

NINETEENTH CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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Compromised Conclusions: Market Considerations and the Open Ending in New Woman Short Stories

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<1>In 1904, Edith Wharton published her third short story collection, *The Descent of Man and Other Stories*, in Britain as well as the United States, a *de rigueur* move for any American writer who wanted to win critical acclaim even if only on her side of the Atlantic, and one of special interest to this writer, who longed for esteem and popular influence on both sides of the Atlantic. Of Wharton's collection, the *Sheffield Independent* wrote, "Miss Wharton has one characteristic of the American short story well developed, namely, that tendency to bring a narrative to an abnormally abrupt conclusion," and the paper identified her stories "The Reckoning" and "The Quicksand" as prime examples. The word "abnormal" is harsh, with a ring of medical discourse about pathology. Sometimes to avoid pointing to a moral, the regional paper wrote, "she sometimes misses finishing the tale" (4). Comments like these were read avidly by Wharton. Her British publisher, Frederick Macmillan, sent her clippings of reviews and bragged about how widely her work was reviewed and advertised, not just in established London weeklies, but also in daily newspapers across the nation (Wharton, *Correspondence* 122, 132, 144, 157-60).

<2>Open short story endings became a sticking point for British reviewers in the 1890s. They were baffled by them, as they represented a new modernist aesthetic to which most reviewers adjusted slowly. Yet most reviewers preferred open endings to the explicitly didactic endings that were still favored by some feminist writers. Reviewers' remarks about short story endings helped privilege openness at the expense of more direct and explicit feminist politics. Writerly and critical responses to stories by Louisa Parr, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, George Egerton, Sarah Grand, and Edith Wharton illustrate that the turn toward open endings at times furthered and at times hindered feminist politics. The urge to be abrupt and inconclusive shifted the form of the short story toward modernism but bracketed feminist questions for later generations.

<3>As scholars have already confirmed, the form of the Anglophone short story was changing in the 1880s and 90s. Stories began to experiment with ellipses and breaks, the refusal to offer total closure, and other elements associated with the modernist aesthetic. Endings grew comparatively abrupt, surprising, and open.¹ Granted, ghost stories and tales of the exotic had been ending enigmatically for decades. What was new about the *fin de siècle* was that realist stories about white, normative middle-class social life were beginning to end without resolution or clear signs of closure.

<4>At the same time as short story form was changing, male and female writers turned to the short story because it offered freedom to investigate women's potential outside the

constraints of the marriage plot that was so central to long novels of the mid-century (Showalter ix; Kranidis 49-53). Stories began to depict frank confrontations of male authority, women endeavoring to think and speak their own voice, fantasies about female sexuality, new economic and educational opportunities for women, or the chance encounters, often but not exclusively in the city, that suggest new freedoms for women (Liggins, Maunder, and Robbins 65-85; Cutter; Richardson). In this way, the short story became amenable to New Woman perspectives on life and literature.² The inconclusive ending was widely employed regardless of the gender or politics of the author, but it got conscripted to New Woman purposes. It helped writers stage new, uncertain, but exciting future possibilities for women. In some cases, an inconclusive ending indicts a world in which women continue to be oppressed and refuses the tying up of local plot threads in favor of a collective solution outside the text (Robbins 302). More frequently, inconclusive endings suggest that conventional outcomes such as marriage or maternity do not create the identity fixedness that people assume. Thus, the inconclusive ending has feminist potential. As the authors of *The British Short Story* put it, "Moving beyond the constraints of the mid-Victorian marriage plot, which often used marriage and the birth of an heir as a reward in the closing chapters, New Woman narratives were less formulaic and more inconclusive; they were structured differently in order to focus on the experience of marital difficulties, messy divorces, working lives for women, the trials of motherhood or fluctuations in sexual desire" (Liggins, Maunder, and Robbins 68).

<5>While scholars such as Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Angelique Richardson, and Ruth Robbins have argued that open short story endings furthered feminist politics at the same time as they helped develop modernist aesthetics, this article argues that the synergy between feminism and modernist aesthetics in the short story was not so straightforwardly productive.³ Market considerations often privileged openness at the expense of feminist politics. It was simply easier to get feminist work respected as a high art form if the story ended in a cryptic rather than definite note.

<6>This argument hinges on turning to the archive to explore how one writer and several reviewers remarked upon these inconclusive endings. In terms of the communications circuit, reviewers of short story volumes came rather late in the proceedings, after the stories were published in their first periodical appearance and after they were accepted to be published in book form. Nonetheless, reviewers framed interpretation for ordinary readers wondering which stories were good for a day's entertainment and which were lasting. Reviews' easy availability as evidence of a communication circuit also influenced the first critics of these writers' fictions. As Dean Baldwin puts it, reviewers might be of debatable cultural importance in general, but in the case of the short story, they lifted the form out of the realm of entertainment or commodity to that of art (*Art and Commerce*, 139).

