

Neglected Novelist or *Cruel Necessity*? The Forgotten Work of a Sensational Sisterhood

Michael Bath

Abstract

In 1886 appeared a late sensation novel called *A Cruel Necessity* by Evangeline Smith. Despite favourable reviews, the novel never sold well because of the unreliability of its publisher. It is of interest today because of what it tells us about domestic collaborative writing practices, because of its clear engagement with Milton, and because of its working out of religious debates. Making use of the Smith family diaries now in Dorset History Centre along with printed materials concerning the family, this article continues work first published in 1973 by exploring the novel in two new ways. First, after an introduction, I show how the diaries reveal the novel to be the result of a family collaboration (especially between Evangeline and her sisters). In the most substantial section of the article, I discuss the novel's engagement with religion, as manifested in the recovery of its heroine's romantic love and of her faith. I argue that the novel exploits strongly Miltonic religious symbolism and action as well as a great deal of Biblical allusion while portraying the social life and Victorian gentility of the established church in a way familiar from mid-Victorian realism, all the while following many of the conventions of the sensation novel. The theology that governs the novel's resolution is that of the established Anglican Church, with little if any acceptance of either Calvinist Nonconformity or Anglo-Catholic ritualism which were growing in importance at the time. This is perfectly in accord with the Smith family's conventional antidisestablishmentarian position, as evidenced by material concerning Evangeline's brother.

Keywords

Evangeline F. Smith, family, collaboration, sensation novel, Milton, religious debates, realism.

Date of Acceptance: 27 June 2022

Date of Publication: 4 July 2022

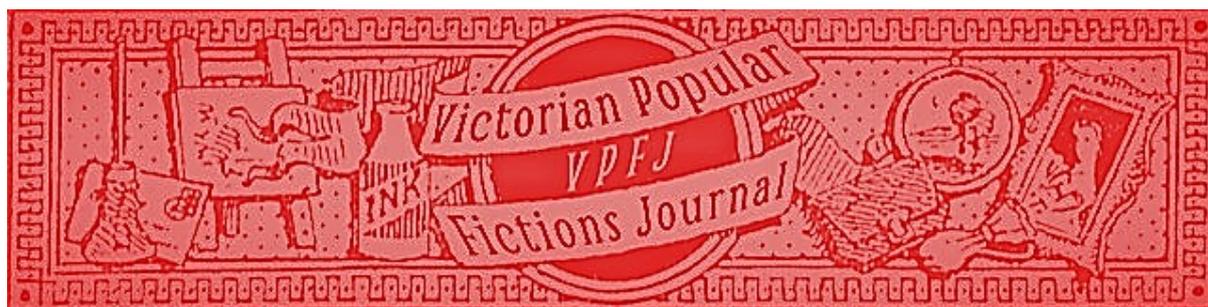
Double Blind Peer Reviewed

Recommended Citation:

Bath, Michael. 2022. "Neglected Novelist or *Cruel Necessity*? The Forgotten Work of a Sensational Sisterhood," *Victorian Popular Fictions* 4:1: 63-77. ISSN: 2632-4253 (online) DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46911/DHRL6389>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).



Neglected Novelist or *Cruel Necessity*? The Forgotten Work of a Sensational Sisterhood

Michael Bath

In 1886, *A Cruel Necessity*, by an author called Evangeline F. Smith, appeared in London from the press of the publishers A. Spottiswoode Jones & Co. – or perhaps one should say it failed to appear since it had a disastrous publishing history. Although it met with reviews in *The Academy* (13 November 1886, 324), with notices in *Literary World* (3 September 1886, 188), and the *Morning Post* (1 September 1886) and a very positive notice in the *Spectator* (15 January 1887, 84), it looks to have found few readers in its own day and has remained largely unnoticed and unread since. The reasons for now resurrecting it for students of Victorian popular fictions have to do with the discovery of a large set of family diaries, which record the process of its writing in collaborative story-telling games played by the author and her sisters. Moreover, the fact that the family were friends and neighbours of Thomas Hardy, that *A Cruel Necessity* is set in Hardy's "Wessex" and he had a presentation copy in his library gives it an added interest.

The problems Evangeline Smith encountered in her dealings with her publisher are also recorded in some detail in the 1886 diary, which records that she paid £100 commission on the understanding that Jones would produce at least two hundred copies, of which one hundred were for private distribution. Jones, however, only printed one hundred copies, and when reviews appeared, and orders began to come in he had none left to meet demand. Before long, Evangeline Smith was getting letters from Mudies' lending library and from booksellers complaining that they could get no reply from its publisher, and when threatened with legal action his excuse was that the type had already been broken up, despite which he promised

a second printing. The diaries record the publisher's claim that he had printed a further five hundred copies later in the year. This may explain why copies have survived in either green or red bindings with variant ornamental details on the cover; the type has not, however, been reset and there was thus no second edition.¹

The opening chapter introduces the novel's hero, Alfred Robinson, standing on Waterloo Station where he takes the trouble to find a seat on the crowded train from London to Swanbridge, in the South West of England, for a "timid little lady", Miss Wise, who is carrying her pet dormouse in a cage, only to discover that an equally small sinister-looking man, who turns out to be the villain of the piece, insists on joining her; we later learn that he is Andrew Leverett and that he "accidentally" steps on Miss Wise's dormouse during the journey; we also learn that he himself owns a pet ferret. Robinson, a talented musician, is travelling to Swanbridge to take up his position as Church organist in the parish of the Rev. Mr. Dallas, a snobbish Anglican vicar whose position, as usual in the established Church of England, is in the gift of the local landowner; he is himself married to a socially superior wife, Lady Cowden, who retains her title and maiden name despite her marriage to a commoner. Issues of social class, marital fidelity, and religious belief are at the centre of the novel and are foregrounded in its densely allegorical symbolism. The Rev. Dallas's son, Vincent, who has also gained his position as head teacher at the local school through patronage, is however an opinionated radical who voices his opposition at every opportunity to the snobberies that have secured his family's and his own status in the town of Swanbridge. The novel does not invite us to share his radical politics, however.

