anxiety regarding the vitality of the race, and the consequent threat to the Empire, that was beginning to emerge in the imperialist discourse of the 1890s.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ Pykett, *The ‘Improper’ Feminine*, p.195.

¹¹⁵ Heilman, *New Woman Fiction*, p.45.

¹¹⁶ Prince, C. (2022). Egerton, George. In: Scholl, L., Morris, E. (eds) *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Victorian Women’s Writing*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-78318-1_120

¹¹⁷ Carol Dyhouse, *Girl Trouble: Panic and Progress in the History of Young Women* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 2013).

Conversely, Egerton forged her own path, adhering neither to mainstream literary conventions or to the challenges that were being explored by her fellow women writers, firmly eschewing the need for conformity and respectability in the search for a more authentic self, and, consequently, a fuller life: 'She refuses to accept less than the most complete life, the most complete freedom, the most complete soul for her women.'¹¹⁸ Furthermore, by identifying Egerton as one of the most radical writers of the Fin-de-Siècle, Bjørhovde notes that her 'rebellion took on a more private character: a rejection of conventional barriers restricting women's freedom of movement, socially and sexually. Egerton emphasized the right of women to be sexual *subjects*, a truly daring stand to take at the time.'¹¹⁹

Despite focusing on the negative impacted exacted by the patriarchy on the lives of women in many of her stories, Egerton also strove to develop a more egalitarian and utopian vision that could be reached in the relationship *between* women and men. This is most fully explored in 'The Regeneration of Two', the final story in *Discords*, in which the two main characters overcome their prejudices and preconceived ideas of each other and of themselves on their path towards a better life.

In the first part of the story, we are introduced to Fruen¹²⁰, a wealthy widow who is bored with her comfortable but, essentially, empty life, similarly trapped as she was in her unhappy marriage. It is not until she has a chance meeting with a bohemian poet that she begins to understand the artificiality of her existence. The ensuing conversation between the characters allows Egerton to voice her dissatisfactions with the nature of both men and women and the ways in which they interact with each other, establishing that societal conventions and constraints act as a barrier to any possibility of meaningful partnership. Following on from several unfulfilling relationships, the poet has shunned women, turning instead to nature for the nurture he seeks and lays the

¹¹⁸ Martha Vicinus, (1983). Introduction. In *Keynotes & Discords* (xix). Virago Press Limited.

¹¹⁹ Bjørhovde, *Rebellious Structures*, pp. 17-18.

¹²⁰ 'Fruen' is a Norwegian word meaning lady or woman, its usage in this story implies that Egerton intends her main character to represent Everywoman.

faults of modern life firmly with women: 'it is women, not men, who are the greatest bar to progress the world holds'. In contrast, Fruen argues that women have always been at the behest of patriarchal control and, thus, are not able to be true to themselves:

We have been taught to shrink from the honest expression of our wants and feelings as violations of modesty, or at least good taste. We have always been battling with some bottom layer of real womanhood that we may not reveal; the primary impulses of our original destiny keep shooting out mimosa-like threads of natural feeling through the outside husk of our artificial selves, producing complex creatures'.¹²¹

Although they go their separate ways, Fruen and the poet have a profound effect on each other, unknowingly sowing the seeds of a different way of being which plays out three years later, in the second half of the story. Fruen is now a changed woman, having used her wealth to open a commune for homeless and destitute women.¹²² She now leads an unorthodox life and finds meaning and salvation in her work, the poet's words having caused her to reassess her life. Having gained a deeper understanding of her worth as a woman, she can now pass this newfound knowledge on to others:

You stung me to analyse myself, to see what was under the form into which custom had fashioned me, of what pith I was made, what spirit, if any, lay under the outer woman ... In teaching me to find myself, you taught me more than you thought ... a feminine 'Umwertung aller Werthe', a new standard of woman's worth. Woman has cheapened herself body and soul through ignorant innocence, she must learn to worthen herself by all-seeing knowledge.¹²³

This raises an interesting point, that women are to some extent complicit in their subservient position and that they should take responsibility for pushing against the norm. Egerton explores this through the concept of performativity, observing that the ascribed version of the feminine model is a masquerade, a position later reinforced by

¹²¹ Egerton, 'The Regeneration of Two', in *Keynotes & Discords*, ed. by Martha Vicinus (London: Virago Press Limited, 1983), pp.163-253, (p.198).