<7>Although the shift in story form was a worldwide phenomenon, much of the writerly and critical *responses* that are examined in this article come from British sources. This is because British writers and reviewers felt rather belated in the short story genre, and its very newness made them especially astute at noting change. Although recent discussions of short fiction, loosely known as the tale, complicates this picture somewhat, scholars agree that the short story developed in the mid nineteenth century in the United States, France, and Russia, but was not profitable or esteemed in Britain until the 1880s.⁴ Remarks about the British belatedness in short story writing and short story collections percolated through the British press in the 1890s. As the *Athenaeum* wrote,

There has been a distinctly new growth in the short story (with two or three exceptions, all the best fiction of the year [1893] has been in the form of short stories), and along with the short story ('poisonous honey stol'n from France') has come a new license in dealing imaginatively with life, almost permitting the Englishman to contend with the writers of other nations on their own ground; permitting him that is to say, to represent life as it really is. ("English Literature in 1893")

The *Graphic*, meanwhile, declared in its more populist voice that the Americans were wonderful at short stories: "Our transatlantic cousins have a special gift for short stories owing to the national tendency to go straight to the point by the shortest cut" ("Christmas Bookshelf").⁵ In contrast, US reviewers at the turn of the century treated short stories as just another important genre. For example, in reviews of Edith Wharton's story collection *The Descent of Man and Other Stories* (1904) as collected in *Edith Wharton: The Contemporary Reviews*, only the British reviews focus on the form of her stories (77-85). The US reviews treat the themes of divorce, free love, and generation gaps in moral terms, not formal ones. This sense of belatedness to short stories as a high literary genre, one worthy of reviewing and appreciating, drove British observers to notice some of the formal shifts that American reviewers were perhaps taking for granted.

Ending Enigmatically

<8>The stories in George Egerton's *Keynotes* (1893) employ cryptic, abrupt endings. Egerton (born Mary Chavelita Dunne in Australia to an Irish father and a Welsh mother) was one of the many notorious modern writers who became associated with the adventurous publisher John Lane. The stories in her volume were not published in periodicals beforehand but appeared in Lane's office as a set. Of his slightly later journal the *Yellow Book*, one reviewer quipped, "We can picture Messrs. Mathews and Lane calling round them the band of Bodley Head disciples, and saying to one, 'Write us something that shall have neither beginning, nor end, nor meaning'" ("A Yellow Melancholy"). Reviewers of Egerton's collection focused mainly on Egerton's refusal to be reticent and her determination to bare women's inmost selves. But many puzzled over the ending to the collection's first and most avidly discussed story, "A Cross Line." In this story, an unnamed heroine dissatisfied with her husband has an affair with a man who understands her better. A conversation with the lover hints that the heroine will not continue the affair because the intrigue is more desirous for her than the man himself: "Can't you understand where the spell lies? It is the freedom, the freshness, the vague danger, the unknown that has a witchery for me, ay, for every woman!", she explains to the stranger (61). Nevertheless, the end of the affair, and the story, comes abruptly. Once the heroine realizes she is pregnant, she discusses children with her maid and issues an order to place a baby garment on the lilac bush to send her lover away. The story's abrupt end leaves it unclear whether the heroine will stay with her husband or whether she loves him enough to do so happily. As the authors of *The British Short Story* write, "the woman's reasons for choosing her husband remain unarticulated, typically leaving the reader to decide how positive the outcome is for the New Woman." (Liggins, Maunder, and Robbins 75).

<9>Reviewers for magazines less adventurous than the *Yellow Book* would become were puzzled and intrigued by the story's ending. The Liberal weekly the *Speaker* sounded relieved that the story returned to conventional Victorian maternal feeling, complete with pathos: "how the heroine of 'A Cross Line' realizes the truth she postulates, the scene between her and her maid apropos of some baby clothes, with its surprising final touch, is a wonder of pathos and beautiful feeling" (T.P.G.). Despite this nod to conventional morality,

the *Speaker* also praised the collection for an absence of didacticism and willingness to treat women's fantasies seriously. Writing for the *Academy*, a weekly that was growing more conservative, the critic William Sharp praised the story's "obliquity of moral vision" and admired the way it resolved the moral problems raised by the affair. It is by mere chance, he wrote, that the woman avoided becoming depraved and ruining two people's lives. While admiring the story's frankness about women's desire to be loved, the *Saturday Review* poked fun at the chance quality of the story's achievement of closure: "A little accident—to the humorous reader, a ridiculous accident—suffices to save her, and the story comes to a most lame and impotent conclusion" ("New Books and Reprints"). The cryptic ending signaled to reviewers that the story was a new and experimental type. Not every critic liked this new type, but their comments imply that they would have disapproved of a more conclusively radical ending.

