

INTRODUCTION: THE MUSE'S REVENGE

In 'A Lost Masterpiece' (1894), which appeared in the first issue of John Lane's *avant garde* journal, the *Yellow Book*, 'George Egerton' (Mary Chavelita Dunne) offers a parodic view of a male aesthete in the throes of artistic creation. The unnamed narrator travels through London keeping track of his impressions for future literary use, and, as he does so, congratulates himself on his attentiveness to detail, as well as for his ability to recognize beauty in what might otherwise appear a bleak scene. His creative self is 'very busy', he announces, 'now throwing out tender mimosa-like threads of creative fancy, now recording fleeting impressions with delicate sure brushwork for future work'. He imaginatively transforms the scene in front of him, so that even the weather-stained brick joints on the factories become 'hieroglyphics, setting down for posterity a tragic epic of man the conqueror, and fire his slave; and how they strangled beauty in the grip of gain'.¹ For him, London is a place where beauty has been 'strangled' and forgotten in the constant struggle for existence and material gain. As he observes the scene, he idealizes what he sees and imagines the scene transformed into a poetic masterpiece. With delight, he recognizes that a 'precious little pearl of a thought was evolving slowly out of the inner chaos' that could be developed into a literary work and begins planning to 'transfer this dainty elusive birthling of my brain to paper'. Not only does he see his future work as one of genius, but also as a philanthropic gesture that will 'make countless thousands rejoice' by giving them a work of beauty to brighten their lives.² Those who are caught up in the struggle for existence will be distracted from their cares by his vision of loveliness.

Suddenly, however, his day-dream of literary grandeur is interrupted by the vision of a 'little woman ... hurrying along in a most remarkable way'. The sight breaks his concentration and he cannot ignore the discordant image of purposeful femininity striding along the pavement and 'dominat[ing]' the scene and his imagination. Unable to recapture his earlier mood of rapt contemplation, he becomes overwhelmed with a 'mortal dread of losing my little masterpiece', which, in turn, causes him to become enraged with the woman 'who is murdering, deliberately murdering, a delicate creature of my brain'. Although the woman shows no awareness of his existence, he believes that her actions are calculated

to disrupt his creativity. As he becomes engulfed with hatred for this 'woman of the great feet and dominating gait', his embryonic masterpiece evaporates, and he is left only with 'regret'.³

In this story, George Egerton touches on what I see as two central tropes in *fin-de-siècle* women's short fiction: the self-absorbed artist who sees the world around him as raw material to be absorbed and transformed by his genius and the female muse who, rather than inspiring an artistic vision of beauty, interrupts and rejects the artist's vision. Even though the woman in this story appears unaware of the aesthete and her role in destroying his imaginative creation, her very presence undermines his self-assured mastery over the situation. Unlike the other figures in the London landscape, rather than acting as an unwitting muse and inspiring him to create, she disrupts his imaginative vision, and he is unable to integrate her self-assured, purposeful figure into his mental picture, and thus his ability to create art dissolves. No longer a budding genius in command of his material, the artist in this and other late Victorian women's texts is left angry and regretful.

This moment in which a male aesthete finds his creative vision disrupted by an uncooperative female muse is not unique to Egerton's story; rather, these 'muse's revenge tales', as I term them, appear throughout *fin-de-siècle* women's short fiction. Furthermore, these tales are not limited to the fiction of British female aesthetes, whose work has been so usefully brought to our attention by Talia Schaffer, Kathy Psomiades, Margaret Stetz and others;⁴ they also appear in the short stories of American writers such as Edith Wharton, Kate Chopin and Constance Fenimore Woolson. However, traditional divisions between Victorian and American studies have largely dictated that these two groups of writers be treated as isolated entities, and thus this common thread has gone largely unrecognized. Given the robust exchange of texts and ideas across the Atlantic during this period, this division overlooks the lines of influence that emerged within a transnational reading public. By reading American and British women writers alongside each other, while at the same time remaining attentive to the specifics of national difference, this study excavates a transatlantic dialogue across late nineteenth-century women's fiction about art, artists and the often parasitic relationship between male artists and their female muses. This dialogue, I argue, is ultimately linked to broader conversations about both aesthetics and the Woman Question.