As a highly talented musician who plays Liszt and Chopin up to concert standard on the piano, Robinson's motives for coming to Swanbridge to act as church organist and offer piano lessons to the parish's young ladies, are soon revealed to have more to do with some undisclosed previous relations he has had with the novel's heroine, Edith Huntley, wife of Col. Gordon Huntley, whose military status, "formidable rectitude" and hatred of sentimentality condemns her to a loveless marriage. The marriage has nevertheless afforded her the solace of her three children in the great house of Mauldeth Abbey, which her own inheritance had secured as the family home following her marriage to this Colonel of the local regiment. The regimental barracks are located in the neighbouring town of "Wembridge"—so the action takes place not merely in Dorset (Hardy's "Wessex"), but in precisely that area of south Dorset containing the Purbeck Hills, with its two Victorian bathing resorts of Weymouth and Swanage.

The plot of the novel involves the disclosure of previous crimes and deceptions that have been propagated to maintain the security of this inheritance of the Abbey and its estate. Our Satanic villain, Leverett, turns out to be the instrument of this disclosure in a plot against our heroine that depends wholly on blackmail. We have to await the closing chapters before her past history and the circumstances of her birth and inheritance are revealed; they are socially

¹ I outlined these circumstances many years ago in Bath 1973. Dorset County Record Office, holds twenty-five relevant diaries in its Smith Family Archive, dating from 1841 to 1974, four of these written by the mother, Emily Genevieve Smith, eighteen by Alice Christiana, one by Caroline Blanche, and two by Evangeline our novelist. A fourth diary of Emily Simpson's, the earliest – dated 1836 – which was the year of her marriage to Reginald Southwell Smith, is in the possession of a private collector, Margaret Smith (no relation), who has published an excellent and invaluable transcript of it together with extensive research on the Smith family in Smith 2003. I am deeply indebted to this research, which appeared in print thirty years after I had the privilege of working through the actual diaries courtesy of their family custodian, Mrs Mary Costabidie, and thanks to the kindness over many years of Evangeline Smith's great-niece, Mrs. Jean Larson, who first alerted me through antiquarian bookseller John Ruston in Bournemouth to the existence of an unrecognized Dorset novelist, contemporary with Thomas Hardy.

and sexually scandalous, and therefore wholly suitable for the plot of a conventional Victorian sensation novel. Our talented, beautiful, acutely sensitive and religious heroine, Edith, turns out to be the daughter of the poor little lady, Miss Wise, whose pet dormouse suffered its proleptic fate on the train from Waterloo, and who serves at Mauldeth Abbey as governess to Edith's three young children. As the plot unravels towards the end, almost everything we may have assumed about the previous history and identity of its major characters turns out to be mistaken, for not only is little Miss Wise the heroine's mother, but Mr. Leverett turns out to be both a symbolic devil figure and also the sometime lover of Miss Wise. This revelation comes towards the end of the novel where, on being forced to reveal to her husband that she has been blackmailed, our heroine writes a formal confession to him of the deceptions surrounding her own birth and parentage of which she has been guilty, and which support his grounds for divorce – she makes this confession in a desperate attempt to retain custody of her children. In it we learn not only that Miss Wise is her mother, but also that Andrew Leverett is her father:

“I, Edith Gordon-Huntley, am not the daughter of Philip Dacre, nor of his wife. My father is Andrew Leverett, an adventurer, who lives by cheating; my mother, Charlotte Wise. I am their illegitimate child.”

(Smith 1886: 325)

We learn only enough of these circumstances to precipitate the momentous climax of the novel in which the heroine not only escapes from her loveless marriage, following Leverett's brutal murder of her husband, but also wins the hand of her true lover with Alfred Robinson's proposal of marriage, which prompts the recovery of her Christian faith. Moreover, these identity-switches at the end of the novel help to restore justice and secure its happy ending: they involve not only the revealed histories of her mother and father, but also that of her lover, for Alfred Robinson is the assumed *alias*, we learn, of someone whose social status exceeds that of any other character in the novel, since this man is no everyday Tommy Robinson but is revealed to be the Earl of Rotherhame and Berkeley. Issues of social status and titles thus play a major role in this novel, as they did in Victorian society more generally.

The dénouement of this hitherto unknown example of Victorian sensation fiction thus turns out to be based not only on the usual motivations of blackmail, revenge and hidden identities which are conventional – if not definitive – of the genre, but also on a tissue of previous events and characters whose existence is recalled only retrospectively as the key to its plot and its final resolution. Moreover, this is only one of three successive novels by Evangeline F. Smith, all of which involve some of these same characters in an extended narrative recording different stages of this scandal, for its successor, entitled *A Bid for a Soul* deals with the previous actions of Edward, Lord Berkeley and of Edith Dacre on which, as we have seen, the dénouement of its predecessor depends and that may well be why the title page announces its successor, *A Bid for a Soul*, which was only published in 1924 though apparently written some years earlier, parenthetically and paradoxically as “A Prelude.” Moreover, both these novels include many of the same characters, and rework plot lines and events that had first appeared in the much longer three-volume predecessor of each of them, *In a Vain Shadow* (Smith, 1883).

The interlinked plot lines and characters whose hidden secrets and scandalous relationships connect all three of the novels readily identify them as members of the genre which had emerged in the 1860s, when Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* set the fashion for such plot devices of fraud, hidden secrets, mistaken identities, bigamous marriages, and attempted murder that characterise so much Victorian popular fiction.

