



## Teaching Victorian Short Fiction

Victoria Margree

### Abstract

This essay argues for greater inclusion of Victorian short fiction in university teaching. In the first part of the essay I argue that Victorian short fiction has been subject to a double marginalisation in scholarship. This has resulted, firstly, from the minor status of short fiction in general, and secondly, from the focus of attempts to redeem the short story upon proto-modernist stories. This leaves underexplored the greater part of short fiction from the nineteenth century – particularly highly plotted popular fictions, and fictions published before the 1890s. Part two contends that this scholarly neglect is reflected in an insufficiency of pedagogic scholarship on Victorian short fiction. It argues for the teaching potential of this material in terms of moving beyond the canon, enabling students to become producers of knowledge, and decolonising the curriculum. Part three provides a case study of a digital platform – the Victorian Short Fiction Project – and an 1862 tale collected there from *London Society* magazine which focuses upon female art students negotiating possibly conflicting desires for autonomy, professional fulfilment, and marriage. The analysis aims to show that even ephemeral, anonymous short fiction of this kind can open up valuable classroom discussions of narrative form, readerly engagement, and the complex ideological work being undertaken by popular Victorian fictions.

### Key Words

short fiction; short story; pedagogy; canon; decolonising; women; genre.

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### Introduction: Rediscovering the Popular Victorian Short Story

The short story is the product of today. This is the age of condensation. You condense an ox into a spoonful of essence. You condense a three-volume novel into eighteen pages. In other words, you boil it down [...]

This effect of largeness may be produced by the skilful treatment of a single incident. This incident, too, may be of the most trivial kind. Your heroine, for instance, sees your hero on Tuesday night. You do not suggest that she ever saw him before. You do not suggest that she will ever see him again. You simply point out that on Wednesday morning she was not the same. We are told that America is the home of the short story. You will see this method handled to perfection there.

(Marsh 1891: 23-30)

In his 1891 essay “The Short Story,” published in *Home Chimes* magazine, Richard Marsh both foretells the imminent death of the Victorian three-decker novel and takes satirical aim at precisely the kind of short fiction that literary critics in the twentieth century would consider the apotheosis of the form. Tongue planted firmly in cheek, Marsh addresses his readers as budding writers of short fiction, advising them to avoid at all costs producing a story in which anything very much happens. Impressing an editor of a literary magazine is vastly more likely if the art can be cultivated of “making something out of nothing,” in the service of which the aspiring author would be well advised to keep “a dictionary at hand, with all the small words left out – or, at least, all the words which have a meaning.” If the story has a male character, he must not be a hero; if there is humour, it may be “dry” or “acid” humour only; if it treats of love, “the treatment must be cynical.” Pessimism is the order of the day – “take it for granted that the world is hideous.” But above all, Marsh exhorts, “to whatever class of short story

*your* short story may belong, let it be psychological. All good stories are psychological. The age is psychological. Let it be introspective. The age is introspective.”<sup>1</sup>

I begin this introductory essay with Marsh not because I agree with his assessment of the plotless, psychological short story as vacuity masquerading as profundity, but because I want to argue that the kind of short fiction he preferred has been unjustly neglected in short-story scholarship. Marsh himself was a writer of popular, genre fiction, and while known mostly for his bestselling novel, *The Beetle* (1897), he was also the author of innumerable short stories published in periodicals and in his own short story collections. Marsh’s stories were very different from the kind he lampoons in his article, being themselves often high in action and event, and treating themes that include not only romance and humour, but also crime, horror and sport.<sup>2</sup> A member of what Andrew Lang called the “partisans of stories told for the story’s sake” ([1886] 2000), Marsh was a defender of short fiction that was popular in the sense that I take it to be understood by the *Victorian Popular Fictions Journal*: accessible, widely consumed, and involving forms of readerly pleasure and engagement that are worth enquiring into. But when literary critics began to take short fiction seriously during the twentieth century, this was not the kind of short fiction they had in mind. Instead, priority was given to what Clare Hanson would call “plotless” stories, in which little might happen by way of external event and the focus is on interior movements of thought and feeling, over highly “plotted” stories which are high in incident (1985: 6). Hanson had hardly originated this distinction, for as will already be clear from Marsh’s satirical account, it had already developed in the late nineteenth century. But she declared her own preference to be with the plotless variety, and other critics agreed, seeing this as the form in which the distinctive aesthetic and narrative possibilities of short fiction could truly be realised. Since such stories had many qualities in common with modernist literature, this in turn led to an historicising of short fiction that looked at nineteenth-century texts through the lens of early twentieth-century modernism, seeing in certain stories from the last decade of the century characteristics that could be considered proto-modernist, and enabling the idea that the short story proper was born in the 1890s. But the problem with this periodisation, I argue here, is that it has left vast tracts of Victorian short fiction outside of the purview of short-story scholarship.

The distance of much short Victorian fiction from the idea of the short story proper can be seen if we briefly consider current articulations of what constitutes a short story. Though it is rightly acknowledged that there can be no ultimate definition, short stories are frequently theorised as having certain characteristics that make them a distinct aesthetic category from the novel and not merely a lesser (quantitatively or qualitatively) version of it. In a 2019 [podcast](#) by Conor Reid, in discussion with Paul March-Russell and short story writer Colin Walsh, chief among these characteristics are proposed to be: a single situation or theme; an impressionistic quality; an absence of linguistic or narrative flab (short stories are “pure muscle”); and a tension between clarity (through exactness of word choice) and obscurity coupled with ambiguity (through the necessity of gaps and omissions). While offering an invaluable account of what the short story has evolved to be today, it is immediately obvious

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<sup>1</sup> I am working from a transcription of the Marsh article which does not provide the original page numbers.

<sup>2</sup> Marsh also contributed to the development of the serial short story with his hugely popular creations Judith Lee (a lip-reading detective) and Sam Briggs (a hapless clerk turned war hero) who appeared in the *Strand Magazine* across the first two decades of the twentieth century (see Vuohelainen 2018). As I have argued elsewhere (Margree 2016), while regularly pilloried by the literary establishment as a hack writer flooding the market with formulaic fiction, he himself subscribed to an idea of storytelling as a painstaking craft, and the most memorable of his fictions display a mastery at constructing suspenseful, surprising, page-turning plots.

that much of this does not correspond to the characteristics of a great many of the shorter narrative forms that proliferated in the Victorian period, including the tale, the sketch (a supposedly impromptu, unfinished outline in words of a person or scene), and the instalment that was part of a longer narrative (such as Gaskell's *Cranford* stories). Far from resembling the short fictions or even flash fictions<sup>3</sup> of today, much Victorian 'short fiction' regularly achieved 30,000 words in length, was written to a word count determined by the space a magazine editor needed to fill rather than an aesthetic of trimming words to a bare minimum, and – as we shall see – sometimes attempted to encapsulate plots that might have filled the pages of a novel.

The aim then of this special issue is to argue for re-engagement with Victorian short fiction in its manifold, sometimes even prolix guises, and with the popular, "plotted" short story as well as with the "plotless," psychological story that can be seen as anticipating modernism. The essays collected here give just a flavour of the breadth and richness of Victorian short fiction, and it is hoped that they will encourage further enquiry into this vast body of work. Tim Killick in his landmark 2008 study of early nineteenth-century short fiction argued persuasively against the "view of this era as one of relative infertility" (5), demonstrating how a scholarly focus upon stories from the mid to late century unjustly marginalised a large part of the history of short fiction.<sup>4</sup> The period since publication of his important book has seen a welcome growth in studies of nineteenth-century short fiction, with scholarship on crime and detective fiction and on children's literature particularly focusing on works from the 1840s and 1850s onwards.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, renewed attention to supernatural fiction has regenerated interest in ghost stories from the second half of the century onwards, although even here there is a tendency to prioritise fictions from its last couple of decades.<sup>6</sup> In general, I would suggest that short-story scholarship continues largely to prioritise the *fin-de-siècle* period and a select group of authors, and that this means that vast swathes of material remains unexamined. Of course, one reason for this neglect is that so much Victorian short fiction was published in periodicals – often anonymously – and never made it inside book covers, with the status and durability that this brings. With digital technologies today able to bring facsimiles of this material to us in our homes, offices or classrooms, it is easier than it was even ten years ago to access many of these fictions and often in their original publication contexts. But even digitisation projects are guided by assumptions about what is worth archiving (as well as limited by the practical issue of whether material was even preserved at the time of original publication), and much fiction – particularly cheap fiction aimed at

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<sup>3</sup> Flash fiction is defined by its particular brevity; though how brief is a matter of debate (commentators agree it may be as short as five or six words, but estimates of the upper end vary from 1,000 to 2,000 words). A wealth of resources can be found at the webpages of the [International Flash Fiction Association](#), hosted by the University of Chester.

