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**The Aesthetics of Female Decadence in Ella D'Arcy's  
Short Fiction**

MA dissertation

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## **Statement of Intellectual Honesty**

**Name:** Francesca Corsetti

**Title of TFM:** The Aesthetics of Female Decadence in Ella D'Arcy's Short Fiction

I declare that this is an original piece of work; all secondary sources have been correctly cited. I also understand that plagiarism is an unacceptable practise which will lead to the automatic failing of this TFM.

Date and place: Barcelona, 4 July 2024

Francesca Corsetti

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This is to my grandmother, my greatest supporter until the end.

## **Abstract**

The late 19th century witnessed profound transformations in artistic, literary, and social spheres which have long shaped through the male perspective. Lately, scholarship has been revisiting the literary phenomena so as to draw attention to women's writings, in order to offer a broader and more truthful representation. In this context, women's writings emerge as a complex blend of stylistic choices and purposes, which once lead to their dismissal. Through a detailed analysis of a selection of short stories by Ella D'Arcy, this thesis seeks to recover and define women's writing of the *fin-de-siècle*, emphasizing their negotiation of traditional literary boundaries to establish a distinct literary identity, and the formal innovations that anticipated modernism. Ultimately, this thesis argues for the recognition of a new critical space for women's literary history, allowing for equal recognition of women's literary contributions alongside their male counterparts.

**Keywords:** Ella D'Arcy; New Woman, female Decadence; The Yellow Book; fin-de-siècle; feminism

## Introduction

Numerous studies are being carried out today with the aim of recovering and defining women's writing in the late 19th century. The *fin de siècle* was a period of significant transformation in the artistic-literary and social spheres, marked by extensive artistic experimentation and socio-political debate. The last two decades of the century witnessed the emergence of the Woman Question, the proliferation of literary magazines, and, consequently, a substantial consumption of these publications, as well as the rise of important artistic movements such as aestheticism, naturalism, and Decadence. Male agency in these movements has largely inflected their tenor and study, which has contributed to a general disregard for the artistic participation of women writers because of their social engagement. What contributed to their dismissal was precisely the blending of aesthetic engagement with the political nature of their texts. Women had to navigate a complex terrain to carve out their own literary identity. However, despite a challenging social landscape and despite being overshadowed by their male counterparts, these writers did not hesitate to engage with these new literary trends. In fact, it would be inaccurate to claim that women were entirely marginal in the literary field. This thesis aims precisely to recover and highlight this blend of aesthetic trends and the characteristic double aim of female fiction. Central to this exploration is the figure of Ella D'Arcy, the notable sub-editor of *The Yellow Book* and a short story writer, whose social and professional position, as well as her writing style, perfectly exemplify the coexistence of these conventional dichotomies. Through the analysis of a selection of D'Arcy's short stories, this study sets out to explore the literary novelties of *fin-de-siècle* in women's writing and question the traditional stylistic demarcations. How did women writers negotiate the traditional boundaries of these literary movements to carve out a distinct female literary identity? And how do Ella D'Arcy's

short stories exemplify the stylistic and thematic innovations of the time? This is meant to recognise not only the important transformation women writers effected in anticipating the modernist technique, but also the skilful application of various topical and formal innovations to serve a more or less subtle social criticism. Ultimately, the thesis argues for the recognition of a new space for women, a “female Decadence” as a distinct and significant aspect of literary history. To acknowledge this new critical space, not as a deflection of the traditional definition of Decadence, but as a distinct genre, implies the recognition of women on a par with their male counterparts.



## 1. A spectrum of social and aesthetic experiments in the 1890s

The debate on whether there are points of contact between Decadence and other neighbouring movements such as Symbolism, New Woman and Impressionism has always been very much in the forefront among scholars (Evangelista, 2020: 106-107). When it comes to reconsidering women writings in the *fin-de-siècle*, “this re-visioning hinges on what definition of ‘Decadence’ one is prepared to allow” (Hawthorne, 2019: 1-2). Melanie Hawthorne here distinguishes two categories: whether it is a “short-lived, aesthetically specific fraternity, such as Oscar Wilde and those associated with *The Yellow Book*,” or “the extensive international movement that linked multi faced reactions against realism of the nineteenth century to the innovative modernist experiments of the early twentieth century” (1-2). Evidently, this distinction does not take into account that the ‘fraternity’ of contributors to avant-garde magazines such *The Yellow Book* and *The Savoy* was made up for over one-third by women (Showalter, 1993: viii), who revised the Decadent aesthetics experimenting with new styles and techniques, including realism itself. How should we locate these women who are closely entwined in an aestheticist or Decadent context, yet often advocate a feminist perspective on society?

Similarities and overlaps between Decadence and the New Woman have long been investigated. As early as 1979, Linda Dowling remarks that the New Woman movement and Decadence, historically considered two antipodal phenomena, were actually “dangerous avatars of the “New,” and were widely felt to oppose not each other but the values considered essential to the survival of established culture” (Dowling, 1979: 436). According to Sally Ledger (2007) “the discursive and aesthetic resonance between aestheticism, the Decadence and the New Woman writing is indisputable. For the cultural movement that embraced aestheticism and Decadence was broader and

more eclectic than sometimes allowed” (Ledger 2007 cited in Herold and Barrera-Medrano, 2019: i). Elaine Showalter’s introduction to her volume *Daughters of Decadence* (1993) points out that even contemporary male reviewers “saw connections between New Women and Decadent men, as members of an avant garde attacking marriage and reproduction” (Showalter, 1993: ix). As a matter of fact, the male bourgeois class of editors and publishers of periodicals, by publicly lampooning and undermining the ideology of the New Woman, actually helped to create a discursive space which was promptly replenished by feminist and sympathetic writings (Ledger, 1997: 9). For, as Ledger explains, borrowing from Foucauldian theory, the dominant hostile discourse naturally invoked its opposite, allowing the suppressed voices of the New Woman to speak for themselves (Ledger, 9-10). This eventually allowed women to emerge as successful competitors in the literary market.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, they still had to face the sexually objectifying and misogynistic perspective of male writings – what is widely referred to as the problem of the muse – whereby women are deemed to be more physical than men, and often portrayed through the male gaze in relation with nature, the material, and the body. Emancipated women in particular were regarded as unfeminine and perverse (Dowling, 440-41; Showalter, x). In this context, New Women writers introduced important formal and thematic innovations to “rescue the worship of beauty [...] from its association with the exploitation of women as nothing more than

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<sup>1</sup> As Talia Schaffer explains, by means of the new audiences, new publishing houses and new formats, women writers in the 1890s seemed to be given a significant advantage in, if not to dominate, the literary marketplace. Many authors reported this common understanding: Richard Le Gallienne wrote that “the onward movement of the world [seems] to be embodied in woman”; Oscar Wilde similarly observed that “no country has ever had so many poetesses at once. [...] And yet the work done by women in the sphere of poetry is really of a very high standard of excellence.” Despite the fact that authors wrote with this perception in mind, it may not have been true (Schaffer, 2000: 24). Or at least so in quantitative terms: the first half of the 1890s witnessed the concomitant upsurge of the literary mass-market and of the interest in the Woman Question which generated a remarkable *corpus* on New Woman fiction (Ledger in Denisoff, 167). New Woman fiction, confluent with female aesthetes’ work, “seemed overwhelming to their male counterparts” (Schaffer, 24).

beautiful ‘occasions’ for masculine discovery, theorizing and reverie” (Stetz 1999 cited in Krueger, 2023: 107).

Kate Krueger in *Extraordinary Aesthetes* (2023, Joseph Bristow ed.) sheds new light on the intricate interconnection between the two cultural movements. Krueger proposes to “place Decadence and New Woman literature along a spectrum of social and aesthetic engagement” (Krueger, 109). As anticipated, the primary common element is the rejection of the idea of a natural relationship between the sexes, which made them a potential danger for the established social order. Their intentions, however, differed. The term Decadence was popularised by what is known as Arthur Symons’s manifesto “The Decadent Movement in Literature” (1893), which characterises it as “an intense self-consciousness, a restless curiosity in research, an over-subtilizing refinement upon refinement, a spiritual and moral perversity” (Symons 1893 cited in Denisoff, 2007: 38), but also makes evident its cross-cultural and transnational approach (Evangelista, 111). While referring to two different yet occasionally interrelated phenomena, by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the terms Decadence and aestheticism were virtually used interchangeably by critics to denigrate works of art that emphasised artificiality or thematic, stylistic and philosophical innovation (Denisoff 2007 cited in Krueger, 106-107). While Krueger truthfully states that Decadent writing did not contain any reformist tendency, it is also true that it “challenged other false normativisations such as the fundamental importance of the middle-class family model, industrial progress and a common moral basis to the beauty and the meaning of life” (Denisoff, 32). Indeed, the key concept for Decadence was that “the greatest beauty was seen to arise at the cusp of a society’s destruction” (Denisoff 2007 cited in Krueger, 107). Escapism through artifice and experiment, the cultivation of the unnatural, and more generally the attack on the status quo through art are further hallmarks that typify

Decadence as a cultural and aesthetic phenomenon. At the same time, aestheticism is predominantly concerned with artistic ideals (Denisoff, 33-36). On the contrary, New Woman writings made use of what Teresa Mangum called an “ethical aesthetics,” advocating and urging a societal transformation (Mangum 1994 cited in Krueger, 107). Nonetheless, R.K.R Thornton’s Preface to *Decadence and the 1890s* (1979) anticipated Krueger in its recommendation to stress “the interconnectedness of the period’s writers” when defining the last two decades 19<sup>th</sup> century, being an “era of complex mergers, [and] variant affiliations” (Fletcher ed., 1979: 8-9). Along the spectrum traced by Krueger, plenty of stylistic experiments and aesthetic nuances are allowed, and an overlap is indeed envisaged. This was readily attainable, partly due to the concurrent implementation of a highly versatile genre.