<10>Another New Woman writer of Irish descent published a short story collection around the same time as *Keynotes* that was not as well received, and its differing reception illustrates the dangers for New Woman writers of employing conclusive and conclusively feminist endings. Sarah Grand's *Our Manifold Nature* (1894) was published on the heels of her bestselling New Woman novel, *The Heavenly Twins* (1893) and the *Edinburgh National Observer*, the *London Bookman*, the *Academy*, the *Saturday Review*, the *San Francisco Morning Call*, and the *New York Times* all agreed that her true subject was the emancipation of women (Reviews of *Our Manifold Nature*, "Hale a Dozen Experiments," "Recent Publications," Cotterell, Lauderdale). The story collection included two selections, "Eugenia" and "The Yellow Leaf," that reviewers linked to that topic, although they are not very short, coming in at seventy-four and 103 pages respectively in the first edition. In "Eugenia," a young noblewoman who enjoys living on her country estate spurns a man who courts her because he believes he can turn her into a vacuous lover of jewelry, fine dresses, and London society, but not before proving his cowardice by failing to perform during a chase through tidal quicksand. The narration, told from the vantage point of a sympathetic female friend, makes Grand's message obvious. Eugenia prefers to walk around her estate with no hat or gloves. The ill-fated suitor, Brinkhampton, "was gazing at her admiringly, but not listening . . . for he attached little importance to anything she said" (162). Brinkhampton eventually retreats, Eugenia marries a local farmer who understands her better, and she lifts a family curse that dooms all the men in the family by marrying a man with both moral and physical courage. The story ends with Eugenia concluding that the curse has been lifted as she cradles her baby boy. Drawn out over several pages, the ending provides closure employing well-trodden motifs—marriage and the birth of an heir. Similarly, in "The Yellow Leaf," a young woman Evangeline obeys her old-fashioned mother, curtails her studying to ready herself for a life of childbirth, and spends time looking pretty. When her parents arrange a ball, she steals a suitor away by "cooing softly and looking lovely all the time" from her cousin Adalesa, who is studious and given to uttering "smart aggressive railleries in high-pitched tones" (48, 49). The squeamish suitor Mr. Perceval turns out to have oriental blood in him, and Evangeline spurns her swarthy child. When Evangeline learns her beauty is all used up, she overdoses on morphine, and only the narrator (another sympathetic female friend) and Adalesa read the suicide note that makes the scandalous nature of Evangeline's death conclusive and clear. The discovery of Evangeline's death is drawn out over five pages.

<11>The *Speaker* praised Grand for turning to the short story because the "exigencies" of the form forced her out of the screeds that had marred the earlier novel: "But the exigencies of the short story, fortunately, compel even female reformers to 'cut the cackle and come to the 'osses'" ("Fiction"). Most critics were more respectful than this. The *National Observer*

praised Grand for writing more fiction on her special subject of the relations of the sexes under morbid conditions (“morbid” being a term that discounts the story’s value as entertainment) (“Hale a Dozen Experiments”). The Liberal weekly the *Athenaeum*, however, faulted “Eugenia” and “The Yellow Leaf” for their implausibility, their melodrama, and above all, their tract-like quality:

This book shows a terrible falling off from ‘The Heavenly Twins,’ which, in spite of obvious temptations, steered commendably clear of the vice of preaching; but of these six stories the three bulkiest are really little more than tracts, exhibiting all the splendid disregard of probability and the irritating attitude of superiority which characterize that form of instruction. (“Short Stories”)

By complaining about improbability and an irritating attitude of superiority, the critic associated Grand's stories with the didactic tale that was popular earlier in the century. Overall, the *Athenaeum* preferred her shorter stories “Ah Man” and “Boomellen” for being poignant and less self-consciously preachy or feminist. The *Saturday Review* similarly likened the stories to tracts, expressing sympathy for Grand's views but objecting to the verbosity and clumsiness of her art: “But ‘The Yellow Leaf’ and ‘Eugenia’ are neither more nor less than tracts put forth in the cause of emancipating woman” (Review of *Our Manifold Nature*, 301).⁶ Negative reviews from journals such as the *Athenaeum* and the *Saturday Review*, both socially central organs of critical opinion in London society, would have bothered any Anglo-American writer. By the time Grand managed to find a publisher for *The Heavenly Twins*, she had proven herself more resilient than most writers at resisting male domination and the distaste for middlebrow aesthetics (Mangum 85-89). Nevertheless, her later story collection *Emotional Moments* contained many stylishly short, cryptic pieces which rendered her feminist messages oblique and therefore palatable to most reviewers (Liggins, Maunder and Robbins 70-72). No wonder most of the other women writers discussed here employed the inconclusive ending.

