

Collapsing the Courtship Plot: The Challenge to Mid-Victorian Romance in New Woman Short Stories of the 1890s

Anne-Marie Beller

Abstract

The New Woman writing of the 1890s grappled with the legacy of mid-nineteenth century constructions of romance and gender ideology. In their bid to promote a new vision of heterosexual relations between the sexes, New Woman writers often explicitly engaged with earlier ideals of Separate Spheres and the “Angel in the House.” The short story provided an ideal form for exploring these issues, freeing writers from the generic conventions of the traditional three-volume novel. This article examines the ways in which three women writers of the 1890s attempted to rewrite the script of mid-Victorian courtship through the short story genre. In different, but related ways, Mona Caird’s “The Yellow Drawing Room,” Ella D’Arcy’s “The Pleasure Pilgrim” and Ella Hepworth Dixon’s “One Doubtful Hour” all offer a challenge to the doctrine of separate spheres. Yet, while each of these texts critique what they present as outmoded views of woman’s sphere and nature, they also articulate the difficulties experienced by both genders in imagining an evolved and improved model of sexual relations. These short stories represent the collapse in New Woman fiction of the traditional “courtship plot” through a failure to re-imagine and re-map the mid-Victorian gender ideology they seek to dismantle.

Key Words

Mona Caird; Ella D’Arcy; Ella Hepworth Dixon; New Woman; short story; Victorian courtship plot.

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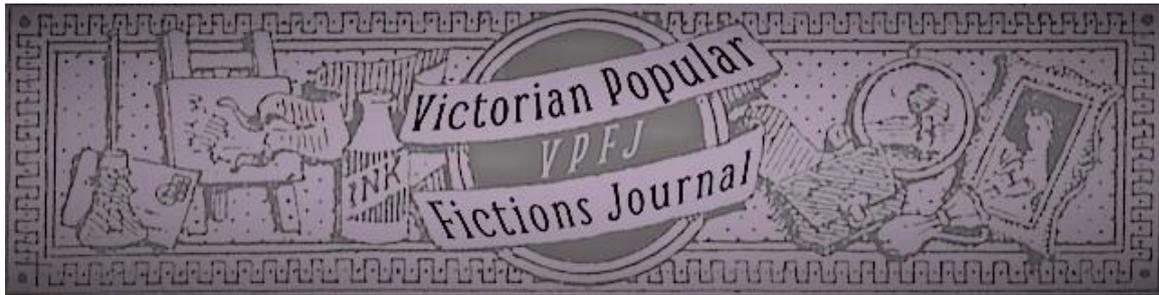
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Collapsing the Courtship Plot: The Challenge to Mid-Victorian Romance in New Woman Short Stories of the 1890s

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Introduction

In Mona Caird's 1887 novel, *One That Wins*, a character articulates a problem that would increasingly exercise the New Woman writer throughout the 1890s: "Must we women eternally be forced to choose between liberty and love? Must the apple of life always be cut in two, so that we can never feel in our hands the rounded whole, but only the hard-edged half?" (Caird 1887, 2: 45). This sense of an enforced choice between New Woman principles of autonomy and independence on the one hand, and emotional fulfilment in love on the other, led to a critical engagement by women writers of the *fin de siècle* with earlier Victorian ideals of heterosexual romance in a bid to re-imagine and re-invent a new courtship plot underwritten by principles of equality and liberty. The difficulty they experienced in this task is demonstrated by the infrequency with which they successfully achieved such resolutions; as Stephanie Forward has pointed out: "Many New Woman novels end dismally, with the heroines unable to vanquish the forces against them" (Forward 1998: 452).

Yet novels were not the only medium available to New Woman writers keen to explore contemporary problems through fiction. The surge of popularity of the short story as an accessible and more immediate form in the late nineteenth century offered feminist writers an escape from the conventions and constrictions of the traditional three-decker. As Sally Ledger notes:

The short story was very much a "modern" form at the *fin de siècle* [...] with its focus on the "psychological moment", its exploration of the interior landscapes of human experience, and its only sporadic commitment to a realist aesthetic [it] became a favoured literary form in *The Yellow Book* – and for radically minded, avant-garde writers of the period more generally.

(Ledger 1997: xv)

Of course, this was not the only way in which the short story developed in the late nineteenth century. It was also a staple of the more mainstream popular market. But for writers interested in exploring new literary directions, the short story offered a number of advantages over the longer novel form. Freed from the restrictions of an extended narrative and perhaps cumbersome plot, the short story could focus on single moments and fragments of experience. As Charles May astutely notes:

The short story is short precisely because of the kind of experience or reality embodied in it, and the kind of experience we find in the short story reflects a mode of knowing which differs essentially from the mode of knowing we find in the novel.

(May 1984: 328).