While the 19<sup>th</sup> century was mostly dominated by the conventional structure of the three-decker Victorian novel, the *fin-de-siècle* saw an upsurge in the production of short fiction, to which women were particularly drawn. In the introduction to the anthology *Dreams, Visions and Realities* (2003), Stephanie Forward traces how the term “short-story” was first used as a specific literary genre by the American critic Brander Matthews in an article in the *Saturday Review* only in 1884. Edgar Allan Poe’s influential theory on the genre, which he named “tale”, was formulated as early as 1842 in his review of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales* (1837; 1842). To him, the short story was a narrative that could be read in a time frame between half an hour and two hours, and had to have an effect or impression of unity. Later in 1884, Brander Matthews first published an anonymous essay on the “short-story” in the *Saturday Review*, eventually expanding it to publish *The Philosophy of the Short-story* in 1901 (Young and Bailey, 2015: 1; VSPF, n.d.). Therefore, while the foundations of the modernist theory of short fiction were being laid, in the 1890s a comprehensive

definition of the genre had yet to be articulated (Doroholschi, 2023: 212-213). For sure, the *fin-de-siècle* short story has drawn increasing scholarly attention due to its importance in introducing those innovations that will be taken over by modernist writers (D'Hoker and Eggermont, 2015: 293; 301). Indeed, shorter fiction allowed authors to “focus on specific episodes, encounters and impressions, analysing psychological responses to those moments, and it was acceptable for the ending to remain open” (Forward, 2003: xii). It is no coincidence that experiments with the new form were taking place around the turn of the 1890s, when the two most influential artistic and literary movements were aestheticism and French realism. On the one hand, the short story form was particularly congenial to the aestheticist and Paterian ideal of experience as a “swarm of impressions” (Pater, 1888: 248). At the same time, it appropriated the realist objective of representing contemporary reality authentically, namely, focusing on the psychology of the characters and ordinary circumstances (D'Hoker and Eggermont, 295-296). The short stories circulated in magazines and periodicals and were growing in demand. Forward illustrates how popular magazines were in the 1890s, citing the Mitchell's annual listing, the *Newspaper Press Directory*, which reported 2,081 periodicals – including weekly, monthly, and quarterly publications – in 1895: nearly twice as many as in 1885 (Forward, xii). The novelty of the genre and the expanding market allowed women to contest societal restrictions by writing “with unprecedented candour about female sexuality, marital discontent, and their own aesthetic theories and aspirations” (Showalter, vii-viii). Indeed, aestheticism allowed middle-class men and women to make their way in nineteenth-century elitist social circles, exclusively on the base of “taste and discernment, not birth, wealth, or the other accoutrements of aristocratic privilege” (Freedman, 1990: 48). At the same time, despite the upper class background of most New Woman writers, and the “aristocratic sympathies” of decadent

writers, critics perceived their avant-gardist experiments with “unsavoury” topics and members of the lower classes as a way to undermine the distinctions and established assumptions of social class (Dowling, 442-444). Women’s fiction in particular was much affected by aestheticist sensibilities in terms of characterisation and setting, while dealing with such topics as adultery, poverty, prostitution and even infanticide (D’Hoker and Eggermont, 296). While the nineteenth-century novel traditionally concluded with a marriage, as a way to celebrate the institution, one creation of the New Woman, as a form of criticism, is to place marriage at the beginning or throughout the narrative and to present it as a trigger for conflict (Ledger in Denisoff, 165). Indeed, the form also gained popularity as “[p]ublishers became more receptive to the realistic tale that ignored romance and a cheerful conclusion” (Mix, 20), and, more generally, as the Decadent interest in undercutting social conventions flourished. This particular attitude to marriage was favoured by *The Yellow Book* writers, who depicted love “not [as] a simple passion, leading straight to the altar [...] [but rather] complex, involved, unsatisfactory”, and marriage “not [as] a sacrament but a disagreeable predicament in which two people were caught” (278). Interestingly enough, after the publication of George Egerton’s groundbreaking collection of stories, *Keynotes* (1893), and before releasing *The Yellow Book*, John Lane had been already identified by critics as the promoter of the ‘feminisation’ of fiction (Forward, xiii). In fact, while a variety of middlebrow magazines still distributed a more traditionally designed short fiction, *avant-gardist* magazines such as *The Yellow Book* and *The Savoy* sought to establish the short story as an elite art form (D’Hoker and Eggermont, 304).

*The Yellow Book* was conceived during a luncheon on New Year’s Day 1894 at Henry Harland’s house in Cromwell Road: Netta Syrett remembered the event and Harland’s “excited talk [...] about starting a magazine that should represent the ‘new

movement” (Syrett 1939 cited in Mix, 69). As a matter of fact, the *Prospectus* (1894) to the first volume reported explicitly the editors’ intentions:

The aim [...] is to depart as far as may be from the bad old traditions of periodical literature, and to provide an Illustrated Magazine which shall be beautiful as a piece of bookmaking, modern and distinguished in its letter press and its pictures [...]. In many ways its contributors will employ a freer hand than the limitations of the old-fashioned periodical can permit. [...] And while *The Yellow Book* will seek always to preserve a delicate, decorous and reticent mien and conduct, it will at the same time have the courage of its modernness [...] (Mix, 77-78).

The conception of *The Yellow Book* clearly asserts its Decadent and aestheticist qualities: Mix points out how never before had a magazine disguised itself as a book, claiming a place on the bookshelf (79). Denisoff further maintains that aestheticist trait, for which each volume was meant to bring attention to its own materiality. Yet, the consideration for the image resulted in the inclusion of a distinguished section of visual works of Decadent taste unrelated to the texts, representing explicit and eccentric subjects such as bizarre or mythological creatures, unconventional sex, pain and physical distortions (Denisoff, 42).

This is the cultural milieu in which Ella D’Arcy writes her short fiction, whose reputation has long been the subject of contestation (Krueger, 106). D’Arcy built a literary career based almost exclusively on short stories published in journals and on her affiliation with *The Yellow Book*. Her first story, “The Expiation of David Scott,” was published in the December 1890 issue of *Temple Bar*, followed by pieces that appeared in other prominent magazines such as *Blackwood’s*, *Good Words*, and even the *Argosy* under the pseudonym “Gilbert H. Page” (Fisher 1992b: 181). One of her first short stories is said to have been accepted by Charles Dickens for publication in *All The Year Round* (Mix, 1960: 234).<sup>2</sup> Many of D’Arcy magazine stories were later gathered in two

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<sup>2</sup> Although this information is reported by numerous scholars, Benjamin F. Fisher and Walter E. Houghton found no validation in the *All the Year Round*. Indeed, since D’Arcy was born in 1857 and

volumes: *Monochromes* (1895), published in London by John Lane and in Boston by Roberts Brothers, contained six short stories; *Modern Instances* (1898) contained seven stories from *The Yellow Book*. There are few exceptions to her short fiction: she published only one novel, *The Bishop's Dilemma* (1898), and the translation of André Maurois's biography of Shelley, *Ariel* (1924). Born in London sometime around 1857, we possess very limited factual information about her life, for she "left no formal record of her life save in her letters and conversation" (Mix 1960 cited in Fisher 1992a: 3), of which only a handful were published.<sup>3</sup> She comes from an Irish family: her father, Anthony Byrne, was a corn factor and a maltster; her mother, Sophia Anne, was the daughter of the town clerk of Gravesend, in Kent. She also received an income from Drummartin Castle, the estate near Dublin belonging to her father's family. D'Arcy was educated in a convent in Clapham, in France, Germany and the Channel Islands. Between 1875 and 1877 she also studied fine arts at the Slade School of Art in London, but she soon turned to short-story writing as her eyesight worsened (Taylor, 2004). Ella D'Arcy's collaboration with *The Yellow Book* began in 1894, when she sent Henry Harland the manuscript of "Irremediable" – her "remarkable" story, as he wrote in a letter to John Lane – which was published in the first issue of the magazine (Windholz, 1996: 117). But D'Arcy contributed more than short stories to *The Yellow Book*: she also served in an editorial role.

Her experience in the editorial staff, chronicled by Anna M. Windholz, was rather ambivalent: in a letter to John Lane, dated 20 April 1895, she recounts that she "proof-corrected, paginated, arranged the pictures, indexed, interviewed everybody,

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Dickens died in 1870, this is either an anachronism or a fallacy on D'Arcy's part at an advanced age (Fisher, 1992a: 248; Fisher, 1992c: 338).

<sup>3</sup> The only letters that have been published are those addressed to her publisher, John Lane. See Anderson, A. (ed.). *Ella D'Arcy: Some Letters to John Lane*. Edinburgh: Tragara Press, 1990. According to Benjamin F. Fisher, D'Arcy became acquainted with Katharine L. Mix, to whom she promised to pass on her papers. However, due to her "ill health in combination with a customary desultoriness", this did not happen and her papers might have been forgotten, if not lost (Fisher, 1992c: 336).



and, like the fly on the wheel, congratulated [herself] on having driven the Y.B. Coach most successfully to its goal” (D’Arcy 1990 cited in Windholz, 116-117). While Harland writes that he pays “Miss D’Arcy as sub-Editor from [his] own pocket”, D’Arcy’s correspondence discloses her frustration at the powerlessness of her position in light of her gender, for “[c]onsidering submissions and making publishing decisions at the quarterly seems to have been primarily a male province” (117). As a matter of fact, correspondence management seemed to have been a significant aspect of D’Arcy’s position. Windholz’s article reveals how the professional relationships between Harland, Lane, and the female contributors to *The Yellow Book* often used “a manipulative discourse of romance and flattery” (119). Although it is claimed that her somewhat jealous tone expressed in her letters is a symptom of her own interest in John Lane, D’Arcy was profoundly critical of the way the discourse of romance jeopardized the integrity of editorial policies. With regard to her own role, it has been suggested both that D’Arcy was trying to promote female writers through his role, and that there is actually little evidence to corroborate this. As a matter of fact, critiques of her literary production and conduct had diverged significantly. She had been identified as a New Woman writer, an “aesthete participant-critic” or even a “Decadent anti-feminist” (Krueger, 2023: 106). Others argue that she is “usually classified as a new-realist” (i.e. naturalist), but recent revisionist studies on British aestheticism recognize her as an aesthete because of her association with Lane’s publications (D’Hoker and Eggermont, 296). It is striking to note how D’Arcy’s literary reputation has created radically discordant responses. The ambivalence certainly stems from the fact that “Ella D’Arcy’s stories regularly depict the dire circumstances brought about by men who objectify women to their mutual detriment” (Krueger, 107). Yet, judgements were quite different in the twentieth century and earlier: so much so that a critic assumed D’Arcy to write

under a pseudonym, insisting that she wrote like a man (Mix, 17). According to Katherine Mix, that all the reproach for the dissolution of marriage rests on the woman's shoulders, in line with a rhetoric favouring the victimisation of the man. Indeed, she writes that "[u]like many men authors of the period, who portrayed gentle femininity tramped by the male's unprincipled brutality, Miss D'Arcy showed the superior and well-intentioned man caught in the snare of a designing or stupid woman." (Mix, 234). Windholz argues that "[h]er general attitude towards feminism was skeptical," for while she praises the work of George Egerton, she is more direct and scathing towards the accomplishments of Alma Strettell and Leila MacDonald (Windholz, 121).<sup>4</sup> However, in stating that "[t]he longer D'Arcy's tenure in that office, the more she asserted herself against the decisions she saw that politics [was] shaping," Windholz essentially contradicts her argument (117). Realistically, it seems that D'Arcy's stance evidences the way she regarded her gender as an unfair determinant. For gender was not just the cause of her secondary role's in the editorial process: it was at the root of women's quest for professional approval, which passed through romantic and manipulative discourses, often ensuring an undeserved success. In her view, there seems to be no room for any depreciation or objectification of women in itself.

Nonetheless, when it comes to her literary work, her much debated style was unambiguously influenced by French realism in the "Flaubertian dissection of failed marriages" (D'Hoker and Eggermont, 297), in Maupassant's "eeriness", and Balzac's treatment of eccentricity (Fisher 1992b: 200; 206). Krueger puts forward a theory to describe this stylistic mixture that is just as perplexing as it is effective: she borrows Thornton's (1979) term "aesthetics of failure" to indicate D'Arcy's approach of

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<sup>4</sup> Katherine Mix maintains that Ella D'Arcy believed that Leila MacDonald owned her inclusion in *The Yellow Book* to the interposition of her husband, Hubert Crackanthorpe. Although she admitted that MacDonald's contribution to Volume III had its merits, she remained suspicious of the rest of her pieces (Mix, 183).

“focusing on passive figures condemned to misunderstanding and disaster” while building “a radical critique of marriage that aligns her work with the social concerns of the New Woman fiction” (Krueger, 107). With her distinctive and unexpected turns of events, D’Arcy encapsulates that sense of disillusionment in accordance with the Decadent paradigm that “celebrate[s] moments of decay as a breakdown of norms, exploring the realm of failure as a new mode of experience” (Krueger, 107).