<sup>4</sup> The absence of consideration of early nineteenth-century fictions within this special issue is a consequence only of the particular interests of the contributors, and I very much hope that Romantic era and early Victorian short narrative forms will continue to be studied and taught.

<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to Lucy Andrew for drawing my attention to this material. In relation to crime and detection, please see especially studies by Worthington (2005) and Sussex (2010). With reference to children's stories, please see Boyd (2003) and Andrew (2017).

<sup>6</sup> In particular this re-evaluation of the ghost story has focused upon its uses in the hands of women writers. See, for example, studies by Edmundson (2013), Margree (2019) and Liggins (2020). Kate Krueger's monograph *British Women Writers and the Short Story, 1850-1930: Reclaiming Social Space* (2014) contains a chapter on women's supernatural fiction while also considering women's wider contribution to the short story genre in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

juvenile and working-class readers – remains difficult to access as fragile material in physical archives or obtainable only directly from collectors.<sup>7</sup>

In this introductory essay, I shall make an argument for more fully integrating the Victorian short story into not just our scholarship, but also our classrooms: for including more Victorian short fiction in university modules and for making use of precisely those online resources that can help students understand how texts would have been received and made sense of by contemporary readers. The essay is divided into three parts. The first part will explore how short fiction developed and was thought about during the nineteenth century and in its immediate wake, tracing the emergence and embedding of what I shall refer to as the double marginalisation of the popular Victorian short story. Part two will argue for the pedagogic value of teaching popular Victorian short fiction in terms of expanding teaching beyond the canon, encouraging students to become producers of knowledge, and contributing to the work of decolonising the curriculum. Part three will exemplify some of these general arguments by offering the case study of some periodical short fiction which has recently been made available through the [Victorian Short Fiction Project](#), an online project to “collect, edit, and share examples of the wide variety of short fiction published in Britain during the nineteenth century” that has its origins in a classroom assignment for undergraduates. Through a discussion of “My First Picture: A Tale” by the anonymous R.M. in the inaugural volume of James Hogg’s *London Society* magazine in 1862, I will try to show how a piece of ephemera such as this could be opened up for consideration by students in terms of the contemporary debates it connects with and the pleasures and identifications it would have offered to its mid-Victorian readers – as well the ways in which it might or might not allow twenty-first-century readers to relate to it.

## **Part 1: The Double Marginalisation of the Popular Victorian Short Story**

As has been well documented, when short stories began to flourish from the middle part of the nineteenth century, and then burgeoned in the latter two decades, it was in response to the exponential growth in periodical publishing that had been driven by technical revolutions in printing processes and the manufacture of paper, repeal of trade duties, changes in copyright law and growing rates of literacy.<sup>8</sup> With literary magazines now very profitable, magazine editors required short fiction to fill the spaces between articles, images, advertisements and longer fictions, and sometimes even came to prefer short stories over novel serialisations. These shorter narrative forms proved popular not only with readers but also with professional authors, who could see a quick remuneration for their work. However, partly because of the commercial conditions that lay behind its success, the short story was frequently looked down upon by the literary establishment as a mere popular genre, one turned to by serious writers for pecuniary reasons alone, or at best as a kind of testing ground for ideas that would achieve full artistic expression only once developed in novelistic form.

It would be a long time before the short story was able to throw off its reputation as a lesser version of the novel. The notion of condensation that Marsh begins his *Home Chimes* essay with was actually central to this mode of perception, since a short story was understood by many Victorian commentators and authors to be an attempt to do what novels do within a smaller narrative unit. Marsh’s Bovril image (“You condense an ox into a spoonful of essence. You condense a three-volume novel into eighteen pages”) actually depicts this idea

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<sup>7</sup> My thanks again to Lucy Andrew for this helpful reminder of the ongoing difficulties of access even in face of the digital revolution.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Hunter (2012) and Springhall (1994).

in terms unusually positive for the period – as a matter of intensifying a thing’s powers by distilling it to its essence.<sup>9</sup> Most Victorian critics, however, saw such supposed “boiling down” as a matter of attenuating rather than enhancing the novel’s powers by attempting to do its work at the wrong scale. It was considered that the smaller canvas of the short story or tale meant it could not satisfactorily achieve what the realist novel could: it could not offer complex characterisation over a long period of time; could not enrich main plots with subplots; could not depict detailed material and social landscapes. Though editors and publishers recognised the popular appeal of short fiction, they often considered it an inferior artistic and intellectual genre, if an expedient one in enticing readers to literary magazines where the more serious fare of the serialised novel was also on offer. During his editorship of *Cornhill Magazine*, William Makepeace Thackeray advised Anthony Trollope (in another alimentary metaphor) to produce for it short stories since the “public love the tarts” while acknowledging that he himself “prefer[red] bread and cheese,” thereby depicting the short story as only superficially appetising in comparison to the genuinely nourishing novel (quoted in Liggins et al: 26).

Indeed, the increasing vogue for shortness in the final decades of the century fed directly into fears about popular tastes that were focused upon a new constituency of reader. The educational reforms of the 1870s and 1880s had produced a generation of newly literate working-class and lower-middle-class readers, many of them young urban workers who desired short articles and fictions that could be easily consumed on the commute to work. These were the “quarter-educated” readers that George Gissing depicted in *New Grub Street* (1891) as demanding easily digestible morsels from lightweight magazines such as *Tit-Bits* (or *Chit Chat* in Gissing’s novel), and as encouraging the rise of a new type of professional author who “make[s] a trade of an art!” (Gissing 2008: 460, 59). Such readers were deemed to lack the time, mental stamina or type of education needed to appreciate intellectual complexity or high aesthetic quality, and their preferences were condemned as leading to a flooding of the marketplace with inferior, formulaic fictions. As the ideological demarcation between popular fiction and serious literature became solidified during the *fin de siècle*, short fiction was generally deemed to fall on the wrong side of this divide. The short story was conceived as a smaller and lesser genre in comparison to the struggling three-decker realist novel, and its popularity was both sign and symptom of a wider cultural decline.

Of course, this is not to say that short fiction was without its defenders. The broad history of marginalisation that I am tracing here has always been punctuated by efforts by writers and critics to theorise shortness not as deficit but precisely as the potential to do something that novels cannot do.<sup>10</sup> An early and influential instance is of course Edgar Allan Poe, who argued in his 1842 review of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales* that the “short prose narrative, requiring from a half-hour or one or two hours in its perusal” was the

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<sup>9</sup> Bovril had been invented in the 1880s as a superfood designed to reinvigorate Napoleon III’s troops, and apposite to this discussion, the “vril” part of its name was taken from Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s popular fiction novel, *The Coming Race* (1870), in which vril is an energy-giving substance that is the basis of a superior race’s supremacy (see Murphy 2019).

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Emma Young and James Bailey have outlined “three key waves of interest in the short story” (2015: 1). What characterises each of these waves is an attempt to rescue the short story from its depiction as the novel’s inferior cousin and to formulate its distinctive aesthetic and narrative principles, with varying degrees of attention as well to the historical and social circumstances of short fiction’s production. Young and Bailey date the first of these waves as beginning at the end of the Victorian period, and include Brander Matthews’ essay “The Philosophy of the Short Story” (1901) along with the theorisations by James and Wedmore that I refer to here. They date the second wave from the 1960s to 1980s and the third waves from the 1990s to today.

prose form best suited to the display of “high genius.” Poe’s rationale was derived from his belief that artistic composition should aim at producing a “unique or single effect” and that only the undisturbed reading experience afforded by short fiction could deliver this with undiluted force (Poe 1842). Poe’s aesthetic stipulations seem not to have been taken up immediately in the British context, but towards the end of the century in England, writers of short fiction similarly turned towards theorising shortness as an enabling rather than a constraining condition. Henry James described the short story as “a form delightful and difficult” which – when done well – was characterised by a “rigour of brevity” capable of producing “distinct effects” that compensated for the loss of what could be achieved within novels (James 1898: 652). In the same year Frederick Wedmore, in an echo of Poe, wrote of the “unity of effect” that the short story could produce through its “pregnant brevity” (1898: 410, 412). For both James and Wedmore, what gave the story this distinctive capacity was the necessity of omission. What the short story must at all costs not be was precisely a condensed novel – “a novel told within restricted space” (Wedmore 1898: 409). By abandoning novelistic ambition, and instead embracing the need for selection, suggestiveness, lacunae and “the sacrifice of verbiage” (James 1898: 653), authors could transform the short story into “serious Art” (Wedmore 1898: 408).