The New Woman writer's frequent preference for the short story form meant that the traditional courtship and marriage plot of the mid-Victorian three-decker could be transformed or circumvented altogether. What often takes its place is a failed courtship plot, which thus removes marriage as the typical resolution. This obviation of marriage would seem to offer an extension of what Katherine Green, in her analysis of the novel of courtship, has identified as the "brief period of [a woman's] autonomy between [her] coming out and her marriage" (Green 1991: 2-3). In practice, though, this is not always presented in New Woman stories in positive terms, and these failed or thwarted courtship plots implicitly denote deep ambivalence over the nature of both desirable forms of masculinity and of female sexual desire.

In this article I examine the ways in which three women writers of the 1890s, associated to varying degrees with the New Woman phenomenon, attempted to rewrite the script of mid-Victorian courtship. In different, but related ways, Mona Caird's "The Yellow Drawing Room" (1892), Ella D'Arcy's "The Pleasure Pilgrim" (1895) and Ella Hepworth Dixon's "One Doubtful Hour" (1897) all offer a revision of, and challenge to, the doctrine of separate spheres.¹ Yet, while each of these texts critique what they present as outmoded views of woman's sphere and nature, they also articulate the difficulties experienced by both genders in imagining an evolved and improved model of sexual relations. Arguably, these short stories represent the collapse in New Woman short fiction of the traditional "courtship plot" through a failure to re-imagine and re-map the mid-Victorian gender ideology they seek to dismantle.

Ella Hepworth Dixon's "One Doubtful Hour" offers a bleak representation of women's miserable plight in the late-Victorian marriage market, or what Thomas Hardy brutally termed "the necessity of getting life-leased at all cost" (Hardy [1894] 2005: 79). While Hepworth Dixon demonstrates the demoralising effects on women of competing for a husband, she also highlights the ways in which men are largely blind to the miseries of single women's existences, not necessarily through callousness, but through the simple fact of their superior freedoms and opportunities. In all of these short stories, a repeated theme is the total lack of understanding between the genders due to their separate and unequal existences.

In Mona Caird's "The Yellow Drawing Room" and Ella D'Arcy's "The Pleasure Pilgrim" we see a revision of, and challenge to, the doctrine of separate spheres, an ideology that implicitly underpinned dominant mid-century formulations of idealised love. Yet both Caird's and D'Arcy's apparent rejection of earlier nineteenth-century romantic ideals (embodied most notoriously in the writings of Coventry Patmore and John Ruskin) is actually an ambivalent one. For while both texts critique what they present as outmoded views of woman's sphere and nature, they also articulate the difficulties experienced by both genders in envisioning a new model of relationship based on equality. Moreover, both stories point to a conflict within the New Woman herself, in terms of her ability (and even desire) to successfully integrate love and liberty. Though the texts end very differently in terms of the situation of the New Woman figure, Lulie Thayer's suicide and Vanora Haydon's inexplicable attraction to a man who epitomises everything against which she is rebelling both point to the challenges posed by the transition towards a transformed gender politics.

¹ Mona Caird's "The Yellow Drawing Room" was originally published in *A Romance of the Moors* (1892) Leipzig: Heinemann and Balestier, 209-230; Ella D'Arcy's "The Pleasure Pilgrim" first appeared in her collection *Monochromes* (1895) London: John Lane; Ella Hepworth Dixon's "One Doubtful Hour" was first published in *The Lady's Pictorial* Christmas Number (1897): 16-21.

The sensation novel, earlier in the century may, as Lyn Pykett argues, have represented “men and women as being foreign countries to each other” (Pykett 1992: 50), but at least these were countries for which “maps” were available, in the form of shared cultural images and discourses. Admittedly, these “maps” were cartographically imperfect, based as they were on stereotypes and oppressive ideals, but they at least provided a shared sense of the geography of gender – a mutual terrain on which to negotiate and enact the courtship ritual. By the *fin de siècle*, the New Woman’s exploration of what George Egerton famously termed the “terra incognita” of woman rendered these previous maps useless as a means by which men might read the opposite sex (“A Keynote to *Keynotes*” quoted in Showalter 1999: 211). For instance, the male narrator of “The Yellow Drawing Room” is clearly unable to navigate the uncharted territory of his encounter with a New Woman, and experiences it as a “haunting, incomprehensible dream” (Caird [1892] 2005: 30). Similarly, Campbell, in D’Arcy’s “The Pleasure Pilgrim,” flounders in his attempts to steer a true course through his ill-fated relationship with the volatile young American, Lulie, whose behaviour is impossible to measure against the traditional assumptions by which he attempts to judge her.

Stephanie Forward has suggested that New Woman writers “gave much thought to the positive qualities required in men if relationships between the sexes were to improve; nevertheless they seem to have found it difficult to depict New Men convincingly” (Forward 1998: 437). More recently, Tara MacDonald has shown how some *fin-de-siècle* female novelists sought to create a New Man as a counterpart to the newly independent woman, who could promote equality between the genders and thereby help to redefine marriage. The New Man was envisioned slightly differently by different writers, but his primary quality was a sympathetic support of women’s equality. However, MacDonald also acknowledges that “[t]he New Woman and the New Man are ... largely marked as figures of an ideal future, not able entirely to realize their utopian dreams” (MacDonald 2016: 166). Despite some positive portrayals of the New Man in the work of writers such as Sarah Grand, Olive Schreiner, George Gissing, and Ella Hepworth Dixon (all discussed in MacDonald’s work), as I will demonstrate, elsewhere within New Woman fiction, there is scepticism about the existence of, as well as an implicit ambivalence concerning the desirability of this “New Man.”