¹²² Egerton was by no means original in her use of this trope as it had been used by writers such as William Blake, Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Gaskell, and it also reflected philanthropic endeavours such as the founding of Urania Cottage in 1847 by Charles Dickens and Angela Coutts-Burdett which offered a refuge for girls and women from destitution and assistance for emigration to Australia. For a more in depth understanding see Jenny Hartley *Charles Dickens and the House of Fallen Women* (York: Methuen, 2008). For a fictionalised account, see Stacey Halls, *The Household* (London: Manilla Press, 2024).

¹²³ Egerton, 'Regeneration', p. 241.

Butler: 'Gender is ... a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions.'¹²⁴ Furthermore, she argues:

If gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief.¹²⁵

The concept of performativity is most notably explored in 'Regeneration' through Egerton's recurrent use of cosmetics and clothing to signify both the way in which Fruen is initially compliant with her conventionally passive role but later becomes gradually aware of an inner strength and more authentic self, an awakening instigated by her first glance of the poet: 'she is conscious of a wonderful sudden change in herself',¹²⁶ and begins to understand that her life is lived through artifice, she 'looks at herself. It strikes her as never before, that the powder accentuates her lines and makes her look horribly haggard. She wipes it off carefully.' Thus, she begins to see herself anew, truthfully in light of 'the utterly non-admirative look in the man's eyes',¹²⁷ and begins on the path towards a regeneration of her self.

After listening to the poet's diatribe concerning the various types of women that he has observed, Fruen further begins to feel the constraints of the role she is playing:

it seems to her that she is inside a circle, and that his voice alone reaches her. She feels her corset press like an iron hand; she is shamed to the depths of her soul. The spots of rouge on her cheeks seem to sting as a sharp blow from a freshly gathered nettle ... she is conscious that she who has all her life let men care for her ... only cares now because this one 'crack-brained poet' ... is the first man who has touched the underlying fibres of her nature.¹²⁸

¹²⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (Abingdon: Routledge Classics, 2006), p. 190. I recognize that, whilst Egerton and Butler are coming at the theory of performativity from differing standpoints, namely that, as a nineteenth century writer, Egerton is still largely a gender essentialist who is critiquing the social constraints on women, I feel that the basic theoretical principles are useful to my line of argument.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.191-192.

¹²⁶ Egerton, 'Regeneration', p.126

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.182.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 196-7.

When the poet finally recognizes Fruen for the woman he met three years earlier, he attributes her transformation to the throwing off of costume and artifice, symbolized by the fact that she no longer wears a corset, but has assumed a natural, unadorned beauty. Egerton's use of this trope reflects the late Victorian dress reform movement, with organisations such as the Rational Dress Society campaigning for women being given the right to wear less restrictive clothing, both for health and social reasons, the use of the divided skirt being the most widely known example. This new mode of clothing provided an easy means for periodicals, most notably *Punch*, and the popular press to scrutinise and ridicule the New Woman figure, thereby significantly contributing to the anxiety generated by the advancement of women. The prescriptive use of clothing has been a means of control throughout history, and became a point of contention in the Fin-de-Siècle: 'Victorian corsetry working together with Victorian morality, repressed the female body and feminine identity both in and outside home'.¹²⁹

However, it is not only Fruen who has been transformed by their meeting, she similarly has had a deep impact on the poet, and, as such, they have regenerated each other. Thus, when he hears about the colony she now manages, he is inspired to write 'the best thing he has ever done ... and he feels a stream of sunlight flood his inner soul'.¹³⁰

Having found each other again, they both have doubts as to how they can move forward to a more meaningful relationship than convention dictates. Fruen chafes at the prospect of marriage and values her new-found independence too much to readily discard it for traditional marriage, for 'old-fashioned bondage' and 'she realises well that his love, no matter if it be his whole love, will not fill her life completely',¹³¹ which indicates that she no longer looks to a man for validation of herself. Equally, the poet has doubts as to what he can offer:

¹²⁹ Melis Mulazimoglu Erkal, 'The Cultural History of the Corset and Gendered Body in Social and Literary Landscapes', *European Journal of Language and Literature Studies*, 3.3 (2017) 109-118 (p.112) <http://dx.doi.org/10.26417/ejis.v9i1.p153-153>

¹³⁰ Egerton, 'Regeneration', p. 232.

¹³¹ Ibid., pp. 247-248.