As Adrian Hunter has drawn attention to, at the heart of James’ and Wedmore’s attempts to distinguish “the short story proper from the mass market popular tale” was precisely an idea of “plotlessness” (Hunter 2012: 8). James contrasted stories which treated a “detached incident, single and sharp, as clear as a pistol-shot” with a “rarer performance,” the creation of an “impression” in which “The ‘story’ is nothing, the subject everything” (1898: 652-3). Wedmore similarly defined a “Short Story” (capitalised) as “a short imaginative work in the difficult medium of prose; for plot, or story proper, is no essential part of it” (1898: 407). He praised Alphonse Daudet’s “Les Deux Auberges” as “a little piece that has no story at all; but a ‘situation’ depicted, and when depicted, *left*” (412). What is clear in both James’ and Wedmore’s accounts is the desire to rehabilitate the short story as literary by distancing it as far as possible from the popular: the short story is a matter of Art when it is plotless, and when it is plotless it is *difficult*. James (1898: 652) calls it an endeavour full of “risks” for the writer, while Wedmore (1898: 408-9) notes that its “allusiveness” makes it an effort that “must be met half way” by the reader. Wedmore in particular is clear that the plotless, literary short story will be appreciated only by “serious readers” (407). The “mass of readers” by contrast are incapable of doing justice to it, trained as they are by a “superficial education” (414) to think that “Fiction is but a *délassement*, and the artists who practice it [mere] contributors to public entertainment” (408).

While by no means all short story theorists in the twentieth century have endorsed Wedmore’s elitist framing, it is hard to shake the feeling that the tendency to affirm plotlessness as the *sine qua non* of the short story proper has prioritised difficulty over accessibility, impression over incident, and as such the modern(ist) over the Victorian.<sup>11</sup> Hunter sees as crucial to the development of the hegemony of an Americanised, Poe-centric version of the short story a debate within the US academy in the early twentieth century about the professionalisation of literary studies. He argues that critics such as Brander Matthews, Henry Siedel Canby and Bliss Perry appropriated for their cause a particular kind of short story: one that “de-emphasise[d] plot” and prioritised “impressionism [...] over rationalism,

<sup>11</sup> See for example Seán O’Faoláin, whose 1948 study, *The Short Story*, theorises the story as a distinctive aesthetic category that makes particular demands upon authors: “The novel and the short-story are two totally different genres and few men have been equally at home in both” (O’Faoláin 1948: 57). For, O’Faoláin, as with many other twentieth-century critics, that distinctiveness has to do with compression, suggestion, implication and an impressionistic quality of language.

literariness over populism, the aesthetic over the instrumental” (Hunter 2019: 33-34). As such, he contends, they “aligned” the short story “with the aesthetic and cultural priorities of an emergent literary modernism” (34) and their ideas would go on to be influential upon later schools of short story criticism. Indeed, as Ruth Robbins has observed in a different connection, there has been “a longstanding preference amongst commentators on short fiction for seeing the short story as a quintessentially modern form, and perhaps necessarily therefore also as a modernist one” (2010: 111).

If we understand the plotless short story as expressing many of the features of literary modernism, then my claim about the double marginalisation of the Victorian popular short story becomes clearer. Of course, some fiction from the Victorian period can be rehabilitated along these lines. In the last decade of the nineteenth century, many writers experimented with precisely the capacity of short fiction to eschew cause and effect narration, narrative closure and reliable narration, to focus instead upon atmosphere and interiority. For example, and as Anne-Marie Beller has rightly argued elsewhere, New Woman writers such as George Egerton and Sarah Grand can be considered as “anticipat[ing] many of the dominant features of twentieth-century Modernism” (Beller 2019: 195). But if plotlessness is allowed to make the proto-modernist experimentation of the 1890s an origin for the short story proper, where does this leave earlier Victorian short stories which in contrast were frequently high in incident and often drew heavily upon the developing conventions of genre fiction? My fear is that these earlier fictions are put at risk of being inferiorised by an account that mistakenly conflates evolution with teleology. A dominant idea in short story criticism is that the short story in nineteenth-century Britain developed late in comparison to the US, Germany, France and Russia. Sean O’Faoláin’s study *The Short Story*, for example, focuses on Russian, French, American and Irish writers, and O’Faoláin comments that “One is tempted to say that the English nature does not take kindly to the short form” (1948: 36). Dean Baldwin refers to the British short story’s “retarded evolution” (1993: 23). Even Adrian Hunter has claimed that only in the 1890s, with writers “beginning to explore the art of writing ‘short,’” had the short story entered “its decisively modern phase in England” (2012: 19). Hunter’s discussion of stories by Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy sees them as lending support to H. E. Bates’ “theory that Victorian story writers were in thrall to novelistic conventions” (17-18) – for Hunter, the short story in the hands of these authors was a pre- or even anti-modern form. Hunter is perhaps not using these terms pejoratively but rather stressing these authors’ use of the short story to explore supernaturalism and to integrate elements of oral folktale. But it is nonetheless hard not to see in his, and particularly Baldwin’s, formulations a conception of the earlier Victorian period as one in which short fiction was caught in a state of arrested development, waiting to become what it was always destined to be. Sympathetic investigation of this period of literary production, however, reveals a rich diversity of forms out of which the short story proper as it is known today was only “one among many of the futures that were possible” (Thorne-Murphy 2016).

This *VPFJ* special issue therefore asks what happens if we change the lens of scholarship so that we are not reading Victorian short fictions backwards through the perspective of literary modernism, hoping to find proto-modernist elements within them, but instead are enquiring into the specific forms of enjoyment and engagement that these fictions in all their guises offered to contemporary readers. Or to put things another way, it does not accept the view of many late nineteenth-century or twentieth-century critics that only proto-modernist plotlessness redeems the short story and makes it worthy of serious attention. Many of the essays collected here enquire into earlier and popular forms of the short story, including ones that might even look uncomfortably like that most cardinal of sins, an attempt to produce “a novel in a nutshell” (Wedmore 1898: 407).

Brittany Roberts' essay, "Plotting Sensation Stories: Affect and Intuition in Short Sensation Fiction," offers the important reminder that the sensation phenomenon was not restricted to novels and calls for critical examination of the "understudied form" of the sensational short stories that flourished in periodicals. Exploring what effects are produced when a "sensational plotline that has all the makings of an 1860s triple-decker novel" makes its way into a story of a "mere fifty-five pages," Roberts' essay develops an important argument about the role of intuition, impression and affect in hitherto relatively unexplored stories by Wilkie Collins, Charles Dickens, Ellen Wood and J.S. Le Fanu.

Tracy Hughes' contribution, "Darkest Wessex: Hardy, the Gothic Short Story, and Masculinity" considers short stories by Thomas Hardy, who Wedmore had considered to have failed at the short story (407). Hughes' essay, in contrast, allows us to consider this neglected aspect of Hardy's oeuvre from a different perspective. Displacing a critical lens that has all too often viewed Hardy exclusively as a canonical author of long-form fiction, Hughes situates him instead within the popular traditions of Gothic fiction, folklore and oral storytelling. The effect is to reveal how Hardy harnesses "the power of brevity" to focus his exploration of destructive forms of masculinity and their deleterious effects upon female subjectivities into distilled form in lurid episodes that draw upon the fantastic.

Jonathan Potter, in "Picture Stories, 1840-1860, or Problems with Photographs," explores some of the earliest short fictions considered in this special issue. His fascinating discussion brings to light a wealth of material published in periodicals in the middle part of the century that "made use of the literary form of the short story to do things with pictures." These stories, in which a picture (textually represented yet rarely visually reproduced) plays a central narrative role, are considered by Potter as constituting a distinct genre involving conventions that could, however, be productively subverted. Focusing his attention on stories which foreground a photograph rather than a painting, Potter argues for the relevance of this popular narrative form to an understanding of photography's reception and the broader context of nineteenth-century visual culture.

Anne-Marie Beller's contribution, "Collapsing the Courtship Plot: The Challenge to Mid-Victorian Romance in New Woman Short Stories of the 1890s," focuses upon three stories by Mona Caird, Ella D'Arcy and Ella Hepworth Dixon. As Beller demonstrates, while these texts give prominence to omissions, unreliability and open-endedness, and as such could be considered proto-modernist experimentations with short-story form, they also negotiate a narrative structure that was central to the popular fiction of the mid-century: the courtship plot. In eliciting and then frustrating expectations of the courtship plot's fulfilment, these stories suggest that "a more complex obstacle to female emancipation" than societal conservatism may exist "in women's own illogical and recalcitrant desires." Beller's essay thus casts a light on an ambivalence at the heart of New Woman subjectivity that has not perhaps as yet been fully reckoned with in scholarship.