There was, of course, widespread perception in the 1890s of the unattractiveness of the “masculinised” New Woman, ably fostered by *Punch*’s endless procession of unflattering parodies. Moreover, just as the New Woman was frequently stigmatised as *unfeminine*, New Men (along with Decadents and Aesthetes) were widely represented as effeminate. Eliza Lynn Linton’s disapproval of “New Men” rivalled her hostility to the New Woman. Of the male supporters of women’s rights, she claimed: “[t]heir morals are the morals of women, not of men [...] Affiliated to the Wild Women and their cause, they are themselves like women in all essentials of mind and character [...] The truth is simply this – THE UNSEXED WOMAN PLEASES THE UNSEXED MAN” (quoted in Ledger 1997: 96; capitalisation in original). But was the reverse also true? Did the so-called “unsexed man” invariably please the New Woman?

One strategy available to New Woman writers seeking to deflect the attacks on themselves as “decadent” and “unsexed” was, as Lisa Hamilton has argued, “to reinforce the decadence and effeminacy of the male in their writings in order to shift the charge of degeneracy away from themselves.” Their fictions, she suggests, “reflect anxiety about the upending of traditional social roles, as some New Woman writers lamented that the late-Victorian period was ‘effeminate’” (Hamilton 1999: 65-6). In the stories I discuss here, the male objects of female desire are not New Men; they are, rather, men whose perception of, and attitudes to, women are deeply indebted to earlier Ruskinian ideals and separate sphere ideology. If then, as Forward and MacDonald argue, the New Man is largely a utopian vision, and yet the traditional man is unable to accept the New Woman on her own terms, the

courtship plot, in fiction by women aiming to represent contemporary gender relations truthfully, arguably faces collapse. In each of the short stories I examine here, the concept of separate spheres is at the heart of this collapse, as the New Woman challenges mid-Victorian prescriptions of femininity in relation to domesticity and autonomy.

Separate Spheres and the New Woman

There is a significant body of critical work on the New Woman's incursions into public spaces and women's increased visibility on city streets in the late-Victorian period. However, there has been considerably less attention paid to the shifts in perceptions of the domestic sphere and the various ways in which New Woman claims to independence and autonomy reshaped the private realm. By the *fin de siècle*, New Woman writers were rethinking women's relationship to both public and private spaces, and the idea of separate spheres offered a logical point of reference for their various critiques and deconstructions of traditional boundaries. In the short fictions discussed in this article, the domestic realm is interrogated in the light of shifting notions of gender roles and spatial boundaries in the 1890s. Caird's "The Yellow Drawing Room," for example, engages explicitly with mid-Victorian separate-sphere ideology, offering a challenge to dominant bourgeois notions of femininity, women's role and nature, and the *fin de siècle* attacks on progressive women as "unwomanly" and "unnatural."²

The ongoing critical re-evaluation of separate spheres has complicated previous conceptualisations of space in Victorian society. As Hall, McClelland and Rendall have suggested:

the difference between what is public and what is private may refer to the contrast between the state and the market, or to that between the political community more broadly conceived and the world of private interest or "civil society." Or it may contrast the private and intimate world of the family with that of different forms of sociability.

(Hall et al. 2000: 34)

In addition to this series of oppositions I would also contend that the private/public dichotomy is complicated further when we come to consider the nature of the Victorian home itself. Binary distinctions between the privacy of the bourgeois home and the public nature of the outside world are not so easy to sustain. At a time when middle and upper-middle class families routinely had servants, and where certain rooms of the house functioned primarily (even exclusively) as spaces in which to receive people from outside, then public/private demarcations are arguably evident within the home itself, complicating the idea of the home as a sanctuary from the demands and pressures of the public sphere.³

² Since the publication of Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall's seminal study, *Family Fortunes*, in 1987, Victorian Studies scholars working in various disciplines have increasingly reconsidered previously accepted notions of separate spheres, arguing for the "interpenetration of men's and women's worlds" (Hall et.al. 2000: 32). Such challenges to earlier over-simplistic understandings of separate-sphere ideology have arisen in part through an interrogation of the different meanings that may be attached to both the terms "public" and "private."

³ Another crucial point to make here relates to the understanding of separate spheres by the Victorians themselves. As Susan Johnston has suggested, recent re-thinking of separate sphere ideology, "while taking as axiomatic the interdependence of public and private domains, curiously assume this interdependence to be a discovery of their own." In fact, she argues, "such thinkers as Ruskin, Patmore, and Ellis were writing prescriptively, not descriptively; the interdependence of spheres that modern critics have uncovered," Johnston contends, "informed both nineteenth-century literature and political philosophy." (Johnston 2001: 2).

