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‘A Thing of Beauty’: Women as Aestheticised Commodities in Popular Victorian Fiction

Kirby-Jane Hallum

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English, University of Auckland, 2012
Abstract

My doctoral research extends and develops the study of the commodification of women in the Victorian period, by focusing on the aesthetics surrounding Victorian courtship and marriage relations as represented in Rhoda Broughton’s *Cometh Up as a Flower* (1867), George Meredith’s *The Egoist* (1879), Ouida’s *Moths* (1880), Marie Corelli’s *Wormwood: a Drama of Paris* (1890) and George du Maurier’s *Trilby* (1894). Specifically my thesis charts the Aesthetic Movement from its beginnings in Pre-Raphaelitism through to its final flowering in the decadent movement so as to show how popular fiction reflects on and mediates the concerns of Aestheticism over the last third of the nineteenth century. My original contribution to knowledge is my examination of how women are represented as objects endowed with aesthetic value when they are commodified by the Victorian marriage market in Victorian popular fiction. The popular literary category examined in this study puts an interesting pressure on the study of Aestheticism; to take my point further I follow how Victorian popular writers themselves recognised/interpreted/theorised Aestheticism as it manifested in their novels. My purpose will be to distinguish whether these writers were conscious of and explicitly responding to the movement, or just working in the zeitgeist.
Acknowledgements

First and foremost, my deepest appreciation and gratitude goes to Associate Professor Joanne Wilkes and Doctor Rose Lovell-Smith for their expert guidance and encouragement as my supervisors.

I wish to acknowledge the University of Auckland Doctoral Scholarship which has funded my PhD research, and provided additional support for visits to the British Library (London), the Chatto and Windus archive (University of Reading), the Tate Britain and the Victoria and Albert Museum (London). In particular I appreciate the Universitas 21 Doctoral Mobility Scholarship that allowed me to spend three invaluable months at the University of Birmingham where I was immersed in Aestheticism research culture and was able to observe numerous paintings and art objects.

I am grateful to the general and academic staff of the Department of English at the University of Auckland. I also acknowledge my fellow postgraduate students who have made this journey both memorable and amusing.

Associate Professor Wendy Parkins of the University of Otago has been a source of support and inspiration from my fledgling years as an undergraduate student. My thanks also go to Doctor Marion Thain at the University of Birmingham for her guidance in my project, and to Doctor Andrew King (Canterbury Christ Church University) for his enthusiastic interest in my Ouida research.

The assistance of staff at all libraries was invaluable, but in particular that of the University of Birmingham Special Collections, the Shakespeare Institute Library, and the Shakespeare Centre Library and Archive who readily allowed me to consult their Marie Corelli records.

Finally thanks to Ben for your encouragement, patience and love, and to my family, Reece, Mum and Dad. I dedicate this thesis to you.
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-Introduction-
The Art of Female Beauty in Context

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing
(John Keats, “Endymion”).

Last year I saw these lines written on the London Tube as part of the city’s longstanding ‘Poems on the Underground’ scheme. Given that I was only in London for the day, that every season six poems are selected to be displayed in Tube carriages across the system, and that there are an estimated 500 active trains on the network at any given time, I believe my happening upon this particular poem was a moment of research serendipity. For, during my time in the United Kingdom, I had been hunting for an appropriate title for my thesis — one that captured a nineteenth-century sentiment and worked in with the parameters of my research. The famous opening line from Keats’s 1818 poem, an extended treatment of Endymion’s endless sleep, evokes the fleetingness of beauty and desire to retain the subjective experience of it. Bruce E. Miller’s reading of the poem in 1965 led to the claim that: “a thing of beauty is a joy forever because it contains in itself the ‘leaven’ or ‘essence’ which makes it lovely, some part of the supernatural life, and affords to man an opportunity through intense union to share in that life” (40). Material beauty is practically by definition fleeting and evanescent. Keats is a reference point in the Aesthetic Movement and an acknowledged predecessor of its passion for beauty, and his paradoxical claim turns on this fragility of (living or inanimate) material being, claiming that though the ‘thing of beauty’ might wane, the subjective experience of it never disappears and retains its ability to move us in memory. The attraction to material beauty is induced by a desire to share in its fragility and evanescence and happens to be a recurring feature of many of the novels this study encounters.

Background reading to my Master of Arts topic, “Collecting Men: the Relationship between Cultural Capital and Masculine Identity in The Woman in White and The Portrait of a Lady,” revealed the need for further work to be done on the aesthetic commodification of women in Victorian fiction. In my reading of The Portrait of a Lady I had examined how Isabel Archer, later Osmond, is aesthetically objectified by her husband, Gilbert Osmond, and how she figures in his collection of cultural goods that exhibit both the refined taste and artistic competence of their collector. Edgar Fawcett, reviewing the novel in 1884, commented that Osmond “has married her with very much the same motive as that which
might prompt him to buy a new bit of antique *bric-à-brac* at slight cost from a shrewd dealer” (145). This kind of reifying dynamic that the Victorians were themselves aware of is what inspired me to write a doctoral thesis exploring women in fiction as aestheticised commodities. But I also wanted to show that this kind of phenomenon was not limited to high cultural Victorian novels. Tracing such patterns in popular fiction would contribute to the current scholarly impetus to reclaim nineteenth-century popular culture in Victorian studies.

Rhoda Broughton’s *Cometh Up as a Flower* (1867), George Meredith’s *The Egoist* (1879), Ouida’s *Moths* (1880), Marie Corelli’s *Wormwood: a Drama of Paris* (1890) and George du Maurier’s *Trilby* (1894), the works covered in this thesis, range over the period of the later nineteenth century when Victorian aesthetics flourished. This temporal shift especially has implications for the study of women as aestheticised commodities. British Aestheticism, a cultural movement predominantly of the 1870s and 1880s, often invokes the feminine in its close association with female aesthetic subjects and the ideas about literature, art, fashion and consumption that invariably inform these novels. My thesis in effect covers the particular historical period of the Aesthetic Movement from its beginnings in Pre-Raphaelitism through to its final flowering in the decadent movement, showing how popular fiction reflects on and mediates the concerns of Aestheticism.

This introduction, comprised of three parts, establishes a cultural and historical framework from which to examine in my later chapters how popular novelists represent women as aestheticised commodities in matrimonial contexts. I begin with an acknowledgement of the relevant critical material concerning the aesthetic commodification of women in the nineteenth-century historical context. Specifically I track the progression of Aestheticism over the last third of the nineteenth century by taking into account its foundations in Pre-Raphaelitism, its fashionable success at its high point in the 1870s and 1880s, through to its eventual diffusion into decadent and fin-de-siècle culture at the end of the Victorian period. I will also supplement previous academic work on the Victorian marriage market with a discussion of the aesthetic implications of this phenomenon. I then follow up some of the issues related to the study of the marriage market by exploring the wider context of the Victorian popular fiction industry.

-Commodifying Feminine Aesthetics-

This thesis is not a history of the Aesthetic Movement; rather it is about the interaction of popular texts with aestheticist themes which follow the path of Pre-Raphaelitism as it developed into Aestheticism, and later the decadent movement. The discourse of Aestheticism
is wide ranging and sometimes problematic; to put it in the most basic context, it was a mid-
to-late nineteenth-century art movement that advocated for an aesthetic sensibility that was
not limited to art. One of the tenets of the movement, the ‘art for art’s sake’ dictum, referred
not only to the creation of art without moral, religious or narrative considerations, but also to
the belief in bringing a quality of attention to the structure and execution of one’s life. This
principle reflects more than the behavioural in the way it relates to beautiful objects;
proponents of the Aesthetic Movement surrounded themselves with fashion, art and interior
design in order to reach a level of refinement that elevated their lives to a work of art. The
eyearly critical work done on this subject mostly focuses on Walter Pater, Henry James and
Oscar Wilde and their aesthetic sensibilities.¹

Walter Pater’s Studies in the History of the Renaissance (1873) offers a high Victorian
and contemporary understanding of beauty in which he affirms that:

Beauty, like all other qualities presented to human experience, is relative; and
the definition of it becomes unmeaning and useless in proportion to its
abstractness. To define beauty, not in the most abstract but in the most
concrete terms possible, to find not its universal formula, but the formula
which expresses most adequately this or that special manifestation of it, is the
aim of the true student of aesthetics (27).

Pater posed a series of meaningful questions designed to illuminate his aesthetic theory:
“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? Does it give me pleasure? And if so, what sort of
dergree of pleasure? How is my nature modified by its presence, and under its influence?”
(27–8). Thus he recognises the subjective aspect of an aesthetic experience, as it relates to
sensation, emotion, and desire. However, if Pater’s text marked a major contribution to the
Aesthetic Movement, it also received a critical backlash for its transgression of Christian
thinking and encouragement of sensuality and hedonism. The Renaissance is in this sense
regarded as a refutation of John Ruskin’s earlier endeavours to elevate the nobleness of art
through what he saw as art’s purpose to please its observer, to teach a moral lesson, and all
the while to stay true to nature. Ruskin’s opposing viewpoint concerning the purpose of art is
typified in Modern Painters (1843), an extended essay that was embraced by the Pre-

¹ Major works in the area include Regenia Gagnier’s The Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the
Victorian Public (1986) and Jonathan Freedman’s Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism and
Commodity Culture (1990). Talia Schaffer later shows in The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in
Late-Victorian England (2000) that while female aesthetes and women writers such as Vernon Lee appropriated
the literary techniques of the Aesthetic movement, they also redefined the notion of beauty beyond its origins in
the female body. See also Schaffer and Psomiades’s Women and British Aestheticism (1999).
Raphaelites, in which Ruskin argued for moral and material truth in which beauty is recognised as being “attractive to our moral nature in its purity and perfection” (26).

The general energy of Aestheticism can be traced to its origins in a Pre-Raphaelite interest in beauty. In the late 1840s a group of artists got together and proclaimed that the art world needed to be revolutionised. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood emerged in the mid-nineteenth century and was established by a group of young painters who sought to challenge the status quo in the Victorian art world (Lucinda Hawksley 20). The group was made up of John Everett Millais, William Holman Hunt, Gabriel Rossetti, William Rossetti, Thomas Woolner, Frederic John Stephens and James Collinson. The Brotherhood was controversially known not only for revolutionary aesthetics and experimental techniques, but also for its adoption of a somewhat bohemian lifestyle. These rebellious youths set out to reform British painting so that it would provide a fuller sense of beauty and nature by rejecting the narrative and morality conventions that had characterised Royal Academy art. As their chosen name suggests, the Pre-Raphaelites aspired to an anterior phase of art, before the time of Raphael (1483–1520).

After only five years the group disbanded and “although the membership of the Brotherhood, which effectively lasted from 1848 to 1853, is clearly defined, ‘Pre-Raphaelitism’ is a much more diffuse and elusive phenomenon” (Tim Barringer, Reading the Pre-Raphaelites 13). However, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, as part of the continuing discourse concerning Pre-Raphaelitism and Aestheticism that characterised Victorian Britain, and for his role in generating meanings about female beauty, requires further discussion here. Painter, poet, cultural critic, and philogynist, Rossetti’s contribution to the aesthetic landscape of the mid-to-late nineteenth-century is immeasurable: he wrote for himself a “central role in the history of British art” (Barringer 17). After the disbanding of the Brotherhood, Rossetti continued to hone and publicise his aesthetic philosophies and artistic direction, and even though he publicly exhibited virtually none of his own works after 1850, he inadvertently championed other groupings of artistic practitioners who shared his vision, particularly William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones.