I take it that these essays together prompt us to ask: what can account for the wide dissemination and consumption of these short fictions and others like them? What made them popular with Victorian readers, and writers? What effects resulted (intended or otherwise) from attempts to compress novelistic plots for a smaller canvas? What roles might short fiction have played in contributing to the development of popular genres in the nineteenth century? And in what ways might Victorian short stories still speak to us, still offer us forms of pleasure, identification, or critical engagement, in the twenty-first century? It is to this latter question, particularly in the context of the higher education classroom, that I will turn now.

## Part 2: Pedagogy and Digital Technologies in the Classroom

The first part of this essay has traced the operation of a number of hierarchies in literary scholarship as they pertain to short fiction: the serious over the popular; the difficult over the accessible; the novel over the short story. How do such hierarchies, when they contribute to the design of university curricula, frame the view of the Victorian era that students are able to form? What gets left out when the emphasis falls upon the canonical and the literary, and on novels, poetry and drama, but not on the short story? Or, to reframe these questions more positively, what might there to be gained if we brought the previously marginal into the foreground and extended teaching to include the short fiction of the period?

My own experience here is subject to significant limitations, so I write not from any assumed position of expertise, but with the desire to reflect upon and develop my own teaching practice. For many years I have taught part of a module on Victorian Gothic Fictions to year-two undergraduate students on the interdisciplinary Humanities Programme at the University of Brighton, on an option pathway that explores how fictional texts negotiate dynamic periods of political and social transformation. The students first spend several weeks reading Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone* (1868), and are asked to understand the sensation genre as a hybrid form that incorporates pronounced elements of Gothic fiction. We then move forwards into the *fin de siècle* to explore why Gothic re-emerges here so powerfully. We look at some fictions that students will be familiar with – even if probably through television or film adaptations, rather than the original texts – such as *Dracula* (1897) and *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886); as well as some fictions they are unlikely to have heard of – Marsh's *The Beetle* (1897) and Florence Marryat's *The Blood of the Vampire* (1897). We spend just one week looking at short fiction, by thinking about the relationship between Gothic fiction and the ghost story in Elizabeth Gaskell's "The Old Nurse's Story" (1852), Mary Elizabeth Braddon's "The Shadow in the Corner" (1879) and Edith Nesbit's "Man-Size in Marble" (1887). The course is consequently overwhelmingly weighted towards novels (and one novella). The students generally enjoy the short stories and gain in their understanding of Victorian supernaturalism through studying them, but I am not sure I can claim that this single week enables much consideration of short fiction as short fiction (rather than as the ghost story as a genre allied to, but not identical with, Gothic fiction).

The one opportunity I have had to teach a course solely focused upon short fiction was in 2016/17 when I designed and delivered a course on Victorian Women's Short Fiction at the University of Passau, as part of their International Visiting Lecturers' Programme. I had not been convinced this would be an attractive proposition to young German students, who could not be expected to be invested in a history not their own, and who might be put off by the narrow focus upon both short fiction and women's writing. I was, however, pleased to be proven wrong.<sup>12</sup> The course (taught in English) attracted a decent-sized group of students from different years of undergraduate study, and through a combination of lectures and seminars with student presentations we explored short stories by Margaret Oliphant, Charlotte Riddell, Rhoda Broughton, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, George Egerton, Kate Chopin, Alice Perrin and B.M. Croker. The course was framed as exploring the reasons for the popularity of short fiction with female authors (and readers) and the critical contention that the short story gave women particular kinds of freedom to interrogate their situation in a male-dominated

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<sup>12</sup> I will admit that part of the course's popularity was probably due to the general popularity of the *Blockseminar* format (which enables students to do the equivalent of a semester's work in a condensed month-long course), as well as perhaps the interest of having a British tutor in the immediate wake of the Brexit vote (there were questions).

society.<sup>13</sup> Among other issues, it explored the capacity of ghost stories to surface questions about epistemic justice, gender and class (a question of whose voices are deemed reliable in Victorian culture), and about money, property and class (how the haunted house narrative negotiated middle-class anxieties around wealth and inequality). It looked at how women's experiences of marriage were depicted in two different genres of short story: the weird story by Nesbit and Broughton; and the realist story by New Woman writers Chopin and Egerton as well as the supposedly anti-feminist Oliphant. It extended the geographic range of 'the Victorian' by investigating stories by Anglo-Indian writers Perrin and Croker, inviting students to consider whether (and if so, in what ways) women writers provided a different perspective on British colonialism in India. Students produced some excellent work on the course, proving willing to enhance their understanding of nineteenth-century Britain by reading historical accounts and in many cases producing extremely insightful close-readings of their chosen texts.

I suspect, however, that just as my own teaching of Victorian fiction has tended (with the above exception) to prioritise novels over short stories, this is reflective of a more general tendency within university teaching – and indeed, in discussions of pedagogy. Two invaluable resources in relation to the latter are the volumes on *Teaching the Short Story* (edited by Ailsa Cox, 2011) and *Teaching Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (edited by Andrew Maunder and Jennifer Phegley, 2010) that have appeared as part of Palgrave Macmillan's "Teaching the New English" series. These contain essays that are richly reflective upon teaching practice in literary studies at undergraduate and graduate levels and I will be drawing on them in the discussion that follows. But something of the issue of the double marginalisation of popular Victorian short fiction is evident even in them. The collection on the short story features discussion of little that pre-dates the twentieth century: the chief exceptions to this are a chapter that includes Chopin along with Ernest Hemingway and Fred Leebron in a consideration of "Short Shorts" (Trimarco 2011) and a chapter on the South-East Asian short story that includes Alice Perrin and Cornelia Sorabji (Baldwin 2011). Reflecting the scholarly preoccupation with the 'modern phase' of the short story then, it is only texts from the last decade of the Victorian period that make it into this discussion of the short story as a genre. There is greater exploration of short fiction in the nineteenth-century fiction volume, with a chapter dedicated to the short story by Ruth Robbins (2010) that focuses on supernatural fiction, as well as references to short fiction in other chapters. Yet it is still the case that the volume focuses overwhelmingly on the novel. Even in Jennifer Phegley's chapter on "Teaching Genre: The Sensation Novel" (2010), where there is an interesting discussion of an introductory exercise in which students are asked to read stories from *The Broadview Anthology of Victorian Short Stories* and classify them into genres and subgenres, when the chapter's discussion turns to sensation fiction specifically this phenomenon is made coextensive with sensation novels. It is not that this focus on the novel is unreasonable in a collection that needs to prioritise the kinds of nineteenth-century fiction that are most frequently taught. But that short fiction is not among these kinds of fiction is precisely my point. In the remainder of this part of my essay, I will outline some of the likely benefits of extending our teaching to include Victorian short fiction in its many guises.

### **Short Fiction is Short**

Once such benefit is obvious: short fiction is short. In a context of UK Higher Education (and elsewhere) where many students are having to undertake extensive paid employment, it is becoming increasingly difficult to ask students to read long texts in their entirety. Teaching the Victorian three-decker novel therefore poses a particular problem. It is not that there are

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Stewart (2001) and Wallace (2004).

not ways around this, or that we should give up on the ambition of doing so. A novel or novels can be read serially across a semester, perhaps in the instalments that would have appeared in the original periodical context, thus allowing students to experience the unfolding narrative and its cliff-hangers as their first Victorian readers would have done.<sup>14</sup> But then there is only a very limited number of texts that can be read, and a consequent danger that whichever texts are chosen are made falsely representative of the vast and varied field of Victorian fiction. Alternatively, a greater number of novels could be taught with students asked to read only a selection from each of these. But then students miss out on the opportunity to analyse the narrative in its entirety, to reflect upon its construction as a whole. Short stories, on the contrary, enable a much wider range of Victorian fictions to be explored. As Michael Greaney has suggested, “the short story is unintimidatingly approachable; its brevity compares encouragingly with the huge three-decker novels and epic poems that dominate the landscape of literary studies” (2011: 28). In my own experience, students tend to find short stories enjoyable: both because short stories do not make the same demands on the patience that the voluminous realist novel can do, and because of the pleasures they make available as (often) forms of popular fiction. And as Ruth Robbins has rightly contended, “there is no reason why students should not enjoy what they read” (2010: 112).

Furthermore, short stories facilitate the development of skills in textual analysis. A very short story such as Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour” (1894) can be literally read aloud together by students during a seminar, thus allowing piece-by-piece textual interpretation of a complete narrative to be conducted collectively (this is in fact what we did in the first seminar of my Passau course). More generally, short stories can encourage close reading through the active participation in meaning-creation that some stories demand of their readers through their deployment of elisions, compressions and ambiguities (see Greaney 2011, and Trimarco 2011). Including short fiction in syllabuses of Victorian literature can as such facilitate the development of close reading skills that are transferrable to novels, drama and poetry, while aiding students’ understanding of different genre conventions and different narrative techniques and their possible effects.