After a two-year collaboration, and one year before the waning of *The Yellow Book*, D’Arcy decided to perform an unprecedented act of rebellion by altering the list of contents of the ninth volume, that of April 1896, without the consent of its founding editors:

I am proving such a Guardian Angel to the Chief – though he doesn’t know it. I’m completely revising his Contents-list, just according to my fancy! I found “The Only Way” with that idiot Frances E. Huntley was to leave her out altogether; and I’ve also, kindly, expunged her name from the Yellow Dwarf’s mistaken eulogies. He will, certainly, murder me when he discovers it; he is already very angry because I don’t send him any revise; but, of course, I shan’t send him any until I’ve passed it for press, and so my changes have become “Irremediable” (D’Arcy, 24 cited in Windholz, 123).

It is interesting to note Windholz’s interpretation of the pun, which lies not merely in the title of D’Arcy’s first sensational piece, but also in the correlation between Willoughby tying the knot because the girl flatters his vanity and the politics of gender within the *Yellow Book* editorial office (123). Either way, the Guardian Angel soon happened to turn into a fallen one, as the action costed her the role of sub-editor. While remaining a regular contributor to *The Yellow Book*, an essential source of revenue was lost. She thus found herself pleading with John Lane to find her a new job, aiming perhaps at the American continent for new opportunities as a journalist: yet “I’ll accept anything, however low down,” she wrote to him, “and surely with the reputation you have acquired for me —see how humble I’ve become!— I ought to be thought capable

of doing low down journalism?” (D’Arcy n.d. cited in Windholz, 126). Eventually she accepted Lane’s offer for a post at the Bodley Head in Oxford, and with the ensuing demise of *The Yellow Book* her career as a “magazinish” and as one of the Keynotes in Lane’s series also came to an end (Fisher, 1992: 182).<sup>5</sup>

The reason D’Arcy produced such little output is only partially discernible. Evelyn Sharp remembered her as being more inclined to stimulating conversation than to writing; whereas her friend Netta Syrett recollected how, because of her indolence, D’Arcy was often locked in a room to keep her writing. While she also noted that “especially taking into account her very small output, the praise she received as a writer was astonishing” (Syrett 1939 cited in Fisher 1992b: 206), much of her later work was either rejected or never came to light for some yet undetermined reason. Windholz points out that D’Arcy offered John Lane a collection entitled *More Modern Instances* as late as 1921 (Windholz, 127). Fisher argues that she worked on *several* more novels, one of which was based on P. B. Shelley and his clique; one biography on the French poet Arthur Rimbaud, which was never accepted by any publisher; and one novel entitled *Poor Human Nature* was announced to be in preparation to be published by the Bodley Head, the result of which was never produced by D’Arcy’s pen (Fisher, 1992b: 181).

Notwithstanding the limited output in quantitative terms, D’Arcy managed to develop a hybrid style – and perhaps a hybrid genre – that combines stylistic experiment with political, social and moral concern (D’Hoker and Eggermont, 298). As will be thoroughly explored in the following chapters, D’Arcy responded to the newly emerging literary trends, being much indebted to aestheticist concerns over the art form,

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<sup>5</sup> Lane’s *avant-garde* Keynotes Series by the Bodley Head Press comprised fourteen novels and nineteen volumes of short stories, which provide an interesting snapshot of the literary landscape of the 1890s. D’Arcy’s *Monochromes* and George Egerton homonymous volume *Keynotes* were included in the series. See Harris, W. V. (1968). “John Lane’s Keynotes Series and the Fiction of the 1890’s”. *PMLA*, 83(5), 1407–1413.

to Decadent distaste for the Victorian bourgeois norms, to the New Woman's ethical aesthetics and to the realistic-naturalistic bleak and often explicit renderings. Her literary aesthetics and form were the result of multifaceted influences that stemmed from, and would have led to, the transition from Victorianism to Modernism (Fisher, 199b: 186).

## 2. Thematic eclecticism in Ella D'Arcy's *Yellow Book* short stories

In 1925, Richard Le Gallienne reminisced about the *fin-de-siècle* as a decade far from being “decadent”, but rather an “immense and multifarious renaissance” (Le Gallienne, 1925: 136). He expressed his view in the book *The Romantic '90s* (1925), where he wrote about the formal innovations and literary experiments of the time:

Such achievements as the twentieth century can boast are merely extensions of what the men and women of the nineties began, and perhaps to-day we have less sowing, or even reaping, than running to seed. However that be, there is nothing that seems “new” just now to any one familiar with the work one in those ten years; nor have we made any discoveries that were not then already discovered, fought for, and written for. Generally speaking, all our present-day developments amount to little more than pale or exaggerated copying of the '90s (137).

Indeed, as D'Hoker and Eggermont argue, the short story at the time lacked fixed general boundaries and was mostly described in terms of what it was *not*. As a result, the output was uneven and eclectic, which also represented a reason for the critical dismissal of *fin-de-siècle* short fiction. While less refined than its modernist successors, the *fin-de-siècle* short story introduced significant changes in terms of hybridity through formal experiments on multiple levels such as plots, narrative modes and thematic concerns (D'Hoker and Eggermont, 294-95). Particularly relevant for women's short fiction is the hybridity of themes, linked to the Woman Question, and thus to politico-economic changes, which brought “the dedication to art and literature as well as more political and ethical concerns about society and women's role in it” (305). In this context, Fisher maintains that D'Arcy was seen “[b]y many of the younger generation, [...] as a spearheader of the new and modern literature,” albeit, to others, there was a certain “narrative ambivalence and a lack of clear morality” in some of her stories (Fisher, 1992a: 241; D'Hoker and Eggermont, 305).

This chapter, then, proposes a mostly theme-based analysis of some of the short stories. The eclectic literary environment of the turn-of-century London provided D'Arcy with an opportunity to experiment with multiple techniques and subjects, rendering a picture and a critique of society from a different perspective. The short stories that have been selected are intended to provide an insight into the variety of themes covered by the author, and are hereby arranged along Krueger's spectrum of social-aesthetic engagement mentioned in the previous chapter. The stories are thus ordered starting from the theme of failed expectations related to marriage and courtship and men's idealization of women, which are the themes that circulated mainly in the *New Woman's* journalistic and essayistic writings. D'Arcy often delivers her social critique through the use of the deterministic pessimism that is typically naturalistic and which, when intermixed with other artistic influences, gives rise to her satirical aesthetics of failure. Indeed, as Fletcher puts it, while "Decadent literature is a literature of failure, [...] its exploration of that failure helped to create new modes of dealing with experience" (Fletcher, 29). For D'Arcy, failure is not merely an inherently decadent trait, but a way of formulating social criticism. The chapter proceeds to the distinctively aesthetic relationship between woman and artifice, then moves on to a study of the twofold nature of man, of the vulgarity of human instincts and the unconscious, up to the point of hallucinatory madness, which culminates in the ghost story.

### **2.1. On the Decay of love relationships: "A Marriage" and "Irremediable"**

Published in the eleventh issue of *The Yellow Book*, in October 1896, "A Marriage" is a tale depicting marital life as a disastrous and irreversible legal contract. The story deals with the consequences of an unbalanced marriage between Catterson, a young upper-

middle-class man, and Nettie, a young lower-class woman, a rather recurring situation in D'Arcy's fiction. Catterson has lived a double life "of married man and father in his riverside lodgings" and "of eligible bachelor in the drawing-rooms of Bayswater and Maida Vale": now that he is in the path towards the respectable British middle-class society, he finds his situation ever more intolerable (D'Arcy, 1896: 311). The two already have a daughter out of wedlock, this would make Nettie an actual "fallen woman". The external narrator's point of view is mediated by a third character, West, a friend of Catterson's who, visiting the family over time, soon notices some changes within the couple. Indeed, the story opens with the two men contemplating the possibility of Catterson's marriage with his future wife: Catterson is conscious of the "*mèsalliance*", which is why his "chief argument [...] was that he had sinned, and that in marriage lay the only reparation" (312). Similarly to what Margaret Stetz argues for the narrator in Ella Hepworth Dixon's *My Flirtations* (1892), West adheres to "dichotomies in which working-class women are used for sex and upper-middle-class women are used for "soul," but no honest dealings with either are required from men" (Stetz in Schaffer and Psomiades, 1999: 32). Indeed, differently from Catterson himself, West expressed his idea through an alleged old French dictum, *ne faites jamais de votre maîtresse, votre femme* (D'Arcy, 310). To obtain his friend's blessing, and likely to persuade himself too, Catterson eulogises Nettie's modesty, domesticity and devotion to him and the household. At the first meeting between West and Nettie, it is the reader, through West's point of view, who first notices that Nettie has disturbingly annihilated herself to please her husband. West soon observes that "she was quick in imitation" as she "modelled her deportment on Catterson's," and that "she expressed no opinions" that could betray some kind of self-revelation (D'Arcy, 317). The situation is perfectly exemplified by Mona Caird in her essay "Marriage," as she writes that "[t]he luckless



man finds his wife so very dutiful and domesticated, and so very much confined to her “proper sphere,” that she is, perchance, more exemplary than entertaining” (Caird cited in Christensen Nelson, 1897: 195). Heater Marcovitch even argues that the approach adopted by some of D’Arcy’s women replicate the attitude “she had to adopt while working at *The Yellow Book*, where her independent nature sometimes clashed with the patronizing attitudes of her employers” (Marcovitch, 2022: para. 4). If, at first, the woman is submissive and adheres to a particular ideal of domesticity, once she has gained legitimacy through marriage, a power reversal takes place as she turns into an authoritative wife. On the one hand, as Krueger points out, Nettie’s demeanour is the result of a marriage made to acquire better economic conditions. Her condition is explained by Mona Caird’s *The Daughters of Danaus* (1984), since Nettie acquired her social position “[b]y bartering [her] womanhood, by using these powers of body, in return for food and shelter and social favour, or for the sake of so-called ‘duty’ irrespective of—perhaps in direct opposition to [her] feelings” (Caird, 1894: 343). Indeed, their firstborn, Gladys, is an illegitimate child: albeit becoming a determining factor in the marriage, her mother will always bear resentment over her failed inheritance. Her conduct resonates with Sarah Grand’s words:

“[w]e have endured most poignant misery for [man’s] sins, and screened him when we should have exposed him and had him punished. we have listened much edified to man’s sermons on the subject of virtue, and have acquiesced uncomplainingly in the convenient arrangement by which this quality has come to be altogether practised for him by us vicariously. [...] All this is over now, however, and while on the one hand man has shrunk to his true proportions in our estimation, we, on the other, have been expanding to our own; and now we come confidently forward to maintain [...] possibilities hitherto suppressed or abused [...] (Grand cited in Patterson, 2008: 31).

However, it is for such characters as Nettie that D’Arcy earned the epithet of anti-feminist. Indeed, she was not just a tyrannical wife, but also “an exacting mistress, and had no indulgence for the class from which presumably she has sprung. Her servants

were expected to show the perfection of angels, the capacity for work of machines, and the servility of slaves (D'Arcy, 333)". D'Arcy appropriated for herself the decadents' aristocratic, antibourgeois (or anti working-class, in her case) attitude, despite their middle-class origins.