It is Rossetti’s new ideal type of female beauty which especially affects popular fiction. He is mainly responsible for the new types of beauty of the 1850s and 60s:

Rossetti created icons of women as the exotic object of sexual desire; however, in contrast to earlier Pre-Raphaelite works, he extended the repertoire of

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2 To Walter Hamilton is attributed the blurring of the terms ‘Pre-Raphaelite’ and ‘Aestheticism’ in The Aesthetic Movement in England (1882), but they are actually two distinct phenomena.
images of femininity to include a self-possessed and self-absorbed sensuality
and on an increasingly monumental and dominant scale (Barringer 147).
The fleshy quality of Rossetti’s writing and painting was both celebrated and despised. Robert Buchanan’s well-known review of Rossetti’s poetry in 1871 accused the poet of parading “his private sensations before a coarse public” (339). In defence of his art Rossetti directed a tirade against what he viewed as “the stealthy school of criticism” and put his poems into a context that debunked Buchanan’s main accusation of “extolling fleshiness as the distinct and supreme end of poetic and pictorial art” (335).

Rossetti was practitioner of both art and poetry. He wrote poems to complement certain paintings sometimes inscribing his verse on their frames. Notable examples which coincidentally offer an extended treatment of female beauty are the sonnet “Soul’s Beauty” which forms a double work with “Sibylla Palmifera” (1866–70); as does “Body’s Beauty” correspond with the painting “Lady Lilith” (1867). “The Blessed Damozel,” first published in 1850 and revised and republished in 1856, 1870 and 1873, is significant in that it was one of the few times when Rossetti preceded his painting with the poem. In a sense his poems are the aesthetic which lends value to the economic viability of his paintings. If we think about who bought Rossetti’s art this binary becomes clearer: the bourgeois/nouveau riche consumer who represented a new kind of art market was not so concerned to purchase Rossetti’s richly decorated volumes of poetry. It is not by accident that today many Pre-Raphaelite paintings, especially those of Rossetti, survive in the galleries of historically commercial and industrial cities such as Birmingham, Manchester, and Liverpool. Rossetti’s poetry and paintings stand alone as separate entities but then come together as something quite different in an ekphrastic effect, a process by which modes of representation such as literature and art rhetorically take on each other’s form. For example a poem may take on qualities of a painting in the way it attempts to freeze a moment of beauty, or to bring to life women who were the subjects of paintings. The ekphrasis quality of Rossetti’s poetry and paintings and their complementarity of sensation extends the visual imagination and, the ekphrastic spectator, as Michael Benton asserts, reads poems “which, in turn are reading paintings or sculptures; and maybe, doing so from the position of knowing the visual work before the poem; or maybe, of coming to it as a result of the poem; or maybe, of ‘reading’ the visual work through or alongside or against the poem’s ‘reading’ of it” (367). Benton’s description of ekphrasis resonates greatly with the

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3 See Rossetti’s “The Stealthy School of Criticism” (1871), a privately printed pamphlet, for a full account of his rebuttal.
4 For an extended discussion of Rossetti as a practitioner of both art and poetry see Elizabeth K. Helsinger’s Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts: Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Morris.
levels of sensation, aesthetics and emotion at work in reading Rossetti’s poetry and paintings together as a contemplative subjective experience.

In the 1870s Aestheticism became a more widely recognised movement. Designers such as Edward William Godwin and William Morris found that their embroideries, tapestries, fabrics, wallpapers, drawings and sketches, furniture, and stained glass proved popular with British tastes. Morris, in particular, strove to cultivate an agreeable “household taste” amongst the lower classes (Brantlinger, “Household Taste” 91) so as to promote a superior national aesthetic. The Grosvenor Gallery exhibition in London in 1877 provided a space for artists associated with the Aesthetic Movement to display their works. The gallery embraced this kind of art not tolerated by the Royal Academy and in its first exhibition presented paintings by James McNeill Whistler, George Frederick Watts, John Everett Millais, Alma Tadema, William Holman Hunt, Albert Moore, and Walter Crane amongst others whose names have become synonymous with Aestheticism in the nineteenth century. Oscar Wilde reviewed this exhibition and noted that the gallery’s founder, Sir Coutts Lindsey, played just as pivotal a role in the movement as its artists:

So it is to be hoped that this is not the only exhibition of paintings that we shall see in the Grosvenor Gallery; and Sir Coutts Lindsay, in showing us great works of art, will be most materially aiding that revival of culture and love of beauty which in great part owes its birth to Mr. Ruskin, and which Mr. Swinburne, and Mr. Pater, and Mr. Symonds, and Mr. Morris, and many others, are fostering and keeping alive, each in his own peculiar fashion (126).

The followers of the Aesthetic Movement, too, contributed to its momentum by commissioning paintings and portraits that adhered to this new style of art, buying these works of art as they entered the market, or getting their wives’ portrait painted as an aesthetic ‘beauty.’

The aesthetic commodification of women is thus firmly situated, and needs to be understood within a historical setting which provides the cultural contexts of each of my key texts. However, it is also necessary to take into account relevant social changes in the second half of the nineteenth century. This thesis builds upon the work of scholars such as Kathy Alexis Psomiades who documents Aestheticism’s close association with female aesthetic subjects. In Beauty’s Body: Femininity and Representation in British Aestheticism (1997) Psomiades points out that “a remarkable proliferation of feminine figures inhabits the paintings of the aestheticist movement” (1). Although a woman as the subject of art is not new, in the context of British Aestheticism, this takes on significant new meanings because art itself became a feminised construct:
When aestheticism represents art as a beautiful feminine figure, it refers to an entire apparatus that characterizes femininity as private and domestic, spiritual yet sexualized, the irresistible object of desire and a certain kind of especially contemplative subject (4).

The aesthetic representation of women in popular late-Victorian fiction also responds to Psomiades’s approach. For example, in *Trilby* du Maurier engages with multiple, but somewhat contradictory anxieties about the construction of the female subject at the close of the nineteenth century, but ultimately Trilby straddles Psomiades’s perceived high culture/popular culture divide of the Aesthetic Movement because she is at once revered and commodified. Study of the commodification of women is a long-standing field of academic focus, because gender studies has concentrated attention on women as objects of exchange between men. In order to look at how women are being represented as objects endowed with aesthetic value, I first examine academic work on the commodity culture of the Victorian period. By acknowledging this specific cultural context I am able to consider how female beauty, objectified through commodification, is conditioned by its economic and social environment.

The commodification of materials inevitably emerges as a result of consumption: “objects, qualities and signs are turned into commodities where a commodity is an item whose prime purpose is sale in the market place” (Chris Baker 28). The rise of commodity culture in the nineteenth century is the historical backdrop for the study of women as commodities. In 1867 Karl Marx centred his analysis of capitalism on the commodity:

> Commodities come into the world in the shape of use-values, articles, or goods, such as iron, linen, corn etc. This is their plain, homely, bodily form. They are, however, commodities, only because they are something twofold, both objects of utility, and, at the same time, depositories of value. They manifest themselves therefore as commodities, or have the form of commodities, only in so far as they have two forms, a physical or natural form, and a value form (*Capital* 55).

In Marx’s political theory, a commodity is something that is bought and sold and thus has value which represents a quantity of human labour. It also has a use-value because, by its intrinsic characteristics, it can satisfy some human need or want, physical or ideal. By nature this is a social use-value, that is, the object is useful not just to the producer but has a use for others generally. The idea that a commodity is “a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort of another” (53) is applicable to social goods because commodification takes place when value is assigned to something not previously considered in economic terms.
The capitalist economic system of nineteenth-century Britain was a culture that revolved around the production and exchange of material goods. Socio-economic conditions and the gradual movement from “scarcity and struggle” to “surplus and excess” in the economy, dramatically influenced Victorian aesthetics (Regenia Gagnier *Insatiability of Human Wants* 1). Reacting to the societal transformation of commercial activity, such as by the greater circulation of mass-produced commodities, the male consumer exercised a new-found autonomy in the marketplace (Gagnier 2). In particular, greater freedom and variety of choice and taste noticeably affected the previously limited relationship of consumer to commodity. As individuals became active consumers of commodities, the equilibrium of production and consumption distorted considerably (Gagnier 2). Economic theory at the time reflected the altering values of items in the marketplace, mainly as a result of commodification and the dominance of exchange value over use-value: “value no longer inerded in goods themselves – whether the goods were grain or human labour – but in others’ demand for the goods” (Gagnier 4). To a large extent, male consumers’ embodied cultural capital, or taste, produced the value of cultural goods in society, particularly the market price of aesthetic commodities (Gagnier 10).

The Great Exhibition of the works of All Nations that took place in Hyde Park in 1851 is an emblem of Victorian commodity culture: its display of “human progress” makes it an important point of reference in Victorian cultural history, especially in terms of commodity production and distribution (Asa Briggs 24). Its exhibits were equally appreciated and criticised for connecting high art and industrial art, but more importantly, the Great Exhibition generated much public deliberation about British tastes (Patrick Brantlinger, “Household Taste” 86). The Great Exhibition, and the access to mass-produced goods that accompanied it, altered the quality and value of British artistic goods, and sparked debate about the aesthetic and economic tensions embodied by commodity culture. John Ruskin acknowledged the large-scale national collection in “The Opening of the Crystal Palace: Considered in some of its Relations to the Prospects of Art” but also weighed in about the quality of the objects on display because, according to him, “mechanical ingenuity is not the essence either of painting or architecture: and largeness of dimension does not necessarily involve nobleness of design” (6). The important social role of commodities in nineteenth-century Britain is revealed by the implications of far-reaching cultural phenomena such as the Great Exhibition of 1851, with the ensuing social debates over high art versus novel industrial commodities.

Such debates occurred not only in public: they were more subtly played out in the literature of the time, as Helsinger notes, “paintings, prints, and decorative furnishings proliferate in the pages of contemporary novels as they begin to clutter up the interiors of
Victorian houses” (“Pre-Raphaelite Arts” 4). Recent interest in material cultures has sparked theoretical responses to this phenomenon and as a result has called attention to the considerable presence of things, objects and commodities in Victorian fiction.\(^5\) For example Elaine Freedgood’s pattern of reading objects in a literary text both in their literal and metonymic sense is an important analytical method for thinking about commodification in literature.\(^6\) Freedgood also recognises the “prolific output of actual nineteenth-century goods” (4) and relates this to the mid-Victorian novel being a “particularly rich site for tracing the fugitive meanings of apparently non-symbolic objects” (4). Thus she attempts to unlock the symbolic significance of objects and things that make up the material world of the Victorian novel. Freedgood’s reading of objects in their context, as things which “suggest, or reinforce, something we already know about the subjects who use them” (Freedgood 2), is a particularly metonymic process, and one which is useful to the study of women as aestheticised commodities.

In thinking of the term ‘commodity’ beyond its economic construct then, Jeff Nunokawa’s argument that “the essence and ornament of a domestic sphere defined by its distance from the marketplace, the angel of the house\(^7\) is a kind of value that transcends the commodity form” (6) shows specifically the aesthetic value of a woman as her husband’s property. In that form, rather than showing the economic condition of her husband, she acts more as evidence of his ‘taste’ or his cultural and social capital. The phenomenon of taste is central to my study because the ability to distinguish aesthetic properties implies a response on the part of the subject. As Pierre Bourdieu argues, “a work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded” (Distinction 2). My reading of Bourdieu’s theories of aesthetics and cultural capital has led me to consider how class position influences the aesthetics of marriage arrangements.

\(^5\) For studies of how Victorian fiction responded to the rise of commodity culture see Andrew H. Miller’s Novels Behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative (1995) and Christolph Linder’s Fictions of Commodity Culture: From the Victorian to the Postmodern (2003).

\(^6\) Freedgood’s The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel (2006) draws on earlier work by Bill Brown, whose ‘thing theory’, with its origins in Pierre Bourdieu’s reading of objects acknowledges the role of ‘things’ and objects and in literature and culture as materials which are “recognizable, representable, and exchangeable” (Brown Sense of Things 4). Brown’s apprehension of the human engagement with the inanimate object world shows the cultural significance of objects. A related text in this field is Arjun Appadurai’s The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective (1986) which shows how things become commodities not only because of their economic value, but also because of their participation in circuits of exchange.