<12>A pairing of two earlier stories, one American, the other British, illustrates that an open ending could be both more stylish and more feminist than the Victorian storytelling that came before it. The American writer Mary E. Wilkins Freeman’s “A Humble Romance” (1884), first published in *Harper’s Monthly*, which was widely read in Britain, features a servant named Sally who marries a tin peddler and drives his cart after he departs to deal with a suddenly emerged first wife. As I will argue, the story is only covertly feminist. It was written early in its writer’s career at a time when she was determined to work with market forces to produce stories that would sell (Glasser 30-32, 138-39). The British writer Louisa Parr published a strikingly similar story named “Sally” (1891) in *Longman’s Magazine*. Journalists at the time accused Louisa Parr of plagiarizing Freeman’s plot and title character.⁷ Parr’s story is less feminist, because it moralizes about a woman’s obligation to stick with her husband under any circumstances. It is not known for certain whether Parr plagiarized intentionally, and if she did, it is not relevant to a comparison of the stories. Louisa Parr wrote to Mary E. Wilkins (who was not yet married and had not yet adopted the name Freeman) disclaiming any knowledge of Wilkins’s story and declaring that her story “Sally” was founded on fact. Wilkins wrote accepting the apology and treating the matter as a strange coincidence alone, although in retrospect one might speculate that both the British Parr and the American Wilkins drew on a transatlantic news story. In any case, Parr’s story seems to be a response to Wilkins’s; it indicates that Parr felt baffled by the new, open-ended story form and sought to close that which had already been exploded open.

<13>The similarities between the two stories are obvious. In Freeman’s “A Humble Romance,” a tin-peddler, Jake, meets a servant named Sally, who has recently been crying, and immediately proposes marriage. They could travel the country in his cart, he says, comparing the prospective role to that of a high woman of leisure: “You wouldn’t hev a bit of work to do, but jest set up thar like a queen, a-ridin’ and seein’ the country” (17).⁸ They marry so hastily that Sally is unable to change into her Sunday dress, and they drive happily around the countryside for three months, selling wares. One day Jake disappears suddenly, pinning a note to his pillow instructing Sally to sell the horse and live off the money in his bank account, to “bear up” and wait for him to return (34). For three years, Sally bears up, but despite Jake’s instructions she keeps the horse and grows the business by offering items such as pins, needles, and thread to housewives. Jake returns and admits that unbeknownst to him, his first wife, about whom he had not told Sally, was still alive, and he felt obliged to keep his wife until her death. Sally takes him back, and in the final lines of the story, he asks her to marry him again, and with “eager eyes” she suggests changing into her new Sunday dress and wearing it to be married in:

“Now we’ll start up the horse, an’ go to Derby an’ git merried over agin, Sally.”
She raised her head suddenly, and looked up at him with eager eyes
“Jake.”
“Well, little un?”
“Oh, Jake, my blue silk dress an’ the white bonnet is in the trunk in the cart
jest the same, an’ I can git ‘em out, an’ put ‘em on under the trees thar, an’ wear ‘em to
be married in!” (p. 44-45)

The abrupt conclusion smooths over the possibilities that Jake was dishonest with Sally or that Sally might never trust him again. The conclusion also suggests that Sally’s business sense will be confined to the safe topic of dress. Instead of decisive feminism (which would be progressive) or outright moralism about a wife’s obligations (which would be conservative), Wilkins opts for a stylish truncation, leaving the effect on the reader ambiguous and puzzling.

<14>In Louisa Parr’s “Sally,” many elements of the story are the same. A tin peddler, Bill Kitto, spies a hard-working girl who has recently been crying in a basement kitchen in a London street. When she sasses him and accuses him of having a wife at home, he proposes marriage, saying he’s got money saved and a horse and cart for selling crockery, and “with you a-sittin’ by my side we should jog along as happy as Albert Edward and Alexandra” (646). Sally’s mistress returns and throws her out on the street. Bill and Sally marry, and for two years, they live happily while he plies his trade through the countryside. Sally wakes up one morning to a note pinned to her pillow instructing her to sell the horse and cart and live off the money he has left. Sally decides not to sell right away and trades for a year before a dying shiftless woman appears at her door. Sally nurses her until her death, learning that she is Bill’s first wife, Maggie. Bill returns, explains to Sally that Maggie had left him for another man and “I married her thinkin’, *e’ceptin’ ’twas down in the bottommost depths of my heart, that you was dead*” (my italics, 659). Maggie eventually succumbs to death after pleading forgiveness for her shiftless ways. She is comforted by the thought that she is going somewhere where there are people as good as Sally. In the final lines, a narrator interposes to say that Sally and Bill married again, this time legally.