If decadents, "[i]n celebrating their counterintuitive cultural presence, [...] perversely utilized the tropes of illness and effeminacy," Nettie assumes the posture of the decadent while functioning as an emasculating figure to her husband, as she violates the so-called ideology of separate spheres by making demands (Schaffer and Psomiades, 65-69). D'Arcy's plot provocatively overturns the opening conditions of the story. The use of illness and the decay of the body is particularly important and fits into the "late-nineteenth-century obsession with visible vice" (64). In fact, the characters are not only overwhelmed by each other's authority, but we also see the ensuing physical degeneration to their oppression. At the beginning of the story, Nettie seemed to West "much older than the girl Catterson had described" because "she lacked colour", she was "flat-chested, undeveloped", and the environment in which she lived was a "dark, musty-smelling room" (D'Arcy, 315-16). Although not ill, she possesses a hidden beauty, almost withered away by the circumstances. Yet precisely because she is "physically imperfect, domestically ideal, and intellectually shrewd", Nettie turns out to be "a version of the New Woman who is no longer purely victim in her relationship with man and society" (Maier, 1994: 42). Catterson, on the other hand, eventually catches a bad cold over Nettie's insistence to go out in the rain, and in a few weeks he would seem to West "some little shrunken sexagenarian than a man still under thirty" (D'Arcy, 333). Yet, his illness can also be read as a result of vice. As Krueger explains: "[t]o paint Catterson as an innocent is to ignore D'Arcy's inclusion of his original sin: his double life, his wilful enjoyment of keeping a mistress in absolute dependence upon

him, and his assumption that her adherence to a normative ideal of submissiveness reflects a natural set of behaviours” (Krueger, 116). Indeed, Catterson’s lifestyle seems modelled on Dorian Gray’s, though serving a different, didactic purpose: juxtaposing the decadents’ aestheticism and their own social engagement, New Women writers criticised the romanticisation of degeneracy and exposed the diseased reality as a result of vice (Schaffer and Psomiades, 65).

By alternating the relationship of authority and condescension within the couple, D’Arcy subverts the expectations of traditional gender roles and the ideal of femininity conceived through the male gaze: in this way, she demonstrates the detrimental effects that such aestheticized and idealised paradigms have both on Victorian women and men (Maier, 36). This “battle of the sexes”, as Sarah Maier puts it, reflects men’s need for women to match their idealised vision and women’s resistance to this imposition, which stems from “women’s desire for power and autonomy and men’s desire to maintain the status quo” (37-38). However cruel Nettie seems, she is but one of D’Arcy’s non-conformist women that exemplify D’Arcy’s radical feminism. In response, the husband, true to the established social order, ruminates that “[p]erhaps if I had never married her—who knows?” alluding to the fact that “the life he had with Nettie before their marriage [...] could be considered remotely ideal” because she would have been totally subordinate to him (D’Arcy, 338; Krueger, 116). Indeed, he further underpins his doubt through the dogmatic and totalising assumption whereby “[w]omen require to be kept under, to be afraid of you, to live in a condition of insecurity; to know their good fortune is dependent on their good conduct” (D’Arcy, 338). This exhibits Catterson’s vanity and naivety since he valued Nettie only when she resembled him in every respect.

By claiming to establish the correct conduct of the wife, here emerges the issue of gender normativity and performance: Catterson champions social norms and behaviours conforming with a gender to which he does not belong, while at the same time being “blissfully ignorant of that artificiality” of Nettie’s “perfect enactment of the role of subservient object of his affections” (Krueger, 115). Krueger further underscores the irony of the decadents’ praise of the aesthetic experience: “an artificial performance as an expression of artistic perfection” (115). Ella D’Arcy thus shows the decay and disillusionment of a marriage union that was not free, and the stagnant and unhappy reality of a mercenary marriage based on insincerity and mutual exploitation (Krueger, 114). In Lord Henry Wotton’s words from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890): “[marriage] makes a life of deception absolutely necessary for both parties” (Wilde, 1890: 10). Nonetheless, D’Arcy’s objective is the opposite claim. Taking up Caird’s words once again: “give room for the development of individuality, and individuality develops [...] Give freedom in marriage, and each pair will enter upon their union after their own particular fashion, creating a refreshing diversity in modes of life, and consequently of character” (Caird cited in Christensen Nelson, 197). Indeed, as Nettie gains control of her own life she becomes “for her husband [...] the constant living reminder of his dead illusions” (D’Arcy, 341). Thus, D’Arcy questions the role of men as the creators of the mythic ideal that control women, which has been historically constructed and authorised by men (Maier, 42).

In the end, D’Arcy makes the powerful choice of having the husband explicitly complain about marriage as a deadly institution: “marriage spells ruin” are indeed Catterson’s last words in the story (D’Arcy, 340). Yet, as opposed to the image of the husband’s fragile health, Nettie is showed returning with her friend from a shopping expedition, and is now engaged in an “animated discussion of dressmaking details”

(336). A complete reversal of roles has thus occurred, where the women have been comfortably out in the public sphere, while men “sat, perforce, silent” (336). Nettie, having initially spent time as a passive, objectified muse, eventually assumes the role of some sort of *mondaine*, the female aesthete thus named by Ouida, who was “witty, brilliant, avant-garde, and daring” (Schaffer, 61). As such, Nettie’s attention is totally captured by the texture and colours of a fabric for a new gown, despite the atmosphere forebodes an “oncoming death for the tubercular husband”, whereby the wife “prudently selects black against an upcoming funeral” (Fisher, 1992a: 244). The technique with which D’Arcy managed to include in the story and stage the contradiction of “two mutually exclusive versions of femininity,” together with others such as “abrupt mood shifts [...] and psychological introspection,” anticipate “techniques crucial to early modernism” (Schaffer, 61).

D’Arcy’s short story “Irremediable,” published in 1894 in the debut issue of *The Yellow Book*, addresses the same dynamics of disillusionment, covering primarily the pre-marital stage, the courtship. Willoughby is an upper middle-class man who, while on holiday outside London, meets a young working-class woman, Esther, in a rather bucolic scenery. This tale, like the previous one, allows for a discourse on social class. Willoughby’s interest in and sympathy for Esther, “this working daughter of people,” actually stems from the moment he learns of her origins, as he “had dabbled a little in Socialism and at one time had wandered among the dispossessed” (D’Arcy, 1894: 89). D’Arcy’s use of language during their acquaintance is significant: the narrator describes Esther’s unrestrained laugh, her candour, together with “the ease and rapidity of children before they have learned the dread meaning of ‘etiquette’” with which they befriended each other (91). These elements constitute an infantilising depiction of the young woman, a view, one might argue, stemming from his aristocratic presumption,

given her lack of education. Moreover, Esther represents that working-class woman whom he allowed himself to kiss with “an uncomfortable suspicion she had not received it in the same spirit in which it had been bestowed, but, attaching more serious meaning to it, would build expectations thereon which must be left unfulfilled” (D’Arcy, 96). Therefore, D’Arcy once again structures her social critique with a story built around the traditional prejudices of class and gender of those men who idealise women in accordance with precise behavioural canons. Nonetheless, it has been argued by Fisher that Willoughby possesses a “winning sensitivity to what he supposes is the plight of Esther [...] whom he rapidly marries in hopes of preventing her from further unhappiness” (Fisher, 1992a, 243). Willoughby may make a reckless decision, certainly provoked also by her urgent plea to escape a grey domestic life blighted by violence; yet he acts in the opposite way to Catterson and, unlike him, does not thoroughly contemplate the implications of the union. It has further been claimed with reference to this tale that “D’Arcy creates situations in which men, not women, are the sufferers in male-female relationships” (Fisher, 1992a: 243). Fisher’s statement, in truth, encapsulates yet another partial view of D’Arcy’s stories. In fact, to perceive Willoughby as a victim is to overlook how he actually made a hasty decision by way of flattering his vanity. He becomes aware of the mediocre living conditions of a young woman whom he considers economically, and therefore socially and culturally, inferior to himself. He is attracted to her precisely because of the sense of superiority this disparity instils in him (Krueger, 112). The sense of male victimization in these narratives is merely the result of women’s rejection of an ideal imposed by men. As Krueger maintains, “D’Arcy plays out the consequences of insubordination” of that condition in matrimony that places the man on a pedestal and degrades the wife’s condition further (113).

D'Arcy's tale then moves on to show the married life of the newlyweds. Willoughby seems fortunate and in love in the eyes of an old friend, who ironically exclaims "[m]arriage is evidently a most successful institution" (D'Arcy, 99); yet after only three months this joy suddenly turns to bitter repentance. As in "A Marriage" Nettie feels dislike for her husband's friends, Esther's anger at her husband's delay in coming home fits into the Victorian propagandistic rhetoric against marriage, for which it represented a limiting force for men (Krueger, 112-13). Willoughby comes home only to find her "envenomed by the idea he had been enjoying himself without her," while she has been spending the evening in a room that "was repulsive in its disorder" (D'Arcy, 101-02). The rooms he now shared with Esther were the lodgings where "he had smoked and studied, here he had made many a glorious voyage into the land of books. [...] All his happiest memories were embalmed in those shabby, badly furnished rooms. Now all was changed" (D'Arcy, 106). However, women too "gained a legitimate household but were trapped there, reliant upon their husbands for company and expected to cater to their husbands' visions of perfect housekeeping" (Krueger, 112-13).

The long and meticulous description of the room and the condition of the objects used by Esther is reminiscent of the attention to detail in the commonplaceness typical of Henry James or Maupassant. This serves to convey to the reader not so much Esther's inadequacy in managing the house, but to instil a profound sense of wretchedness and failure that transcends the single episode. Willoughby's irritation stems from his doubt as to "why Esther never did any mortal thing efficiently or well" (104). Indeed, Esther "was natural, simple-minded, and entirely free from that repellently protective atmosphere with which a woman of the "classes" so carefully surrounds herself" (D'Arcy, 91). In other words, as such, Esther could and should have been "humbled into silent submission" and moulded to her husband's preference

(Maier, 44). However, the problem is that “Willoughby had tried to educate her [...] [b]ut Esther had not wish to improve. She evinced all the self-satisfaction of an illiterate mind” (D’Arcy, 106). As Maier rightly expresses, “D’Arcy’s narrator makes it clear that Willoughby does not wish to educate Esther in order to encourage her emancipation; the education he has in mind would further domesticate her wildness to a non-threatening level; it would transform Esther into someone he could hold up to his peers” (Maier, 44).

The sequence of thoughts as he examines the room leads him simply “to admit a curious thing,” which, unexpectedly, is the disastrous realisation of his detestation for Esther (D’Arcy, 107). Despite her being at the centre of his universe, the passion “intense indeed, all-masterful, soul-subduing as Love itself” turns out to be hatred, arguably prompted by his vexation at her refusal to submit to him, which he had renounced “with humiliation at his previous fatuity” (107-08). The story concludes after pages of introspection and without any extraordinary plot overthrow. In fact, in terms of the storyline developments, the plot is virtually non-existent, in favour of a sequence of considerations and reminiscences. The focus on the psychological introspection and the abrupt change of emotions and mood are among the remarkable innovations of the 1890s short fiction which anticipated the Joycean epiphany (D’Hoker and Eggermont, 303).

## **2.2. Aestheticist influences and the *mondaine* in “The Pleasure-Pilgrim”**

“The Pleasure-Pilgrim” is D’Arcy’s fourth Yellow Book story, published in 1895 in the fifth issue. The tale deals with Lulie Thayer, an unconventional American young woman, who completely subverts the traditional performance of gender roles and



norms. She has left the United States to travel around Europe and meets Campbell, the British protagonist and focalizer, at a castle in Austria where they lodged for the holidays. Captivated by the beauty and accomplishments of the lady, who takes an interest in him, Campbell is deterred by the comments of a friend, until she commits suicide to prove her love for him.