Through these muse's revenge tales, late nineteenth-century women writers on both sides of the Atlantic dramatized the period's anxieties about women's artistic and political autonomy. Whereas late nineteenth-century aestheticism focused on the responses of the observer and claimed that art emerges from artists' reactions to what they see, women writers created a counter-discourse that portrayed this approach to artistic creation as parasitic. Women's short fiction

from the period repeatedly features female characters refusing to take a secondary position as model or inspiration for a male artist and instead insisting on the right to tell their own story or create their own art. Through these narratives, women writers worked to reclaim the subject position for the object of the aesthete's gaze.

Overall, this book builds on and extends recent important scholarship on female aestheticism by placing American voices in dialogue with the British 'forgotten female aesthetes' (to use Talia Schaffer's term) that have been the subject of many recent studies. While Victorianists like Schaffer, Psomiades and Stetz have pointed to the ways in which British female aesthetes critiqued and revised mainstream aestheticism, and Americanists like Sharon Dean and Emily Orlando have examined the ways in which American writers like Wharton and Woolson wrote about art and aestheticism,⁵ no study as yet has put these writers up against one another to uncover a broader conversation about art, artistry and its connections to the Woman Question. This study bridges this gap, offering a transatlantic comparison of women's short stories from the period which makes visible not only shared concerns over women's autonomy as both artistic subjects and creators of art, but also the ways in which women writers problematized and participated in a conversation about how art is and should be created. By calling into question male aesthetes' use of female models in their art, women writers uncovered even more abstract, theoretical questions about the potentially vexed relationship between artists and their raw materials. What, these writers asked, should be the source of artistic inspiration? Is artistic creation inextricable from a parasitic reliance on source material? Are artists adding to what is already there as they transform raw material into art, or is it simply a translation into another medium? Is there an 'appropriate' relationship between artists and their sources? It is only by looking transatlantically at the broad range of ways in which women writers on both sides of the Atlantic wrote about the power dynamics of art, artists and their subjects that these central aesthetic questions about the creation of art emerge.

The term 'transatlantic' is itself fluid, as a recent thread on the Victoria list-serv testified when a list member wrote asking for suggestions for a course she was developing on transatlantic women's writing. In the flurry of responses, it quickly became obvious that there is no consensus about what we mean when we say 'transatlantic'. Suggestions ranged from accounts of transatlantic tourism to pairings of authors who had connections on the other side of the Atlantic to works that might be fruitfully paired with a transatlantic text.⁶ Margaret McFadden, whose *Golden Cables of Sympathy: The Transatlantic Sources of the Nineteenth-Century Women's Movement* (1999) argues for and excavates a broad range of networks and matrices of connections and influences among women across the Atlantic, points to an additional reason why transatlantic women's

writing has received relatively little attention. As McFadden writes, 'The inherently international character of the nineteenth-century women's movement suggests one reason why it has not been studied: it was both too obvious and too elusive.'⁷ In McFadden's account, the crossings and recrossings of influences and connections throughout the nineteenth century laid the groundwork for the explicit organization of a transatlantic women's movement signalled by the International Council of Women in 1888. These influences and crossings, I argue, persisted even among women who did not explicitly identify themselves with the women's movement.