It is that generative power that may well explain not only the interconnected plots and characters of all three of Evangeline Smith's novels but also what the diaries tell as about the fantasy games she shared with her two sisters which, as we shall see, were involved in the invention of all three. The "Secret" which in Braddon's novel *Lady Audley* has fabricated to preserve her home and marriage involves fraud, bigamy, mistaken identities, and attempted murder: it is the exposure of that secret which threatens to destroy the home and marriage of the principal characters. By 1886 the sensation novel and its congeners had expanded and developed hugely, but it was by no means exhausted. As Pamela Gilbert says,

Although the term's use waned in the 1870s and began to be superseded by other designations, writers associated with sensation continued to write through the turn of the century – and often continued to write the same sort of 'sensational' plots.

(Gilbert 2011: 3)²

The precedents of sensation fiction have long been recognised as including the Brontës, with *Jane Eyre's* multiple-spouse plot and its madwoman in the attic suggesting its status as at least a forerunner of this genre, and as we know those melodramatic fictions were recorded in the Brontë children's surviving "play-books" where, in the 1820s, the sisters dramatized the actions of characters based on their brother Branwell's toy soldiers. The narratives were known collectively as the Young Men's Play and involved such characters as the Duke of Wellington, dwelling in an Eastern kingdom known as Angria. Their adventures are recorded in the handwritten scripts, both prose and verse, that have survived.³ The novels of Evangeline F. Smith, as we shall see, were the product of a Dorsetshire vicarage and they grew out of somewhat similar fantasy games to those played by the Brontë children. Moreover, it was my discovery more than forty years ago of the family diaries of Evangeline Smith and two of her sisters that suggested a remarkable correspondence between the writing of these novels and those of the Brontës. Clarifying the family circumstances in which they were written thus becomes of interest since, as we shall see, the production of these female-authored novels involved a process of collaborative authorship between siblings in closely-knit nineteenth-century families, both of which were, as it happens, ecclesiastical households. We are therefore talking about a process of female authorship by creative sisterhoods. How that worked for the Brontës is now well known, but the

² The diaries do not unfortunately record the sisters' reading of any particular "sensational" authors who might have supplied models for such secretive plot devices, though they may well have included such writers as Mrs. Henry Wood or Rhoda Broughton. In 1871 Hardy's *Desperate Remedies* represents a belated example of the genre, with "The principles observed in its composition ... too exclusively those on which mystery, entanglement, surprise, and moral obliquity are depended upon for exciting interest" as Hardy confesses in the "Prefatory Note" to its 1889 second edition. I have found no record of the Smith sisters reading of *Desperate Remedies*, although in 1884 (Dec. 21), Alice records she "read *Far from the Madding Crowd*" and the sisters certainly kept abreast of his writing. A few days earlier she records a "Very interesting letter from Mr. Kegan Paul with criticisms adverse to Leverett, and Edward's conduct to Edith. The vicarage family he thought very good. He thought Eva would hear much the same praise and blame as for the last book [...] and said if she would write very slowly and pause much she would one day be able to write a very interesting book." For Hardy's own advice to Evangeline Smith on some of her own short stories which she had sent him in 1876, see Bath 1973. For Hardy's writings' relation to Victorian sensational fiction see Sparks in Gilbert 2011.

³ The relationship between the 'Angria' fantasies and the Brontë novels has, understandably, been widely studied; see e.g., Brontë, ed. Ratchford, 1955.

identification of a similar process for the production of literature in another nineteenth-century household arguably has a significance that is independent of any intrinsic merit these particular novels by a hitherto unknown Victorian female author may have. Hence it becomes of interest to say at least something about Evangeline F. Smith, her family, and her wider connections.

Evangeline Smith, Family and Collaboration

Evangeline (1853-1945) was a daughter of Reginald Southwell Smith, Rector for over fifty years of the small parish of West Stafford, near Dorchester, adjoining the parish of Dorset dialect poet William Barnes and two miles from Upper Bockhampton, birthplace of Thomas Hardy. Her paternal grandfather was Sir John Wyldbore Smith (1770-1852), baronet of Sydling St Nicholas, Dorset, and thus a member of the local gentry. Her mother, Emily née Simpson, grew up in Bath where she was influenced by the Evangelical revival in the Church of England, whose doctrinal and moral principles she passed down to her children, including Eva; she was an accomplished singer and amateur musician who also passed on those talents to her daughter. In 1836 she married Reginald Smith, then curate of Lyme Regis in Dorset, who had studied at public-school Winchester College and then at Balliol College Oxford before taking holy orders. Following his marriage his Winchester friend John Floyer presented him with the living of West Stafford, where Evangeline our novelist was one of their twelve children all of whom grew up in the rectory, though six of them died of tuberculosis (“consumption”).

Her brother Reginald Bosworth Smith became well known as author of an official and monumental *Life of Lord Lawrence* of India as well as an equally scholarly and politically liberal study of *Mohammed and Mohammedanism*. He worked as a highly respected schoolmaster at Harrow where he is remembered as “one of the first classical tutors to break away from the tyranny of Latin verses” (i.e. Latin verse composition) (Grogan 1909: 113). He was a close friend of Thomas Hardy – indeed when Bosworth’s and Eva’s brother Henry died in 1879, Hardy attended the funeral at West Stafford where, as he recorded in his diary:

During the funeral of Henry Smith, the rector’s son at West Stafford, the cows looked mournfully over the churchyard wall from the adjoining barton at the grave, resting their clammy chins on the coping; and at the end clattered their horns in a farewell volley.⁴

(Hardy 1962: 203)

Of the six surviving children Evangeline, Alice and Blanche are the three who were most closely involved in the writing of these three novels; Blanche the youngest (1855-1913) was the only one who married, in 1884, when she wed Caledon Egerton, a Colonel in the Dorset Regiment: the couple settled at a house called Tenantrees close to a neighbouring house which Hardy had built for his own brother and sisters: relations between the two families had always been close. Following the death of their father in 1895 the two unmarried sisters moved from West Stafford Rectory to join their younger married sister and her husband, where they lived out the remaining years of their lives well into the twentieth century. That remarkable closeness and sibling solidarity undoubtedly helps to explain why all three sisters should have collaborated twenty years earlier in writing these novels.