\(^7\) The ‘angel in the house’ cultural stereotype is originally attributed to an 1854 narrative poem by Coventry Patmore. In Good Girls Make Good Wives (1989) Judith Rowbotham explores the domestic and aesthetic implications of this nineteenth-century feminine ideal and argues that the term refers not only to idealised social behaviours but also to the “ornamental pattern” of upper-middle and upper class femininity (13). Laurence Talairach-Vielmas is also aware of this model of femininity and suggests in Moulding the Female Body in Victorian Fairy Tales (2007) that the fairy-tale motifs often found in Victorian literature emphasise beauty and aesthetics as being essential to ideal femininity.
Bourdieu’s influential theory of cultural capital in its three distinct forms relates to aesthetic discrimination. In “The Forms of Capital,” Bourdieu examines how education, wealth, and the possession of certain cultural objects affect the development of one’s aesthetic disposition and social mobility. Firstly, the *embodied* state Bourdieu refers to is the cultural capital personified in the individual, in the form of “long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body” (243). More specifically it is the taste, skills, knowledge and attitude the aesthetically accomplished individual is presumed to possess. Secondly, the materiality of *objectified* cultural capital, or “cultural goods” (243) acquired by the individual accordingly indicates aesthetic competency, not to mention the availability of economic capital. The potential economic convertibility of a collection of art is read in accordance with what social prominence the collected objects impart. Thirdly, *institutionalised* cultural capital translates to educational qualifications which confirm the cultural capital of the individual and secure the “certitude of cultural competence which confers on its holder a conventional, constant, legally guaranteed value with respect to culture” (248). The possession of academic credentials implies a measured commitment to the acquisition of cultural capital in the same way that the ownership of cultural goods entails significant class status and a greater access to economic wealth (235).

In terms of how this theory applies to women as aestheticised commodities, the male aesthete’s embodied cultural capital translates into a capacity to identify and designate the aesthetic qualities of a desirable female. Recognised ownership (in the form of marriage) of such a culturally-valued commodity in turn represents his objectified cultural capital. Therefore, the ‘possession’ of such a wife would seem to present a clear indication of the husband’s affluence and social status in the Victorian period. An aesthete may also possess institutionalised cultural capital and a high level of education which enables him to reach a socially acknowledged rank and thus to ‘own’ an aesthetic female commodity which reflects his own social situation, in terms of his class status, education, and access to economic capital.

My argument, in brief, is that in literature, when women are represented as aestheticised commodities, the male aesthete’s embodied cultural capital translates into a capacity to identify and designate the aesthetic qualities of a desirable female. Recognised ownership (in the form of marriage) of such a culturally-valued commodity in turn represents his objectified cultural capital. Therefore, the ‘possession’ of such a wife would seem to present a clear indication of the husband’s affluence and social status in the Victorian period. An aesthete may also possess institutionalised cultural capital and a high level of education which enables him to reach a socially acknowledged rank and thus to ‘own’ an aesthetic female commodity which reflects his own social situation, in terms of his class status, education, and access to economic capital.

My argument, in brief, is that in literature, when women are represented as objects endowed with aesthetic value they become commodified by the Victorian marriage market. I contend that the nineteenth-century woman is caught up in a circuit of consumption. Rita Felski foregrounds this culture of consumption and exchange in our understanding of women’s place in nineteenth-century society (61). A woman assumes the power to investigate her sense of self, or she may project her own taste by her conscious choices of adornment: “woman has been seen as an object of consumption exchanged between men in a capitalist economy, compelled to render herself as seductive as possible in order to attract the gaze of
the male buyer” (Felski 64). In this case in point, it cannot be overlooked that the value of the female commodity also relies on her sexual appeal. As Abigail Solomon-Godeau points out, there is a “homology between the seductive, possessable feminine and the seductive, possessable commodity” (114). Ultimately, I will argue that male desire for the beautiful female, often cloaked in aesthetic terms, is a key component in the aesthetic commodification of women. Through marriage, men seek to create a legitimate space to act out heterosexual desire. Essentially the female commodity is an ideal “representation, sculpted by a male hand” and her absorption into a structure of power is normalised by aesthetic language (Michèle Le Doeuff 79). The language of aesthetics that most often surrounds such arrangements in Victorian literary convention stabilises the embodied power that the male subject wields over the beautiful female object.

Women’s association with beauty in the nineteenth century particularly draws attention to physical appearance. The Victorian woman sought to appear attractive through fashion and ornamentation; as Valerie Steel argues, “she had relatively little choice other than to make a ‘profession’ of being pleasing and attractive to men” (Fashion and Eroticism 4). While Steel’s essay is concerned with women and fashion it also points out the connection between dress and sexuality: “all my research has led me to believe that the concept of beauty is sexual in origin, and the changing ideal of beauty apparently reflects shifting attitudes towards sexual expression” (5). In a sense, I too see the aestheticisation of women as being linked to men’s sexual gratification because there is a correlation between aesthetic appreciation and sexual desire. Arguably beauty is what first draws an admirer’s (and a reader’s) attention to a Victorian heroine and makes her valuable in the Victorian marriage market because “from a practical point of view, to be as beautiful as possible was important for the Victorian woman, because to a considerable extent it was through her appearance that she won ‘admiration and affection’” (Steel 105). Ideal feminine beauty was heavily debated during this period. Jeanne Fahnestock’s “Heroine of Irregular Features” (1981) shows how the description of heroines in literature became more vivid by the mid nineteenth century (325), which she attributes to the growing nineteenth century fascination with physiognomy, “the ‘science’ of reading character in the face” (325). The increasing descriptions of feminine features paralleled this fascination with physiognomy, “suggesting without proclaiming . . . imputing intelligence, caprice, and even sexuality to heroines without indecorous explicitness” (326). Fahnestock also relates the growth in conspicuous descriptions of heroines to the literary marketplace, and thus makes a case for authors seeking to align with readers’ growing interest in physiognomy in the nineteenth century (334). The nineteenth-century pseudo-science of physiognomy promoted reading a person’s inner worth by their physical appearance. As a method of analysis, it is
transferrable to literature through its realisation in lengthened descriptive passages of characters and their physiognomic appearance. Narrators, especially male ones, used descriptive passages to show their apprehension of a woman’s beauty and I would argue that “the virtual inventory of the heroine’s features” (328) commonly found in English novels from the 1860s onwards (329) contributes to the way in which women were more and more depicted in the language of aesthetic commodification. As we will see in the case of Nell in *Cometh Up as a Flower*, as a consequence of such precise description, “the minutely described heroine has a much harder time being perfectly beautiful” (329), because as Fahnestock also points out, “irregular features must deviate from some standard of feminine beauty, and in the early and mid-nineteenth-century, that standard was predominantly a classical one” (330). Words like ‘grecian’, ‘perfect’ and ‘regular’ were often used in literature to signal this ideal (330). Ultimately, however, “the Victorian ideal of beauty was not merely physical” (Steel 104). I would also argue that ideal femininity in the nineteenth century encompasses not only physical attributes, but also a variety of customary social behaviors and accomplishments. Throughout the period markers of ideal femininity included morality, social aptitude and talents such as music or handicraft. I am interested in the ways in which men respond predominantly to heroines’ physical beauty and how other accomplishments merely add value to their aesthetic status.

The beautiful Victorian woman served a very essential domestic purpose in that she was ‘on display’ in the home. Beth Newman engages with this idea in *Subjects on Display: Psychoanalysis, Social Expectation, and Victorian Femininity* (2004) and proposes that feminine display served an important role in showcasing her husband’s wealth and social status (2). However, for the Victorian heroine, there is a delicate balance between feminine display and feminine exhibitionism and she must learn the constraints of her aesthetic role (3). Paradoxically, the beautiful heroine charged with displaying husbands’ economic and cultural capital must not enjoy the male gaze in order to remain ideally feminine (3). As Newman notes, the woman who “refrains from being a cynosure” (3) is most often rewarded in the world of the novel because a woman was generally valued more on the Victorian marriage market if she appeared modest and inconspicuous (8). This concept will be clarified further in my thesis when I look at female characters’ responses to aesthetic commodification and whether or not they take pleasure in being ‘on display’ in their husbands’ homes.

Helena Michie is one of the scholars who explores female images in literature and argues that writers encased their descriptions of heroines in codified language that both acknowledged and diminished their physicality (84). In *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Woman’s Bodies* (1987) the codified language that Michie identifies divides into
three forms. Firstly, the *cliché* or *dead metaphor* refers to the literary representation of women through a series of descriptive terms that serve to concurrently depict the heroine in recognisable detail and consign her body to a clichéd state. Thus, she becomes undifferentiated from other literary heroines (87). Secondly, the symbolic nature of the *synecdoche* allows writers to use simple and familiar parts of the female body – such as hands and arms – to stand in for the female body as a whole (97). As Michie notes, this code has a twofold effect which not only figuratively constitutes the female body, it also highlights the absence of it in Victorian literature (96). The hand in particular serves a synecdochal role in the Victorian novel in that it often substitutes for the female body as a whole, and it also symbolizes the heroine’s heart (98); in marriage narratives especially, “hands stand for hearts” (98). Such a notion is particularly relevant when considering not only the physical emphasis on the hand in Victorian marriage narratives but also the way in which the potential husband connects with the heroine via touch. Thirdly, the *metatrope* translates to the heroine being described through a chain of metaphors that often relate to music and art. Like the other two codes, the metatrope frames the heroine within a familiar discourse but also distances the female body from the reader (102) because she appears more as a work of art than a physical being. This third code is chiefly applicable to the study of women as aestheticised commodities, because on the one hand it foregrounds her aesthetic attributes, and on the other hand it objectifies her through her figurative association with objects of art.

-Marriage, Market, Metaphor-

Women are commodified in marriage contexts in this period. While owning a thing is not the same as being master of a servant, and wives might well occupy both discourses, they are different discourses. Leonore Davidoff’s “Mastered for Life” (1974) underscores this idea in its discussion of the natural hierarchy of a household in which the husband is ‘master’ over his family and servants. Davidoff likens the relations between master and servant to the interaction between a husband and wife in terms of subordination (407). Conversely, in *Marriage and Property* (1991) Elizabeth Craik argues that marriage was seen as a haven for women, idealised throughout the nineteenth century despite on-going debates about women’s position in society. Marriage can be summed up as “the goal of a man’s labours and the summit of a woman’s expectations” (171). Regardless of social commentators like Mill arguing against separate spheres (168) and the growth of education and employment opportunities for women transforming their social position from the 1880s (171), Craik argues that “the one irrefragable claim of every woman on her society was that she passed safely from the custody of her father into that of her husband” (162). The language in this quotation
invokes the notion of custodianship, power and exchange in that the woman is transferred between owners.

The husband’s position as master is also acknowledged through nineteenth-century social and legal expectations. Under the common law, a wife was in many ways regarded as the property of her husband. William Blackstone, writing in the eighteenth century, stated:

By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection, and cover, she performs everything . . . (Commentaries on the Laws of England 746).

In 1854 Barbara Bodichon drew attention to this idea of ‘couverte,’ the condition or position of a woman during her married life, when she is by law under the authority and protection of her husband, in her Brief Summary of the Laws of England Concerning Women: “a man and wife are one person in law; the wife loses all her rights as a single woman, and her existence is, as it were absorbed in that of her husband” (15). In theory, a woman’s body belonged to her husband; in effect she was his possession. Joan Perkin’s Women and Marriage (1989) provides a thoughtful summary of Bodichon’s work and highlights the significant differences between single women and married women in the nineteenth century (11). Perkin draws attention to the advantages of class and economic wellbeing in securing fair marriage settlements for women. Divorce law is also underlined in this text, with Perkin showing that generally marriage “is a public and virtually indissoluble contract, a legally approved sexual relationship and validation of property and inheritance rights” (30). The legal status of married women and the wider social implications of marriage arrangements in Victorian culture necessarily inform my reading of women characters’ positions in later chapters.