Transatlanticism, as I refer to it in this study, operates at three levels. First, many of the women in this study knew one another. Vernon Lee (Violet Paget), in particular, was a central figure with connections to Woolson, Wharton, Henry James and Sarah Orne Jewett. However, although Lee and others crossed the Atlantic themselves, this study is not focused on crossings by individual writers, but rather on the ways in which their works, which were published transatlantically, can be said to be in dialogue with each other. This, therefore, is the second and most significant sense in which I am invoking the concept of transatlanticism: these authors' works crossed borders and were published on both sides of the Atlantic. These writers were often aware of each other's material, as in the case of Lee and Wharton who met and discussed their work, with Lee even writing an introduction to an Italian edition of Wharton's first novel, *The Valley of Decision*.⁸ Above all, their fiction picks up on common threads, and, as I will show, builds on and develops shared ideas about art. Third, as I will explore in greater detail throughout this volume, in these stories the relationship between the artist and his muse is often mediated through transatlantic cultural misreadings. While critics like Laura Stevens have pointed to the shortcomings of transatlanticism as a concept because of its fluidity, a fluidity through which '[s]o many kinds of projects can be grouped under this rubric that it also threatens to lose specific meaning', I would argue instead that this very flexibility is a strength because it allows us to chart a broader understanding of women's writing in the period.⁹ Considering that books and periodicals were published and read transnationally throughout the nineteenth century, we lose sight of a crucial aspect of literary and intellectual influence when we read texts strictly along national lines. It is possible to remain attentive to the ways in which national differences are reflected through genre, style and theme while recognizing how similar concerns within these works echo transatlantic women's issues.

This study focuses on women's writing within a specific genre: the short story. Although critics have looked at women's writing at the *fin de siècle* across a variety of genres, such as the recent work being done on late Victorian women's poetry, little attention has been paid to the short story as a cultural phenomenon in this period.¹⁰ This critical oversight ignores the ways in which the short story

as a form that could transcend traditional plot structures thus offered a uniquely supple genre in which late nineteenth-century women writers could perform what Jane Tompkins refers to as ‘cultural work’ by re-imagining the plots and possibilities of women’s lives.¹¹ The attractiveness of this genre as a mode for such re-imaginings was enhanced by a concomitant increase in the public demand for short stories. Although by the late nineteenth century the short story had long been in existence as a genre, it gained increased popularity in this period, an increase in popularity that coincided, in Britain at least, with the decline of the three-volume novel that accompanied the decreasing power of conservative lending libraries like Mudie’s. The rise of the short story as a *fin-de-siècle* phenomenon was further fostered on both sides of the Atlantic by the proliferation of periodicals, such as George Newnes’s the *Strand*, which focused primarily on short fiction as opposed to serials.¹² These journals reached increasingly large audiences as advances in print technology allowed mass production and, according to Richard Ohmann, magazine publishers made the economic decision to concentrate on generating profits through advertising revenues. Within this economic model, advertising revenues could be maximized by offering advertisers the audience of a large readership enticed through low subscription prices.¹³ Thus, while there is no single reason for the rise of the short story in this period, the dramatic increase in publishing outlets for the genre was fuelled by a combination of advances in print technology, emphasis on mass circulation and the success of journals featuring short fiction.

While the short story, according to Dean Baldwin, lagged in Britain until the 1880s and ’90s, the format developed much earlier as a theorized and mainstream genre in the United States.¹⁴ As Baldwin points out, as early as the 1830s, American magazines like *Godey’s Lady’s Book* insisted on, and paid highly for, short fiction, and this emphasis became even stronger with the popularity of local colour fiction in the 1870s and 1880s.¹⁵ Another reason that the short story gained in popularity earlier in the United States may be that magazines, which tend towards shorter fiction, were always the most hospitable market for untried American writers. Many American authors began by publishing articles and short fiction in magazines because the lack of international copyright protection in the United States until 1891 meant that American book publishers had little incentive to take chances on new, untried authors when they could ‘pirate’ English authors like Dickens and Trollope for free.¹⁶ As the Boston publisher Dana Estes pointed out at a Senate hearing on international copyright in 1886, ‘it is impossible to make the books of most American authors pay, unless they are first published and acquire recognition through the columns of the magazines.’¹⁷ Under these conditions, writers like Mary Wilkins Freeman, Wharton, Chopin and Jewett established their literary careers by publishing short fiction in periodicals.