⁴ For Bosworth's friendship with Hardy see Thomalin 2006: 35, 136, 392.

The evidence for that collaboration can be found in the remarkable series of family diaries which came to light in the 1970s. The circumstances surrounding the writing and the publication of Evangeline's first three-decker novel *In a Vain Shadow* (1883) and its successor *A Cruel Necessity* three years later are recorded in these journals of its author's sister Alice for the years 1883, 1884, and 1886 (the diary for 1885 has apparently not survived). In January 1883, for instance, the sisters were all correcting proofs of *In a Vain Shadow* and the diary identifies some of the particular episodes and characters in the novel that were keeping them busy. However, from time to time it is evidently not describing episodes in a narrative that had already gone to press but characters and events that were still work in progress, and which all three sisters evidently discussed, narrated, or invented between themselves. Thus, in August Alice records how "Eva and Ducky [pet name for her sister Blanche] wrote their jolly novels again. I did Blanche's with her." There are further references throughout the year to "Blanche's novel". On 16th October, she records "Eva wrote novel" and "Eva and I had a sit by our fire after tea and nice correcting. She read me out her new powerful and thrilling bit, the disclosure of Edith on Sunday". On the 24th of that month, she writes,

I had the treat of two of Eva's jolly readings. Corrected and read out in evening and some jolly jolly G. [sic.] before tea and late ... had a chance for the Chapter with Evy. She is making Leverett a vile little droll character like Fagin whom Blanche loved, snugly toasting his sausages.

Alice Christiana Smith Diary 1883, Dorset History Centre, D-500/11

Further readings and discussion followed almost daily: on 5th November, for instance, Alice records Eva and Blanche both writing, when "She read us out her jolly new chapter – the Choral Association, discussed plot and had G ideas. Geraldine again to be the Marquis of Rotherham's wife, the Hamiltons for his children, the four curly heads for Daubeny's."

And so it continues, in a way that often makes it difficult to know whether the diary is recording events of their everyday lives in West Stafford or elaborating on things which had no existence outside the stories they were telling each other, some of which, though by no means all, found their way into the three novels. Recurrent references to "Blanche's novel" confirm, however, that Eva was not claiming unique responsibility as author for all these plots or even for writing them up, and the significance of the recurrent "Had some G" becomes clear when in a later diary we learn that "G" means "Game" and that they sometimes referred to it using its German synonym as "*Spiel*". Thus, on 12th December in this diary, Alice already writes, "Lots of jolly spiel ideas about H's release from Newgate" and the following day, "All kinds of G ideas. At the time of Howard's release ... Alf's interview with Rotherham at Windsor discussing the composition to be made to Howard etc." and, two days later, "We read out 'Story of Edith' in morn".

In reading these diary entries we are therefore evidently witnessing – at the very time they were correcting the proofs of Evangeline Smith's first novel – her sister's day-by-day account of the invention of its planned successor in what was clearly a collaborative and connected process. "The Story of Edith" is evidently the narrative that appeared two years later under the title *A Cruel Necessity*, but which other diary entries suggest was originally going to be titled simply *Edith* after the name of its heroine, and its plot also included from an early date characters that had already played their roles in their sister's first novel, whose proofs were just reaching them for correction. Such shared narrative games were both retrospective and prospective, and they account for the interconnected plots and characters of all three of these novels that were eventually to appear under the name of Evangeline F. Smith. They may also account for the often complex, if not confusing, plotlines of the novels.

Finally, it is worth noting that on 28th October they were reading *Paradise Lost* for, as we shall see, the theology of Edith's beliefs and actions in this novel carries strong Miltonic overtones, and later diary entries confirm that *Paradise Lost* was read aloud annually in the rectory, indeed as late as 1916 Alice records her satisfaction at having finished "the nice yearly repetition of *Paradise Lost*".

Secular and Sacred

This brings us to say something about the art of *A Cruel Necessity*, its literary qualities and its interest as a novel. Amongst the myriad of forgotten, routine and unread examples of Victorian popular fiction, why might this example be worth rereading or reprinting? As we have noted, the outcome of its utterly conventional sensation-novel plot is the recovery both of its heroine's romantic love and of her religious faith. The interdependence of these two things – the secular and the sacred – emerges as the key not just to its plot but also to its dense symbolism. We are not far into the narrative before the problematic basis of Edith's marriage is revealed when, at a dinner party with some fellow officers at Mauldeth Abbey, Colonel Huntley is asked whether his wife plays tennis, to which Edith replies "My husband has a prejudice against married women doing anything but sit still and look dignified" which Huntley confirms by saying,

"I am afraid that as regards the duties of married women my notions do *not* keep pace with the times [...] I defy any man in our service who has been to India and who respects himself to acquiesce in the present state of things [...] Trust is the first essential of domestic life. When a man ceases to trust his wife he ceases to respect her, and where there is no respect there can be no love."

To which Edith's response is decisive:

"That is a dreadful theory!" and a slight shiver passed over Edith's snowy shoulders. "One would like to think that even when Hope and Faith were killed, Love might yet abide."
(Smith, 1886: 42)

As the narrative reaches its crisis, with Edith's confession to her husband of the deceptions surrounding her own birth and upbringing and her true love for Robinson, she rejects Huntley's proffered parting payment,

... should I ever be driven to seek pity or charity from any Christian soul on earth, it should be from him and not from you; for him I love, and you –"
"Me you hate? Pray finish."
"Yes" she said slowly; "I have shrunk from you for years." The words came from her, not in anger, hardly with intention.

And she continues,

"I meant well when I married you—I hoped it would make me forget the dream of the past. I thought all women loved their husbands; and when we knelt at the altar I prayed God to make me a blessing to you and help me with my vows. When once you had me in your hands my downward course began [...] those things which you laughed at as sentimental and hysterical, were to me necessary, the very breath of my life. Life stripped of its romance, its poetry, its aspirations, is difficult to me. As for my religion, the blow with which you shattered what you called its superstitions cut it at the roots."