In the late decades of the century, when gender boundaries were widely recognised to be shifting more rapidly and significantly than ever before, writers of the *fin de siècle* began to offer a more explicit deconstruction of the public/private dichotomy, which reinforces the idea that separate sphere ideology, as accepted by much mid-twentieth-century scholarship, was largely an oversimplified ideal rather than a lived reality. The gendered and spatial boundaries between private and public were always more complex, fluid, and overlapping than such constructions suggested – a fact of which the Victorians themselves were wholly aware. However, to recognise that the realms of the public and private were not in fact ever really separate does not enable us to reject the concept out of hand. As Brenda Weber has recently argued, building on the work of Caroline Levine, “the ideology of separation and difference created a fantasy of a sex- and class-segregated order that called for prescriptive divisions between actors, bodies, and identities” (Weber 2016: 8). In this way, we cannot overlook the considerable effect of these ideas and the psychological importance of separate sphere discourse in the nineteenth century.

Mona Caird’s Colour-Coded Critique of the “Separate Spheres”

Mona Caird is best known for her essay on marriage, in which she famously termed the institution “a vexatious failure” in its current state (1888: 197). In her 1892 short story, “The Yellow Drawing Room,” though, Caird deals not with marriage, but with what might be called a failed courtship plot between Vanora Haydon (who bears all the hallmarks of the New Woman, though she precedes the actual term by a couple of years) and Mr St. Vincent, a visitor who becomes unwillingly infatuated with her.⁴ The short story form of the *fin de siècle* allows Caird to evade the conventional marriage plot of the Victorian novel to focus in concentrated detail on the gender ideology upon which nineteenth-century marriage is predicated. As Kate Kruger has posited: “Because the short story’s compressed narrative occurs on a narrow stage, setting becomes more than a benign backdrop. Instead spaces are crucial in the short story because they accrue symbolic significance” (Krueger 2014: 2). This is indubitably true of “The Yellow Drawing Room,” which uses its titular location to dramatise the clash between radical and reactionary ideas in the 1890s, through a symbolic rendering of the domestic sphere.

Like Edmund Widdowson in George Gissing’s *The Odd Women* (1893), St. Vincent is a fervent disciple of Ruskin in his views of women, repeatedly phrasing his beliefs in terms which closely echo the language and imagery of Ruskin’s *Sesame and Lilies* 1865 essays. He is prepared to disapprove of Vanora from the outset because she has had the audacity to decorate the drawing room in a startling and vivid shade of yellow, whereas St. Vincent’s “ideal woman would unfailingly choose a nice tone of grey-blue” (Caird [1892] 2005: 22). Critical of what he assumes to be Vanora’s desire to “make herself conspicuous” – when he believes “the true woman [to be] retiring, unobtrusive, indistinguishable even” (22) – St. Vincent bestows his approval on the quiet sister, Clara, who embodies these attributes. Indeed, the most recurring compliment he bestows on Clara is that she is “a conspicuously *clean* girl” (23; emphasis in original). Vanora, on the other hand, according to St. Vincent’s narration, is “vital;” “In the human colour-spectrum, she took the place of the yellow ray” (23).

⁴ In the same year that Caird published “The Yellow Drawing Room,” American writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman published her well-known short story “The Yellow Wallpaper.” Whereas Caird’s focus is on courtship, Gilman examines the collapse of a marriage and, with it, a woman’s psyche. Nevertheless, both short stories explore themes of female domestic imprisonment, ideas of female madness, as well as masculine attempts to control and ‘master’ the ‘rebellious’ New Woman. Yellow, of course, was the colour of the 1890s, although Caird and Gilman use its symbolism to connote different things.

Vanora is thus associated with her drawing room, which has “confronted [the sunshine] in a spirit of respectful independence, brotherhood being acknowledged, but the principle of equality uncompromisingly asserted” (22). Not only is Caird’s language here loaded with connotations of feminist rhetoric, but Vanora’s transformation of this traditional feminine space – the female sphere – seems to offer an ironic challenge to Ruskin’s assertion in “Of Queen’s Gardens” that women’s “intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering [and] arrangement” (Ruskin [1865] 2002: 77).

Despite “completely, ardently, approv[ing] of Clara” (Caird [1892] 2005: 24), his “grey-blue goddess” (24), St. Vincent cannot repress the “fascination” Vanora exerts over him. In keeping with her association with the masculine sun, Vanora is described by St. Vincent as a “great radiating centre of light and warmth,” whose “glowing atmosphere” “penetrated” him (24). Appalled by this unnatural state of affairs, and at seeing “our beautiful ideas of womanhood set scornfully at naught” (25), St. Vincent undertakes to show Vanora the error of her ways, warning her that the “sacred realms where woman is queen will soon be forbidden to you if you ... continue to think and act in disharmony with the feminine nature and genius” (25). But in response to his fear for “the loss of a real woman from the spheres where she was intended to create and maintain those sacred ties and sentiments” (26), Vanora simply states that her “father never sought to ‘arrange’ a sphere for” her (26). Notwithstanding St. Vincent’s imagery, which consistently associates Vanora with natural forces, such as the sun, he obstinately persists in construing her present actions and behaviour as artificial, as *unnatural*. His essentialist theory of womanhood leads him to believe that by making Vanora fall in love with him, he can “set alight the *true* womanly flame within her” and “make her proud of her subordination” by turning “her powers and affection into the *true* channel” (my emphasis, 28).