From the very first impression she makes on Campbell, Lulie wears “magnificent apparel” that “would have been noticeable in Paris or Vienna – it was extravagant here” (D’Arcy, 1895: 35-36). Her physical appearance is beautiful and proportionate, with “red hair, freckles on her nose, and the most singular eyes he had ever seen” (36). According to Fisher “Lulie’s red hair, to be sure, may imply a passionate, and untrustworthy or unpredictable, sexuality underlying her nature,” which lends her a mysterious aura (Fisher, 1992a: 247). One might also argue that her features recall those of the voluptuous Pre-Raphaelite woman as a highly sexualized seductress. Her features combined with her foreignness convey a certain exoticness about her: indeed, her eyes are “slit-like [...], set obliquely in her head, Chinese fashion” (D’Arcy, 36). This makes her “an occasion for spectacular Paterian connoisseurship” and fantasies on the strangeness of her beauty, as Campbell feels he is “the discoverer of her possibilities” and even “saw superiority in himself” for recognising her extraordinary allure (Schaffer and Psomiades, 37-38; D’Arcy, 40). In such instances, “Lulie functions as visual property, seized through the power of Campbell’s superior eye” (Schaffer and Psomiades, 37).

Nonetheless, more than Nettie in “A Marriage,” Lulie perfectly embodies the figure of the *mondaine* as a “witty, rootless socialite whose overwhelming beauty, aristocratic hauteur, and razor-sharp tongue give her complete dominance of her social scene” (Schaffer and Psomiades, 60). The *mondaine* is destabilizing for her male

counterpart, just as Lulie is for Campbell in this story. From the very first meeting, the girl “showed no sense of embarrassment whatever,” but was soon described by his friend Mayne as “the most egregious little flirt,” who “doesn’t flirt in the ordinary way. She doesn’t talk much, or laugh, or apparently make the least claims on masculine attention,” as if man’s complacency could not tolerate the presence of a young woman who did not pursue male consideration (D’Arcy, 36; 42). As Margaret Stetz points out, D’Arcy’s Luly Thayer represents a threat to the male aesthete, as she is “usurping the male prerogative of appreciating” (Schaffer and Psomiades, 39). Indeed, Campbell’s opinion of her would oscillate between fascination and disgust, as he periodically recalls that “she cannot fulfil his ideal of the fresh innocent whom he first imagines her to be” (Krueger, 118). Just as Linda Dowling associated the Decadents and the New Women as two degenerate versions of the “New,” Lulie, as a *mondaine*, embodies the perfect blend of the two. She bears features of the aesthete, as she wishes “to extend her opportunities [...] and to acquire fresh sensations. She’s an adventuress. Yes, an adventuress, but an end-of-the-century one. She doesn’t travel for profit, but for pleasure” to much of Campbell astonishment as he “wondered why on earth she should wish to do such things” (D’Arcy, 43). As an adventuress, she also embodies a New Woman type of lady, for she even “[c]ycled in Paris [...] in her cycling costume”: D’Arcy invokes this new turn-of-the-century device that represented female liberation and the subversion of gender differences, along with the cigarette and the latchkey, which was attacked in the press precisely because it “necessitates an androgynous outfit...worn by its adepts of the weaker sex” (D’Arcy, 43; Joze cited in Schaffer and Psomiades, 205). Just like Ada Levenson, D’Arcy also seeks to contest the assumption that emotions, interests, and intellect do not belong exclusively or dissimilarly to one of the sexes (205). To reinforce this view, Lulie also enjoys manly pastimes like shooting

and, having read a good deal, “she knows how to apply her reading to practical life” (D’Arcy, 43).

Male-centred aestheticist influences are nonetheless present in this story. Lulie’s character is aestheticized and constructed by the male gaze as another work of art, interacting with others from the past, for “she’s learned from Herrick not to be coy; and from Shakespeare that sweet-and-twenty is the time for kissing and being kissed” (D’Arcy, 43-44). The relationship between the two is reminiscent of that between Dorian Gray and Sibyl Vane. Sibyl is similarly aestheticized by Dorian, who only notices her acting performance and the characters she plays, without paying attention to the real person behind the actor. She would then be transformed into a “real” woman with genuine feelings by her love for Dorian: “before I knew you, acting was the one reality of my life. It was only in the theatre that I Lived. I thought that it was all true. I was Rosalind one night, and Portia the other. I believed in everything [...] and you freed my soul from prison. You taught me what reality is,” she admits to Dorian after her disastrous performance (Wilde, 2003:84). Dorian, who finds beauty in artifice for its own sake, is no longer attracted by the natural woman behind it. In contrast, Lulie, who arguably has genuine feelings for Campbell, is forced by Campbell the contrived mask of the alleged actress, which drives himself away. In a sense, just as her love for Dorian ruins Sibyl’s talent, the same is true for Lulie, as she is no longer interested in being entertained by, or pose for, others. Both Sibyl and Lulie are aestheticized by the men they are in love with, with the result that the former is tainted by reality, the latter by artifice. In both cases, the man “is hounded by the idea that [the woman] is not what he has imagined her to be” with the consequence that the woman, out of unrequited love, commits suicide (Krueger, 118).

In Campbell's case, as Krueger rightly argues, it is as much an aesthetic as a sentimental conflict:

She exists as a beautiful object only when mediated through Campbell's "aestheticizing connoisseur's gaze," but he retreats from her when she takes on a life of her own as a "romantic adventurer." Though Campbell's fascination with Lulie does stem from his own narcissistic tendencies, his inability to conventionalize the images of masculinity and femininity within their romantic relationship also frustrates him" (Krueger, 117-18).

In this sense, scholars have found many resonances with Henry James's novella "Daisy Miller: A Study" (1878). Daisy Miller, too, is a young American girl from an affluent background that travels around Europe and, like Lulie, is "left to carve her own way through European society, and finally cruelly sacrificed by expatriated snobs with misogynistic double standards" (Haralson and Johnson, 2009: 222). Just like D'Arcy's novella, James's story is also narrated from the perspective of a man, Winterbourne, who is fairly jealous of society and the implications of the young woman's freedom. As a result, Daisy Miller has been the subject of much debate regarding the status of her innocence, as she is "much talked about, and it pains Winterbourne to hear her prettiness reduced to vulgarity" (221). It is precisely the male, individual perspective that allows for the possibility that the ambiguity arises not from her conduct, but from the focalizer's perception. Scholars agree that James highly dramatized the use of narration within the consciousness of a single character, which shifts the subject of the novella from Daisy's innocence to the effects of her ambiguity onto the people around her (223). Placing the drama in the male focalizer's consciousness "implies the possibility of competing interpretations of Daisy's character and conduct. Readers must first evaluate Winterbourne's point of view in order to understand Daisy" (223).

This technique is adopted by D'Arcy too, who rather invites the reader to speculate on Campbell's prejudice that filters the perception on Lulie. In her story, both

male characters soon persuade themselves that the young girl is an “actress,” ironically, because she refuses to play the part of the innocent maiden (Krueger, 119). Campbell’s first perception is not necessarily prejudiced, despite the objectification of the woman, but soon becomes so through Mayne’s intervention. Mayne manipulates Campbell like Lord Henry moulds Dorian, finding relish in provoking, influencing and mystifying others. In fact, he neither invites Campbell to distance himself nor encourages him to liaise with Lulie, “rather, he is enjoying seeing the effect Lulie has on Campbell and cultivating a need for Campbell to further confide in him” (Marcovitch, para. 25). Yet, Mayne is not a round character, we do not have information on his appearance or his life, he occasionally emerges only as a voice. While the centre of the drama is placed in Campbell’s consciousness, Mayne’s remarks emerge as a voice of the Campbell’s male subconscious which, disoriented by an “new” independent and resourceful kind of woman that disrupts gender norms, perceives her as a threat to the established order and does not want to be fooled by her. As Krueger maintains, “[Campbell] also recognizes that his prejudice, not her past, is the true barrier to domestic bliss” (118). Indeed, there is no certainty about his allegations, but Campbell is nonetheless persuaded of Mayne’s account more than her own. It must also be noted that social class still remains a crucial factor, even if it is an underlying one: Sibyl Vane is undoubtedly expected to behave more freely precisely because she is of a less affluent class, though not Lulie and Daisy Miller, as “[n]o girl of her class would do such things” (D’Arcy, 42). Because of this, Krueger rightly defines Campbell a “coercive agent of gender normativity” with an “undisputable ontological power”, as he gets to decide what is real or not in the story (119).

Furthermore, Krueger points out that, precisely because Lulie does not embody the ideal model, all her actions are deprived of meaning, even her death. Once again the

parallelism with Sibyl Vane is appropriate: Sibyl is said to have “played her last part” by Lord Henry Wotton, who encourages Dorian Gray to think of her death “as a strange lurid fragment from some Jacobean tragedy” and not to waste tears on her, as she was less real than the women she played (Wilde, 100). In a similar fashion, Mayne’s sporadic and intrusive remarks persuade Campbell that she lived for the same ideal of performance for its own sake and that “[t]he role she had played so long and so well now demanded a sensational finale in the centre of the stage” (D’Arcy, 67). The ambiguity with which D’Arcy confronts the theme of the natural woman – the Victorian maiden – as opposed to the artificial woman – the New Woman – can be interpreted as a challenge to the traditional view of the woman associated precisely with Nature and not with artifice. This rationale naturally leads to the direct conclusion that man is instead aligned with intellect and art. This correlation is particularly contemptuous on Baudelaire’s part, whereby he associates the natural with the abominable, and defines the woman as constantly vulgar since she is the opposite of the dandy (Schaffer and Psomiades, 198). In his essay “A Defence of Cosmetics,” published in the first issue of *The Yellow Book*, Max Beerbohm challenges the idea that any art form is a mere reflection or imitation of real life. He suggests that favouring artifice in the form of make-up and cosmetics over a more “natural” state is a way of challenging “the fetish of Nature” to which all things, including art, have been sacrificed. In the specific case of women, who have been “under the direct influence of Nature” until recently, they “have seized on make-up and the manipulation of their appearance as part of their newfound rights” (Bristow, 2023: 119; 208). This novelty, insofar as it transcends the supposed nature of sex, is subversive to the old order of things and has been embraced by D’Arcy precisely to denote female progress (Krueger, 119; Schaffer and Psomiades, 133-34). Moreover, D’Arcy’s use of the unreliability of the focalizer on the tension between

reality and artifice, together with the aesthetics of failure, irony, and masculine disillusionment over false expectations is intended to raise more doubts in the reader: for that, according to Fisher, this story “takes a merited place in modernist literature” (Fisher, 1992a: 247).