(336-7)

Hence in the concluding chapters of the novel we witness not only the marriage of our heroine to Robinson, *alias* Earl of Rotherhame and Berkeley, but also the restoration of her religious faith at the very altar, in the closing pages, where he is characterized as both her lover and her Saviour.

It is in keeping with Edith's taste for life's "romance" and its "poetry" that it should be recorded in a narrative style that is so densely symbolic. The symbolism includes the physical setting of the novel's action, starting with its sea-side location on the Dorsetshire coast. Thus, when Robinson reaches Swanbridge at the end of his train journey from London, he strolls along the esplanade as he lights his cigar, but his thoughts are less topographical than metaphysical.

The smile of amusement which his lips had worn as he left the Vicarage faded more quickly than might have been expected, and his eyes travelled restlessly from the cloudy sky to the dim expanse of water, as though he was secretly echoing the cry which, like the daughters of the horse-leech [sic.], the sea moans wearily through all eternity. 'Give! give!' Does it ask for prey? Is it greedy to swallow up life, and strength, and quickening pulse, and throbbing heart, in its insatiate maw? or is it for rest it asks? the Rest which may not be found!

(26)

The biblical allusion is to Proverbs 30:15, "The horseleech hath two daughters, crying Give, give", and the three things they ask for biblically are the grave, the barren womb and "the earth that is not filled with water". Equally metaphysical are Robinson's musings on the sea's symbolism a few days later as he returns along the coast from Edith's first music lesson and muses on the sound of the waves breaking on the sands, so that he quickens his pace,

... as though swift progress would shut out the desolate ideas which every falling wave seemed to drive onwards to his mind, and inwardly he called on the God of sea and sky to come down out of the infinite, as once to Mary's womb, and to shut out the witching and lesser loves of earth by the Love which burns without consuming, the pure passion of divine rapture and desire.

(110)

Once again, the distinction between earthly and heavenly, or secular and spiritual, love is blurred. Death, as symbolized by the waves, is both the end of earthly love and yet also the gate to heavenly Love, alternatives for which Evangeline Smith's resort to capitalization frequently clarifies the distinction.

The symbolism of the waves washes through to the very end of the novel as accompaniment or commentary on the development of the plot, since it dramatizes our heroine's journey to that destination in which earthly and heavenly love (or "Love") come together. Hence in Chapter 28, when Robinson is anxiously seeking the answer to his moral dilemma, whether or not to declare his love for our heroine as a married woman, he stands by the sea and it is once again the waves that comment on his decision with their repeated Scriptural cry echoing the daughters of the horse-leech,

When he had fixed his fate irrevocably – not before – he turned sharply from the shore, and went at first to prosecute his purpose. But as he went, the waves washing over one another upon the sands moaned after him, "Give, give!" Eternal cry, no longer vague, but hungry, definite, imperious, whose eternal echo had passed into his soul.

(270)

The waves are, moreover, far from the only features of this Wessex landscape which become densely symbolic, for the topography of Mauldeth Abbey is full of features which identify it with the garden of Eden – not only is it filled with trees and flowers that recall Milton’s description in *Paradise Lost*, but the Water of Life flows through it and the serpent Leverett gains his entrance by deception and very much in terms recalling *Paradise Lost*. Thus the stile at the garden is “fondly christened” the “Gate of Heaven”, as Edith puts it in Chapter 13 when she is walking there “like a ghost” to a rendezvous with Leverett, that is to say with the devil: “She recalled as she mounted it, how in her nightly walks the stile at its summit had seemed to open straight upon the sky and stars” (124). As she approaches, she has “the fancy that she might pass through it straight onto her mother’s spirit presence”, but the sky is “Empty” she insists, though she sees leaning on the stile a man smoking: it is Leverett and within a few minutes of their encounter Edith has called him “Devil”, to which he retorts, “The devil’s daughter was a Lie, say the Scriptures ... and you are a Lie, Mrs Huntley.” (126). It is only when, later in the novel, we have discovered that Edith is indeed Leverett’s daughter and that the indisposed Miss Wise, whose place she is mercifully taking on this appointment with the governess’s intended blackmailer, is in fact her own mother. The irony thus anticipates the novel’s as-yet unrevealed conclusion. Furthermore, in the climactic Chapter 29, when Edith and Robinson declare their love for each other as they pass through the Abbey’s casement out onto the terrace and into the garden, they have an overwhelming sense that “Something was close before them – some great crisis, some catastrophe. Had it been death itself, they would have approached it with rapture, as though it were the hymeneal altar.” (287) What they hear is the sound of the stream flowing through the garden, “Their feet were on the long mossed grass, and near them the rush of the river over the little fall sounded in their ears like the near gurgle of the Water of Life” (289). It is thus entirely fitting that the Water of Life gurgling through Mauldeth Abbey’s garden should flow into the neighbouring sea, with its voice from beyond the grave calling, as we have noted, “Give, give, give”.

Not all the description is symbolic, however, and indeed we might well wonder how a Victorian novel written by this daughter of a respected Anglican vicarage, where she spent the larger part of her long life, should have written a novel containing quite so much acerbic satire of the values and manners of Victorian small-town parochial society. If the novel’s dense symbolism and emotional intensity recall the Brontës, its sharp satire of Victorian provincial manners and morals is closer to Trollope or Thackeray. Evangeline Smith’s portrayal of the Swanbridge parish of Mr. Dallas offers a highly satirical exposure of the shallow respectability, uncharitable morality, and theological vacuity of what she must have recognized as a fairly typical Anglican parish. It would, therefore, seem to be important to understand how this novel’s strongly Miltonic religious symbolism and action sorts with its realistic portrayal of the social life and Victorian gentility of the established church. We have a foretaste of this already in Chapter 1 when Robinson arrives at his lodgings in Mrs. Whistle’s seaside guest-house, where he notes her “consciously meek and suffering face” on which

Faint marks of small-pox betrayed that in past times Providence had had severe dealings with Mrs. Whistle, and accounted for the air of injured innocence which oppressed every one who approached her with a vague sense of guilt.