If he judge her rightly, no love will ever satisfy her wholly; it will ever be more than one note; true, a grand note, in the harmony of union; but not the harmony. The whole man in him is touched by this new creature his stray words have waked into life: this grand, fearless, wholesome woman.¹³²

The concept of the free love union as a better model than traditional marriage was being widely debated in the Fin-de-Siècle by radicals such as Carpenter, Ellis and Karl Pearson, the latter having formed the Men and Women's Club (1885-1889), in which 'discussions were part of the proliferating discourses over sexuality that marked the 1880s, when Utopian projects for a 'new sexuality' flourished alongside new repressive legislation against prostitution, homosexuality, and pornography.'¹³³

Egerton's message is that both women and men need to realise that one's true self is independent of the other, that they should not seek meaning in each other without knowing their own worth and that both need to be true to themselves if they are to have a meaningful partnership. The utopian impulse underlying this story is that the relationship that is formed once both have found self-worth is much more lasting and fulfilling, one based on freedom and mutual respect rather than mutual bondage. As Vicinus notes, it is this proactive aspect of her work, that perhaps best illustrates how Egerton stood apart from other New Woman writers:

Certainly she shared with her female contemporaries a zeal (and zest) for describing the effects of sexual ignorance on women faced with venereal disease, or alcoholism or gratuitous violence on the part of a careless man. But she differed from her contemporaries in her portrayal of the solutions to these situations; she advocated not restraint and meaningful work, but sexual fulfilment and power.¹³⁴

Although now largely forgotten as a writer, some critics have emphasised the important part that Egerton has played in literary history, most significantly in highlighting female sexual autonomy at a time when the woman was deemed to be sexually passive.

Wendell Harris argues that, whilst she may not have been the first writer to

¹³² Ibid., p.246.

¹³³ Judith R Walkowitz, 'Science, Feminism and Romance: The Men and Women's Club 1885–1889', *History Workshop Journal*, 21.1 (1986), 37–59 (p. 37) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/21.1.37>>

¹³⁴ Vicinus, (1983). Introduction. In *Keynotes & Discords* (ix-x). Virago Press Limited.

acknowledge female sexuality, she was the first to do so in such a forthright and overt manner.¹³⁵ Pykett further reinforces Egerton's groundbreaking role in terms of agency and authenticity:

at around the time that Freud was beginning to develop the techniques of psychoanalysis by probing the secret inner lives of women ... Egerton was developing her own kind of key to what Freud (among others) saw as the riddle of femininity. She was developing a narrative technique in which to 'plot' female desire and to explore, from the woman's point of view, the question of what it is that a woman wants.¹³⁶

It is useful to explore this primary concern with the mystery of the 'eternal feminine'¹³⁷ through the perspective of French feminist theory, in particular that formulated by Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray in the post-1960s feminist second wave as they, like Egerton, emphasized sexual difference over sexual equality, focusing on essentially female qualities. Furthermore, in contrast to Anglo-American feminist theory from this period:

the French took it for granted that psychoanalysis could provide an emancipatory theory of the personal and a path to the exploration of the unconscious, both of vital importance to the analysis of the oppression of women in patriarchal society.¹³⁸

In *The Newly Born Woman*, Catherine Clément establishes that women are:

double. They are allied with what is regular, according to the rules, since they are wives and mothers, and allied as well with those natural disturbances, their regular periods, which are the epitome of paradox, order and disorder.¹³⁹

Cixous argues that Western thought rests on binary oppositions, such as day/night and culture/nature, in which the woman is always defined by the negative and lesser quality, aligned with chaos and beyond masculine rational thought. Thus, in the patriarchal

¹³⁵ Wendell V. Harris, 'Egerton: Forgotten Realist', *Victorian Newsletter* 35 (1968): 31-35 <http://hdl.handle.net/1811/103282> [accessed 30 August 2025].

¹³⁶ Pykett, *Engendering Fictions*, p.62.

¹³⁷ Egerton often uses this concept of the 'eternal feminine' (ewig weibliche) in her stories. It first appeared at the end of Goethe's play *Faust* (1832) and has been widely used across various disciplines, undergoing many interpretations, often denoting the essential qualities pertaining to the idea of 'woman', thereby invoking the charge of biological essentialism.

¹³⁸ Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1985), p.96.