If St. Vincent’s confused response to the modern, independent woman of mixed outrage and fascination might be anticipated in a New Woman story, what is perhaps surprising is Vanora’s reciprocation of this response. In spite of the presence of the progressive-minded George Inglis, implied to be a New Man (and dismissed by St. Vincent as “lank,” thereby implicitly invoking the idea of effeminacy in relation to this figure), Vanora unaccountably experiences desire for the man who deems her unnatural. For this New Woman, there is seemingly something desirable in the man who espouses Ruskinian ideals of woman’s queenliness, despite her professed rejection of her prescribed “sphere.” Of course, Caird saw only too well the pitfalls of the Ruskinian model of gendered spheres, but her story explores the notion that to recognise something on an intellectual level is not necessarily tantamount to re-schooling the emotions nor controlling the mysterious process of sexual attraction, even where this is a half-shameful and reluctant attraction. When St. Vincent demands that Vanora “must learn to love” him and “be a woman in the old sweet sense” (27), she replies:

“That is the horrible absurdity of it!” [...] “You enthral one part of me and leave the other scornful and indifferent” [...] “To live with you would be like living in a tomb [...] And there is no sunshine within miles of you! Yet when I am not with you there is a sort of ache; your personality seems to fascinate me.” (29)

Ann Heilmann claims that “[u]ltimately, Vanora’s vision is able to enter the bloodstream of Old Manhood and endure only because her reason overrules her desire” (2004: 214). While this is true to some extent, I would argue that this reading makes Vanora’s rejection of St. Vincent appear far more decisive and based upon logic than is actually clear from the text. As Heilmann implies, Vanora’s conflict is one between reason and desire, but what she fails to acknowledge is how very nearly desire wins out. At the climax of the story there is a point at which Vanora seems about to surrender to her physical passion for St. Vincent, despite her intellectual rejection of his doctrines:

She looked white and distraught. I pleaded like a lunatic, argued, urged; for one supreme moment my arms were around her, and I thought that she would yield. But whether or not a triumph was in store for me I shall never know... (29)

This moment of seeming “triumph” for St. Vincent is curtailed by the abrupt appearance on the scene of Clara, and, significantly, it is solidarity with her sister’s distress, rather than a mastering of her own desires, which provides the impetus for Vanora’s rejection. Sisterhood, seemingly, in approved New Woman fashion, trumps heterosexual desire. What is also notable about this episode, though, is the way in which the language emphasises St. Vincent’s dominating impulse. He “argued” and “urged,” and his “*triumph*” is based on her “*yield[ing]*” (my emphases). Here the man arguably embodies the traditional model of dominant, masterful, overpowering masculinity, and it is in this role that Vanora comes closest to succumbing to him. Earlier, he admits to “a burning desire to subdue her” and likens his “wooing” to “going to fight a duel” (27). Though Vanora rejects St. Vincent, she admits that “the fault, after all, is my own” (29-30), this “fault,” presumably, being an irrational desire which contradicts her ideological principles.

Frederic Harrison declared that “Women must choose to be either women or abortive men” (Harrison 1891: 451). Caird subverts this notion, not only by emphasising Vanora’s womanliness – St. Vincent is forced to admit that she is “supremely, overpoweringly womanly” (Caird [1892] 2005: 23) – but also by leaving St. Vincent at the story’s close as an “abortive creature, striding between two centuries” (30). This recalls an earlier description of St. Vincent’s advances towards Vanora as “the eighteenth century as a lover wooing the nineteenth century” (27) and points to the difficulty of the transition posed by the new ideas of the *fin de siècle*. Importantly, though, it also inverts Harrison’s statement, so that the unnatural “abortive creature” becomes, not the New Woman, but the man who is unable to accept her and, by implication, progress in general.

Ella D’Arcy’s “polluted” pilgrim

In the shocking resolution to Ella D’Arcy’s 1895 short story for *The Yellow Book*, “The Pleasure Pilgrim,” Lulie Thayer shoots herself dead in response to a man telling her that if she had any real concept of how “unworthy” and “polluted” she is, she would “blow her brains out” (165). As in “The Yellow Drawing Room,” D’Arcy’s story invokes the idea of separate spheres and idealized notions of female purity in order to highlight the difficulties attached to the courtship plot at the *fin de siècle*. Also like Caird, D’Arcy presents her New Woman figure through the eyes of a male narrator, an English writer, Campbell, whose idealised views of female purity resemble St. Vincent’s in many respects; he dislikes bawdy talk and professes to have “a high ideal of Woman, an immense respect for her” (147). Campbell is travelling to a German Schloss turned boarding house, where he not only anticipates quiet time for his writing but looks forward to seeing his friend Mayne, and the “good talks Mayne and he would have together, late at night [...] after the rest of the household had gone to bed” (140). Into these foregrounded homosocial bonds Lulie Thayer is rudely thrust, a young American woman described by Mayne as ““the newest development of the New Woman – she who in England preaches and bores you, and in America practices and pleases”” (150).