(7)

On being shown into her shabby-elegant “front drawing room” he notes its cheap engravings of “a clergyman in gown and bands, Bible in hand and eyes uplifted; the Queen and Prince Albert, a tinted fancy portrait of a lady crowned with roses, and an undertaker-like copy of Holman Hunt’s ‘Light of the World’.” When next day he meets his new employer, we learn that the Rev. Vincent Dallas is a man with whom life “at all events so far as

his social standing was concerned, had dealt with kindly.” His wife, Lady Cowden, “was the crowning distinction conferred by a grateful Providence on this exemplary clergyman” having, as “the widow of a civil knight [...] turned two moderate incomes into an ample one [...] and retained the only relics of her first marriage which she valued – her title and her wedding ring.”

It could not be said that she had enough of the Divine Likeness to be capable of experiencing the misery and rapture of that wonderful faculty called love, but she had certainly an affection for Mr. Dallas, for her lap-dog, and for her late maid, Whistle, whom this second marriage enabled her to provide for...

(13)

We might well acknowledge the honesty with which this description recognizes the close connections between the established church and issues of social status and economic security in Victorian England, where for those who had no inherited wealth a career in either the army or the church stood among the few routes into polite society and a respectable income. That these values of the Rev. Mr. Dallas are shared by most of his parishioners becomes evident when, in Chapter 7, Robinson and Leverett attend the Vicar’s “At Home”, where the parish matrons (“unattached members of the female sex – lonely faced spinsters dressed in a modest edition of the fashions of two years ago”) flutter round their Vicar.

They spoke of him as of a clergyman whose labours were confessedly unequalled, and appeared convinced that no small portion of his apostolic spirit rested upon themselves; they discussed with him from an altitude the affairs of the parish, and the souls of the poor, and spoke of sin as they did of poverty, as of an evil with which they had no personal connection.

(66)

Which brings us to the question of defining the basis of Evangeline Smith’s own theology. We find that emerging most explicitly towards the climax of the novel when, in Chapter 33, Edith makes the fateful confession to her husband of her fraudulent family history and her love for another man. As she confesses, “I couldn’t help loving him – that wasn’t my sin. God put that into our hearts [...] My sin was that I ever married another man.” (330) Or, as the authorial voice puts it on the following page,

It was not wonderful that he was bitterly incensed against her, for her misfortune not less than for her sins. But it would have been a grand opportunity for any man – it was sublime opportunity for this man, could he have risen to it – to have stretched out a kind, strong hand to this erring soul, which nothing could reach but mercy [...] By such tests does God try all souls, whether they be chaff or wheat. Thus, by Love, must we all, the strictest, be proved and judged at last.

(331)

Hence the novel proposes a theology which stresses mercy in opposition to the Jahwistic theology of Gordon Huntley. Duty is part of this, but ultimately, Evangeline Smith feels, we are judged not by duty but by “Love” (and the capitalization suggests that “Love” is here being used as a synonym for God: this is Divine Judgement). On that criterion Huntley stands condemned. This distinction is confirmed a little later, in Chapter 38, when Edith meets the clergyman who stands as our author’s alternative to the empty theology and selective pastoralism of the Dallases. The contrast between the two types of clergyman is seen clearly in the contrasting effect of their two visits to Edith. The Rev. Dallas is cold and formal, urging her to confession and repentance and reducing Edith to a trembling wreck, whereas his humble curate John Brown, whose everyman type of name suggests his common humanity, offers sympathy, compassion and understanding, emphasizing Eternal Love:

He added no word of her fault, nor of the duty of repentance. For in the message he had given, the message of Love Eternal, lies the secret of all penitence – the principle of the new life which shall be God's.

(363)

The voice, and the capitals, are again those of the narrator. The contrast between the two clergymen extends to their respective wives at this point, for Rev. Dallas's wife treats Edith as an outcast and refuses to visit her, whereas Mrs. Brown welcomes her and takes her into the vicarage like a lost sheep returning to the fold. (364).

Despite this assurance of Divine Mercy, Edith's sense of her own failings leaves her feeling alone in the presence of a God whom she has offended – the Miltonic deity by whom she has been driven out of Paradise. And the telling symptom of this, we gather, is the fact that Nature is no longer a joy to her. It is at this point in the novel that Brown and his family obtain "leave for a year" from the Bishop to move from Dorset for an "exchange of duty with the vicar of a country parish in Westmoreland". They take Edith with them, as "she must remain under their protection; ill, weary, and broken down, they would rather have given up their prize living and gone back to poverty than now have turned her from their doors" (372). At this point (Chapter 40) the narrative mode switches (not for the first time) from third-person authorial narration to direct citation of our heroine's personal diary: it is a shift that not only puts us in direct, unmediated communication with her personal feelings but, I suggest, reflects the whole novel's origins in those diaries written at West Stafford by our author and her two sisters in which this and their other novels had their origins. The Wordsworthian ideal of nature as a source of spiritual health accounts for the move in the closing chapters from rural Dorset to the Lake District.

As the novel reaches its concluding chapter, following the melodramatic murder of Gordon Huntley and the death of the devil Leverett, who ends up drowned in the mill dam which, symbolically at least, broaches the River of Life that flows through the Mauldeth Abbey garden, so we witness the return of Robinson in a dual role as Edith's lover and, also, as her spiritual Saviour. This must surely in some way also reflect his double identity as both "Mr. Robinson" and "Earl of Rotherhame". No longer a salaried parish organist in Swanbridge, Robinson has spent the intervening years traveling "in Russia" we learn (384). At his own estate ("Rotherhame's house is one of the most splendid [...] ever seen," says Mrs. Brown) he has bestowed the incumbency of the parish which is in his gift on Mr. Brown.