<15>Both stories explore the emancipatory possibilities of the scenario of a woman who starts out as a lowly servant, is promised the life of royalty, and becomes instead an

independent businesswoman, who grows her husband's trade and gains him back in the end. While Parr's story might be considered more daring, since it asks the moral questions of whether Bill is bigamous or not, Freeman's ending is more interesting and covertly feminist in terms of its form. Structurally, the stories differ in two main ways. Parr's story explores the moral perplexities of Bill's decision to leave his wife and Sally's decision to stick by Bill. The third-person omniscient narrator makes it clear that Bill has done the right thing through a heavy narrative aside, "All unknown to Sally, the battle of good and evil was being fought within that rough, untutored breast" (649). Two of the seven parts of the story delve into the dynamics between Maggie and Sally. Should Sally stick with Jake once she has learned the truth? Should Maggie forgive Sally for unwittingly committing bigamy? These moral questions are drawn out over five pages of the magazine. Second, Parr's ending, unlike Wilkins's ending, is full of situation, sentimentality, and religious piety. "Those that forgive should be forgiven. You wish them to be happy, don't you?" says a vicar. Maggie asks if there will be people like Sally in heaven, she places Bill and Sally's hands together, and she dies. The narrator steps in with a message far more serious than Wilkins's stylish reference to dress: "up to the present moment Sally is puzzled to know why people make such a fuss about her" (663). Of Freeman's ending, Leah Blatt Glasser argues that its brevity helps Freeman choose sentimentality and timidity over audacity; Glasser writes that "a woman's power and capacity to manage a business and gain autonomy is abruptly eliminated with the cheerful and sentimental return of her missing husband" (217-18). Freeman's stories frequently end abruptly before the reader is prepared for a conclusion or a denouement. Although she published many stories with happy endings, these endings come suddenly, before the reader is prepared for the plot to be resolved, employing the device of the late nineteenth century known as a surprise ending. Yet the brevity and abruptness of Freeman's closing lines in "A Humble Romance" avoid moral proselytizing. The open ending leaves it unclear whether Sally remains with Jake out of the goodness of her heart or the strength of her sexual and romantic desire. The closing lines work in favor of letting Sally gain romantic satisfaction even as she has already proven her business acumen. The story involves little explicit moralizing, and in this respect, it is far more modern and palatable to contemporary taste than the story by Parr. Wilkins Freeman is remembered by Americanists today for her short story craft and protofeminism, while for British specialists, Parr remains forgotten.

<16>Edith Wharton developed the modernist experimentation initiated in part by Egerton and Wilkins to arguably greater lengths in her early short stories, which often employ modernist techniques (Whitehead, Malcolm). Following soon after Sarah Grand's *Our Manifold Nature* was Edith Wharton's third short story collection, *The Descent of Man and Other Stories* (1904). Given that the collection was less openly a New Woman collection than either *Keynotes* or *Our Manifold Nature*, reviewers focused not on feminist politics but aesthetic form. Like the *Sheffield Independent*, the *Spectator* praised "The Reckoning," which was a popular story with many British reviewers, perhaps because its theme of serial divorce seemed so characteristically American. The *Spectator* reviewer admired the very modern "complete self-effacement of the author and the suppression of any obtrusive endeavour to edify the reader" (965). Yet it admitted to what it called "a very old-fashioned curiosity on the part of the reader or reviewer" about the endings of these stories (965). It discusses how modern literature from Coleridge's "Christabel" to the "modern short story" "end on a note of interrogation or a 'suspended cadence,' which, whatever may be said of its artistic appropriateness, must often expose the writer to the charge of indolence, or of shirking a difficulty" (965). Among modern short story writers, "Mrs. Wharton is more than usually tantalising in her reticence as to 'what became of' the characters in whom she has enlisted our

interest” (965). Although the *Spectator* felt ruefully old-fashioned in its concerns, the review closes by recognizing Wharton's skill in piquing the reader's interest.