A year after Bodichon’s pamphlet Caroline Norton’s “The Non-Existence of Women” appeared. In the mid-nineteenth century Norton was denied access to her children by her husband, and was consequently active in British campaigns for the removal of laws that highlighted women’s unequal status to men in society. Her essay questions the law and points to the double standards surrounding divorce in the mid-nineteenth century (Marie Mulvey-Roberts and Tamae Mizuta 544). Norton rather controversially argues: “[women] are born and educated, as it were, for total absorption” (558). The word ‘absorption’ is also rich in meaning in the way it points to a woman’s value as a relational being, because a woman’s life was most valued in her relation to parents, siblings, husband, children, servants and others to whom she might have social or charitable responsibilities. Norton most likely refers to this kind of absorption of a woman’s selfhood into perpetual secondariness to others. Norton’s
situation was very well known and is a key instance of women’s suffering unjustly under the law and resisting it. While under the original system, a woman under the common law was “in many ways regarded as the property of her husband” (Mary Lyndon Shanley 8), over the second half of the nineteenth century Britain began to respond to increasing opposition by women to biased regulations regarding women’s right to divorce, women’s rights to property, custody of children and marital abuse (3). In 1857, the Matrimonial Causes Act reformed the divorce law but still favoured the husband in that a man could divorce his wife for adultery, but a wife had to prove adultery aggravated by cruelty or desertion in order to be granted a divorce. In 1870 the first Married Women's Property Act allowed women to keep their earnings and even inherit personal property; however it was not until 1882 that the second Married Women's Property Act gave women the full right to own property in their own names and to keep their own earnings in the event of separation or divorce.

Changes to matrimonial law in the nineteenth century were a substantial issue in Victorian studies in the 1980s with the appearance of Lee Holcombe’s Wives and Property: Reform of the Married Women’s Property Law in Nineteenth-Century England in 1983 and Shanley’s Feminism, Marriage and the Law in 1989. Holcomb surveys women’s legal position in relation to changes to the married women’s property laws, while Shanley foregrounds the significance of the reforms of marriage laws in Victorian Britain in terms of married women’s civil rights. As I have already pointed out, while these reforms altered the rights of married women, they by no means equalised their position with men. Victorian fiction, especially when written by women, often recorded the adverse effects of women’s limited civic status and correspondingly a lot of novels monitored how these legal and social changes impacted on women’s lives. Tim Dolin’s Mistress of the House (1997) has shown that the marriage plot fiction written between the 1850s and 1880s underlines the changing legal status of women in the nineteenth century in terms of their lack of control over property and earnings (1), arguing that this is in turn represented by: “the age-old matrimonial ending becom[ing] in these novels a double sign of the heroine’s triumphant accession to a newly apotheosized middle-class domestic realm, and her ritual preparation for legal absorption and dispossession” (3). Despite the reform of property laws concerning women during this period, which Dolin looks at, women remained essentially the property of their husbands (9). If marriage is the “assumed ending for the Victorian heroine” (10) Dolin examines how marriage is represented in literature, especially in relation to the paradox that a woman of property is more attractive as property herself: “her property is the supreme sign of her eligibility for marriage, and an integral part of her attractiveness. She is therefore already
caught up in the market, and already conceived of as a valuable property, and not an owner of valuable property” (10).

Not all the marriage arrangements in the texts I will study are without the idea of love, falling in love, affection, respect and companionship. Stephanie Coontz’s study of the history of marriage includes an interesting chapter on Victorian marriages. Her examination of the implications love had in nineteenth-century matrimonial arrangements focuses on marriage as a way of conforming to social expectation despite its sentimentalisation in this period (172). Coontz writes about the tension between marrying for love and marrying for money/class status and also notes that “women needed to marry in order to survive” (185). This tension also incorporates the possibility that a woman might be fallen in love with, not just chosen as a wife, because she fitted into an aestheticised idea of female beauty, and/or because she herself understood and was able to symbolically appropriate aesthetic values: to dress, to decorate a house, buy tasteful furnishings or ornaments or personal adornments, and entertain as suited the current aesthetic ideal.

Nineteenth-century society encouraged unmarried women to develop domestic and artistic talents in order to market themselves as understatedly attractive wives and home-makers. Nancy Armstrong’s Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel (1989) discusses the rise of conduct books in the eighteenth century and notes their continual popularity in the nineteenth century (62). These ‘educational handbooks’ for women detailed the “practical matters of running a household” (61) and were viewed as an essential part of the gentlewoman’s education (61). One such conduct book, Mrs Sarah Ellis’s, The Women of England, their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits (1839) was written in order to “increase the moral worth of [her] countrywomen” (344). It contains many long passages about how young ladies could make themselves attractive to prospective suitors:

I have devoted an earlier chapter in this work to the consideration of dress and manners; but I have omitted one of the most striking points of view in which these subjects can be regarded,—the different characters they sometimes assume before, and after marriage. When a young lady dresses with a view to general approbation, she is studiously solicitous to observe, what she believes to be, the rules of good taste; and more especially, if a gentleman, whose favourable opinion she values, evinces any decided symptoms of becoming her admirer. She then meets him with her hair arranged in the most becoming style; with the neat shoe, and pure-white gloves, which she has heard him commend in others, with the pale scarf, the quiet-coloured robe, and with the general aspect of her costume accommodated to his taste. He cannot but
observe this regard to his wishes, and he notes it down as a proof of amiable temperament, as well as sympathy of habitual feeling. Auguring well for his future happiness with a woman, who even in matters of such a trifling moment is willing to make his wish her law, he prevails upon her at last to crown that happiness by the bestowment of her hand (267–8).

Women in the nineteenth century were encouraged to respond to the aesthetic expectations of men in order that they might win their affection, and perhaps even more importantly, their hand in marriage. Such books proved popular with their female readers and reinforced the idea of marriage as an essential part of a Victorian woman’s life, and a focal point of Victorian society (Patricia Jalland 45).

The idea of marriage as a way of conforming to social expectation is accompanied by a compulsion to marry in the nineteenth century. John R. Gillis underscores the significance of class status and marriage choice: “a wife who could offer a little refinement was often preferred by those who considered themselves a cut above the common lot” (245). ‘Refinement,’ here, probably does mean good taste in the sense of knowing how to keep a genteel house; but equally, it could refer to manners, accent, speech, knowing social rules and so on. A woman’s ‘marriageability’ was tied to her beauty, her social class, economic fortune, virginity and virtue, and accomplishments. Such qualities made her an ‘object of desire’ in the Victorian marriage market and signalled that the marriage market itself was not entirely about economics. Gillis’s quotation also shows the sort of ‘value’ a beautiful woman had on the marriage market, especially later in the century, because aesthetic qualities were looked for by men who sought to project a kind of cultural superiority through having an aesthetically-pleasing wife. While being beautiful was an attribute that was continuously valued on the Victorian marriage market, being aesthetically minded as well was a quality that appeared more during the latter part of the century in light of the shift in aesthetic ideals brought about by Aesthetic Movement. My thesis traces this shift in the aesthetic value of women in Victorian Britain from Broughton’s emphasis on unusual beauty as the reason why Nell is chosen as a marriage partner to Meredith’s egoist’s unashamed desire to have a wife that mirrors his own aesthetic sensibilities; from Ouida’s contest between natural and artificial beauty, to Gaston’s choice of wife because she models the ideal of beauty in Corelli’s *Wormwood*, and finally to du Maurier’s parody of the married woman as a submissive female.

When Edward Bulwer-Lytton referred to the ‘universal marketing’ of ‘unmarried women’ in Britain in 1836, he recognised the economic implications of the Victorian ‘marriage market’: “A notorious characteristic of English society is the universal marketing of our unmarried women; a marketing peculiar to ourselves in Europe, and only rivalled by the slave
merchants of the East. We are a match-making nation” (88). Bulwer-Lytton’s early-nineteenth-century allusion to an Eastern slave market has resonances for the novels of Meredith, Ouida and Corelli and my discussion in later chapters of the way in which heroines like Clara, Vere, and Pauline imagine the barbarisms of slavery still being practised within the context of their marriage arrangements. One of the problems associated with the Victorian marriage market was the tendency to regard marriage as merely a business transaction between two families. The idea of a woman being for ‘sale’ is not new in feminist critical studies and it has been studied generally in the context of marriage history. However, the aesthetics of the marriage market, as I have illuminated in the preceding paragraphs, is one of the more neglected fields in Victorian social history.

The Victorian marriage market is one of the main phenomena from which my study of women as aestheticised commodities derives, but as a cultural cliché, it lacks specific discussion in literary and cultural history. The idea of a marriage system that imitates the conditions of market sales is so prevalent in Victorian fiction that it seems to be taken for granted, the result being that I have not been able to find any definition or description of it. My understanding of the Victorian marriage market is two-pronged. At the outset, it is a metaphor for the way in which families sought to arrange financially and socially advantageous marital unions between their sons and daughters in order to preserve “the two interrelated factors of social and economic interest, which traditionally determined marriage choice” (Jalland 51). Relatedly, the ‘marriage market’ also refers to publicly organised events on the social calendar intended to bring eligible men and women together, or as Jalland notes: “elaborate social conventions were created to restrict and regulate young love among the upper-middle and upper class. The London season, ‘coming out’ country house parties and balls – all operated to ensure that young people only met others of desirable social background” (21). The London season in particular served as a more literal kind of marriage market because a young woman’s presence at various social engagements during this season announced her candidature for marriage, with the result that many of them succeeded in gaining good husbands after meeting them at a dance or ball (Jalland 23). These balls and dances, like many Victorian social practices, incorporated a plethora of status and etiquette-related customs that served not only to regulate the experience but to emphasise the expected social decorum of such events.

The prevalence of marriage narratives in the nineteenth century ensured that marriage was seen as the expected vocation for women, as Judith Knelman argues: “Victorian novels, a more traditional (but not necessarily reliable) source of information than newspapers, tell us that women were meant to have husbands, and to hold on to them” (80). Indeed, most popular
fiction at the time centred on a marriage or romance narrative, and correspondingly, this subject matter has become more and more important in studies of Victorian literature. This proliferation of popular romantic fiction during the Victorian period has led to related critical consideration in recent times. For example, Rachel Ablow’s *The Marriage of Minds: Reading Sympathy in the Victorian Marriage Plot* (2007) brings together a number of ideas that relate marriage to the experience of reading about it. Ablow uses the term ‘sympathy’ not in its common practice as a state of feeling sorry for someone, but rather more broadly as “the experience of entering imaginatively into another’s thoughts or feelings” (8). She is interested in this process both as a realisation of the relationship between reader and text, but also the sympathetic relationship between husband and wife. At the centre of Ablow’s exploration of marriage narratives is the idea of coverture and she is particularly interested in how the idea of ‘one flesh’ in the nineteenth century was combined with notions of coverture:

As a result, there is a consistent slippage between discussions of marriage as making husband and wife one person legally (under coverture), practically (as in a household with a division of labour), romantically (as in desexualised versions of [Plato’s] *Symposium*), or psychically (as an extreme form of sympathy) (11).