### Teaching Beyond the Canon

Short fiction also assists in the ongoing project of teaching beyond the canon. In his introduction to the inaugural issue of the *Victorian Popular Fictions*, Andrew King asks how far university teaching has really extended beyond canonical Victorian authors, and his answer is revealing if a little dismaying. Citing Mark Bennett’s 2008 survey of university curricula as well as his own “counting of authors” from the last ten years of *The Year’s Work in English Studies*, King notes a limited extension of the canon as the Leavises would have understood it to include Charlotte Brontë, Stoker, Wilde, and to a much lesser extent, Collins and Braddon. He concludes, however, that while “The outsider status of Victorian popular fictions seems modified [...] beyond what is already established it continues still” (2019: 10). In a crowded curriculum where these more popular authors are already tussling for space with Dickens, Eliot, Hardy and Gaskell, the addition of short fictions enables inclusion of a wider range of authors without having to abandon the canonical ones. And this matters because of the inclusion it enables of a range of voices, including potentially heterodox ones. As Janice Allan has rightly argued, “Introducing a range of non-canonical fiction will, no doubt, enhance our students’ appreciation of the breadth and diversity of nineteenth-century literary production” (2010: 21).

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<sup>14</sup> For fascinating discussions of this see Hughes and Lund (2010) and Tange (2006).

Indeed, I would argue that this is even more so the case in relation to short fiction. One of the arguments that late twentieth-century advocates of the short story have made is that it has been a genre particularly hospitable to the expression of views and experiences that are at variance with the mainstream. For some this has been a matter of its formal qualities. Clare Hanson, for example, has argued that the “disjunction, inconclusiveness, [and] obliquity” that often characterise short stories have liberated them from the novelistic ambition of explaining what has happened to focus instead upon mood and impression; this in turn, she argues, allows for the surfacing of “unconscious desires” that make the short story particularly well suited to expressing what is “suppressed / repressed in mainstream culture” (1989: 6). For others such as Frank O’Connor, it is more the minor or marginal literary status of the short story that has made it a form focused upon “outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society” (quoted in Hanson 1989: 3). Much scholarship on Victorian short fiction by women has similarly argued that for reasons of form or status the genre has enabled the expression of subversive perspectives on a male-dominated society.<sup>15</sup> Clare Stewart, for example, has argued that women’s ghost stories flew under the radar of male magazine editors who, expecting only a popular entertainment form based upon oral tradition, were consequently impervious to the “social comment” encoded within them (2001: 111).

I would also suggest that the ephemeral and anonymous mode of publication of much periodical short fiction is beneficial to the project of seeking out alternative Victorian voices. Students’ sense of who the Victorians were is likely to change if we shift attention from topics prioritised by a fairly narrow range of realist novelists (and the editors who guided them, and the later critics who canonised them) to the treatments of contemporary issues by the jobbing writers who contributed to magazines with little expectation of being read beyond the immediate moment. We have already seen, in the example of Richard Marsh with which I started this essay, that we gain a different perspective on the *fin-de-siècle* vogue for shortness when we turn to an article by an avowedly popular author such as Marsh than if we only consult the preferences of an elite commentator such as Henry James. Additionally, reading periodical fiction that was published anonymously might be a useful exercise for students who, disqualified from applying knowledge or assumptions about an author in their approach to a text, might in consequence be able to question the value of author-based criticism more generally.

But it should also be noted that teaching fiction from the minor or marginal literary forms can also productively challenge our understandings of canonical authors themselves, who often wrote differently in popular genres than in the realist mode within which they gained their reputations. Vanessa Dickerson has argued of George Eliot, for example, that her supernatural novella *The Lifted Veil* (1859) reveals a writer significantly different from the “avowed realist” and “positivistic thinker” familiar from her novels, who despite her apparent attachment to science “was not blind to the spiritual implications of tensions between the known and the unknown” (1996: 81). As already mentioned, Tracy Hughes’ essay in this special issue invites readers – and students – to reflect upon how a different view of Thomas Hardy might emerge when we consider him not as (or not only as) a realist novelist, but as a short story writer drawing upon a popular genre such as Gothic as well as on oral storytelling traditions.

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<sup>15</sup> See Stewart (2001), Wallace (2004), Edmundson (2013) and Margree (2019) – though my own study also urges caution about placing too much emphasis on this idea of the women’s short story as subversive.

## Students as Producers of Knowledge

Another powerful argument for teaching more Victorian short fiction is its capacity to facilitate students' development as producers of knowledge. Talia Schaffer has made a compelling case for this in relation to non-canonical fiction in general. Noting that the role of a teacher in relation to familiar authors such as Jane Austen or Charlotte Brontë is often to be an "agent of estrangement" (2010: 78) who must render unfamiliar a text to which students often bring pre-formed assumptions (for example, about Austen's supposed feminism) in order that students can encounter the text as it is, Schaffer observes that this is not labour that is necessary in the case of works by non-canonical authors. In the latter case, she explains:

By contrast, students tend to know nothing about the noncanonical novels and therefore they can keep an open mind about them. Indeed, the very rationale for reading these novels is up for debate, and is not the least useful aspect of teaching them.

(Schaffer 2010: 80)

Schaffer goes on to articulate the "democratization of the classroom" that occurs when studying texts about which there is little existing scholarship. Rather than "slog[ging] through well-worn comparisons of much-studied texts," students are given a "readerly authority" to analyse and interpret by themselves, to see "that it is actually possible for them to make a real, original contribution to scholarship" (82).

I suggest that this is particularly the case with short fiction, which offers up a vast terrain of under-studied or even entirely neglected material. Activities such as Phegley's introductory exercise (see above) can empower students to develop a "functioning" knowledge of genre conventions, in which they can classify texts for themselves rather than merely describe the conventions of Gothic, or sensation, etc.<sup>16</sup> In my own experience of the Victorian women's short fiction course at Passau, I certainly found that discussing texts where there was not a great deal of scholarship seemed to liberate students to produce their own close readings and arguments about the political or ideological work of texts. When it came to their essays, I was also pleasantly surprised by the willingness of students to identify stories from beyond the syllabus to write on – something that it is hard to imagine happening so easily with novels because of the simple practical difficulty of surveying several long pieces of fiction in order to make a selection. The increasing availability of online archives extends this possibility still further, opening up to students who do not have easy access to physical libraries the chance to skim through digitised periodicals and make their own selection of stories. This involves several benefits. Students can engage in the practice of reading across different kinds of text within a magazine – stories, articles, advertisements, illustrations, competitions, puzzles, letters to the editor – to consider the kinds of meaning that might have been generated for original readers through these intertextual relationships. Teaching can thus militate against what Mark Turner has called a "smash and grab approach" (2006: 310) in which periodical fiction is isolated from materials that are not mere background but paratexts that contribute to the meanings a story can generate. In being enabled to survey periodicals and select their own stories, students are thus also liberated from what Ruth Robbins reminds us are the preferences and biases of anthology compilers, as well as the impression created through anthologisation that some stories produced for ephemeral consumption "have always enjoyed a solidity and respectability since their original publication" (2010: 128-29).

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<sup>16</sup> I am drawing here on the distinction between functioning and declarative knowledge advanced by John Biggs (2003).

In short, studying short fictions – especially in their original publication contexts – has a particular capacity to productively decentre the authority of anthologists, canonisers and university lecturers.

### **Decolonising the Curriculum**

Could it also be the case that short fiction can contribute to decolonising the Victorian curriculum? Certainly, it can be helpful in extending what we understand to be the geographic boundaries of “the Victorian.” A good illustration of this comes in the form of the ghost story, which while being hugely popular in the hands of Dickens, Gaskell and Braddon, also proved capable of translating to locations outside of domestic Britain where it blended with local narrative traditions. One such example is Lafcadio Hearne, the Irish/Greek writer who after living in Britain, America and the West Indies settled for the last fourteen years of his life (1890-1904) in Japan, where he became fascinated with its *kwaidan* or ghost stories. Hearne’s supernatural short stories – recently collected into a Penguin edition by Paul Murray – blend Japanese legends and myths with tropes from Western *fin-de-siècle* fictions such as *Dracula*, and in so doing, as Murray notes, “indicate the common folkloric and fairy-tale elements” at work in both Western and Eastern traditions (2019: xxix). But Hearne’s stories are also notable for their keen interest in and respect for Japanese culture, and avoid many Orientalising assumptions in a way that is perhaps surprising for a European-educated writer at the height of empire. Such stories offer students the chance to think more deeply about both the modern and folkloric origins of the British Gothic fictions they may be studying, while also prompting them to reflect upon the precarious distinction between cultural appreciation and appropriation.