By linking the dominance of the short story in the United States to the fact that magazines presented a more receptive market for new writers is not, of course, to ignore the reality that magazine serialization was often the first place in which novels appeared throughout the nineteenth century. Most major American and British magazines such as the *Atlantic* serialized novels in their pages, and, as Robert Patten points out, when we look at the three-volume version of a Dickens novel, for example, as the first edition, we are ignoring the novel's actual first appearance in print in a journal.¹⁸ However, as the literary critic Brander Matthews argued in 1884,

in the United States the serial story is not the chief concern of the editor of a popular magazine ... We have seen the *Atlantic Monthly* without a serial story for three months at a time. But every number of every American magazine contains at least one Short Story.¹⁹

The short story, which included the local colour sketch, was a predominant American form throughout the nineteenth century, and the genre was increasingly fostered towards the end of the century in magazines such as *Harper's* and the *Atlantic* where editors such as William Dean Howells showed a sustained interest in defining and developing it.

Alongside such cultural and economic factors encouraging the growth of the genre, the short story was seen as both a popular and cutting edge literary form at the end of the nineteenth century. One aspect of the literary world's enthusiasm for the genre may have been its association with modernity. Pointing to the preponderance of short stories in magazines such as the *Yellow Book*, Sally Ledger asserts that 'The short story was very much a "modern" form at the *fin de siècle*,²⁰ and its association with modernity made it attractive for journals desiring to be seen as new or *avant garde*. Increasingly, the short story as a genre became integral to successful periodical publication in this period; as Winnie Chan puts it in her study of the ways in which short stories were both commercialized and aestheticized in the *fin de siècle*, 'At the end of the nineteenth century, the growth of the periodical press made short stories a necessity to any periodical with any aspirations to popularity.'²¹

The combination of popularity and self-conscious modernity makes the short story both a crucial and an ideal focus for understanding the ways in which women writers of the period took advantage of the genre's flexibility to describe, revise and imagine possibilities for women's lives. By writing in a genre that did not have the same generic, and thus plot, constrictions as the novel, writers of short fiction could eschew the traditional novelistic focus on marriage and romance, a move that could be tremendously liberating for women writers. In her introduction to Egerton's *Keynotes and Discords*, Ledger points out that when New Women writers wrote in the traditional novelistic format,

they 'generally remained committed to the aesthetic codes of literary realism and naturalism', whereas in the short story 'feminist writers began to push against the boundaries of the dominant generic codes of the nineteenth century.'²² Likewise, as Rachel Blau DuPlessis argues in *Writing Beyond the Ending*, the endings of Victorian novels carried significant cultural weight because they limited the imaginative possibilities for picturing women's lives.²³ In other words, whereas traditional nineteenth-century novelistic endings generally limited women's options to death or marriage, short stories as a narrative form do not require such neatly wrapped-up conclusions. Because their length dictates a certain amount of compression and omission, short stories are more likely to be open-ended and fragmented, focusing on a moment in a character's life rather than the totality of that life. As Chan puts it, 'the "single effect" by which the short story accumulates details toward its conclusion ... was also sufficiently vague in deemphasizing plot and elevating the "effect" of aestheticist fiction.'²⁴ The genre's flexibility allowed women to explore an incident in a woman's life and to make a suggestion about possibilities without necessarily having to wrap up the story's ending with a neat, conventional conclusion, as in the case of Sarah Grand's (Frances Elizabeth Bellenden McFall) novel *The Beth Book* (1897), a story of rebellion, artistic development and emerging political consciousness that ends with the heroine joyfully greeting the 'knight' who rides up to her front door, presumably to carry her away.²⁵ Along with New Woman writers, most notably George Egerton, who recognized the potential in short fiction for re-scripting women's lives, the women in this study employed the genre as a means for revising cultural narratives about the relationship between artists and the female models whom they regard as little more than raw material.