<17>Judging by today's pithy and inconclusive standards, twenty-first-century readers might not find “The Quicksand” and “The Reckoning” to be quite so abrupt. In “The Reckoning,” Julia Westall is forced to reconcile herself to her second husband's decision to divorce her when his interest wanes, for much the same (flimsy) reason as she had earlier divorced her first husband. Their set is artistic rather than conventional, and “Even [Julia's] second marriage did not make traditional morality stir in its sleep,” so the irony of the story is that Julia feels alone in her chagrin and dismay (425-26).⁹ The story is full of ellipses and broken lines of causality. After her second husband makes the painful announcement, which nearly elides the name of the woman for whom he is leaving Julia, she wanders the streets and knocks on the door of her former home to discuss the matter with her ex-husband John Arment. She explains that she only now realizes that John did not understand why she left him, just as she does not understand why her current husband is leaving her. She asks John to forgive her, they shake hands goodbye, and she departs. A contemporary short story writer, or a modernist short story writer, might have ended the narrative before the completion of this conversation. But Wharton completes the conversation and sends Julia Westall back into the night, offering both technical closure and thematic resolution.

<18>“The Quicksand” is more cryptic and inconclusive than “The Reckoning.” “The Quicksand” is divided into three parts. In the first, a son Alan comes home to his mother Mrs. Quentin upset because his fiancée, Hope Fenno, has announced she refuses to marry him. The fiancée does not agree with his newspaper the *Radiator's* politics and he will not agree to relinquish the newspaper. Details in the story make it clear the *Radiator* is a gossip rag; it published the inside story of a scandal that shamed a family. In the second part, Mrs. Quentin visits Miss Fenno and attempts to make her relent, saying life is full of compromises, especially for women. Miss Fenno refuses. In part three, Mrs. Quentin encounters Miss Fenno by chance in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and it is evident that the girl has been suffering. In a twist, Mrs. Quentin admits to Miss Fenno that the real reason she urged her not to let the newspaper stand in the way of her marriage is that she disliked the paper too in her youth when her young husband had established it, but she allowed Alan's father to keep it because it paid for yachts and holidays. She died a little in accepting the paper for the sake of her sickly child. Miss Fenno has no chance to reply to this revelation: the story ends when the lights dim and the mother has disappeared. The theme of the story is the suffocating nature of maternal love and the old-fashioned nature of female sacrifice. Tension arises when the symbol of the younger generation of women, Miss Fenno, fails to sacrifice her ideas for her love. Yet the reader is left puzzled about which woman is morally right—should one choose love over ethical conviction? Mrs. Quentin's role in the story is mysterious; readers cannot be sure whether she represents an antagonist or protagonist. On the one hand, she is envious of the younger woman's courage in her convictions, which implies that the younger generation can teach her a lesson, but on the other hand, she persists in interfering with the girl's choices. That Mrs. Quentin's maternal love is smothering is made clear from details in the third person narrator's narration, which says satirically that Alan “was the key to the meaning of life, the justification of what must have seemed as incomprehensible as it was odious, had it not all-sufficingly ended in himself. He was a perfect son, and Mrs. Quentin had always hungered for perfection” (397). As in Susan Lohafer's schema for the modernist short story, the reader is moved from a naïve worldview (mothers should interfere in their children's choices) to a skeptical one (mothers who interfere may be better off focusing on their own life). The abrupt ending enables the writer to leave the reader guessing which worldview is best.

Shirking a Difficulty

<19>The inconclusive endings in these stories initially further, but ultimately also truncate, their feminism. The *Spectator* wondered whether Edith Wharton and like-minded writers were merely “shirking a difficulty” or being “indolent,” and this anonymous reviewer had a point worth considering today. “A Humble Romance” could be accused of following an older format, in which, as Liggins, Maunder, and Robbins argue, “a neat tale with a twist and a sense of completion” might be contrasted to the “technical experiments, psychological intensity, and a fragmented narrative” of modernism (Liggins, Maunder and Robbins, 123). But the comparison to the story “Sally” makes clear that “A Humble Romance” is already enigmatic and ambiguous. The story’s ending seems precious on the surface but raises an existential appeal to uncertain outcomes for women who wish to combine business and romance. Sally in “A Humble Romance” is coded as a good woman, much as is the protagonist in “Sally,” but the brevity of the ending leaves it open that “A Humble Romance”’s Sally is also in a process of becoming in which desire for sex, fashion, or careers might also be construed as acceptable, if not necessarily virtuous.

<20>The abrupt ending in “A Cross Line” forces the reader to focus on the story’s sensuous middle, in which the heroine fantasizes about dancing in front of a group of admiring men and of achieving solidarity with all women, including working women and old maids. Indeed, many of the stories in *Keynotes*, like “Now Spring Has Come” and “A Little Grey Glove” in addition to “A Cross Line,” focus on fleeting encounters between men and women. Because the stories are so brief and inconclusive, the dalliances are allowed to be relevant mostly to the characters’ hearts and souls, not to social conventions surrounding flirtations or marriage, and Egerton is enabled by the open ending to imagine freer relations between men and women. The valorization of maternity in “A Cross Line” and “The Spell of the White Elf” strike some present-day scholars as essentialist and Victorian. Recently, Tina O’Toole has usefully complicated the picture of Egerton’s maternalism by showing how Egerton subverted more typical Irish policies toward maternalism such as the control of female sexuality, silence around the corporeal aspects of maternity, and the support for two-parent families (89-109). Egerton’s maternalism is subtly encoded in the open end to “A Cross Line.” Yet the maternalism is only somewhat legible, and Egerton’s refusal to make her views clear for the reader adds to the enduring value of the story for present-day feminist readers who may disagree with the valorization of maternity.