Ablow argues that the canonical texts that she explores in this work not only demonstrate the comparability of ‘sympathy’ between marriage and reading, but also “the overdetermination of that comparability by a legal context that claimed to absorb married women’s legal identities into their husband’s” (15). The absorption of identities between a husband and his wife, then, parallels the understanding between reader and text. I record Ablow’s theory here as a recent significant idea in the study of Victorian marriage in canonical literature, one that

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8 For earlier studies of the importance of marriage in popular Victorian fiction see Jenni Calder’s *Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction* (1976) which traces the commercialisation of marriage in the nineteenth century through its representation in literature of the time. Drawing attention to the economics of nineteenth-century marriage arrangements (24, 25, 26, 31), Calder suggests that mercenary marriages paralleled the preoccupation with money in Victorian fiction (25) as demonstrated by the language of trade and acquisition in mid-nineteenth-century literature, especially Dickens (108). See also Shirley Foster’s *Victorian Women’s Fiction: Marriage, Freedom, and the Individual* (1985) for its examination of romance in the Victorian novel, specifically pointing out that the “capacity for portraying love” is categorised as a female tradition (2). Foster also argues that the female writer in the Victorian period had an obligation to engage in current debates about marriage (15) and whilst some authors, such as John Stuart Mill and Mona Caird, challenged matrimonial ideologies (8) wifehood and motherhood was viewed as an integral part of female experience (6, 11). Similarly, in *Good Girls Make Good Wives* (1989) Judith Rowbotham explores the professionalisation of wifehood in the nineteenth century and maintains that stories for girls during this period emphasised the traditional feminine role and taught that “the highest ambition for a good girl of any social class was shown as being to become a professional good wife and mother” (12).

9 The *Symposium* is a philosophical book written by Plato sometime after 385 BC and deals with the genealogy, nature and purpose of love.
provides an intellectual starting point for my own study instead of popular fiction, as we shall see in more detail in the section that follows.

-Gender and the High Art/Popular Culture Divide-

As Amy Cruse pointed out in the early twentieth century when scholars were acutely aware of the dichotomy of the canon: “it is the great books, we know, that make up the literature of a country, but there is a sense in which the lesser books are equally important” (Victorians 14). A recent trend in Victorian studies has been to foreground noncanonical popular fiction as repositories of cultural value. Though texts that are identified as being ‘popular’ do not necessarily match the critical acclaim of canonical novelists such as Henry James, Charles Dickens, George Eliot and the Brontës, or William Makepeace Thackeray, Anthony Trollope, Elizabeth Gaskell, Robert Louis Stevenson and Thomas Hardy, who are very highly regarded and attract a substantial critical attention, their rediscovery in recent times has led to a lot of interesting and crucial work on Victorian social history. My thesis is grounded in literature that was in high circulation during the last third of the nineteenth century and accordingly I have concentrated my research around a number of key ideas pertaining to the production and consumption of popular Victorian fiction. I begin this section by exploring the wider context of the Victorian popular fiction industry in order to contextualise the processes of the nineteenth-century literary marketplace. This is followed by an acknowledgement of the relevant critical material concerning popular writing, especially in terms of women’s position as both readers and writers within this industry. I also trace with some thoroughness the sensation genre as a case study of popular fiction, aiming to capture some of the economic and aesthetic tensions it embodied.

The novels of popular writers, who were consciously supplying for the masses, were available in monthly parts published in shilling periodicals (Rachel Anderson 19). Texts that gained a wide readership through serial publication then went on to achieve more literary recognition through publication as a three-volume novel. The format of novels during this period was most commonly the three-volume set, costing 31/6d and “priced out of the range of the common reader” (Anderson 19). W.J. McCormack explains this commercial process:

First, the novelist received or contracted to receive payment from either the publisher or the proprietor or the editor of the magazine in which the work was to appear. In return, the magazine generated subscriptions and sales as a consequence of providing fiction of the kind members of the reading public enjoyed or otherwise approved. Secondly, the serial novel, on or just before completion in the magazine, was transformed into a three-volume book
publication, some (but by no means always) issued from the same publishing house: this publication provided the author with further payment and generated further sales. . . . Thereafter, the author’s income depended on the publication of further editions of the novel . . . serialization constituted a rite of passage in which the author was obliged to demonstrate a sustained appeal to readers (100–1).

The circulating library, established by Charles Edward Mudie in 1842, also allowed those who could not afford to purchase fiction, the opportunity to borrow three-volume novels for a yearly subscription of one guinea (Anderson 19). As Anderson argues, “Mudie had the power to make or break an author by inclusion or rejection of a novel in its lists. Popular fiction and Mudie’s were synonymous, and the circulating library revolutionised the reading habits of the middle classes” (20). Mudie also effectively censored fiction by choosing not to stock fiction of a questionable nature. In the nineteenth century, while all forms of literature flourished (17), the content of some of the novels produced and consumed during the period was sometimes problematic, with this mass readership’s penchant for melodrama, crime and violence (18). Anderson questions whether the nineteenth century was a “triumph” of fiction, or a “flood of fiction” (22) but what is unquestionable is not so much the literary, or indeed moral, merit of these texts but their successful sales records.

Norman Feltes’s Literary Capital and the Late Victorian Novel (1993) traces the different stages of the manufacture of Victorian novels from the pre-capitalist petty commodity mode to the fully capitalist, monopoly-capital mode of production (4).10 These changes were brought about by certain cultural and social factors such as technological change, and increasing international competition (4).11 At the same time, ideologies of literary value were also changing especially in terms of the relationship between author and publisher (5–6).12 As such, the world of book publishing embodied the tension between aesthetics and economics (14) because different types of publishers emphasised different parts of the book production process with some focusing more on the literary market and others being more concerned with the aesthetic quality of the books they produced (18). Within this shifting climate of ideologies rose the publisher’s readers and literary agents who mediated between publishers

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10 Feltes’s earlier work, Modes of Production in Victorian Novels, outlines changes in the material conditions for the production of Victorian novels from 1836–1910 in more detail, arguing that “capitalist social relations permeat[ed] the Victorian social formation, shaping social phenomena as commodities, so literary texts are distinguished and transformed, along with the forces in relation to their production” (xi).


12 These changes were due to shifting notions of literary property and economic profit (Feltes, Literary Capital 7–9).
and authors in order to determine both the literary qualities as well as commercial potential (19–21) of certain books.

The relationship between literature and economics in the nineteenth century, specifically the ‘value’ of literature is the subject of Ian Small’s, “The Economies of Taste” Literary Markets and Literary Value in the Late Nineteenth Century” (1996). This essay investigates the difference between ‘popular’ and ‘elite’ culture in association with literary production and reception. Using early Marxist ideas of nineteenth-century literature, Small suggests that the growth of popular culture in opposition to elite culture during this period was also considered in relation to class distinction:

Popular culture, it was suggested, was produced by a number of material, technological and social changes. It was brought about by the advent of mass literacy acting in concert with new groups of economically empowered readers, modern distribution networks, and mass publishing technologies (such as photo-lithography, or cheap paperbacks and magazines produced by steam-powered rotary presses) (8).

This influential way of thinking about the development of the popular and elite culture rift in the nineteenth century also posits that there is a distinction between the mass market and the elite market (9) and “presupposes that the terms ‘mass,’ ‘popular,’ and ‘elite’ answer to categories which are themselves stable, in the sense that the values or tastes which they designate remain constant over time” (9). Small says that this is a limitation of Marxist analysis, thus: “the main drawback of the mass/elite oppositions is that it assumes a simple correlation between economic status and cultural value in which those literary works that appeal to an elite market automatically become part of a society’s cultural capital” (9). Small wants to avoid this quantitative view of value and goes on to talk about the 1980’s “more sophisticated versions of this ‘mass versus elite’ argument” (10), which shifts focus from production to consumption (10).

As the title suggests, Terry Lovell’s Consuming Fiction (1997) is concerned with the consumption of literature; it examines this by relating the idea of the novel as commodity to the growth of capitalism in late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century society (47). Lovell argues that during the period 1840–94, the “novel’s respectability regarding both its literary status and bourgeois values was established. It was marked by a development of a stable system of production and distribution” (11). Within this context of literary production and distribution Lovell also examines the significance of women as major producers and consumers of popular fiction in the nineteenth century, an idea Gaye Tuchman earlier explored in 1989 in Edging Women Out: Victorian Novelists, Publishers, and Social Change.
Tuchman follows the development of the novel in the nineteenth century from its early trivialising association with feminine writers and readers to the masculine appropriation of novel writing as an intellectual instrument by the end of the nineteenth century: “before 1840 the British cultural elite accorded little prestige to the writing of novels, and most English novelists were women. By the turn of the twentieth century ‘men of letters’ acclaimed novels as a form of great literature, and most critically successful novelists were men” (1). Interestingly, Tuchman sees this shift in the cultural status of the novel as symptomatic of the gendered distinction between popular and high culture. On the other hand, publishers were not about to disregard the opportunity to make money from books that they envisaged would become popular:

In mid-nineteenth-century Britain, the distinction between consumer-oriented and producer-oriented publishers was not as marked as, say, [among our contemporary publishers]. Indeed, publishers did not assume that a popular book was unworthy of critical praise. Conversely, they believed that some critically esteemed novels could gain large audiences (23–4).

Whereas women were prevalent as novel writers in the eighteenth century, by the late nineteenth century, women were relegated to the popular-culture novel and the high-culture novel was deemed a male enterprise (69).

Recently, popular fiction, especially the previously unfamiliar work of women authors, has become the focus of some important critical work in Victorian Studies, with scholars such as Kay Boardman and Shirley Jones extending the study of popular women writers by localising them within intellectual and domestic frameworks. That being said, recent studies of women and popular fiction tend to draw on major works of feminist literary criticism from the 1970s onwards. No study of popular Victorian women writers is complete without drawing attention to Elaine Showalter’s valuable survey of this literary category. A Literature of their Own first appeared in 1977 and was revised and expanded in 1999. Not only does Showalter set out a forceful theory of the nineteenth-century female literary history, she foregrounded many almost forgotten Victorian women authors. Her opening chapter, “The Female Tradition,” proposes that “the Nineteenth Century was the age of the female novelist” (3). However, in terms of female creativity, Showalter argues that the larger question is not whether or not women simply “appropriated another masculine genre” (4). In attempting to identify innovative feminine literary traits Showalter traces historical responses to women’s literature, and unearths some of the “personal and psychological” stereotypes surrounding lady novelists (5–6). Ultimately what is often discerned about women’s writing comes from the four or five ‘great’ female writers: Austen, the Brontës, Eliot and Woolf, leaving no room
for other commercially-successful, yet not as literary female writers (7). Accordingly, theories of women’s writing derive from these major novelists: “having lost sight of the minor novelists, who were links in the chain that bound one generation to the next, we have not had a very clear understanding of the continuities of women’s writing, nor any reliable information about the relationships between the writers’ lives and the changes in the legal, economic, and social status of women” (7). Now, however, the minor novelists – the ‘links in the chain’ – have come into focus more in Victorian studies and their writing proves very useful to cultural and sociological examinations of the period.

Other academic work, prior to Showalter, that served to develop the study of women and popular fiction in the nineteenth century includes a number of articles and books that appeared in the 1970s. Firstly, Louis James’s article “The Rational Amusement: ‘Minor’ Fiction and Victorian Studies” appeared in 1970 and proposed that lesser-known Victorian fiction had been left out of most studies of Victorian literature (193–4). While ‘major’ novelists such as Eliot and Dickens are the subjects of most studies of Victorian literature, James is more interested in the likes of Anthony Trollope, Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Rhoda Broughton. James pinpoints what separates major and minor authors, arguing that in the depiction of social realism, “the recognized giants appear to be those that redirect their imaginative impulse while to some extent remaining beyond their time” (195) and suggests that this difference is in part due to some writers “of meager talent” mercenarily exploiting the Victorian literary market (195). However, as I intend to show in my thesis, just because some novels lacked ‘literary calibre’ does not mean that they do not stand up to analysis by today’s scholars of Victorian literature, which James recognises: “we need to apply more complex methodologies in the investigation of Victorian minor fiction” (199).