Of course, the motif of the male artist who considers women only as raw material to be incorporated into his art is not limited to late nineteenth-century short fiction. Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Oval Portrait' (1845), for example, features an artist so intent on the process of translating his wife into a painting that he only belatedly notices that she has died. However, *fin-de-siècle* women's short stories about artists are unique in the ways that the female muses problematize the theories of art that characterized the aesthetic movement. Specifically, women writers reveal something objectionable in a theory of art that privileges the viewer at the expense of the subject under view while still drawing on that subject to create art. Again and again in the *fin de siècle*, female writers create images of male artists who demonstrate their genius by interpreting, translating and reflecting the beauty of female models, and again and again the female models push back against being used in this way, thus creating a counter-discourse about aestheticism. These female models, in effect, reject the role of passive model and insist on the right to create their own art or, at the very least, to define themselves in their own way. For example, in Wharton's 'The Muse's Tragedy', a

woman who has long been popularly considered the muse of a great poet reveals that she never was the subject of the poet's art and that she provided intellectual, rather than literal, inspiration for his work. As Laura Saltz has argued, through this act of revelation, she breaks the illusions about her identity as muse and claims the right to explain who she really is.²⁶

This refusal to remain a passive subject for the artist's genius echoes an emerging feminist sensibility that was gaining momentum at the end of the nineteenth century and came to be known in the last quarter of the century as the Woman Question. This broad term covers a cluster of issues, from suffrage to the right for married women to control their own property. Helen Watterson, writing in the *Century* in 1895, summed up the broad debate as relating to two main questions:

first, the question as to woman's right to live in the world on the same terms as a man does – to work as he works, to be paid as he is paid, to govern as he governs – to use the world, in short, as he uses it, and to be treated by it as it treats him; and, second, the question as to woman's competence to do so.²⁷

As Watterson puts it, there are two separate, but linked questions to be resolved by this debate: whether women should be given the same rights as men and whether women were 'competent' to exercise these rights. Likewise, Olive Schreiner wrote that the 'key-note' of the debate was women's desire for '*labor and the training which fits for labor!*' (emphasis in original).²⁸ In this way, Schreiner suggests that the issue of 'competence' that Watterson is concerned with could only be resolved once women were given the same training as men. If women did not receive the same training as men, they would never have the chance to prove their 'competence'.

Within the debate over the Woman Question there was, of course, no single solution for resolving the interrelated issues of 'competence', access and rights; instead, this debate was connected to a constellation of legal and social issues targeted by early feminists. According to Nicola Diane Thompson in *Victorian Women Writers and the Woman Question* (1999), the central debates about 'women's proper role and status in society' focused on 'marriage and divorce laws, women's property and custody rights, and educational and employment opportunities for women, as well as a vocal debate on female suffrage'.²⁹ The fiercely independent New Woman is perhaps the most visible proponent of early feminism, although, as others have noted, it is impossible to consider New Womanhood as a monolithic identity because the range of issues, causes and political sympathies espoused by particular New Women ranged widely.³⁰ Because the New Woman was broadly caricatured in the press and in fiction, identifying the real New Woman who walked the streets of New York or London versus an imaginative composite is a problematic endeavour, as Angelique

Richardson and Chris Willis's *The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact* (2001) makes clear.³¹ Despite the wide-ranging nature of the debate, and the multiple sides that women took within it, the common theme – both in the emerging feminist movement and women's fiction – is the desire for women's autonomy. I will argue that, just as women were asking for expanded educational, professional and even political opportunities, the women writers within this study, whether or not they identified themselves with the emerging women's movement, used their fiction to explore the possibilities for women to gain control over their own image by moving from a passive object of the artist's gaze to an expressive, authorized subject.