The absence of any narratorial direction, other than Campbell's subjective account of events, means that Lulie is explained by others – primarily men – throughout the short story.⁵ Mayne's supreme confidence in his ability to "read" women like Lulie is starkly contrasted with Campbell's naivety and reliance on conventional idealizations – the latter is initially drawn to Lulie because "he had thought her so fresh, so innocent" (149). Both men represent opposite ends of traditional female stereotypes in their construction of Lulie as either Madonna or whore, emphasising the psychological distance between the sexes found in Caird. Mayne's gossipy elucidation of Lulie's sexual history is received by Campbell as absolute truth, despite the absence of any form of supporting evidence: "She's an adventuress. Yes, an adventuress, but an end-of-the-century one. She doesn't travel for profit, but for pleasure" (148). Mayne assures his inexperienced friend that Lulie "makes love – desperate love, mind you – to every man she meets. And goodness knows how many she hasn't met in the course of her career, which began presumably at the age of ten" (149).

Lulie's frank and flirtatious ways, coupled with Mayne's cynical account of her past amorous adventures, lead Campbell to revise his initial assessment of the girl as "so fresh, so innocent" (149) and to designate her "a wanton" (150). As Sally Ledger notes, "Campbell recoils from [Lulie] when she takes on an all-too-physical life of her own as a romantic adventurer" (Ledger 2007: 53). Just as St. Vincent chastises Vanora for her transgression of feminine ideals, Campbell rebukes Lulie, though in this case, the criticism focuses more exclusively on the idealistic man's horror at supposed loss of chastity: "To me, [...] to all right-thinking people, a young girl's kisses are something pure, something sacred [...] you have deliberately, of your own perverse will, tarnished your beauty, and thrown away all the modesty, the reticence, the delicacy, which make a young girl so infinitely dear" (D'Arcy [1895] 2005: 155). Despite the fact that Campbell's treatment of Lulie becomes increasingly brutal, she continues to seek his company and declare her love for him. In this way, she resembles Caird's Vanora, who is similarly attracted to a male ideology that deems her unnatural. The difference here is that, along with Campbell himself, the reader is never able to decide whether Lulie's professed sentiments are sincere, or (as Mayne insists) part of her game-playing. This ambiguity is facilitated by the short story's compressed form and, in particular, the anticipation of modernist techniques apparent in short fiction of the *fin de siècle*, which frequently resist explanation and closure. Finally, in desperate frustration at his inability to believe in her, Campbell throws the ultimate challenge to Lulie:

"Why, if you really loved me, really loved any man – if you had any conception of what the passion of love is, how beautiful, how fine, how sacred – the mere idea that you could not come to your lover fresh, pure, untouched, as a young girl should – that you had been handled, fondled, and God knows what besides, by this man and the other – would fill you with such horror for yourself, with such supreme disgust – you would feel yourself so unworthy, so polluted . . . that . . . that . . . by God ! you would take up that pistol there, and blow your brains out!" Lulie seemed to find the idea quite entertaining. (165)

D'Arcy's refusal to offer clarification about the true intention behind Lulie's actions echoes the sense of inexplicability and miscommunication that pervades the treatment of gender relations, and particularly romantic relations, in much New Woman fiction. It is perhaps significant that despite appearing submissively to obey the callous instruction of the man she professes to love,

⁵ The voices of Campbell and Mayne are pitched against those of Lulie and Nannie in opposing explanations of Lulie's behaviour and personality. Lulie's companion, Nannie, is granted a strong voice in the text, but she is contemptuously disregarded by Mayne and Campbell. As Lulie herself notes: "I think men gossip a great deal more than women [...] They try to make all life suit their own preconceived theories" (D'Arcy [1895] 2005: 151).

Lulie makes an interesting deviation by *not* “blow[ing] her brains out,” as Campbell suggests, but shooting herself in the heart – the traditional symbolic site of romantic love. Andrew Maunder has suggested that, in “The Pleasure Pilgrim:”

D’Arcy raises many questions ... concerning women’s sexuality and the disjuncture between the act of romance and the feelings that underscore it. This story is a criticism of Victorian men’s fears of sexual, independent women; also implicit, however, is a criticism of the New Woman’s inability to love in a way that will lead to a happy resolution.

(Maunder 2007: 340)

Two of the questions raised by both these stories are what sort of man does the New Woman *need* and what sort of man does she *want*? Are these two things the same – or even reconcilable? If the New Woman rejects the sexually philandering, syphilis-carrying man (frequently attacked in fiction by New Woman writers such as Sarah Grand), and also the New Man, who is too often seen as effeminate, then it becomes plausible that the strong man of noble ideals (albeit ones which seemingly conflict with the New Woman’s political agenda) might exert a certain kind of attraction – even if this attraction is inherently problematic, contradictory and, in Lulie Thayer’s case, fatal. In the doomed courtships depicted here, Caird and D’Arcy, in different ways, explore the uncomfortable notion that inequality might be a precondition – a requirement – for female sexual interest in men.