Perhaps Rachel Anderson’s The Purple Heart Throbs: the Sub-Literature of Love (1974) is one of the first to pick up on James’s vision because it makes known many of the forgotten female authors of the mid-to-late nineteenth century. This survey of romantic fiction over the last 150 years claims that the modern-day impression of romantic fiction as “poorly written and cheaply produced” was also applied to its Victorian ancestor and the latter was “condescendingly dismissed” in the same manner (12). Writing in the 1970s, Anderson laments the lack of scholarly attention to “light reading matter” (13), but this gap has been filled in recent years by the work of Pamela K. Gilbert, Rachel Ablow and Lyn Pykett. Anderson defines romance rather generically as “the branch of fiction consisting of lightweight, but full-length, novels of no great literary qualities which appeal to a wide popular audience” (14). Despite the lack of ‘literary qualities’ associated with this type of fiction, “reading matter which can continue to attract readers in such numbers must have some
importance” (14). The spread of the activity of reading, according to Anderson, is a nineteenth-century development, due to both “improvements in education, and also improvements in the techniques of papermaking and printing” (16). Naturally, along with a semi-educated society’s new-found ability to read, came the appetite for “easy-reading matter” (17), a demand which was filled by popular Victorian authors, many now forgotten.

The relationship between women writers and readers in 1860’s Britain is the focus of “Sentiment and Suffering: Women’s Recreational Reading in the 1860s” (1977) by Sally Mitchell. Most significantly, Mitchell explains the purpose of the popular women’s novel: it “supplied for women of the middle classes both a means of filling leisure time and a mode of recreation in the true sense of the word” (29). The light fiction of this period was characterised by “a cluster of situations, characters and emotions which [were] peculiar to their era” (30). The highly emotional nature of this fiction is of particular interest to Mitchell because she argues that emotion and sentimentality respond to the social conditions in which this fiction is produced (31). The emotion experienced by the romantic heroine, commonly expressed as “pain, suffering and alienation” (34) is felt also by the reader. As Mitchell argues, the woman’s novel provides satisfactions which real life lacks. It offers vicarious participation, emotional expression, and the feeling of community that arises from a recognition of shared dreams, and it does so within the limits of imaginative possibility. The reader’s sensibilities about her own character, her virtues, and her moral values are not violated (45).

Popular fiction by women, for women, served an important social role because it concurrently affirmed the woman reader’s everyday emotions whilst offering her imagined escape from everyday domestic life.

The 1980s produced a surge of interest in women and mass-market fiction. For example, Jean Radford’s The Progress of Romance: The Politics of Popular Fiction (1986) situates this scholarly interest in popular fiction within the context of 1980’s “renewed interest in all forms of popular culture” (1). Interdisciplinary in its form, this text pays attention to historical and contemporary popular fiction, specifically focusing on the romance genre (2). Although Jan Cohn’s 1988 work, Romance and the Erotics of Property focuses mainly on the contemporary romance novel, it traces the historical origins of this literary genre through a reading of two popular American Victorian novelists. While Cohn’s analysis of the popular romance genre novelists also takes into account iconic romantic narratives such as Pride and Prejudice and Jane Eyre, her work is not concerned with the popular authors covered in my thesis, nor
indeed the Victorian British non-canonical authors in general. However, in the American and contemporary literary contexts, Cohn does recognise the tension between marrying for romantic love versus economic considerations that these novels deal with (8). Ultimately Cohn’s work deals with the historical and contemporary romantic heroine’s journey towards a successful marriage, a marriage which fulfils her romantic and financial aspirations (131). This narrative strategy is common also in British literature and forms the basis of many romance plots. These concerns, grounded in the British context, will necessarily be investigated in my thesis.

In recent times 1860’s fiction and popular female authors again came into focus in the mid-1990s with two valuable articles by Ellen Miller Casey and Carol Poster. Firstly, Poster’s “Oxidization is a Feminist Issue: Acidity, Canonicity, and Popular Victorian Female Authors” (1996) is a survey of the state of popular fiction studies and Victorian women writers and their exclusion from the canon. Even though “female authors were substantial producers of Victorian fiction” (287) their work has in the past not often been thought of as being literary. Indeed, the division between popular and literary fiction is more often than not a gendered issue in literature studies. Women writers of the Victorian period had significant influence over literary genres such as sensation and domestic fiction, as Poster notes: “three major genres of the Victorian period – the sensation novel, the domestic novel, and the sentimental novel – were originated or substantially developed by popular female novelists” (296). For that reason, Poster argues, it is important to include more obscure writers such as Braddon, Broughton, Corelli and Ouida in Victorian literary studies. For a discussion of the gendered implications of Victorian popular fiction see Pamela K. Gilbert’s Disease, Desire and the Body in Victorian Women’s Popular Fiction (1997). This text is remarkable both for its work on Broughton and Ouida, positioning these women within their historical contexts, but also for the way it examines why popular fiction was associated particularly with women writers and readers.

Casey’s “Edging Women Out?: Reviews of Women Novelists in the ‘Athenaeum,’ 1869–1900” (1996) also discusses the literary presence of women during this period, especially in regard to women’s espousal of novel writing (151). While women were dominating the novel market, Casey argues that they were perhaps underpaid and over criticised by reviewers (151). The Athenaeum, as “the most respected and influential critical journal of its time” provides

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13 Similarly, Janice A. Radway’s Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature explores contemporary popular women’s fiction in America. Nevertheless her consideration of romance narratives and mass culture is very interesting. Radway argues that modern romance narratives have standardised language and narrative strategies, an idea which I would argue also applies to nineteenth-century popular women’s novels.
reviews which Casey uses to explore the “publishing and reception history of Victorian women novelists” (151). From her research she concludes two main facts: that “the number of novels by women increased substantially from 1860 to 1900, but since the total number of novels reviewed increased even more, the percentage of novels by women [which got reviewed] decreased” (152). The double standards associated with publishing and reception of women’s novels during this period are evident. Not only were women writers believed to be deficient in language and grammar, but their choice of subject matter – love and marriage – was supposedly less intellectual and they were criticised for this (156). However, as the century evolved, “Athenaeum reviewers modified their evaluation of women novelists: after 1880, rather than edging women out, many reviewers took more positive and less stereotyped attitudes towards them. For mid-century reviewers, women were emphatically the stranger, the other” (158). These reviews that revealed “stereotyped concepts of women’s inferiority” slowly began to accept women novelists’ aptitude by the end of the century (152). Casey also documents a number of interesting errors made by the publication pertaining to the gender identity of its writers. For example, the review of the anonymously published Cometh Up as a Flower, insisted “the author is not a young woman, but a man, who, in the present story, shows himself destitute of refinement of thought or feeling, and ignorant of all that women either are or ought to be” (155). As Casey argues, this claim of gender identity has ideological significance in that it makes a case for assumptions about male authors and their understanding of female characters (156).

Even more recently, Boardman and Jones’s Popular Victorian Women Writers (2004) explores the varied lives of popular women authors and is interested in how such women ‘fit’ writing into their domestic and maternal lives. Out of the female writers of the nineteenth century, a clear hierarchy has been established, putting ‘immortality’ ahead of ‘popularity’ (3). This notion of a ‘feminine tradition’ has of late shifted to include an understanding of “the Victorian literary world where the marketplace rather than aesthetics defined a writer’s significance” (4). Indeed, as Boardman and Jones add, a writer’s “relationship to the market is perhaps one of the reasons why so many writers were written out of the canon; generally to be popular, best-selling, marketable, a writer had to produce work suiting the palette of a public eager for reading material in an increasingly literate and urban culture” (4). In conjunction with the overall post-war rediscovery of women and popular literature, Boardman and Jones outline the development of a feminist critical tradition, of course drawing attention to Showalter and others, as well as foregrounding some of the lesser known contributors to this tradition, all the while highlighting how women’s experience is related to women’s writing (8). In that sense they refer to the studies of single authors which have been variously
produced over the last three decades (10) as well as recent critical studies of certain themes and representations (9). This book identifies three key areas in the study of women’s writing: radical writing, writing for children, and sensation and romance fiction, “the archetype of the gendered genre” (10, 12).

Sensation fiction burgeoned in the 1860s and 1870s and was partly derived from earlier gothic and romantic conventions. Typically the sensation novel focused on scandalous subject matter including crime, adultery, illegitimacy, seduction, mistaken identity and murder. In situating these themes in ordinary, recognisable and typically contemporary domestic contexts, thereby destabilising the common Victorian-era belief that sensational events were removed from British middle-class society (Patrick Brantlinger, “What is Sensational about the Sensation Novel?” 1), it differed from other contemporary literary categories, including the gothic novel which tended instead towards historic locations. When sensation novels emerged in mid-Victorian Britain they immediately became bestsellers and some continued to dominate the literary market (Nicholas Rance 1). For instance the sensational East Lynne (1860) by Mrs Henry Wood was the top-selling novel of the nineteenth century (Winifred Hughes, “Sensation Novel” 260). These novels were in high circulation as commodities of Victorian literary production and distribution circuits. Henry Mansel, reviewing the sensation fiction phenomenon in 1863, drew attention to its mass production and commerciality, noting that: “a commercial atmosphere floats around works of this class, redolent of the manufactory and the shop. The public want novels, and novels must be made—so many yards of printed stuff, sensation pattern, to be ready by the beginning of the season” (483). Mansel’s highly industrialised language and references to the raw materials of book manufacture in relation to the production of sensation fiction underline how sensation fiction was a significant product of Victorian mass culture (Hughes, “Sensation Novel” 267). However, because these novels were associated more with popular audiences and indeed because their subject matter dealt with melodramatic plotlines, sensation fiction was often relegated to a lower class of literature because it was said to feel “the popular pulse” (P. O’Neil 210). The literary and cultural phenomenon was criticised publicly and privately not only for its subversive qualities but also for its social implications, as Hughes argues: “the threat to literary standards is only exceeded

15 For example, Joanne Shattock’s collection, Women and Literature in Britain 1800–1900 (2001), observes how women contributed to nineteenth-century literary culture as both writers and readers and highlights the importance of the female reader in relation to the growth of the Victorian mass readership. In particular Valerie Sander’s “Women, Fiction and the Market Place” explores the professionalisation of women’s writing during this period. For further studies of popular women writers and their relationship to the ‘canon,’ see also Pamela K. Gilbert’s “Feminism and the canon: Recovery and Reconsideration of Popular Novelists” (2009) and Emma Liggins and Andrew Maunder’s “Reassessing Nineteenth-Century Popular Fiction by Womem, 1825–1880” (2004).
by the threat to social distinctions. Reading sensation novels becomes a subversive pursuit because it brings the middle and lower classes together over the same printed page” (Maniac in the Cellar 42). With this mass readership’s penchant for melodrama, crime and violence (Anderson 18), typically the high circulation of sensation fiction indicated its commercial success rather than its literary quality. Publishers were not about to disregard the opportunity to make money from books that they envisaged would become popular with both the middle and lower classes.

In the 1860s and 1870s female writers’ espousal of sensation fiction contributed to its lowbrow association. Women were implicated in the sensation genre both as subjects and practitioners, as Lyn Pykett notes: “sensation novels were, in the main (or so it was thought), written by wicked women, about wayward girls and wicked women, for consumption by women whose waywardness and potential for wickedness was signalled by the very fact that they read such material” (Sensation Novel 40). Women were already entering the popular literary market in the 1860s (Showalter, Literature of Their Own 154) but it is their particular relationship with sensation fiction, as foregrounded though its feminine overtones, that is the subject of this section. Women’s’ legal and social position during that period translated into these narratives of heightened emotion and sensations. As Pykett notes in The Improper Feminine the sensation novel’s “intense focus on marriage and domestic relations” is perhaps symptomatic of society’s awareness of “the anomalies in women’s legal status, especially within marriage” (55). While marriage was prevalent in narratives in the nineteenth century, the sensation novel’s proclivity for adultery and imperfect marriage arrangements is certainly worthy of note.