### **2.3. “The Web of Maya” and the study on human nature**

“The Web of Maya”, published in the seventh issue of *The Yellow Book*, still in 1895, provides an example of D’Arcy’s use of psychological realism and naturalist techniques. The story follows a married man, Le Mesurier, living in the bleak atmosphere of the island of Saint Maclou. The landscape of the Channel Islands, which D’Arcy often employs as a setting and incorporates here too, is nothing short of sublime. Central to the story is the isthmus connecting the island to the mainland, a tremendously craggy and narrow bridge of land that is terrifying for those unfamiliar with it. As Fisher states, “D’Arcy’s early training as a painter is frequently detectable in her fiction” and in her use of geographical local colour, as she minutely describes the barren, wild land, and the local fauna with its gorse and brackens, the purple heather bushes and golden ragwort (Fisher, 1992a: 244). Fisher further underscores the careful use of descriptions of “fogs and haze that surround the irrational rages and revenge desires” which create a framework “that exquisitely symbolize his upset, confused emotional state” (245). D’Arcy’s descriptions also reflect the naturalist tendency to explore the poor if not squalid living conditions of the lower classes. Indeed, in Le Mesurier’s house there are “[u]nwashed cooking utensils and crockery littered up the hearth and dresser; the baize cover and cushions of the jonquière, often laid upon, [...] never shaken or cleaned” (D’Arcy, 1895b: 295). Naturalism also openly addresses

grittier themes of ordinary life, such as addictions: in the house “rusting guns, disordered fishing tackle, canvases, a battered oil-paint box, spoke of occupations thrown aside and tastes forgotten,” leaving room for tobacco and whisky, which instead “showed the lustre which comes from frequent use” (295-96). This is Le Mesurier’s life after “six years of unhappy married life had come to an end”: a “solitary, half-savage sort of life” with no contact with the outside world (D’Arcy, 293; 299). Le Mesurier is also described as a man with a violent temperament, a taste for drinking, and other people, especially women, report that he has treated his wife badly, beat her in front of the servants, and that he uses bad words. In this context, the contrast created between the environment and the figure of Le Mesurier, both battered, and the radiant figure of Shergold is particularly striking. Interestingly, there is a rather brief physical description of the latter, while more emphasis is placed on the description of him contemplating his nails: “[h]e had a trick of drawing these together in an even row over the palm of his hand, while he contemplated them admiringly, his head a little on one side. The dabs of light reflected from their surface made them look like a row of polished pink shells” (296).

Clearly, Shergold is first introduced in an effeminate pose, as it were, characteristic of the decadents as a positive trait of socio-cultural transgression. In fact, in typical decadent style, D’Arcy establishes with Shergold not quite the figure of the degenerate aristocrat, at least that of the effeminate intellectual, which is suggested here not by the make-up, but by the manicure. adept in the art of conversation, he is accused by Le Mesurier of having “got at [his wife] intellectually, [...] seduced her mind, [...] subjugated her spiritually” (304). Once again, in this story we ascertain precisely what Linda Dowling had previously written, namely the commonality of ideas between the decadent man and the New Woman, when she called them “twin apostles of social



apocalypse,” threatening the society with “contemporary male effeminacy and female mannishness” (Dowling, 445; 447). The theme of emancipation is, besides, ever present, and the decadent male is a trigger of it. Indeed, Shergold is said to have “taught her to commiserate herself,” which is the first step towards a change of her home life. In addition to being educated in mathematics and Greek, she rediscovered the pleasure of her new favourite pastime: good conversation with himself. An interesting contrast is to have the two interlocutors discuss such radical topics as the abolition of the monarchy, vegetarianism, the emancipation of women, agnosticism, and other subjects that the conservative and religious Le Mesurier cannot tolerate, while he paradoxically “sat silent at the head of his table” (D’Arcy, 306). The real problem for Le Mesurier is that Sherwood is not his lover. He could have understood that his wife had feelings for or felt attracted to another man, but what he cannot accept is a relationship between the two based on intellectual nurturing, which emancipates the woman from her traditional dependence on her husband. Like in “A Marriage,” the wife is not subservient to the husband’s will, and importance of education to this end is much emphasised. The account of the family’s past arouses a certain compassion for Le Mesurier himself. D’Arcy skilfully develops a slow account of the development of Le Mesurier’s hatred for Shergold, who, as his relationship with his wife deteriorates, sees himself removed from the decision-making process in his son’s upbringing and is replaced as master in his own house. Except for the family drama, which is told in the manner of a flashback, the story is essentially devoid of significant events, but the psychological drama of the protagonist is central.

This story, in time, has been rightfully described “a forcible study of hate” or “a study in the beginnings of madness” of a man “far removed from any nurturing family life and human mutuality” (Fisher, 1992a: 145; Fisher, 1992b: 198-99). The term

“study” is particularly apt: with this story, D’Arcy seems to align herself with the naturalist trend of studying human instincts, thus the more animalistic side of human nature. With the occurrence of Shergold’s alleged murder by Le Mesurier himself in the grip of animalesque instincts, D’Arcy addresses the theme of reaction to the homicide from the murderer’s point of view: the result is an account of Le Mesurier’s emotional and psychological reactions throughout time while being isolated on the island. In this sense, D’Arcy’s tale is configured as a naturalist study: a bit like Émile Zola, who, as he wrote in the preface to *Thérèse Raquin* (1887), wants to follow step by step “the secret working of [the characters’] passions, the promptings of their instinct, the cerebral disorders following a nervous crisis” (Zola: 1887, vi). D’Arcy decided to analyse Le Mesurier’s state of mind for three long months without receiving any news about the alleged victim. Crude details are also featured, such as the realisation that the body would probably not be recognized by the rings, because the “fingers were always the part first attacked by the fish,” or never found altogether, being “pulled down by a million tenacious mouths and never seen again” (D’Arcy, 311). Le Mesurier’s reactions goes from suspicious calmness to the realization that, in fact, Shergold has become “a fixed idea, an obsession, which overpowered his will,” also as a consequence to his loneliness (313). After three months in the throes of madness and obsession, Le Mesurier, “in the solitude of Le Tas, ha[s] suffered every pang a guilty conscience can inflict” and has been “through every phase of remorse and of despair” (315). Zola defines remorse precisely “a simple organic disorder, in the rebellion of a nervous system strung to the point of breaking” (Zola, vi). In this sense, the island that previously served as a safe place where to escape the dejection of family life, now becomes a prison in which all the darker mechanisms of the human psyche are exposed. The final realization that Shergold’s death had been “a mere phantasmal creation of his

own brain” renews in Le Mesurier a deep desire for revenge and murder (D’Arcy, 318). The ending confirms that D’Arcy wanted to approach naturalism with a study “of temperament and of the profound modifications of organism under the pressure of circumstances and situations,” concentrating, in an extremely innovative way, the drama in the human psyche and its social configurations (Zola, x-xi).

#### **2.4. Experiments in the horror, the gothic and the symbolism: “Two Stories”**

Ella D’Arcy published “Two Stories” in the tenth issue of *The Yellow Book*, in 1896. The story, as the title suggests, is actually composed of two tales, or rather, two sketches: “The Death Mask” and “The Villa Lucienne.” The two stories have no real social commitment, but rather represent an exemplification of the author’s purely aesthetic experiments. The first is a short sketch with a very simple plot, almost absent: it is about a *mouleur*, Peschi, who has been chosen to execute the death mask of “the Master,” the late poet Verlaine. It is told by an internal narrator and focalizer, by a member of the group close to the poet witnessing all the events, but we never get to know who this person is. The plot essentially tells of the *mouleur* who is called the day before a few hours after the poet’s death, and then the poet’s intimates go to the studio to see the result of the mask. The funerary theme brings with it the naturalist and Zolaesque elements of detachment, of macabre and meticulous observation and scientific objectivity. The process by which the facial imprint of the deceased is made is described as follows:

As you cover the dead face over with the plaster, a little air is necessarily forced back again into the lungs, and this air as it passes along the windpipe causes strange rattlings, sinister noises, so that you might swear that the corpse was returned to life. Then, as the mould is removed, the muscles of the face drag and twitch, the mouth opens, the tongue lolls out; and Peschi declared that this always remains for him a gruesome moment. (D’Arcy, 1896: 268).

The story appears to be a celebration of the natural duplicity of the poet maudit, on the one hand praising his interiority and artistic expression, while, on the other, exposing the vileness and unruliness of his later years. Indeed,

“the Master had somewhere a beautiful soul you divined from his works; from the exquisite melody of all of them, from the pure, the ecstatic, the religious altitude of some few. But in actually daily life, his loose and violent will-power, his insane passions, held that soul bound down so close a captive, that those who knew him best were the last to admit its existence” (D’Arcy, 272).

The ekphrastic depiction of the mask, of his double, does not fail to show this complexity. Depending on how Peschi places the light around the mask, it takes on monstrous or divine features. Because of this D’Arcy’s sketch has been defined as “wonderfully sympathetic and far from ideal picture of this strange dual nature, at once divine and bestial” (Fisher, 1992b: 203). The mask echoes the duality of respectability and refinement against the decadence of vice, recovering this trope that became known with Jekyll and Hyde or Dorian Gray and his portrait, but which, until then, has always been doubled into two related but distinct avatars. The dissimilarity with D’Arcy’s sketch, which we can conceivably associate with a purely French naturalistic tendency, is to emphasise the presence of the noblest sentiments and the most degrading instincts and vices as intrinsic elements in the same person.

The second story, “The Villa Lucienne,” is classified as a gothic tale and even a ghost story. While “The Web of Maya” offers a folkloristic narrative of quasi-supernaturalism, this story associates D’Arcy with those contemporary writers who, adhering to the realist aesthetics, also employ supernatural elements for symbolic or entertainment purposes (Fisher, 1992b: 182-83). In this tale, D’Arcy tackles the subjects, now familiar, of the haunted mansion, the ghostly housekeeper or gardener and the disturbing connection between wraiths and children. These are the elements that Henry James would reclaim and elaborate further two years later with the publication of

“The Turn of the Screw” in the book *Two Magics* (1898), which also features two stories – the other one being “Covering End.” D’Arcy opens the story immediately with an outer frame stating that, in fact, “as you will see, there is in reality no story at all,” but it is simply an account of Madame Coetlegon’s visit to a villa to let with some friends (D’Arcy, 275). The narration then switches from the third to the first person.

If the first story could have been a tribute to Verlaine, here too D’Arcy makes several references to French naturalists and symbolists. Indeed, it has been argued that D’Arcy “plausibly displays a Maupassant type of eeriness” (Fisher, 1992b: 200). The lady who wants to rent the Villa Lucienne is, not by chance, Madame de M–, mother of the late “Guy,” who was “very imaginative” and “poor Guy undoubtedly derived his extraordinary gifts from her” (D’Arcy, 284). Moreover, the story ends with that sensation of “overwhelming fear” that is “the crystallisation of one of those subtle, unformulated emotions in which only poor Guy himself could have hoped to succeed” (285). The kind of fearsome atmosphere to which D’Arcy refers and which she sought to recreate is described by Maupassant himself as arising from a danger not clearly understood:

*[...] cela n’a lieu, quand on est brave, ni devant une attaque, ni devant la mort inévitable, ni devant toutes les formes connues fu péril: cela a lieu dans certains circonstances anormales, sous certaines influences mystérieuses en face de risques vagues. La vraie peur, c’est quelque chose comme une réminiscence des terreurs fantastiques d’autrefois* (Maupassant cited in Atkin, 1927: 194).<sup>6</sup>

D’Arcy, as observed with “The Web of Maya,” is no stranger to playing on hallucinations. The sight of the gardener as he stood “motionless, silent, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, staring” with “suspicious and truculent little eyes” bears all the

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<sup>6</sup> “[...] this does not happen, when we are brave, either in the face of an attack, or in the face of inevitable death, or in the face of all known forms of peril: it happens in certain abnormal circumstances, under certain mysterious influences in the face of vague risks. True fear is something like a reminiscence of the fantastic terrors of the past.”

semblance of a phantasmagorical apparition (D’Arcy, 278-79). Despite his assigned position, the man was “standing stolidly there in the middle of the garden, and evidently knee-deep in the grass, awaiting” (278). The decay of the house can be read as a natural abandonment as a result of being unoccupied, or as a context hiding something more sinister. D’Arcy does not fail to include some disturbing elements to evoke this feeling: the terra-cotta faun’s head that has tumbled in the middle of the garden and grins sardonically. A disturbing image in itself, this feeling is undoubtedly increased by the quotation from the poem “Le Faune” by Paul Verlaine, which D’Arcy transforms into a symbol of bad foreboding. Instead of “*Un vieux faune de terre cuite / Rit au centre des boulingrins, / Présageant sans doute une suite / Mauvaise à ces instants sereins*”, D’Arcy changes the second and the third lines into “*Présageant sans doute une fuite / De ces instants sereins*” (Verlaine, 1958: 29; D’Arcy, 279).<sup>7</sup> The story goes on until the gardener’s “brutish eyes narrowed with such malignancy,” as he refused to take the group to the pavilion (283). At that point a climax is reached, and the group is overwhelmed by a feeling of panic and *sauve-qui-peut* (283). However, nothing truly supernatural has really happened. The sole exception is that of the child, being the only one who was able to see the phantasmagorical presence of a certain old woman who was watching him, who at one point “got up and began to—to come—” (285). However, the episode, placed in a child’s consciousness, is profoundly dubious and potentially delusional. According to Marcovitch, the use of this ambiguity allows for a double reading. Marcovitch has identified satire as a recurring element in D’Arcy’s fiction, in this tale as well as in others. Therefore, she argues that “The Villa Lucienne” could also be interpreted as a parody of the horror genre, since “two women trying to rent a haunted house collapse into hysterics when they tour the house but leave

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<sup>7</sup> Verlaine’s verses translate as “An old terracotta faun / Laughing in the middle of the boulingrins (gardens) / No doubt foreshadowing a sequel /to these serene moments.” However, D’Arcy changes them to “No doubt foreshadowing a flight / of these serene moments.”

unscathed” (Marcovitch, para. 30). Nonetheless, the way the story is crafted illustrates D’Arcy’s dexterity in creating the seemingly supernatural in the mundane.