¹³⁹ Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman* (London: I. B. Tauris Ltd., 2007), p.8.

order, woman has no agency: 'Either woman is passive or she does not exist. What is left of her is unthinkable, unthought'.¹⁴⁰ Similarly, Irigaray critiques the Freudian theory of sexual difference which states that, as a woman has no penis, she is absent, lacking, which, in effect, positions her as other and beyond representation, arguing that, cited in Moi: 'The feminine has consequently had to be deciphered as forbidden [interdit], in between signs, between the realized meanings, between the lines'.¹⁴¹ Moreover, if woman exists at all, she only does so in order to reflect man's image back to himself, in effect acting as a foil to his masculinity. Trapped in this patriarchal prison, women can either remain silent and marginalized/absent or mimic the male which Irigaray likens to a form of hysteria which reflects how, having challenged gender boundaries and stepped outside her feminine role, the New Woman was represented variously as mannish, unsexed or sexually deviant.

Thus, the patriarchy not only negates and devalues woman by equating her with emotion/body in contrast to man who is defined by rationality/mind, but positions her in a double bind, which itself subscribes to the hierarchical binary discourse. She is defined either as a passionless, non-sexual being, her domestic and maternal role granting her moral and spiritual superiority over man, (the Angel in the House), or as a primitive being, closer to nature and lower on the evolutionary scale than man. As women increasingly began to challenge gender boundaries and roles, it was this latter representation that was used to generate fear, suggesting the primitive was also close to hysteria and sexual deviancy. Egerton anticipates the disruption to the phallogentric system that foregrounds this branch of French feminist theory in her search for the authentic self: 'Men manufactured an artificial morality ... the untrue feminine is of man's making, whilst the strong, the natural, the true womanly is of God's making.'¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p.64.

¹⁴¹ Luce Irigaray, *Spéculum de l'autre femme* (Paris: Minuit, 1974) cited in Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1985), p.132.

¹⁴² Egerton, 'Now Spring Has Come', in *Keynotes & Discords*, ed. by Martha Vicinus (London: Virago Press Limited, 1983), pp. 37-67, (pp.41-42).

Further to my line of argument, that Egerton proves to be a key figure through which to explore the concept of contested femininity, is that she understood the manifestation of woman as an emotional being not merely as positive, but fundamental to any understanding regarding the 'bottom layer of real womanhood,'¹⁴³ and it is through the recurrent use of the themes of motherhood and sexuality that she is able to address the contradictions posed by the nature of woman: 'by fusing together an autonomous female sexuality and a sublime maternity Egerton's stories appear to wrest woman from the familiar whore/madonna dichotomy of the dominant discourse.'¹⁴⁴

Egerton is inconsistent in the representation of motherhood, her characters depicted variously as (un)natural mothers which allows her to explore the complexities that the maternal role signified in the late Victorian period. In 'A Cross Line', Gipsy does not conform to the 'feminine ideal', initially questioning her capacity for maternal feeling, suggested in the scene where she expresses disgust when shown some chicks by her husband and in which Egerton also implies that motherhood can be a burden: 'A dishevelled-looking hen, with spread wings trailing and her breast bare from sitting on her eggs, screeches after him'.¹⁴⁵ In contrast, at other times, Egerton sanctifies and elevates the maternal role, positioning it almost as a higher calling. For example, in the story, 'Gone Under', having heard Edith's life story which has taken a downward turn after the traumatic death of her unborn child, the unnamed narrator remarks:

I have known many women, and I think the *only divine* fibre in a woman is her maternal instinct. Every good quality she has is consequent or co-existent with that ... the deep, underlying generic instinct, the "mutterdrang," that lifts her above and beyond all animalism, and fosters the sublimist qualities of unselfishness and devotion.'¹⁴⁶

It could be argued that, by spiritualizing motherhood in this way, Egerton is simply adhering to the dominant essentialist discourse dictating that woman's 'natural', sole

¹⁴³ Egerton, 'Regeneration', p.198.

¹⁴⁴ Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine*, p.168.

¹⁴⁵ Egerton, 'A Cross Line', p.9.

¹⁴⁶ Egerton, 'Gone Under', in *Keynotes & Discords*, ed. by Martha Vicinus (London: Virago Press Limited, 1983), pp. 82-114, (pp.100-101). 'Mutterdrang' roughly translates as 'mother urge.'

function was to procreate, but she undercuts this by suggesting that motherhood was not intrinsically linked to physical reproduction, demonstrating that mothering could be achieved in other ways, often bringing a deeper sense of satisfaction and completeness:

It is striking, in Egerton's fiction, that non-biological motherhood is shown to be much more fulfilling than biological ties with children. In 'The Regeneration of Two' ... the New-Womanish protagonist achieves fulfillment and a strong sense of independent selfhood through her fostering of 'illegitimate' children ... by contrast, biological motherhood is repeatedly associated with psychological suffering and despair in the stories.¹⁴⁷