Another example would be the Anglo-Indian writer Alice Perrin, who creates a kind of hybrid supernaturalism by mixing conventions of the Victorian ghost story with Indian beliefs such as reincarnation or the transmigration of souls. Perrin’s is an ambivalent colonial gaze that commingles moments of empathy for India’s colonised subjects (see Edmundson 2013) with a belief in the necessity of foreign rule and a rather myopic sense of the particular sacrifices entailed for *memsahibs* (see Margree 2019). Studying her short stories alongside those of the more canonical Kipling would extend students’ appreciation of the various forms assumed by Imperial Gothic, as well as allow them to better consider the intersections of race and gender in the construction of imperial identities. Admittedly, decolonising the curriculum is seriously constrained if it only means extending consideration to stories written by British colonialists that put their subjectivities at the centre of the perspective. But reading of both Kipling and Perrin might be enhanced by contrasting to them stories by Cornelia Sorabji, a legal advocate and social reformer and one of “the earliest Indian writers of short stories in English” (Baldwin 2011: 80), whose 1901 collection *Love and Life Behind the Purdah* has been digitised by UPenn. Sorabji’s stories mix realism and “sentimental fiction” and suggest an “awareness of the literary contexts in which India was so often presented” (Innes 2008: 149). They also importantly give central place to a figure marginalised in fictions by Kipling and Perrin, the Indian woman. Some of Sorabji’s stories focus upon older women suffering social marginalisation because they are beyond child-bearing years or are childless; others feature younger Indian women tragically caught between tradition and modernity. Students might usefully read “Love and Death,” for example, and be invited to consider whether its Indian “doctor-girl” heroine (Sorabji 1901) succumbs to the fire-walking festival in a regression to “stereotypical colonialist fictional type” (Innes 2008: 149) or in despair at the short-lived nature of her brief year of freedom before an arranged marriage. The complex ideological position of Sorabji as an Anglophile Indian who at different times supported both the Indian Independence Movement and the continuation of British rule, can allow students to

explore questions of cultural hybridity as well as to challenge the Eurocentric assumption that calls for modernising transformation arise only from outside of colonised cultures.

The diversity of voices that short fiction assists in bringing to the curriculum helps establish that lines of literary influence pay scant regard to national boundaries and that Britain was in any case an empire before it became a nation.<sup>17</sup>

### Part 3: Case Study

In this final part, I would like to present a case study of an online resource for Victorian short fiction and explore how a text made available through it might be used in the classroom.

The [Victorian Short Fiction Project](#) (VSFP) is a digital collection of tales, sketches and short stories that appeared in periodicals across the nineteenth century. It makes annotated versions of texts available through a Wordpress interface, along with a facsimile version of the text in its original magazine format provided as a PDF. These are contextualised by a scholarly apparatus that includes brief introductions to each story, biographical notes on authors, contextual information on the magazines in which the stories appeared, and a list of further online resources. Stories can be searched for alphabetically or by date, author, topic or journal. There is also an immensely helpful [“Introduction”](#) section which summarises conventional histories of the British short story (as “not coming of age in Britain until the late nineteenth century”) before defining VSFP’s own project as being to reveal the diversity of narrative forms that writers throughout the nineteenth century drew upon in their production of “oriental tales, colonial adventure stories, legends from around the globe, sketches of urban life, moral tales, sentimental fiction, children’s stories” and more.

Fittingly, the Project has its origins in undergraduate teaching and maintains a commitment to collaboration between students and professional academics. As the website’s [“History”](#) section details, it began in 2004 when Leslee Thorne-Murphy asked her Victorian literature students at Brigham Young University to “comb through Victorian-era periodicals” held in the campus library and look for “exemplary short fiction to share with class members and to analyze in a research paper.” Thorne-Murphy compiled and circulated a photocopied anthology based upon the students’ work, and repeated this exercise in subsequent years. Discovering, however, that students frequently selected the same texts, Thorne-Murphy created a permanent digital collection that successive cohorts of students could contribute to without reproducing the efforts of their predecessors. The resulting online environment became the Victorian Short Fiction Project in 2013.

The benefits to students in terms of extending their appreciation of the range of Victorian fictions and empowering them as producers of knowledge is evident from a quotation from one of the original students, which I reproduce in full from the website here:

Overall, this project was one of [the most], if not the most[,] influential educational activities I’ve taken part in as a student here at BYU. I was able to research lesser known material which contributed to the sense of accomplishment I felt. I had the sense that *I was actually contributing to the discourse within literary studies and not simply churning out another banal paper or project* and at the same time I also feel that the knowledge I gained from the project is valuable because it is not a topic that the whole of literary studies is familiar with, and I can therefore feel a sense of ownership for what I’ve done and feel pleased with the effort I’ve put into it.

([“History”](#); emphases added)

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<sup>17</sup> See Bhabra (2020), who observes that “The creation of a unitary state with a single government across the Kingdoms occurred subsequent to the colonial endeavours of Scotland and England.”

The project continues to welcome contributions from students as well as professional academics, guaranteeing academic rigour through a process of peer review. Its website currently identifies under “Future Directions” the ambition to include “nineteenth century texts written [...] about short fiction” and current articles on pedagogy (“History”).

Of course, the VSFP presents the opportunity of inviting students to make their own selection of stories to analyse and to identify the questions they feel these narratives raise. But for the purpose of the present discussion I am selecting “My First Picture: A Tale,” which was originally published in 1862 under the initials “R.M.” in *London Society* magazine. While in many respects any of the fictions collected in the VSFP could be the basis of a pedagogic case study, I choose this one because it is not easily redeemable as significant or worthy in conventional scholarly terms. It was anonymously published and has not, to my knowledge, been reclaimed for posterity through publication in any subsequent volume. It was published significantly prior to the period of the short story’s supposed coming of age and it does not conform to the model pronounced by Poe and endorsed by subsequent critics. Indeed, it provides its own generic designation within its title, a “Tale” being the common term used in mid-Victorian British publishing for short (and sometimes longer) fictions. Although at 10,000 words it is easily capable of being read at one sitting, it involves a fairly complex plot and focuses upon external events rather than interior states or moments of epiphany. It does not particularly deploy gaps or ambiguities, and achieves decisive narrative closure in a conventional way through its utilisation of the marriage plot. Indeed, it could very well be considered to be written along the lines of the “condensed novel” model. But what I want to suggest in the discussion that follows, is that this piece of apparently ephemeral, popular, formulaic short fiction is nonetheless capable of prompting rich and sustained analysis by students. My final reason for choosing it is that its focus on female students (at an art college) makes it also capable of opening up reflection on the part of undergraduates about their own circumstances and aspirations today.

“My First Picture: A Tale” concerns two young women art students at the Female School of South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert Museum). Mave, our first-person narrator, becomes intrigued and attracted by Hilda Barry, whose compositions exhibit “glowing faults” while also suggesting an untaught passion and talent, and who possesses in her own person a “latent beauty” only partially obscured by her frequently pale and listless appearance. Mave and Hilda assume a “tacit friendship” which blossoms into passionate attachment after Hilda confides in Mave her secret. At this point Hilda assumes the narrative perspective as she recounts her story. Orphaned at a young age, she had spent most of her time in boarding schools until ill health had discharged her into the care of her elderly guardian, a man she barely knew but instinctively disliked. Living alone with her guardian and his maiden sister at their “lonely old manor in the country,” isolation and unhappiness so much further deteriorate her health that she is eventually indulged in her wish for an art tutor and a Mr Winthrop is engaged. Hilda falls in love with her art master, and the chance discovery of a sketch he has drawn of her reveals that her feelings are reciprocated. But when Winthrop requests permission to marry her he is dismissed by her guardian as an adventurer covetous of the wealth Hilda is to inherit from her parents. Worse still, the son of Hilda’s guardian, the “drawling, conceited, middle-aged coxcomb” Captain Alfred, returns home, and Hilda discovers that she is expected to marry him. Disguising herself as an “antiquated gentlewoman” by donning a wig and old-fashioned dress discovered in some “ghostly” disused rooms in the manor, Hilda escapes by train for London, where she obtains lodgings for her “niece” and then, abandoning her disguise, lives as Hilda Barry (her real name is Werner, her father having been German) and enrolls at the art school; her intention being to learn how to make her own living through art. At the point that Hilda relates this

story to Mave she has reached a crisis: her landlady has been financially exploiting her and she faces homelessness that very night unless she can sell her last piece of jewellery. Mave resumes the narration, and brings Hilda to live at her own modest lodgings before hatching a plan to secure her friend's happiness. She asks Hilda to sit for her, and works tirelessly to produce a painting that will capture the dormant beauty in her friend that hardship and oppression have threatened nearly to extinguish. The portrait is accepted for the Exhibition of the Royal Academy of Arts. Mave knows, but Hilda does not, that Hilda's former art master, Mr Winthrop, is now "one of the most rising artists of the day." Mave has calculated that Winthrop will attend the exhibition, and will recognise his former student and lover if her portrait has been able to do Hilda justice. The plan succeeds: Winthrop purchases the portrait and is reunited with Hilda when he is invited by Mave to their lodgings. The story concludes with a brief coda in which we learn that they are happily married, with Hilda proving an excellent wife and household manager despite dedicating her leisure time to her painting. Mave, although warmly invited to live with the couple, prefers to continue living independently in London and is "beginning to succeed as an artist."