Sensation fiction is reflective of Victorian social trends, including debate over marriage and divorce laws. Perhaps women writers such as Rhoda Broughton, Ellen Wood and Mary Elizabeth Braddon used sensation fiction as a way of “confronting and processing hidden fears, anxieties, and obsessions behind the dominant Victorian cultural institutions” (Hughes, “Sensation Novel” 260). Social regulation that was integral to Victorian women’s lives became the ‘stuff of fiction’ in the sensation novel: “women’s legal subjugation within marriage . . . generated the narrative and emotional tensions of many sensation novels” (Pykett, Improper Feminine 56). Women were predominantly the readers of sensation fiction (Pykett, Sensation Novel 41) so it made sense for these novels to be about unhappy middle-class marriages and “sensation novelists never tired of reminding their readers that home, at best was deadly dull” (Showalter, “Family Secrets” 106). In this respect sensational novels were subversive in offering their readers escape from the monotony of domestic life. Fictional adulteresses, seductresses and female fraudsters such as Braddon’s Lady Audley play on
Victorian anxieties about the domestic sphere and the undercurrent of entrapment within some marriage arrangements.

I give attention to the sensation novel in detail because it was also one of many genres incorporated into the novels of Ouida, Corelli and du Maurier because of the suitability of an ‘aesthetically commodified’ wife to generating an exciting and harrowing, emotional, sensation plot. Sensation fiction – the genre to which *Cometh Up as a Flower* specifically belongs – has been identified for its hereditary connection to these later aesthetic novels. Specifically Sophia Andres has pointed out the relationship between Pre-Raphaelite art and the sensation novel when she traces both the overt and subtle “intertextual and contextual connections” that writers like Elizabeth Gaskell, Wilkie Collins, Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Thomas Hardy used to engage their readers” (4). The relationship between an artistic practice and literary genre recalls my earlier reference to ekphrasis in that these writers appropriated Pre-Raphaelite techniques in the way they represented female beauty — *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) of course has a painting at its centre and has been read by some as a precursor to Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890).16 Talia Schaffer has shown in “Aestheticism and Sensation” (2011) that both sensation and aesthetic texts aimed to “generate excitement” in their readers (618). This is also precisely the structure of thought that acknowledges an inherited connection between the two popular genres, as Schaffer subsequently clarifies: “while sensation fiction adapts, intensifies and redirects the dominant values of realism, moralism, and sentiment, aestheticism flouts them, creating an entirely different kind of writing, a formal play with images and language” (618). The popular literary category examined in this study puts an interesting pressure on any study of Aestheticism given its own status “as a both a high art and mass-cultural movement” (Psomiades and Schaffer 3) and in the publishing paradigms and literary genres discussed already it is possible to trace a valid connection to Aestheticism. To take my point further I will follow how Victorian popular writers themselves recognised/interpreted/theorised Aestheticism as it manifested in their novels. My purpose will be to distinguish whether these writers were conscious of and explicitly responding to the movement, or just working in the zeitgeist.

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Before turning to an outline of my thesis I wish to briefly mention that there is no single, readily identifiable formal signature that unites all the texts I discuss, because the authors in

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16 Lynette Felber writes on the portrait in the Victorian novel and makes explicit these connections between *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in “The Literary Portrait as Centrefold: Fetishism in Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret*” (2007).
question were in no ways part of a single Aesthetic Movement, but rather each was responding at various times and places (and with various degrees of self-consciousness) to the wider shifts in aesthetics in later nineteenth-century culture. At the same time, my argument is not solely focused on literary texts but addresses in each case a nexus of the popular novelistic genre and non-fictional discourses or knowledge formations that were written and rewritten at various points within Victorian culture. I have chosen five texts, each one located at an edifying and significant moment in the history of Aestheticism in Britain.

In Chapter One, “‘Two Lovers to Decide their Rival Claim to the Possession of My Person’: Rhoda Broughton’s *Cometh up as a Flower,*” I show how Pre-Raphaelite ideas in the mid-Victorian period can be seen to influence Broughton’s *Cometh up as a Flower* in her espousal of feminine aesthetics. Given that this is not the first popular novel to invoke Pre-Raphaelitism, I will discuss Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* to establish the context in which Pre-Raphaelitism and its new types of female beauty reached a popular audience in the mid nineteenth century.

Chapter Two, “The ‘Aesthetics of Love’ in George Meredith’s *The Egoist,*” focuses on the dual implications of Aestheticism and Darwinism. Meredith is an unlikely choice in a list of ‘popular’ novelists but his inclusion is justified by his popularising effect as a purveyor of new intellectual developments to a wider readership. Meredith was an aesthete and through his relationship with the Pre-Raphaelite he thus stands on the critical ground of Aestheticism, while this novel’s appearance two years after the Grosvenor Gallery Exhibition raises the issue of the dissemination of Aestheticism to a wider public. This chapter marks the beginning of my investigation of the growing phenomenon of Aesthetic decoration and how this is signified in popular texts including fiction and periodicals.

Chapter Three, “‘A Lovely Woman Whom He Had Bought’: The Market for Aesthetic Commodities in Ouida’s *Moths,*” examines how Ouida’s invocation of Aestheticism is delicately balanced between the natural and the synthetic. It builds upon Chapter Two by showing how Aestheticism transformed art and design. The European context is also significant, as most chronicles of Aestheticism attribute it to French origins.

In Chapter Four, “I Love Beauty – And I Study it Wherever I Find it, Dead or Living”: Decadent Aesthetics in Marie Corelli’s *Wormwood,*” I explore the correlation between Aestheticism and decadence in Corelli’s *Wormwood.* Gaston Beauvais exhibits the refined judgment of an aesthete, and the sexual deviancy of a decadent. Corelli’s novel is useful in that it also further constructs for English and American readers Aestheticism and decadence’s connection with French culture and its associated degenerative influence. In this chapter I will document how the transcendent experience of female beauty is also shown to be a product of
the novel’s cultural context. I am also interested in Corelli’s complex relationship with Aestheticism. While condemning the influences of Swinburne’s decadent poetry in *The Sorrows of Satan* (1895), a decade earlier she had written to him to laud him as the greatest poet in Britain. She also sent a copy of *Wormwood* to Arthur Symons. Thus, Corelli’s (arguably) suburban Aestheticism provides an opportune way to discuss shifts in popular late-Victorian culture.

In “Love for love's sake”: George du Maurier’s *Trilby,* I illustrate how the beautiful heroine is subjected to the gaze of the male aesthete. Trilby poses for numerous artists; thus she enters into a circuit of aesthetic commodification though her being literally represented as an object of art. Because accounts of Aestheticism suggest that it was overwhelmed by parody in the 1890s, du Maurier’s amiable and satirical representation, as well as the complicated context he was working in, provides material for a suitable final chapter.

The afterword that concludes this thesis attests to my purpose in showing how decadence and fin-de-siècle culture as an extension of Aestheticism appeared beyond the Victorian period. E.M. Forster's *A Room with a View* (1908) provides a way of discussing how the popular concerns of Aestheticism did not just stop at the end of the century. The relationship between Aestheticism and Modernism (what were originally thought of as opposing research disciplines) is a growing field of interest and ultimately my thesis will be positioned within this area of scholarship.
From the first-person perspective of its heroine Rhoda Broughton’s *Cometh Up as a Flower* (1867) situates aesthetic commodification within mutually exclusive romantic and matrimonial frameworks. That this idea of the aesthetic commodification of women is active in a popular novel of the 1860s suggests its influence in the wider Victorian social context, and this chapter will investigate relevant contexts, and show how the frameworks of sensation fiction and romantic fiction are used to validate this idea in Broughton's novel. This novel has proven to be a rich resource, providing a starting point for my investigation of the contemporary practice of aesthetic commodification, and enabling study of how the figure of the romantic heroine is being modified to be shown to be responding to and participating in this practice. Additionally, as Broughton's Nell participates in the wider aesthetic and economic circuits of the novel, her story comes to demonstrate how the Victorian marriage market, as represented in *Cometh Up as a Flower*, has the potential to be represented as a process of legal prostitution, within which the aesthetic heroine has enhanced value. Perhaps the most prominent aesthetic point of reference of the novel is how it draws on contemporary Pre-Raphaelite attitudes towards the representations of female beauty.

The wider concerns in my thesis about where subjective positioning and visual language intersect are foregrounded by this novel’s unorthodox female first person narration and her self-representation of the visual. After contextualising the novel within its sensation context in this chapter I take a three-pronged approach to the representation of the perception of the heroine. First, Nell’s ‘rivals in romance’ both oscillate between perceptions of her that are aesthetic and sexual, with the latter foregrounded predominantly. In contrast to the male perception of her, my next section deals with the language of nature as it comes to bear on Nell’s characterisation and beauty, which evidently leads into the final section on how Nell’s version of herself is reliant on Pre-Raphaelite tropes. These three discourses operate, and indeed, intertwine through Broughton’s particular focus on the female body, which by the end of the novel becomes invalidated.
Born at Denbighshire in Wales in 1840, Rhoda Broughton began writing novels from a young age. *Not Wisely but Too Well* (1867), published after *Cometh up as a Flower*, was her first work and was composed over a six-week period. In 1893 Helen C. Black recounts Broughton’s motivation to write the novel:

She says she remembers a certain wet Sunday afternoon when she was about twenty-two; she was distinctly bored by a stupid book which she was trying to read, when the ‘spirit moved her to write.’ It was on the leaves of an old copy-book lying at hand that she delivered her soul of the ideas which poured in on her brain. Day after day, night after night, she wrote swiftly and in secret, until at the end of six weeks she found a vast heap of manuscript accumulated, to which she gave the title *Not Wisely but Too Well* (41).

Black, and Broughton’s biographer, Marilyn Wood, both suggest that she wrote the novel after reading a popular contemporary book and believing herself capable of producing a superior work of fiction (1, 9). Despite realising her ambitions, Broughton set aside the manuscript and neglected to pursue a literary career at that point.

Rhoda Broughton never married but she found contentment in the Victorian literary world. Eliza Lynn Linton’s 1887 article in *Temple Bar* points out that she was “independent and high-spirited” and “she has contented herself with doing her work to the best of her powers” (196). Indeed, Broughton received just as much attention for her own character as she did for her literary ability (Wood xii). Described by Anthony Trollope as being “full of energy” (215), Broughton was a well-liked individual not only in literary circles but in wider British society and she “reigned as queen both of the circulating library and of Oxford society” (Louis James 194). Broughton’s social reputation grew with her budding writing career until “the name ‘Rhoda Broughton’ on a title-page, or as a symbol of conversation of witty but alarming pungency, was almost a national institution” (Michael Sadleir 84). This acknowledgement of her status as a cultural icon firmly situates her within the Victorian popular fiction tradition.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Rhoda Broughton’s name was conspicuous amongst other popular writers of her day, because although she was evidently aware of the literary tastes of her audience, her books stood out for their “unmistakable individuality” (Alfred Austin 202) and “brilliant understanding of humanity” (Sadleir 95). Broughton began her literary career with her success in the expansive three-volume novel which then dominated the market. Both *Not Wisely but Too Well* and *Cometh Up as a Flower* were
initially published in serial form before they were revised and reprinted as longer novels.\(^{17}\) Regardless of Broughton’s dislike for the three-decker novel, and the adverse effects she believed it to have on her writing quality (Wood 14), it served her well in terms of commercial success.