Thus, Egerton often presents a multifaceted view of the female experience, marking her out as innovative and influential, more than merely an essentialist writer that some critics have claimed:

the effect of her writing is rather more complex: Egerton does not simply reproduce this essentialist discourse, she also appropriates and interrogates it. Although she may ultimately remain within it, she puts it to new uses by attempting to reclaim autonomous feeling as a source of power.¹⁴⁸

It is Cixous' theory of 'écriture féminine', outlined in 'The Laugh of the Medusa', that most significantly resonates with Egerton's writing in that fundamental to both is a strong connection between female creativity and sexuality, a fusion which is powerful and a potential instigator for change to the status quo: 'Woman must write herself ... must put herself into her text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement'.¹⁴⁹ In addition, Cixous' claim that: 'I write woman: woman must write woman'¹⁵⁰ echoes Egerton who declared that she could only write from the woman's point of view, and that, as a woman, it was her right to determine what that perspective

¹⁴⁷ Sally Ledger, 'The New Woman and Feminist Fictions', in *The Cambridge Companion to The Fin de Siècle*, ed. Gail Marshall, p.161.

¹⁴⁸ Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine*, p.168.

¹⁴⁹ Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1.4 (1976), 875-893 (p. 875) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173239>> [accessed 11 April 2017].

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.877.

was, to define: 'the *terra incognita* of herself, as she knew herself to be, not as man like to imagine her.'¹⁵¹

'Medusa' is a passionate call to arms, charging women to write from their bodies in order to challenge and subvert the patriarchal order, reclaiming not only their history but also securing a central position in their future; thus the essay has a twofold focus which Cixous establishes immediately, 'what I say has at least two sides and two aims: to break up, to destroy; and to foresee the unforeseeable, to project'.¹⁵² Women must fight and resist the patriarchy that has excluded them, keeping them in the shadows and margins, denying them a voice and a history. At times, the tone is revolutionary and militant, at others, joyful and visionary, elevating and celebrating the potential of women's creativity, which Cixous believes to be a force for the good of all society. However, it is a complex theory, arguably idealistic and utopian in its reach and often inaccessible. Toril Moi discusses the many inconsistencies that run throughout Cixous's work, noting that this ambivalence has been acknowledged by Cixous herself, 'fundamentally contradictory, Cixous's theory of writing and femininity shifts back and forth from a Derridean emphasis on textuality as difference to a full-blown metaphysical account of writing as voice, presence and origin.'¹⁵³ Thus, her shifting theoretical stance is problematic but it is perhaps useful to consider that Cixous is drawing on many influences. She is a poststructuralist and, as such, is interested in the indeterminacy and instability of meaning, and is greatly influenced by the deconstruction theory most closely associated with Jacques Derrida; she also looks to the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan in order to explore the notion of the self and identity.¹⁵⁴ However, she is also a feminist and as such is critical of the theories that she

¹⁵¹ Egerton, 'A Keynote to Keynotes', p.58.

¹⁵² Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', p.875.

¹⁵³ Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, p. 119. Moi discusses how much of the nuance of Cixous's theorizing may have been lost in translation. See pp.102-3.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, see pp. 92-126, for further discussion on how the theories formulated by Freud, Lacan, and Derrida intersect with Cixous.

draws on, arguing primarily for the validation of the female perspective, affirming the concept of sexual difference, and formulating her idea of a feminine form of writing.¹⁵⁵

'A Cross Line' is the story which anticipates Cixous' theory most patently, in particular the extended interior monologue in which Gipsy imagines herself escaping the mundanity of her life for a more exotic experience, her fantasizing becoming wilder and more sensual: 'her thoughts shape themselves into a wild song, a song to her steed of flowing mane and satin skin; an uncouth rhythmical jingle with a feverish beat; a song to the untamed spirit that dwells in her.'¹⁵⁶ Attuned to the rhythm of her body, she becomes powerful and creative, a Salome type figure who, far from being the passive, objectified muse, Egerton's protagonist is given agency:

She can feel now ... the grand intoxicating power of swaying all these human souls to wonder and applause. She can see herself with parted lips and panting, rounded breasts, and a dancing devil in each glowing eye, sway voluptuously to the wild music that rises, now slow, now fast, now deliriously wild, seductive, intoxicating, with a human note of passion in its strain. She can feel the answering shiver of feeling that quivers up to her from the dense audience, and she flies swifter and swifter, and lighter and lighter, till the very serpents seem alive with jewelled scintillations.¹⁵⁷