Ella Hepworth Dixon’s desperate spinsters

Unlike the other two short stories under discussion here, Ella Hepworth Dixon’s “One Doubtful Hour” (1897) does not feature a New Woman protagonist. Instead, Dixon portrays the desperation of a woman, no longer in the first flush of youth and unblessed by a dowry, to succeed in the only vocation for which she has been trained: the procurement of a husband. In contrast to both Vanora and Lulie, Effie Lauder’s single state is unremittingly cast as failure and dependency, rather than autonomy and independence.⁶ Described as “faded,” “angular,” and showing “traces of having once been a pretty pink-and-white girl” (Hepworth Dixon [1897] 1904: 1), Effie aspires only to the conventional domestic goals for which she has been pre-conditioned: “a snug little sitting-room of her own” and “a baby with dimpling, creasy wrists” (5). Despite this difference in outlook and motivation between the New Woman and the woman who tries to play by the rules of the gender game she has been taught, all three stories highlight the problems of separate sphere ideology and the ways in which it hinders female fulfilment, not least through its promotion of lack of understanding between men and women.

Hepworth Dixon avails herself of the advantages of the short story form, using its episodic structure and potential for brevity to convey her heroine’s wretched plight. The story focuses on three key scenes: the first two in public spaces (a steamship and a public ball), with the tragic finale taking place in the private sphere of home. At the beginning of the story, Effie is traveling home from India, where she has been staying with her brother and his wife. On the journey she spends time with Colonel Simpson, upon whom Effie sets her last hopes of

⁶ Interestingly, Jennifer Phegley notes that women were often seen, in the late-Victorian periodical press, as having gained the upper hand in courtship. She writes: “The perception of women’s increased power in the marriage market – or the marriage lottery, as it was often called – also inspired anxiety-ridden accounts of the state of courtship in the humor magazine *Punch*. ‘Love Making in 1891’ depicts a woman in complete control of courtship as well as the legal and intellectual aspects of her budding relationship.” However, Phegley also acknowledges that such control was largely the preserve of women with financial independence. (Phegley 2012: 16).

catching a husband. Conversations between the two are typified by assumptions regarding feminine behaviour on the colonel's part and a concerted attempt on Effie's to conform to these false expectations.

The private sphere of home holds no happiness for Effie; as an unmarried woman, she lacks influence and independence. Emma Liggins has pointed out the way in which Effie's domestic space denotes her disappointment with life: "Like many of the spinster-heroines of contemporary New Woman novels, she perceives her space as a symbol of her own fadedness, looking round at 'its damp-stained walls and shabby furniture, seeing a vista of drab years in which she would be only half-alive'" (Liggins 2012: 15). As Effie admits to Colonel Simpson, "home isn't always the happiest place," whereupon she immediately "realized she had said the wrong thing" (Hepworth-Dixon [1897] 1904: 3). Her recognition that she has "said the wrong thing" in the colonel's eyes – betrayed herself in effect – demonstrates Effie's consciousness of maintaining the illusion that men expect of women. Valerie Fehlbaum discusses the ways in which Hepworth Dixon's female characters are frequently shown to be conscious of performing a role; as she notes, key scenes in the short stories often happen at theatres or, in the case of Effie, a ball, which emphasises "the public repercussions of private disappointments" (Fehlbaum 2005: 105). This notion of performance means that the public sphere is an equally unhappy space for Effie, consisting chiefly of the social assemblies that function cynically as "business" opportunities rather than events designed for pleasure. Colonel Simpson, in his complacent ignorance about the indignities shaping Effie's life, assumes that she must be fond of dancing because it is "'natural' in 'girls.'" But for Effie, there is nothing "natural" about dancing: "how tired Effie was of balls! She [...] had danced so unceasingly in pursuit of an ever-vanishing husband [...] How weary she was of it all!" (Hepworth-Dixon [1897] 1904: 4).

The restricted canvas of the short story, with its emphasis on "the interior landscapes of human experience" (Ledger 2003: xv) and on epiphanic episodes, means that Hepworth Dixon is able to reduce Effie's life down to three single locations (the steamer, the ballroom, and Effie's bedroom), which can be read respectively as representing last hope, desperation, and death. Claire Drewery has demonstrated how modernist short stories by women are fascinated with the liminal, with spaces of transition, and I would suggest that such liminality is similarly notable in "One Doubtful Hour" (Drewery 2016).⁷ In the opening sections, Effie is located in the "in-between" space of the steamer, which carries her home from India. The "passage" home is just one instance of the semantic emphasis on this word, which taken together highlight the way in which Effie is constantly between one thing and another, echoing also the transitional stage of her life – between faded youth and discarded spinsterhood. At the ball, where Colonel Simpson drops by to pay his respects to Effie, there is again an emphasis on passages: the "obscure passages" (Hepworth Dixon [1897] 1904: 16-17) that lead off the ballroom are the scenes of discreet liaisons or, in Effie's case, utter humiliation (discussed below). After the ball, she tries to think of anything other than "that long drab passage" (27). Even Effie's bedroom is not part of the main house but has been built in the garden and is located "at the very end of the hall passage" (27). This annexed position symbolically reflects Effie's home-life, both separate from and subordinate to her family as a dependent and mere chaperon to her younger sisters.