As the "Introductory Note" provided by the VSFP contributors suggests, despite the reputation of *London Society* for being a "lighthearted and conservative" publication (it was subtitled "An Illustrated Magazine of Light and Amusing Literature for the Hours of Relaxation") "My First Picture" is actually a "complex" narrative that engages with a number of serious social themes. In the remainder of this essay, I will outline how this story might form the basis of wide-ranging classroom discussion by inviting students to consider its formal qualities, the contemporary issues it engaged with, and the pleasures and identifications it could have offered its readers. I will group some of the chief questions that the story is capable of opening up under three headings: generic belonging; depiction of young women and female friendship; and the question of whether to marry or establish an independent career.

### **Generic Belonging**

One striking feature of "My First Picture" is its mixing of generic modes. These are arguably more pronounced in this short narrative – where transitions from one mode to another happen abruptly – than they would be in a novel. Students might be invited to identify what these generic modes are, where the shifts take place, and how each mode is contributing to the text's production of meaning.

The story begins in realist vein with a contemporary setting (the South Kensington Museum was established only in 1857) and in a recognisable location where particular London districts and streets are referenced by name. There is an attention to the detail of everyday life for the young students and particular focus is given to the financial precarity that is faced by Mave – an Irish migrant supporting a fatherless family who lunches on a crust of bread rather than the sandwiches and cakes that her fellow students can purchase. Students could be asked to consider in what terms the city of London is being depicted – as an hospitable or inhospitable destination for young people hoping to realise their dreams? – and how that might be expected to have resonated with the concerns of *London Society's* readers, some of them likely London dwellers and workers, and others of them possibly desirous of experiencing London life for themselves.

The tale makes one of its transitions, however, when it moves to Hilda's narration of her personal history (this occupies the middle third of the narrative). Here, the quotidian details of life in the art school give way to events that are dramatic – indeed – melodramatic, and that shift the narrative towards both sensation fiction and Gothic (although supernatural elements are absent). Students familiar with these genres could be asked to identify the

conventions that are being drawn upon. I identify the following: loss of beloved parents and transfer into the power of a corrupt guardian; entrapment in an isolated location; threat of forced marriage and economic exploitation; emphasis on female passions and extreme emotions such as “terror”; untrustworthy servants and purloined letters; disguise of identity and flight. Students might further be asked to consider these as the conventions of Female Gothic, and to explore what meanings around female vulnerability and patriarchal power are thereby being produced. It is notable both that Hilda sees no option for making her own living beyond her artistic ambitions (the alternative being “outcast wanderings” and “in the end [...] starvation”) and that she professes herself entirely ignorant of financial matters. Mave, in turn, strongly suspects that Hilda’s guardian has lied to her about her inheritance (he has claimed that her right to her father’s property depends upon her marrying his son) but lacks the legal knowledge to ascertain this. Is the story surreptitiously drawing attention to, even protesting against, the financial and legal ignorance that many young women are kept in – and perhaps about the lack of opportunities that women have to support themselves outside of marriage? If so, can students relate this not only to claims about the social criticism enabled by Gothic fiction and sensation fiction, but also to the claim that the very marginal status of short fiction has historically facilitated the inclusion of heterodox views?

### Depiction of Young Women and Female Friendship

Another of the story’s notable characteristics is the distance of both its main characters from the Angel in the House stereotype of mid-Victorian gender ideology. This is firstly the case because of the very ambition of both young women to succeed in a profession and make their own living, though students could be invited to consider whether this is undercut by Hilda’s marriage at the story’s resolution. But the Gothic and sensation elements of the text are also relevant here, with Hilda revealing herself to have been no passive victimised heroine of first-wave Gothic, but more the active and resourceful female protagonist that was becoming familiar in the early 1860s through sensation novels. It is notable that although Hilda chides herself for her “wilful temper,” it is in fact exactly this characteristic that enables her to resist her oppression. Indeed, if this story looks like it might be recycling elements of Collins’ *The Woman in White* (1860), then Hilda escapes the fate of Laura Fairlie only through the “wild temper” that leads her to reject her own Sir Percival Glyde and instead escape to London.<sup>18</sup> Hilda avers that although she has been told it was “sinful [...] unwise [...] unmaidenly” to fall for her art teacher, she “will not believe it” – and the story’s happy resolution apparently endorses the right of a young woman to her own emotional life and to love whom she pleases.

Indeed, both the story’s female protagonists are active and desiring subjects, in a text that makes constant equations between the artistic vision, understanding of another person, and loving and being loved. Hilda first discovers that she is loved by Winthrop when she comes across his “glorious little sketch” of her. It is a “tinted” sketch against a “grave mellow drapery” and Mave later searches among bits of drapery to find “the right tint and tone” to reproduce the effect of the art master’s original. But Mave has herself earlier composed her own ‘picture’ of an unwitting Hilda by choosing a piece of drapery and arranging it on a shelf behind Hilda’s seat, thereby restoring colour to the girl’s pallid complexion and revealing her “exceeding beauty.” The text establishes the artistic gaze as a privileged way of looking and

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<sup>18</sup> In Collins’ novel too an art master falls in love with his student, similarly the orphaned ward of a (complacent, rather than actively malicious) guardian. Laura herself is a rather passive character and not an example of the active, transgressive sensation heroine I allude to here: Magdalen Vanstone from *No Name*, also published in 1862, would be a better example. While Magdalen, like Hilda, actively assumes a disguise to effect her own purpose, Laura is confused by others with the madwoman Anne Catherick.

knowing that is capable of revealing hidden physical and spiritual beauty, and this is a gaze that can be wielded by women, looking at women, as well as by men.

This latter point brings me on to what is perhaps one of the most interesting questions for students to consider: how should we understand the nature of the attachment between Mave and Hilda? I would expect that the text's frequent references to Mave's attraction to and fascination for Hilda and her pleasure in contemplating her beauty might elicit the suggestion that it be read as a coded expression of female-female desire. Students may then wonder whether this would have been picked up upon by contemporary readers, with the expectation that any suggestion of erotic desire between women would have been deemed as deviant. However, the text also represents an opportunity to introduce students to the Victorian conception of romantic friendship. Mave and Hilda form just the type of passionate attachment including physical intimacies that this idea entailed. As Sharon Marcus (2007) has explored, normative femininity as such included an expectation of the forming of intense attraction between women, and far from being prohibited, such relationships were considered essential to the cultivation of qualities that a woman would need to become a good wife. In that sense, "My First Picture" can be seen as continuous with a novelistic tradition that depicted female friends as being central to the ability of a young woman to make a good marriage match and to form a lasting heterosexual bond (Marcus 2017). Mave's enthrallment with Hilda's beauty also seems less potentially dissident in a context where, as Marcus again reports, women were encouraged to "consume images of desirable femininity," for example in fashion imagery that was "all about women's beauty being displayed for women's enjoyment" (2007: 18-19).