In this chapter, the themes selected by the author over the course of approximately two years have been analysed. These stories serve as evidence that the ways in which short fiction employed, particularly by women writers, were manifold, providing a space for stylistic innovation, as well as social criticism. Broader considerations on formal innovations and an in-depth reflection on women’s writing in this historical context will follow in the next chapter.

### 3. Is there a female Decadence? The double-aim of women's fiction

As anticipated in Chapter 1 and further explored in Chapter 2, Ella D'Arcy's fiction responded to the numerous literary trends of the time. Although an effort has been made in the previous chapter to differentiate between New Woman, realist and aestheticist influences, these movements are expectedly much more intertwined. Yet, while their combination is likely, it also presents inherent contradictions, since aestheticism itself "empowered and erased women writers" at the same time (Schaffer and Psomiades, 1). From topical and purposive clashes and intersections, many works of women writers of the period produced thematic novelties that challenged the male viewpoint, and formal advancement that reflected the hybridity and eclecticism distinctive of women writers. These innovations, which underpin modernist short fiction, will be explored in this chapter. Yet, before putting D'Arcy's oeuvre into this particular context, it is appropriate to elucidate the complexity of the relationship between and *within* the literary movements also on the base of gender.

Women writers who were trying to make their own way in the male-dominated literary market could not have failed to be affected by the Woman Question and by the social debates about such themes as work, education, marriage and suffrage (D'Hoker and Eggermont, 305). Talia Schaffer argues that New Woman writings have long been studied from two distinct and equally problematic standpoints: an inclusive and a feminist one. Indeed, both approaches suffer from a lack of clarity due to either their complexity or their ambiguity. The problem with defining New Woman using the inclusive approach is that it risks being overly inclusive, encompassing "politically ambivalent" texts that concern women, such as George Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893) or Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895), thus including canonical male authors and inadvertently undermining the cause that sought to dethrone them. This also



entails a vast group of subjects and trends, which leads the critics to select preferential topics. A more specific definition focuses on texts with a feminist and highly politicized agenda, written by marginalized women, which reduces the texts that have been useful to the feminist cause to a handful. Schaffer therefore points to Ann Ardis's approach in *New Women, New Novels* (1990) as the most balanced, whereby New Women viewed art as an act of political engagement—a term that Ardis uses to bridge inclusivism and feminism. This represents one factor that might be deemed irreconcilable with aestheticism: as a matter of fact, Schaffer makes a rather clear distinction between New Woman writers and female aesthetes, with the latter having earned a degree of respect among literary cliques that the former had not (Schaffer, 10-14). Nevertheless, she also opens to the possibility that female aesthetes could be considered New Women, “inasmuch as they participated in a rebellious cultural clique, wrote unconventional literature, and supported themselves,” citing the example of Clara Pater, sister of Walter Pater, who “agitated for a women’s college at Oxford while dressed in the aesthetic peacock blue and amber beads” (20). That this is not an exception is, however, corroborated by other critics. Prominent women writers were present in literary circles, and issues related to the feminist cause were featured in aesthetic and avant-garde journals—*The Yellow Book* itself featured an article on women’s fiction in its first three issues (23). This indicates not only that women’s writing was considered an integral part of aestheticism, but also that aestheticism itself was, to some extent, open to social engagement. It must also be said, as Margaret Stetz points out, that “female proponents of aestheticism and of feminism [...] simultaneously opened up larger questions about gender hierarchies, especially in middle- and upper-middle-class British life, and struggled toward change” (Schaffer and Psomiades, 31). Indeed, it is stressed that revisionist female authors were spurred in their efforts by their dual allegiance, as “a

woman could inhabit quite diverse positions, not only sequentially but at the same time” in both art and politics (Cherry, 1995, cited in Schaffer and Psomiades, 31).

The same intellectual regard, according to D’Hoker and Eggermont, was earned by those women writers dealing with naturalist techniques (D’Hoker and Eggermont, 297). That naturalism was particularly permeated by a misogynistic climate that ensued an almost complete inaccessibility to women is widely acknowledged. Nonetheless, “[a]llegiance or even allusion to the *avant-garde* literary movements of the time [...] enhanced the perception of [women’s] work as serious as literature or art” (D’Hoker and Eggermont, 297). It is not by chance that Jane E. Miller specifically defined the New Woman as “a particular group of women authors who used the new realism as a vehicle for feminist expression” (Miller, 1994, cited in Schaffer, 11). This leads to the termination that, in considering women’s writing in the 1890s, a distinction must necessarily be established between the form of the text, the aesthetics, the content and thus the morality, as women had diverse needs and priorities that shaped their literary expressions. As Schaffer states, “[w]hen we look exclusively for either heart-warmingly passionate feminism or memorably venomous misogyny, we lose the fame aesthetes’ evanescent, complex, and contradictory models of gender behaviour” (12).

The role of D’Arcy within the literary milieu of the period is particularly pertinent to this discourse. Ella D’Arcy herself is now specifically being classified as a New Woman, although it is well known, as stated in Chapter 1, that her writings have long been considered anti-feminist and her female characters have been described as tyrannising, “ignorant and destructive” (Nelson, 2001, cited in Krueger, 109). This is due to the fact that, as already illustrated, D’Arcy also experimented with themes and aesthetics, as she mingled “the morbid, the weird, the French, and the sophisticated and secures unusual shades of color and meaning” (Fisher, 1992b: 206). Nonetheless, there

are conflicting opinions on D’Arcy’s stylistic influences and, consequently, on how her fiction should be regarded. Kate Krueger acknowledges that, while observing a hybridity in D’Arcy’s oeuvre, she does not concur with her association with the aesthetic movement, which she deems delineated solely through her involvement with *The Yellow Book*. She maintains this despite noting herself that even Margaret Stetz observed an overlap between the New Woman and aestheticism in their attempts to rescue beauty from objectification —an element that is readily identifiable in “The Pleasure-Pilgrim,” but is present in every narrative involving romantic relationships. Yet, Krueger uses instead the term Decadent New Woman fiction to refer specifically to D’Arcy’s fiction, considering her “the perfect example of an in-between writer” whose “short stories embrace elements of both strains of writing to create a set of narratives that are uniquely disturbing” (109). This, indeed, was not unusual, as “New Women embraced [...] expectation and turned it to their own advantage,” developing “an impressionistic and intuitive, rather than a pathological, forensic, categorising naturalism” (Schaffer, 14; Pykett, 1992: 195).

The hybridity of styles with which D’Arcy managed to portray her frequent political endeavours is also due to the fact that the genres of aestheticism and naturalism actually shared many ideas about art. As Schaffer explains, the aestheticist motto of art for art’s sake without regard for the didactic-moralising aspect “accommodates a writer’s exploration of unsavory topics” in a clear decadent fashion (Schaffer, 44). As a matter of fact, Amy Cruse expounds that “the Decadents admired Zola, not in spite of his realism, but because of it. He, like themselves, refused to be bound by what others considered the laws of morality and decency....There was, in spite of striking differences, much in common between the French realists and the English Decadents” (Cruse in Schaffer, 45). In line with this, aestheticism explored such topics “from the

mystic past to the mysteries of the mind,” as well as psychological musings and pleasure (44). This was presumably another reason for neglecting women’s writers, as the typically decadent, naturalist and aesthetic subjects such as crime, addiction, and disease were not supposed to be known to them.

The discourse on the influences of the two literary strands leads to a reflection not only on the aesthetic changes at the narrative level but also on the conceptual and structural innovations they have triggered in the form of the proto-modernist short story. Indeed, as briefly mentioned in the first chapter, D’Hoker and Eggermont associate the concept behind the short story to the Paterian aesthetic experience through Frederick Wedmore’s essay “On the Short Story.” According to Wedmore, short fiction encompasses “a little piece that has no story at all, but a situation depicted, and when depicted, left” (Wedmore cited in D’Hoker and Eggermont, 295). This conceptualization is grounded in Pater’s *The Renaissance* (1873), whose “Conclusion” declares “that those impressions of the individual mind to which, for each one of us, experience dwindles down, are in perpetual flight.” Consequently, “each of them is limited by time” and “infinitely divisible,” such that “all that is actual in it being a single moment, gone while we try to apprehend it” (Pater, 248-249). Predictably, the short story, as a genre adept at capturing fleeting moments in depth, proves particularly amenable to naturalism as well. This compatibility arises from its objective, which aligns with the naturalist aim of representing reality with greater accuracy and detail. Consequently, the short story facilitates a nuanced exploration of quotidian subtleties and of the psychological dimension of its characters.

### **3.1. Formal innovation in women’s proto-modernist short stories**

The literary landscape of the final decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was not just a matter of hybridity among different artistic currents, but also a matter of “tradition versus experiment” (D’Hoker and Eggermont, 298). One of the main criticisms levelled at studies of the recovery of women’s writing of the *fin de siècle* is that of dwelling much on their feminist potential or aesthetic affinity with other decadent writers, and not on the literary value of the stories per se. D’Hoker and Eggermont move this criticism with the aim of restoring value to the innovations of the women’s short story of the 1890s as a proto-modernist creation, as well as a vehicle for the expression of their political and social concerns (293). In order to approach the discourse from this perspective and to elucidate the developments relevant to D’Arcy’s short fiction, it is necessary to provide a theoretical overview on the nature and implications of proto-modernist innovations.