<21>The lack of cryptic endings in Grand’s stories “Eugenia” and “The Yellow Leaf” make them less modern and less enduring. What little critical attention to them paid to them recently concerns Grand’s feminist interventions in the scientific debates around eugenics and natural selection (Eggermont, Lawrence). The stories have not been republished in prominent story collections of New Woman writing like Angelique Richardson’s *Women Who Did: Stories by Men and Women, 1890-1914* (2002) or Elaine Showalter’s *Daughters of Decadence: Women Writers of the Fin-de-Siècle* (1993). The tale of their travels through the publishing world from the first negative reviews to the lack of their republication aligns feminist short story writing and curation with general developments in short story form as they have been practiced by non-feminist as well as feminist writers. This alignment has come at a certain cost to feminist politics.

<22>The ending of “The Reckoning” leaves the reader wondering whether Julia will contest her second divorce (the law will be on her side, she realizes) or try to make further amends with her first husband. The question of whether it is moral to end a marriage simply because

one has grown tired of one's spouse is left open for the reader to decide. In this story, Wharton raises a question about female and male independence from permanent marriage that feminists and other ethical thinkers have not answered satisfactorily to this day. Wharton raises even harder and more unanswerable questions in "Quicksand." Again, the reader is forced to do a lot of work in a universe of uncertainty, imagining how Miss Fenno reacts to Mrs. Quentin's revelation, whether Miss Fenno returns to Alan, whether Mrs. Quentin regrets her outburst. The story asks what the nature of a mother's duty should be toward herself, her young child, and her adult child. It moves beyond questions of courtship that occupy "Eugenia" and "The Yellow Leaf," or marriage that occupy "A Humble Romance," "A Cross Line," and "The Reckoning," to ask questions about the choices available to women concerning child-rearing over a whole lifespan. Any reader who prefers not to think too hard about the exact ethics of motherly duty can occupy himself or herself with the cleverness of the abrupt conclusion, the mystery of whether the mother is still manipulating her way into her son's heart with this poignant confession, the artfulness of the dying light in the closing scene. The urgent questions of what mothers and children owe each other can be lost in the modernity of the short story form. Indeed, this question remains urgent for feminists even in the contemporary era, when Julia Kristeva in "Motherhood Today," to name a prominent example, suggests that mothers still choose not to weigh the costs and benefits to themselves and society of their maternal passion, which they prefer to treat as the last sacred secret. Both Kristeva and Wharton only infer that mothers might rethink their clinging to maternal passion. While Kristeva is circumspect, Wharton is downright obfuscating. Throughout much of her career, Wharton did not know the answers to the questions about maternity and maternal passion that she raised in her fictions. By her novels of the 1920s, her views about motherhood became more decisive, her opinion being increasingly that mothers should forgo their personal freedoms on behalf of their children. Her later fictions are harder to align with feminism or high art (Ammons 158-71). In this respect, in "The Reckoning" and "Quicksand," Wharton preserves for herself the reputation of a writer of craft and artistry rather than openly feminist fictions.¹⁰

<23>The many other New Woman writers writing short fiction during the fin de siècle, including but not limited to Olive Schreiner, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Mona Caird, Pauline Hopkins, or Evelyn Sharp, faced similar dilemmas of pleasing reviewers with enigmatic endings, getting shunned for argument and didacticism, or losing publishers' contracts for fictions that were too openly daring, although space does not allow me to consider their reception here.¹¹ Like Wharton, Freeman, and Egerton, other writers' use of abrupt endings leaves them open to charges of "indolence" and "shirking a difficulty." Yet the negative remarks from reviewers of Sarah Grand make clear that writers simply could not offer resolution and maintain their reputation as authors of short stories, not feminist tracts. Grand eventually turned from writing commercially viable fictions to local politics, suggesting that she was not satisfied with the rules of publishing in her day.