The imagery which accompanies Robinson/Rotherhame's second coming in the closing chapter of the novel finally links the naturalistic and the metaphysical (or theological) themes that we have witnessed throughout. On the one hand, as the advent of her lover, physical: "Life, which she had schooled herself to strangle, had burst forth once more with creative, all conquering energy" (386). However, on the other hand, in the very same paragraph that triumph of nature and the life-force is figured as a type of Christian resurrection:

The dead had left his grave, the blood once more flowed in his veins – Lazarus had come forth into the land of the living, and the grave-clothes had been flung away.

(386)

This allusion brings together both the biblical miracle of Christ's raising of Lazarus from the grave and also the classical myths of Galatea, which the writing has repeatedly identified as an analogue to Edith's story. Both versions of the classical myth are invoked as she awaits Robinson's return: the statue which comes to life when sculptor Pygmalion falls in love with it, and the less familiar Ovidian myth of the sea-nymph beloved by Polyphemus, who crushed his rival Acis under a rock but was revived when Galatea turned his blood into the river Acis. Both myths have been repeatedly alluded to in previous chapters, such as in chapter 19 when Edith reflects in her own diary "I am like Galatea when the breath of life passed into her" (183), or on page 248 where she is again "Galatea, the statue come to life". Indeed, in Chapter 25 Edith attends the County fancy-dress ball dressed as Galatea (227), although the paradox of designing a ballroom costume for a classical figure whose defining attribute in both versions of her myth was her nudity should not be missed – designing a costume for any future dramatisation of this highly cinematographic episode in the novel would surely be challenging.

On the symbolic level, the novel thus includes not only a melodramatic villain who is characterized as the Devil (Robinson recommends him to adopt that *persona* at the Ball, rather than dressing up as a bishop on page 237) but also a heroic Lover who acts as our heroine's Saviour. The interval between the lovers' parting, after Robinson saves Edith in the garden, and the concluding episode when he comes again for her, is ambiguous even in its Christian analogues: it is both the period between the Fall and the Atonement – the period of man's expulsion from Eden and wandering in the wilderness (corresponding to Books XI and XII of *Paradise Lost*), whilst corresponding in the New Testament to the dark hour between the Crucifixion and Resurrection (Good Friday and Easter Sunday). This ambiguity is not theologically unintelligible – Milton after all makes Christ offer the Atonement immediately following the Fall in *Paradise Lost*; it is already accomplished with Christ's offer, and the expulsion and exile which separate Fall from the historical Redemption are merely the necessary expiation of sin. This, incidentally, would be a theological construction that tallies with Evangeline Smith's belief that none are excluded from the possibility of salvation, since it includes in Christ's Redemption all generations of man since the Fall. Evangeline Smith makes it clear in one of her letters that she does not believe in eternal punishment, although she believed emphatically in Judgement. She thought, however, that the punishment for sin would be the death of the spirit and hence, as we have seen, she uses the terms Death and Life and their related symbolism in a largely theological or metaphysical sense.

If this way of reading seems to make heavy weather of the theology of its melodramatic plot as a Victorian sensation novel, we should bear in mind not only the author's upbringing in West Stafford rectory, as the daughter of a highly respected Anglican priest, but also what she is likely to have understood and absorbed from the annual readings of *Paradise Lost*. Unlike Milton's, however, her own doctrinal position, as revealed in the novel and in the surviving family diaries, was that of the established Anglican Church, with little if any acceptance of either Calvinist Nonconformity or Anglo-Catholic ritualism. Evangeline Smith's sense of the fundamental importance of fulfilling life's "romance, its poetry, its aspirations" leads her at times into a vein of Victorian sentimentality, with writing that occasionally indulges in unrestrained purple patches that are unlikely to appeal to modern readers. However, the belief that the "Love" which it idealizes is rooted in family feelings nevertheless distinguishes it from at least some of the shallower manifestations of Victorian sentimentality.

For Evangeline Smith's own theological position in relation to the issues and controversies confronting the Church in the late nineteenth century, it is probably sufficient to note that she was the daughter of a highly respected Anglican clergyman who was thus remembered in the *Brief Memorials* published on his death in 1895:

He belonged to the Evangelical portion of the English Church and he was always proud of the name. But he was conspicuously devoid of all narrowness and exclusiveness. The moment that he recognised that the same religious depth and fervour was to be found in the High Church Party which had given birth to the Evangelical, and had, at one time, been practically confined to it, his heart broadened out towards it.

(Anon. *Brief Memorials*, 1896: 13)

Evangeline was remembered posthumously as "Among the loyal servants of the Church" as "organist at West Stafford since 1866" when the organ was built there to "replace a pitch pipe used to start the singing which was led by the Rector's wife and the old sexton" (*Church News*, 1945, unsourced cutting from Smith family papers). Her brother, and Hardy's friend, Bosworth Smith is described in the biography written by his daughter Lady Grogan as a noted champion of the National Church and opponent of Disestablishment:

This conviction, that the National Church was the most powerful agency for good in England, came to him, he says himself, 'from the remembrance of what I had seen done, from my earliest years onwards, by my father and mother in the little village of Stafford. I argued outwards from our own parish, which I knew intimately, to the scores of neighbouring parishes, which I knew less; and thence to the thousands of other parishes which I knew resembled them; and I tried to estimate what would be the effect on them, and so on the country at large, if all that was being done, by a good country clergyman and his wife and family were to be swept away by a rude and ostentatiously unjust method of Disendowment and Disestablishment, such as had been outlined in the Radical programme and was being distinctly threatened by Mr Chamberlain.

(Grogan 1909: 194-95)

So brother Bosworth was a supporter of Victorian antidisestablishmentarianism. Lady Grogan also records that, in his teaching as schoolmaster at Harrow, he substituted lessons on the Bible and Milton for "the tyranny of Latin verses" and

He was wont to say that a passage could be found in *Paradise Lost* to illustrate every event in human life and every condition of mind, and the passage would usually rise at once to his memory with the occasion that suggested it.