Hepworth Dixon's unremitting analysis of Effie's situation culminates in an inevitable rejection. Emboldened by desperation and her awareness of "the old, old tragi-comedy; the degrading, unceasing pursuit of the possible husband" (17), Effie defies convention by taking

⁷ I am grateful to Victoria Margree for her editorial comments, which suggested the points about liminality in Dixon's short story.

matters into her own hands, presumably confirming the colonel's alarmed impression that she exhibits "the air of a lean and hungry huntress ... that of a hungry huntress of men" (23). The narrative elides this crucial scene, leaving the reader capable only of inferring that Effie makes some kind of audacious overture or proposal to the colonel. Elision, of course, is not a technique peculiar to the short story, but it is perhaps more common (and effective) due to the necessary compression of the form. Following a scene-break, indicated by ellipses, the narrative re-joins Effie as she thinks that she will "never forget ... that look on the colonel's face – that mixture of astonishment, disgust, and, yes, repulsion" (25). Oblivious to the end of the devastating effect he has had on Effie's life, Colonel Simpson wonders "how he could ever have thought seriously ... of such a girl as Effie Lauder" (26). With the departure of her final hope, Effie returns home and gasses herself, unwilling to play the part any longer of "this heroine of a humble, every-day tragedy" (15). Unlike Lulie Thayer's suicide, the reasons for which are never truly explicable by the reader, Effie's self-killing is only too comprehensible. The bleakness of her fate is emphasised by the final lines of the short story. A doctor who is attending a birth in another part of the house, is called upon when Effie's lifeless body is discovered; after a "brief examination," the doctor merely inquires Effie's age "in his professional tone" (30). The concluding lines announce the birth of "a girl – a very fine little girl" (30). This ironic juxtaposition of Effie's exit from the world with a new, hopeful female life underscores the dreadful circularity of life for women such as Effie Lauder.⁸

As noted at the outset, the failed courtship plot in much women's writing of the *fin de siècle* removes marriage as the typical resolution. My textual readings have aimed to show that this is due in part to the New Woman's inability to imagine a solution to the many problems she identifies, not least the difficulty of overcoming attraction to unsuitable men who will not support her vision. At the same time, these unresolved courtships might be read as a deliberate strategy to avoid alienating more conservative female readers, and this is particularly true in the case of Hepworth Dixon. W.T. Stead, writing anonymously for the *Review of Reviews* in 1894, acknowledged that Caird's "Marriage" essay gives "articulate utterance to the 'dumb despair of trampled centuries,'" even though she "errs by excess, and carries her protest far beyond the bounds of moderation" ([Stead] 1894: 64-5). Nevertheless, he expressed supreme confidence that the challenge of the New Woman would leave no lasting effect on female desire for traditional marriage: "But there is little danger that women, in their recoil against loveless unions, will sacrifice the lifelong monogamic tie *which is their chief safeguard*" (65; my emphasis). This emphasis on marriage as women's "safeguard" points to the writer's assumption that social and economic motives will be the primary factors in women's continuing acceptance of traditional models of marriage. Hepworth Dixon's sad tale of desperation seems to support this statement; for women like Effie, few alternative routes to happiness presented themselves as yet. However, the short stories of Caird and D'Arcy arguably imply that a more complex obstacle to female emancipation from the oppressive aspects of the conventional courtship and marriage plot might lie in women's own illogical and recalcitrant desires, which are not always easily subordinated to feminist reason. In all three texts discussed here, women writers expose and critique the gendered norms on which relations between the sexes are predicated and they are enabled to do so effectively, in large part, because of the distinctive textual strategies and characteristics of short fiction. As Krueger

⁸ The resolution of "One Doubtful Hour" is reminiscent of the ending of George Gissing's novel, *The Odd Women*, where Rhoda Nunn contemplates the infant daughter of the late Monica Widdowson: "She gazed intently at those diminutive features [...] The dark, bright eye was Monica's. And as the baby sank into sleep, Rhoda's vision grew dim; a sigh made her lips quiver, and once more she murmured, 'Poor little child!'" (Gissing [1893] 2002: 332). Gissing is similarly pessimistic in his presentation of the cruel cycle "odd women" face.

suggests, “The short story, rather than the novel or nonfiction, lends itself to such disruptions [of normative gender ideology] due to its concentrated narrative power” (Krueger 2014: 8). For Caird, D’Arcy, and Hepworth Dixon, the short story provides the ideal form for crystallising both the challenges and the opportunities facing women at the *fin de siècle*.

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