By focusing on the subject's experience of, and resistance to, being made into art, these authors invoke and respond to a central tenet of aesthetic thought that privileges the viewer's response, which is then elevated to an art form itself. In his influential rewriting of Matthew Arnold's critical imperative 'To see the object as in itself it really is,' Walter Pater shifted the focus from the object to the viewer by asking, 'What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to *me*? What effect does it really produce on me?'³² In other words, the art object itself is less important than analysing and expressing how the critic responds to it. In this way, Pater transforms the art object into an object of consumption whose function is to provoke an effect on the critic, forcing him or her, as Pater famously put it, 'To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame.'³³ In Pater's formulation, the aesthetic critic

regards all the objects with which he has to do, all works of art, and the fairer forms of nature and human life, as powers or forces producing pleasurable sensations, each of a more or less peculiar or unique kind. This influence he feels, and wishes to explain, by analyzing and reducing it to its elements.³⁴

The aesthetic critic, therefore, must possess a superior level of perception in relation to the aesthetic object, and, thus, by extension, have a greater capacity to be moved by beautiful objects. The critic's impulse is to break down, analyse and explain what 'elements' in the work of art create a heightened response. As Pater explains, 'What is important, then, is not that the critic should possess a correct abstract definition of beauty for the intellect, but a certain kind of temperament, the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects.'³⁵ Thus, beauty as an abstract principle was less important to Pater than the ability of the critic to respond to what he as an individual regards as beautiful.

Likewise, Oscar Wilde shrinks the difference between critical and artistic practice by emphasizing the viewer's reaction to and re-articulation of what he sees. According to Wilde, the aesthetic critic or artist interprets what he sees, and it is the process of interpretation, rather than an adherence to the original object, that creates art. These ideas are perhaps most clearly articulated in 'The

Critic as Artist' (1890), in which he asserts that the artistic and critical faculties are equivalent because both create something fundamentally creative out of the material in front of them. Criticism, according to Wilde, 'works with materials, and puts them into a form that is at once new and delightful'.³⁶ The artistic critic, then, 'treats the work of art simply as a starting-point for a new creation'. In other words, 'it is rather the beholder who lends to the beautiful thing its myriad meanings, and makes it marvelous for us, and sets it in some new relation to the age, so that it becomes a vital portion of our lives'.³⁷ He delineates the critic's artistic function as arising directly from, although not necessarily echoing, the work of art before him or her: 'To the critic the work of art is simply a suggestion for a new work of his own, that need not necessarily bear any obvious resemblance to the thing it criticizes'. Because the highest criticism aims primarily to 'chronicle [the critic's] own impressions', the quality of the original materials is unimportant. Drawing on the example of the 'sordid and sentimental amours of the silly wife of a small country doctor' out of which Flaubert created *Madame Bovary*, Wilde concludes that the true artist 'does not even require for the perfection of his art the finest materials'.³⁸

This intertwining of consumption and perception in the process of creating, or revising, art reappears in another register in the working life of Henry James, who argued that the artist transforms the elements of everyday life into art. James articulates this view in 'The Art of Fiction' (1884) when he describes the imaginative artist as a constant observer who 'takes to itself the faintest hints of life, [and] converts the very pulses of air into revelations'.³⁹ James's realist observes the world and, according to the quality of his or her perception, translates it into art. In this essay, which attempts to outline the novelist's artistic method, he claims that actual experience is less important than the artist's impressionability. To illustrate this idea, he points to the hypothetical example of a 'young lady living in a village [who] has only to be a damsel upon whom nothing is lost to make it quite unfair (as it seems to me) to declare to her that she shall have nothing to say about the military'.⁴⁰ In other words, a true artist need only be particularly susceptible and powerfully imaginative to transform a limited realm of experience into great art. In describing the kinds of experience that an author should strive for, he says, rather than a broad range of experience, an artist should cultivate

an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every airborne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind; and when the mind is imaginative – much more when it happens to be that of a man of genius – it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations.⁴¹