Her fantasy, suggestive of sexual abandon and voyeuristic in tone, celebrates the power of both female sexuality and creativity, and is, arguably, an example of *écriture féminine*. The idea that female power can be a positive and life affirming force, something to be celebrated rather than repressed, is a further parallel between Egerton and Cixous, as demonstrated by the way they subvert the concept of the dangerous/degenerate woman, often represented by the stereotype of the 'femme fatale'. Egerton's protagonist in the fantasy interlude in 'A Cross Line' foreshadows the figure of the Medusa that Cixous focuses on as a way of addressing the male bias underlying cultural and literary images and myths. In classical mythology, Medusa is portrayed as a powerful, hence dangerous, woman who must be controlled and chastised, and so is beheaded by the

¹⁵⁵ Jo Burroughs, (2023), 'The Difference of View', *HPEN7002: Methods and Approaches in the Study of Language and Literature*, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, unpublished essay, p.4.

¹⁵⁶ Egerton, 'A Cross Line', p.19.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p.20.

male hero, who then makes use of her to further himself; as Mary Beard notes she is 'one of the most potent ancient symbols of male mastery over the destructive dangers that the very possibility of female power represented.'¹⁵⁸ It is an enduring and powerful image that has been variously used throughout Western art to suggest that women's power is both illegitimate and dangerous.¹⁵⁹ Conversely, Cixous argues that we should resist this reading, that, by shifting the perspective we gain a different narrative: 'You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing.'¹⁶⁰

In this way, both Egerton and Cixous reappropriate the traditional patriarchal construct of woman, reinventing and relocating it, urging us to challenge and disrupt prevailing stereotypes and misrepresentations. In addition, the way in which they highlight the fluidity and indeterminacy underling the nature of woman suggests that perhaps it is not necessary, or even possible, to define woman but to accept the inherent contradictions.

¹⁵⁸ Mary Beard, *Women & Power* (London: Profile Books Ltd, 2018), p. 71.

¹⁵⁹ Burroughs, 'The Difference of View', pp. 20-21.

¹⁶⁰ Cixous, 'Medusa', p.885.

Conclusion

As I have argued, the concept of ‘woman’ has been problematic throughout history and it is still being contested today, with much debate over exactly who identifies as or what constitutes ‘woman’, with the resultant anxiety and moral panic widely expressed in the media and by various focus groups. Highlighting the representation of ‘woman’ at a particular point in history, in this case that of the New Woman in the Fin-de-Siècle, is useful in that it enables us to uncover the complexities that have been lost through the marginalisation and misrepresentation of the New Woman writer and to reassess the impact and influence that both the New Woman figure and writer has had on the wider cultural, social and political landscape. The extensive attention that the New Woman garnered was indicative not just of her popularity with the reading public but also established that she was of central importance to the Fin-de-Siècle and not just a vehicle for ridicule and derision. Conversely, the fact that she was lampooned so frequently by periodicals such as *Punch* is testament to the fact that she posed a significant risk to the status quo and was at the heart of many of the social changes that were being debated and formulated.

Taking advantage of changes within the publishing industry, the New Woman writer appropriated and reimagined the short story format as a means through which to give voice to the feminine perspective, finding opportunities for publication in periodicals, such as *The Yellow Book*, which favoured this innovative model over the traditional serialised format.

The New Woman figure was complex and multifaceted, and it has been useful to focus on George Egerton who presents somewhat as a hybrid figure, neither identifying as a feminist or as a New Woman writer, but who is nevertheless widely accepted as the paradigmatic example of that faction. Many of her stories are open ended and fragmentary, with a shifting narrative style, and she has been credited with foregrounding female sexuality, signifying it as a positive force rather than an indication of degeneracy and decadence. Moreover, it has been constructive to explore Egerton through the perspective of French feminist theory, particularly that formulated by Hélène Cixous, as both place value on the power and creativity of feminine feeling and,

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arguably, Egerton anticipates Cixous' theory of *écriture féminine*. On a final note, I will allude to the fact that the New Woman writer was often utopian in outlook, envisioning a more inclusive and equal way of life, based on acceptance and mutual respect, a sentiment echoed by Cixous:

I am for you what you want me to be at the moment you look at me in a way you've never seen me before: at every instant. When I write, it's everything that we don't know we can be that is written out of me, without exclusions, without stipulation ... In one another we will never be lacking.¹⁶¹

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p. 893.

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