Conclusion

<24>Feminist writers—like all short story writers—continue in the twenty-first century to win critical acclaim and book contracts with inconclusive, open-ended short stories. The aesthetics of the short story still leans toward suggestion rather than didacticism. This continuing trend makes excavating obscure reviews of short stories and rereading Louisa Parr's rewriting of a more prominent writer all the more pressing, for these seemingly ephemeral pieces of evidence reveal misgivings on the part of Victorian writers and reviewers about the new abnormally abrupt endings and irresolution. Reviewers hoping to lift

the short story above the level of entertainment disliked lengthy endings because they were too preachy. Reviewers hoping for satisfying entertainment disapproved of endings that seemed too “morbid” or radical. British writers and reviewers were at the forefront of this open discussion of open endings because the endings seemed new to them in the 1880s and 1890s. Whatever our national specialism, we in the twenty-first century might do well to remember their misgivings. There was a strong element of economics and cultural capital as well as free aesthetic choice in how feminist writers chose to end their stories. They chose from the endings available at the time as crafted by non-feminist as well as feminist writers. It would be too simple to suggest that writers tailored their cryptic irresolution solely to meet the needs of a stable market, for the market and the writers were dynamic and formed by a variety of factors. There is evidence that writers ended stories abruptly or inconclusively because they themselves did not know how the developments they were helping to set into place would turn out. Nevertheless, sometimes writers really are “shirking a difficulty.” The questions raised by these stories about how to write past conventional endings in marriage, maternity, and maternal self-sacrifice should be answered by feminist discourse and filtered through society. Maybe it is time to rename the inconclusive ending as the compromise with a market largely hostile to feminism that it was.

Notes

¹ Although many scholars have noted the modernist short story's lack of closure, Lohafer and Gerlach have separately demonstrated it in the most detail. Gerlach treats a variety of authors, but mostly male, and finds that open endings are the signature of the twentieth century more than the nineteenth. Lohafer found that short stories published between 1820 and 1850 offer firmer methods of closure than those published in the modern period (1920-1950) or her contemporary period (1960-1980). Although Lohafer dates this shift to the 1920s, D'hoker and Eggermont show that stories of the 1890s by women exhibited some modernist characteristics intermingled with continuing reliance on extensive plotting.

² On the New Woman and the way this figure of the *fin de siècle* shaped new content and form in the short story and novel in Great Britain and the United States, see, among other scholars, Heilmann, Ardis, Patterson, and Rich, *Transcending*. Although the New Woman was clearly a transnational literary phenomenon, much recent scholarship confines itself to a single national context. One article that directly compares New Woman writing in Britain and the United States is Rich, “Reconsidering *The Awakening*.”

³ The essays collected in Booth, ed. argue that endings in Victorian fictions were not as closed and neat as was previously discussed; nevertheless, they find more diversity in novelistic endings in the twentieth century. There is a debate among scholars of New Woman fiction as to whether scholars should recover the fiction purely on the basis of its protomodernism, when so many writers self-consciously strove to cater to a popular market dominated by women readers; Heilmann and Kranidis argue for reading many New Woman fictions as a popular discourse, while Ardis shows how New Woman fictions anticipated modernism. Unlike the present article, however, these scholars focus on the novel.

⁴ Several critics argue that the British short story emerged comparatively late, including Baldwin, “The Tardy Evolution of the British Short Story,” and Chan. Other critics argue for seeing earlier British short fictions as akin to the short story, including Killick, Krueger, p. 8-17 and 108-9, and Collins.

⁵ It is significant that this praise for going straight to the point by the shortest cut comes from the *Graphic*, a newspaper of the popular press. Such newspapers were aspiring to cater to a

mass market in a new way by innovating with concise prose themselves (Brown 102). The short story was part of a multimedia shift toward pithiness.

⁶ Both the *Saturday Review* and the *Athenaeum* objected to the immodesty of Grand's preface because it explained her aesthetic. They disliked the idea of a woman presenting her aesthetic to the public, and their objection surely influenced their assessment of the fiction.

⁷ The alleged plagiarism case is discussed in the following: "Occasional Notes," "Literary Notes, News, and Echoes," "One of Those Facts Which Nobody Can Explain," Hill, "Mary E. Wilkins at Home."

⁸ I cite the Edinburgh edition because the British journalists who spotted the potential plagiarism would have read it. There is no difference between the endings in this edition and the *Harper's Monthly* edition except that the spelling "merried" is changed in one case to "married." Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

⁹ For ease of readers, I quote from R.W.B. Lewis's widely available edition, but the endings of stories in the original British edition by Macmillan are the same.

¹⁰ On this aspect of Wharton's authorship, see Williams.

¹¹ On the warm reception of Olive Schreiner's important experimental collection of allegories, *Dreams* (1891), see Gill. Because of their political radicalism and differing levels and types of estrangement from the Anglo-American literary field, Caird, Gilman, Hopkins, and Sharp did not produce short story collections that were widely reviewed in Britain.

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