(Grogan 1909: 113)

That centering of Christian charity in the family surely also accounts for the way the narrative exploits the received conventions of its genre for, as we have noted, the sensation novel invents plots in which issues of mismarriage, illegitimacy and family breakdown can be exposed and resolved by a dedicated investigator, so that the true relations between its members can be restored. In *A Cruel Necessity*, however, it is not clear whether those relationships are fully revealed, and I suggest that we may well be pardoned as readers if we are still somewhat uncertain quite what the previous history and family relationships of several of its central characters really are. We know that our heroine is the illegitimate daughter of Mrs. Wise and of Mr. Leverett, and that she was brought up as adopted daughter of Mauldeth Abbey's impecunious owner Mr. Dacre, who secured her future fortune by offering her hand and leasing the property to Col. Huntley. But the circumstances of our heroine's former relationship with the Earl of Rotherhame (alias "Robinson") himself before the novel

starts are never clarified. We learn only that both had declared and yet foresworn their love for each other, and it is only when the Rev. Mr. Dallas is expressing his surprise that his curate, Mr. Brown, has been offered the incumbency of the parish of Gussage on Rotherhame's estate that we hear something of the prior history of their relationship.

It is in the gift of the Earl of Rotherhame, a young nobleman of immense wealth and great talents, whose magnificent seat is situated in the parish, and who, by the way, has a sensational history of his own attached to him, his father, the former earl, having actually undergone a term of penal servitude. You may have heard of the case, which caused a considerable stir when I was a youngster. A murder had been committed by one of his own servants, and if I remember right, his lordship was so indiscreet as to conceal the guilty party for many months. I believe it was urged in his defence that ...

(Smith 1886: 232)

At which point Mr Robinson, alias Earl of Rotherhame, interposes, "Yes, yes ... I remember perfectly." The irony of this disclosure, to the very man whose sensational history he is actually recounting it, is extreme.

How many of Evangeline Smith's readers, we might also ask, would have known that these events were just part of the plot of this novel's predecessor, *In a Vain Shadow*, which was going through press at the very time, as we have seen, when its successor was being planned, and whose three volumes – comprising more than a thousand pages – contained enough material, as one of its early readers complained, to fill at least three conventional novels. It seems likely that all three sisters were familiar with the connected plots that they had invented in those fantasy games which they played together in their Dorsetshire vicarage. We might well wonder as modern readers, however, whether their own familiarity with this extended narrative led Evangeline Smith to underestimate readers' ability to unravel the shifting names and identities of her central characters and their actions in all three of her published novels.

As *A Cruel Necessity* reaches some kind of closure in its final pages modern readers are unlikely to identify as fully as earlier readers might have done, with its unbridled sentimentality and its shift into the language of rogation. We do not, after all, expect a Victorian sensation novel to end its melodramatic mysteries by appealing to us to join its author in prayer: Author has become Evangelist. For all his mysterious former identities, the Earl of Rotherhame emerges as our heroine's Saviour; he cannot possibly be that for us as readers, however.

The distance which surely separates us (or many of us) as modern readers from the original or intended audience for this novel should not prevent us however from recognizing both the skill of its portrayal of the realities and hypocrisies of Victorian middle-class social life, but also the sophistication of its Miltonic symbolism. The responses of creative writers at this period to issues of practice and doctrine which were troubling the established church are of continuing interest: Evangeline Smith's representation of some these is, we should surely acknowledge, worthy of belated recognition.

Bibliography

Archives

Smith Family of West Stafford Archive. 1836 – 1974. Dorset History Centre. D-500. See <https://archive-catalogue.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/records/D-500> for individual diary references.

Printed Sources

- Anon. 1896. *Brief Memorials of Reginald Southwell Smith*. Dorchester: Dorset County Chronicle Printing Works.
- Anon. review of Evangeline F. Smith, *A Cruel Necessity*. *The Academy* (13 November 1886): 324.
- Anon. review of Evangeline F. Smith, *A Cruel Necessity*. *Literary World* (3 September 1886): 188.
- Anon. review of Evangeline F. Smith, *A Cruel Necessity*. *Morning Post* (1 September 1886): 3.
- Anon. review of Evangeline F. Smith, *A Cruel Necessity*. *Spectator* (15 January 1887): 84.
- Bath, Michael. 1973. "Thomas Hardy and Evangeline F. Smith." *The Thomas Hardy Yearbook*. 4: 36-47.
- Braddon, Elizabeth. 1862. *Lady Audley's Secret*. London: Tinsley, 3 vols.
- Brontë, Emily Jane. 1955. *Gondal's Queen. Arranged, with an introduction by Fannie E. Ratchford*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Gilbert, Pamela K. 2011. *A Companion to Sensation Fiction*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Grogan, [Ellinor], 1909. *Reginald Bosworth Smith: A Memoir*. London: Nisbet.
- Hardy, Florence E, 1962. *The Life of Thomas Hardy*. London: Macmillan.
- Smith, Evangeline F. 1883. *In a Vain Shadow*. 3 vols., London: Remington & Co.
- Smith, Evangeline F. 1886. *A Cruel Necessity*. London: A. Spottiswoode Jones.
- Smith, Evangeline F. 1924. *A Bid for a Soul*. London: Hutchinson.
- Smith, Margaret. 2003. *From Victorian Wessex; The Diaries of Emily Smith 1836, 1841, 1852*. Norwich: Solen Press.
- Sparks, Tabitha "Realism after Sensation: Meredith, Hardy, Gissing", in Gilbert 2011: 603-613.
- Sutherland, John. 1988. *The Longman Companion to Victorian Fiction*. London: Longman.
- Tomalin, Claire. *Thomas Hardy: The Time-torn Man*, London: Viking, 2006.