In the first introductory chapter to the volume *The Modernist Short Story* (1992), Dominic Head traces the theory and definitions of the short story. The rise of the modern short story is placed in the 1880s and 1890s, a period that Head points to as concomitant with the birth of Modernism. However, the definition of short story has been revised over time, often simplified: Head elucidates that criticism of short story has been dominated by Poe’s theoretical approach of the ‘single effect’ and unity that the short story should convey. In contrast, Head interestingly argues in favour of a disunifying effect given by such narrative devices as ellipsis, ambiguity, destabilization of traditional characterisation —a “disruption [that] establishes a connection between text and contexts” (2). In other words, what Head calls the “disruptive literary gesture” derives from a tension between formal convention and formal disruption, whereby disruption is conditioned by and critical of the literary conventions and, more broadly, the ideological context (26). The general consensus is that “the genuine short story severely restricts its scope for plot or action,” focusing rather on the reiteration of

certain themes or structures that emphasise reflection and emotional depth (Head, 1992: 5). According to this conception, the short story “involves only ‘one dramatic event’, with other subordinate events which ‘facilitate the understanding of the main event’” (5). D’Hoker and Eggermont similarly write that “many fin-de-siècle stories came to revolve around the slice of life,” which they define as that specific moment that can be recounted in detail and which, often through a depressing, evoked, yet unexplained reality, has a lasting impact on the reader’s consciousness (D’Hoker and Eggermont, 299). However, a longstanding yet rather commonplace distinction has been made in short story criticism, based on the degree of reliance on a well-structured plot: on the one hand, there is the plotted story, inherited from Maupassant; on the other, the slice-of-life narrative, derived from Chekhov (Head, 16). Head draws on further distinctions developed by Suzanne Ferguson and Eileen Baldeshwiler. Ferguson classifies these narrative forms into two types: simple, referring to anecdotes or stories, and complex, known as episodes. Simple stories focus on “a single character in a single, simple action,” while complex episodes use their elements to reveal the character – that is to say, the *internal* action – the rather than to advance the plot (16). Baldeshwiler offers an alternative terminology for this dichotomy: she distinguishes between the traditional, plot-driven story, which she terms “epical”, and the “lyrical” story, which is often open-ended and emphasises internal transformations, moods and emotions (16).

Within this theoretical framework, it is difficult to determine where D’Arcy belongs. Such stories as “A Marriage” certainly have a well-structured plot; yet D’Arcy proceeds with short episodes of life that repeat throughout time. From her initial contribution to *The Yellow Book*, “Irremediable,” D’Arcy has consistently employed narrative interruptions, structuring the story through a series of distinct moments spanning an extended period. This is not a dissimilar construction to the one that is

argued by Maupassant himself in the preface to his fourth novel, *Pierre et Jean* (1888), where he writes that the short story consists of a “happy grouping of small but constant facts” and whose aim is the “history of the heart, soul and intellect in their normal condition” (Maupassant, 1888, cited in Lavrin 1926: 5). Later in 1926, writer and critic Janko Larvin would indeed argue that “Maupassant split up French naturalism into its single incidents” preserving a “classic sense of selection, of economy, of lucidity, of taste” (6). Similarly, while many of D’Arcy’s narratives entail an evolution at the plot level—as already exemplified in “A Marriage”—“The Web of Maya” serves as an excellent example, showcasing the development of a complex set of emotions at different moments in time. This is analogous to what D’Hoker and Eggermont identify in George Egerton’s “A Psychological Moment in Three Periods” (D’Hoker and Eggermont, 299). In this regard, one can already observe a shift in the perception and treatment of time from the Victorian realist novel’s alleged comprehensive narrative of full-length life to a proto-modernist episodic and fragmentary representation, from which the whole of life can be inferred. In a way, these formal experiments anticipate the modernist preoccupation with form and the capacity of the story, for its narrative limitation necessitates the use of “oblique expression through image and symbol” (Head, 7). While the plot is still present, Baldeshwiler “lyrical” aspects are those to which the reader’s attention is drawn in much of women’s *fin-de-siècle* short fiction. In fact, D’Arcy’s stories can be considered examples of Ferguson’s complex episodes, in which “the constituent elements are thus channelled towards the orderly revelation of character or, in some cases, the development of symbol, rather than towards plot” (16). Hence, the experiments with the psychological element that pervades D’Arcy’s texts, shaping its metaphorical and temporal structure, cannot be overlooked.

In terms of narrative devices, D'Hoker and Eggermont confirm D'Arcy's inclinations for "stories with more plot development," whose shift towards the single fragment is achieved by means of ellipses, which can be placed in the middle, at the end or at the beginning of the story (299). Similarly, it is argued that D'Arcy's stories depart from the Victorian tradition by means of the incipit *in medias res*, thus avoiding extensive introductions about the setting and the characterization: the lack of a proper introduction, as well as a proper closure is an innovative element of the stories of the 1890s (D'Hoker and Eggermont, 299). D'Arcy does not entirely abandon introductory descriptions of the landscape, through which she revisits the places of her upbringing and expresses her pictorial inclination. Nevertheless, she provides no introduction to the characters, and certainly offers no conclusive resolution. In this, D'Arcy's failed resolutions remind again of Maupassant's technique in "La Parure" or "Les Bijoux," whereby the "final moment of crisis," after a sudden realisation, does not provide a sense of a proper narrative closure, but "a refreshed set of questions" for the reader (Doroholschi, 214; 216). According to D'Hoker and Eggermont, this type of "story-with-a-twist" is however less congenial to the contemporary aestheticist and neorealist preferences for open ending, in favour of anticipating the modernist epiphany. Indeed, 1890s writers still found in the final twist given by the psychological revelation a way to round up the plot (D'Hoker and Eggermont, 303).

Psychological revelation is also a key aspect of character development. As Head explains, there is a school of thought that views characterization in the novel as a result of an evolution and, in the short story, of a revelation (Head, 18). In modernist short stories, the emphasis on inner action is crucial, but in D'Arcy's short stories there remains an element of external characterization, to the point that one can discern a further tension between external and internal characterization. This tension, which often



culminates in a subversive final twist, arises from the multiple or constant shifting of the focalization, the authorial distance, and the unreliability of the narrator. Indeed, these are narrative devices that would become hallmarks of modernism, whose main distinctive trait is the withdrawal of the omniscient and authoritative narrative voice, in favour of portraying complexity. Notably, women writers in the 1890s were already experimenting with this transformation through figural narration: while using the third person, the narration still conveys the perspective of one of the characters, thereby providing a partial view (D'Hoker and Eggermont, 302). In oscillating between external and internal action, and between one character's perspective to another's, D'Arcy also provides a focalized, subjective perception. As elucidated in the previous chapter, "The Web of Maya" provides a most fitting example: indeed, the story begins with an external and rather impersonal depiction of the landscape and the protagonist's living conditions. However, Le Mesurier soon becomes the focalizer of a third-person narration that eventually reveals that he has been the victim presumably of some sort of hallucination. This created quite a dissonance for the Victorian reader accustomed to an authoritative and omniscient voice that ostensibly holds the truth of the events: in this context, however, such certainty is entirely stripped away. A similar unreliable situation occurs when the characterization is external—that is to say, projected by the focalizer onto another character. As a matter of fact, in "The Pleasure-Pilgrim," D'Arcy employs a focalizer who appears to interpret the reality of events solely according to his bias, thereby shaping the reader's perception accordingly. Nonetheless, there is a noticeable dissonance between what is conveyed in the interaction with Lulie and the moments of reflection focalized on Campbell. The result of the authorial detachment, producing a constant shift in perceptions and perspective, is again a fragmentary and ambiguous narrative, with an unpredictable structure. Interestingly, female writers specifically

employed unreliable narrators to create that sense of irony which also serves a social function for women. This technique is particularly prevalent in D’Arcy’s works, where she often utilizes a flawed male focalizer whose “pretensions and delusions [...] are subtly poked fun at in this way” (D’Hoker and Eggermont, 302). Irony functioned as a device to create a subtle ambiguity, through which D’Arcy effectively subverts the authority of the male viewpoint in the narrative and criticises the authority of male connoisseurship against women. This approach goes hand in hand with the theme of breaking gender and power hierarchies aiming at restructuring social institutions.

This thesis, therefore, sought to illustrate that thematic elements are intertwined with formal elements, revealing how the combination of genres and aesthetics introduced important novel techniques that laid the foundation to the definition of the better-known modernist short story. It has also shown that these dichotomies can coexist, aiming in fact to transcend the conventional separations, to support the notion that artistic and social concerns can indeed reflect one another.

#### 4. Conclusion

By examining some of the least-known short stories of Ella D'Arcy, this thesis aimed to convey the notion of a female fiction of the 1890s that responded adeptly to literary influences and social events of its time. Indeed, opinions regarding how and where to stylistically position D'Arcy, as well as other peer women writers, have proven to be widely varied.

In her analysis, Kate Krueger characterizes D'Arcy as a Decadent writer because she embraces the Decadent “aesthetic of failure.” This definition centres on passive and doomed figures condemned to disaster by misinterpretation, thus celebrating “moments of decay” as a rupture from societal norms (Krueger, 107). These premises form the basis for Krueger’s discussion of the Decadent New Woman, as it emerged that the two facets can coexist harmoniously, with aesthetic experiments aligning with and responding to social interests. Moreover, in light of their analysis on the stylistic affinities between contemporary literary movements, D'Hoker and Eggermont propose that “[r]ather than separating the short fiction of women writers according to their supposed emphasis on “aesthetic experiment” or “social crusading,” it seems more useful to recognise the double finality of their works” (D'Hoker and Eggermont, 298).

By acknowledging this dual purpose, D'Hoker and Eggermont appear to allow the opportunity for a new critical space, facilitating a possible redefinition of a decadent literary trend that integrates both “aesthetic and social aims” and potentially marked by a “uneasy tension” between these two sides (298). Indeed, the analysis carried out in this thesis has highlighted how women negotiated the traditional boundaries of contemporary literary movements, and how such an interaction is not just possible in their writings, but a typical trait of their literary expression in itself. D'Arcy proved to be an ideal example to highlight this blend: in the light of the topical and formal

eclecticism revealed in the analysis of her narratives, there may be room in criticism and in Decadence studies to formulate a female version of Decadence. Unlike its male counterpart, this female version inherently engages both artistic dimensions and social aspects with varying degrees of commitment, borrowing techniques and aesthetics from various contemporary artistic currents. The tension, mentioned by D'Hoker and Eggermont, would be a key factor to define a female decadence, as it is pervasive in every aspect of their prose: between formal convention and disruption, social and aesthetic concerns, “between the traditionally supernatural and modern psychological” are just a few general contrasts that emerge in this thesis (D'Hoker and Eggermont, 301).

To include and study this tension “is not merely to hear the double voice of these texts but to become aware of the multiple voices [...] within aestheticism itself” (Schaffer and Psomiades, 41). While it is crucial to appreciate the innovations in themselves, as D'Hoker and Eggermont did, it is also crucial to contextualise them within the major literary movements, not only to demonstrate their diversity or to attempt to carve out a space for women within them. It is also important to consider them in the light of their social position, to value the enrichment that women brought to these movements with this alternation of intentions, precisely because women had a greater investment in the social debate as objects of this debate. Reclaiming a new critical space for them that admits the double aim of fiction as a characteristic of female decadence ultimately means treating them as equal to their male counterparts.

#### **4.1. Further research**

Due to the length constraints of the thesis, a full exploration of D'Arcy's work has been constrained, despite her contribution of nine short stories to *The Yellow Book* alone. An

in-depth analysis of these omitted short stories would offer a more comprehensive understanding of D'Arcy's stylistic nuances and literary influences. Similarly, while allowing for the hypothesis of a new critical space, the limits of the thesis also prevented the incorporation of the analysis of other contemporary authors such as George Egerton, Netta Syrett, Ada Leveson, Vernon Lee or Sarah Grand in this study. Although some of these women writers have been studied in more depth within specific movements, broadening the scope of the study aiming at highlighting the double aim, the devices used to achieve it, and the blend of stylistic choices, may delineate further common features functional to a more precise outline of a female Decadence.

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