And yet, the story does seem to me to be striking in that its major emotional investment lies in the attachment between the two women and the love that drives Mave to secure the happiness and safety of Hilda. Even while the heterosexual romance plot is used to bring the story to its conclusion, the narrative does little to prompt its readers into desiring a reunion of the lovers and Winthrop remains a mere cipher throughout. In representing an intense female bond – probably made more intense by the very shortness of the text, which requires that the young women form a connection so quickly – the story is perhaps best understood as both eliciting and eluding a queer reading. But in posing questions about Victorian understandings of female friendship, appreciation of beauty, and erotic desire, it presents an opportunity to denaturalise students' conceptions of gendered and sexual identities, by revealing that the Victorians understood intimacy according to different configurations of gender and sexuality than our own.<sup>19</sup>

### **An Artistic Career or Marriage?**

As the VSFP's "Introductory Note" on the text makes clear, this is also a narrative "notable for its depiction of the women gaining an understanding of art and beauty," and this aspect of the story could also be opened up. In featuring female art students, "My First Picture" is actually engaging with an issue of great topicality, the 1860s being a decade of intense debate over art education for women, with "great strides forward" being made (Dodd 1995: 187) in gaining acceptance of women as producers of art (as opposed to being only the subjects of a male artistic gaze). This is not to say, of course, that gendered binaries did not resurface within art education itself: women's participation was more broadly accepted in relation to activities classified as "crafts" or design rather than "fine art," and even when engaged in the

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<sup>19</sup> Talia Schaffer writes that "When students tend to naturalize modern ideas of identity, nothing is more salutary than introducing them to a culture where drastically different ideas of sexual identity, gender behaviour, class status and racial hierarchy dominated" (2010: 75).

latter women were typically restricted in their choice both of subject and medium.<sup>20</sup> It is therefore significant that “My First Picture” locates its action within the South Kensington female section, rather than the other notable female art institution of the time – the Female School of Art at Gower Street – since the former was particularly associated with fine art. Also significant is that the text does not depict its young female protagonists’ interest in art as in any way dilettante; on the contrary, the students are treated as being engaged in a painstaking and often difficult apprenticeship. When Mave succeeds in reuniting Hilda with her lover, this is testimony not only to her dedication to her friend but also to her artistic achievement, since it is only because she has been able to render her friend’s beauty that her portrait is exhibited and Hilda can be recognised by Winthrop. The Royal Academy was an elite institution and relatively inhospitable to female artists, sometimes enabling them to exhibit but remaining resistant to accepting them as pupils. Students might be invited to think about the gender politics of the text’s apparent endorsement of female artistic ambition at a time when this was a matter of contention – though they may also consider whether the potentially progressive elements of this are undermined by Mave’s noting at the story’s conclusion that “it is chiefly owing to [Winthrop] that I am beginning to succeed as an artist” (“My First Picture”).

The text raises questions about whether readers are being prompted to prefer either of its protagonists’ resolutions: Hilda’s married bliss or Mave’s determination to continue a single life dedicated to her painting career. A crucial context to this is of course the ongoing debate in the early 1860s about “the ‘problem’ of women’s need and desire for work,” following a 1851 census that had revealed the existence of 126,000 “surplus” marriageable women (Zakreski 2006: 2-3). As Patricia Zakreski explains, with remunerative work understood as masculine, but large numbers of women without a husband, father or brother to support them, artistic employment had gained growing acceptance as a respectable way for middle-class women to secure an income. While I suspect that students today would be likely to chafe at the story’s closing reassurances that despite her keeping up her painting, Hilda’s “house is the neatest, her drawing-room the daintiest, her kitchen the best ordered, and her bedroom the most refreshingly tidy of any as yet known to me” (“My First Picture”), this must in fact be read in light of the “principle of compatibility” being asserted at the time by advocates of women’s inclusion into the art industries (Zakreski 2006: 64). This reassured critics that “neither the expanding public role of the woman artist nor the public use or exhibition of her work” (65) need compromise her private femininity or domestic accomplishments. It appears that the husband’s prerogative to be considered the real artist is being asserted by the tale: it is “in her husband’s studio” that Hilda “does stain her fingers with paint,” and Mave tells us that – since Hilda clearly is not stinting in her performance of her housewifely duties – it is likely that she “works at her easel during those hours which most ladies spend in their dressing-rooms, paying visits, shopping, or reading novels” (“My First Picture”). Yet this is consonant with other fictional representations from the period which likewise asserted the principle of compatibility in order to defend the woman artist against ideological attack. Indeed, Hilda’s marriage seems better able to accommodate her artistic ambitions than does the one which brings closure to an obvious fictional model for this tale, Dinah Mulock Craik’s *Olive* (1850). In this novel’s conclusion, as Mariaconcetta

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<sup>20</sup> Women artists were supposed to restrict themselves to subjects attributed lesser value in a hierarchy of genres: to landscapes, still life and domestic scenes, rather than portraiture and historical painting. Figure painting (needed for historical painting, the most valued form) was especially proscribed due to prohibitions against teaching women anatomical knowledge or allowing them to draw from nude models (only draped ones were acceptable). Women were also encouraged to paint with watercolours rather than oils. For more on this see, for example, Dodd (1995).

Costantini has discussed, the woman-painter protagonist seems likely to give up an artistic career whose primary meaning had been “compensation for her affective and social loss” (2008: 254) as a marginalised disabled woman – a loss now ably redeemed by her marriage.<sup>21</sup>

If Hilda’s artistic endeavours are presented as secondary to her significance as a wife, Mave herself has insisted on the primacy of her artistic ambitions. There is no concluding hint of a love interest for her and, anxious to protect her capacity for “hard work” and “the hoarding of time,” she has even rejected the invitation to enjoin herself to the heterosexual domesticity of Hilda and Winthrop where “a little jewel of a room lies vacant for me.” In this sense Mave’s resolution resembles that of another fictional trainee woman artist, Madonna Blythe from Wilkie Collins’ *Hide and Seek* (1854). Denied closure through the marriage plot by the discovery that the man she loves is actually her half-brother, Madonna’s future seems uncertain but, as Costantini has again observed, the possibility that she will “complete her training” within the extended non-nuclear family of the Blythes and “become an accomplished painter” is at least left open (2008: 254). In allowing Mave to conclude the story with the prospect of a professional life much more assuredly before her than is Madonna’s, “My First Picture” arguably presents its readers with an independent, non-domestic female subject who does not require justification through the compatibility principle.

In contrast then to many novels of the period that struggled to imagine artistically inclined women achieving either creative fulfilment or happy marital unions, “My First Picture” seems to promise that both are possible, and indeed, compatible.<sup>22</sup> Students might be invited to consider whether the independence and fulfilment offered by Mave’s single life is being presented as equally desirable to Hilda’s married life. And if it is, then how might that be weighed against the more conservative strains of the story’s resolution when analysing the ideological work being done by this apparently straightforward tale in the apparently conservative *London Society* magazine?

## Conclusion

“My First Picture” could easily be dismissed as a fairly derivative narrative that uneasily combines conventions from novelistic genres to produce an improbable wish-fulfilling fantasy for readers seeking entertainment in their “Hours of Relaxation.” For me, however, what makes the story worth reading and studying is precisely the ways in which it elicits particular kinds of desire and attempts to resolve conflicts between them. It works to reassure its contemporary readers that financial independence, personal autonomy and artistic fulfilment are possible for young women, and that a single, professional life is a tenable

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<sup>21</sup> Patricia Zakreski offers a slightly more positive account of *Olive*’s ending, drawing attention to the equivocation of the line “it was a natural and womanly thing that in her husband’s [intellectual] fame Olive should *almost* forget her own” (Craik 1875: 247; emphasis added), seeing this as hinting at the possible continuation of Olive’s artistic work and professional identity (Zakreski 2006: 82). The novel’s ideological negotiations around female artistic achievement are exhibited in a passage of authorial disquisition that avers that, while “no woman can be an artist – that is, a great artist,” this is because what is dominant in her nature is the “heart and the affections,” which bind her to others and prohibit in her the selfish dedication to art that is possible for men. Yet a woman in whom “change or circumstance or wrong” has lessened these social and affective bonds may still hope to count “among those stars of lesser glory [...] graceful painters and musicians,” if not artists of the highest rank (Craik 1875: 97).

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Graziella Stringos’ discussion of two novels featuring female writers by Rhoda Broughton (2020).

option. But it also wishes to say that women can marry for love and that marriage can be a state in which significant elements of autonomy and self-realisation can be preserved. It recognises that women's happiness and security are imperilled by their economic and legal disenfranchisement, but it argues that such dangers can be overcome through braving hardship and forging friendships between women. It sees female friendship as an enriching, enabling and intrinsically valuable experience, while also one that is capable of assisting with heterosexual relationships and as continuing undiminished after marriage. It is, as the contributors to VSFP have observed in their classification of this tale, not only an example of the "love story / marriage plot," but also of "social problem fiction" that recognises the challenges faced by young women in the mid-century as an important social question ("My First Picture").

Teaching a popular short story such as this to students today can offer them a productively defamiliarised version of who the Victorians were. I suspect there might be surprise at the seeming modernity of this story, with its apparently sympathetic portrayal of young women seeking to forge an independent path for themselves in the world. One might ask students to consider how their own responses to the text have been affected by its anonymous authorship. Is not knowing the author and possibly their political positions a hindrance or alternatively a liberating factor when analysing the text? Would they feel differently about the story if they knew it was written by a man, or by a woman? Students could also be asked to consider what role is played by shortness itself here. I have suggested that the brevity of the narrative helps to expose its internal mechanisms and structure. But I might ask students what they think would be the effects if the plot were *decompressed* to fill the pages of a novel. Finally, I would want students to consider what forms of affective engagement they themselves are able, or not able, to have to this story. Are there ways in which it might speak to the contradictions that they themselves face as they also try to find fulfilment, security, friendship and love in a frequently inhospitable world not of their making?

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