However, when her twelfth novel *Alas* (1890) failed to win public approval to the same degree as her earlier works, she resolved to “forswear the 3 vol. novel” (quoted in Sadleir 86). From then on, Broughton’s literary output changed to better-quality one-volume works, but these did not comply with popular public taste to the same extent as her former books. Even though she still received a modest income from her writing, she was no longer “top of the library lists” (Wood 95). As Sadleir points out, “paradoxically, then, Rhoda Broughton won abuse, financial profit, and a name in literature by books inferior to those which earned her none of these things” (86). While *Not Wisely but Too Well* and *Cometh Up as a Flower* are the most widely known of her novels, her posthumously published *A Fool in Her Folly* (1920) is said to be a superior work of fiction because of its noted improvements in style: “although this novel recaptures the spirit of those early works it shows, in its construction and language, the craftsmanship of the mature author” (Wood 118). Despite falling from public favour to some extent, Broughton remained an enduring Victorian popular literature figure, as her obituary in the *Times* noted in 1920: “Rhoda Broughton’s books were many and entertaining: they have a place which is very much their own in the tale of fiction; but it seems almost impossible to speak of them without recalling at once that she herself filled their place far more brilliantly than any of her Joans, or Nancies or Belindas” (“Miss Rhoda Broughton”). While Broughton’s status as a popular literary figure is undisputed, what is significant, and overlooked, I think, is Broughton’s contribution to the aesthetic landscape of the nineteenth century which will be the subject of later discussion. But first I wish to contextualise the novel within the literary environment of sensation fiction, in relation to the way in which it is already carefully explored in the Introduction, so as to establish how the genre admits and feeds off the practice of the aesthetic commodification of women.

*Cometh Up as a Flower*, Broughton’s second novel (of 26), was serialised in the *Dublin University Magazine* edited by Broughton’s uncle, Sheridan le Fanu, between July 1866 and January 1867 (Shirley Jones 209). It was later published anonymously, with an extra ten chapters, in March 1867 by Richard Bentley and Son (Sadleir 99). In the first year of publication 2,500 copies were produced and a further 8,000 by 1874 (Sadleir 103).

\(^{17}\) *Not Wisely but Too Well* appeared in the *Dublin University Magazine* in twelve instalments from August 1865 to July 1866 (Wood 175). Bentley and Son offered to publish this novel if she extended it to a three-volume length but she refused and offered it to Tinsley Brothers, where ironically it was expanded and published in 1867 as a three-volume edition (14).
Notwithstanding its popularity with the Victorian reading public, the novel met mixed criticism. An unfavourable review from Margaret Oliphant disapproved of it for its “fleshly inclinations” (quoted in Tamar Heller, “That Muddy, Polluted Flood of Earthly Love” 87) and shockingly sensational content. Geraldine Jewsbury, reviewing in 1867, criticised the novel for its: “all-pervading coarseness of thought and expression” (140), “mixture of slang and sensuality” (140), “sensual sentimentality, self-indulgent emotion” and “morbid scepticism, with dashes of equally morbid religious emotion” (141). Both reviewers signal that its “depiction of the excessively sensual and sexual” (Jones 212) marks the novel as a work of sensation fiction, a literary and cultural phenomenon that was criticised publicly and privately not only for its subversive qualities but also for its social implications.

*Cometh Up as a Flower* appeared in the midst of the sensation fiction era and while it lacks the criminal and clandestine elements of other more typical sensation plots, in its framing of an arranged marriage and intimations of adultery it sits within the conventions of sensation writing. The novel is narrated by its heroine, Nell (Eleanor) Le Strange, as she reflects upon her unhappy marriage arrangement. Although Nell is in love with Dick M’Gregor, a handsome army officer, she fulfils her father’s wishes and agrees to marry Sir Hugh Lancaster, a much older suitor. Sensation fiction allowed authors like Broughton to write about social issues such as marriage by focusing on characters who are socially transgressive. Towards the end of *Cometh Up as a Flower* Nell implies the customary consequences of the sensation fiction phenomenon while she reads:

> I am buried in an arm-chair in my boudoir, reading a novel. It interests me rather, for it is all about a married woman, who ran away from her husband and suffered the extremity of human ills in consequence. I have made several steps in morality of late I flatter myself, but even now, I can hardly imagine that I should have been very miserable if Dick had taken me away with him.

> The naughty matron is just dying of a broken heart and starvation in a Penitentiary, when I hear carriage-wheels (436).

For Nell, reading becomes an outlet for imagined escape from her marital ennui. The sensation text she reads provides a temporary distraction from her domestic boredom, as well as injecting a fleeting sensation of heightened emotion into her emotionally-detached lifestyle. Both Elaine Showalter and Tamar Heller suggest that Nell is reading Ellen Wood’s famous sensation novel, *East Lynne* (*Literature of their Own* 173), with Heller further adding that “Broughton’s self-reflexivity comments on the 1860’s craze for sensation fiction” (504n.546). Published only six years before Broughton’s novel, *East Lynne* was an elaborate narrative that detailed Isabel Vane’s scandalous infidelity. While Showalter argues that in reading this
particular text, Nell decides not to run away from her husband, it is instead clear from the quotation that Nell “can hardly imagine that [she] should have been very miserable if Dick had taken [her] away with him” (436). Nell’s sentiments clearly depict her awareness of the sensation genre and her apparent flouting of its conventions. In fact Nell and Isabel experience opposite scenarios when it comes to their clandestine relationships. Whereas Isabel falls victim to the romantic charms of the villain, the only reason Nell does not run away with her lover is his refusal to thus condemn her to a life of poverty and the status of a fallen woman (424–5). Her unconsummated romantic relationship with Dick remains internalised and idealised by Nell and thus saves her from absolute social ruin, or ‘the extremity of human ills,’ but unhappily kills her in the process.

-Rivals in Romance-

Broughton’s success as a novelist was in part because of her sensational subject matter, but also because of her capacity to experiment with the romance plot. Prolific Victorian romance authors – like Broughton – attracted readers in great numbers yet the 1860’s popular women’s novel with its particularised language and narrative constraints has often been dismissed in Victorian literary scholarship (Rachel Anderson 12, 15). The term romance, or, “the branch of fiction consisting of lightweight, but full-length, novels of no great literary qualities” is typically associated with a wide popular audience consisting mainly of female readers (Anderson 14). For this reason the romance novel was in its own time deemed to be an inferior literary category. While many female writers did follow conventional romance narrative patterns, in effect Rhoda Broughton, one of the period’s most popular romance writers, challenged the genre in Not Wisely but Too Well with her narrator’s comments: “What absurdly false pictures novels do give us of love, the drawings they make out of it are so out of perspective! They represent it as the one main interest of life, instead of being, as it mostly is, a short unimportant little episode” (12). Broughton’s acknowledged ability to strike a balance between “passionate involvement” and “self-mockery” in her writing (Anderson 62) is what made her stand out from other mass-produced and formulaic Victorian romance writers. In this section I will explore how Cometh up as a Flower is simultaneously consistent with whilst undermining the romantic fiction genre that was popular in the nineteenth century. I also underline how male perceptions of female characters, especially Nell, which are filtered through her narration, contribute to at least one version of her aesthetic commodification.

Critical studies of the romance genre have been inclined to argue that it endorses the patriarchal subjugation of women. Drawing on Janice A. Radway’s keystone study, Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature, Dawn Heinecken argues that
Despite the imagined escapism the romantic text offers its readers, the novel’s typical narrative structure and the tendency to end with a marriage between the heroine and hero simply assists in “indoctrinating” women into the system of patriarchy (Heinecken 149). Although Heinecken’s, and Radway’s, arguments apply to the romance genre in its contemporary form, this contention is also relevant to the popular Victorian romance novel because it too conformed to set narrative strategies. In order to avoid being too socially dissident, this romance novel includes a socially-endorsed marriage agreement and Nell’s devastated love ends with its heroine submitting to patriarchal conventions by marrying a man chosen for her by her father and eventually dying of a broken heart.

Dick represents a model of the romance hero in his class origins and military profession and embodies many of the paradigms of middle-class manliness that permeated nineteenth-century Britain. Dick is not an ‘aesthete’ in the sense of the word as it might apply to Sir Hugh, the aristocratic gentleman, though he still exhibits patterns of behaviour that play an important role in Nell’s aestheticisation. The emergence of a politically-empowered industrial middle class after 1832 and the social ascension of the Victorian bourgeoisie had ramifications for masculine identity, especially for the idea of the gentleman. The two different types of gentleman identifiable in this period – the traditional gentleman of noble birth, and the modern self-made man (Robin Gilmour 1) – were strongly connected to their respective class positioning (Arlene Young 5–6). It is necessary to the narrative of *Cometh Up as a Flower* that the profession of its middle-class hero carries with it a satisfactory amount of social capital in order that he pose competition for the other male suitor. Broughton surrounds her middle-class male protagonist with gentlemanly attributes on a number of occasions in *Cometh Up as a Flower*. Although Dick is welcome as a guest in the home of the novel’s aristocratic family, he is undeniably not in the same social class as the Lancasters. Moreover, in terms of the possession of cultural capital, Dick holds an ambivalent position.

On the one hand, he is the first character in the novel to acknowledge Nell’s beauty and aesthetic appeal; thus his recognition is just one way of constituting her status as an aesthetic object. Dick’s “long eager gaze” (241) awakens Nell’s sense of her own aesthetic value. Through her relationship with Dick, Nell goes from being in denial about her good looks (227, 228, 230, 235, and 236), to asking herself: “could he have thought me pretty?” (241). The first mention of Nell’s beauty in the novel comes from Dick when he playfully remarks: “I should not think such a pretty mouth could say anything rude, if it tried” (234). Later that evening Nell feels the full impact of his admiration for her: “We were in the hall alone together for a minute, and as he put my shawl round my shoulders, he stooped and gazed full into my eyes. Innocent and childish as I was, I could not mistake that expression, bewildering
me with its bold, avowed admiration” (236). Such a scene of erotic encounter clearly demonstrates how Dick’s gaze stirs in Nell a newfound sense of sensuality and joy (241). He later boldly tells her: “you are pretty—awfully pretty, and I cannot for the life of me help telling you so” (260). Nell, not used to having those sorts of things said to her, is quite dumbfounded by his outburst, but begins to accept her beauty as the novel progresses. I will look more closely at Nell’s growing sense of herself as an aestheticised commodity, but here I wanted to emphasise how Dick’s recognition rouses this sense in her; it makes her realise her own beauty and its associated value.

On the other hand, without having the economic capital and class status to support his claim, Dick is not really in the running for Nell’s hand, a fact which she playfully points out to him: “he’s ‘a baronite,’ and you are ‘a shade or two wus’ as you must allow” (305). Despite Broughton’s construction of the lovers as youthful, naïve and driven by feeling, acting against them is their social unsuitability. Underpinning their incompatibility is Dick’s association with the Coxes, a newly wealthy family eager to display their prosperity and social ascension to the rest of the community. Dick stays with the Coxes during his visit to the county and on two particular occasions he has a fabricated familial link with them, which given their shared class circumstances, is taken to be factual by Nell. For example, when he tells Nell that he is Mrs Coxe’s brother so as to tease her she takes him at his word (233); and he is also romantically linked to the eldest daughter, once as another joke at Nell’s expense (271) and again by her sister when she paints Dick as a fortune hunter (291). Dick, aware of his social and cultural inferiority in relation to Sir Hugh, nevertheless attempts to secure ownership of Nell — “You are my darling, and not Lancaster’s aren’t you?” (310). This emphasis on Nell’s belonging to him is conspicuously demonstrated in the following proposal scene:

‘You like me a little better than Lancaster?’
‘I should like you very little indeed, else.’
‘You little foolish girl! Think of preferring me with twopence a year to him with a fine house, and a handle to his name.’
‘That’s just what Dolly says; as you both say the same thing, there must be some truth in it, but it’s never too late to mend, is it? The big house and the handle are still within reach, you know; will you come and see me when I’m Lady Lancaster?’
‘No, I’m d—d if I will!’

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18 Heller points out that this is a reference to Harry Clifton’s nineteenth century ballad about a young servant girl who rejects her common lover so that she might instead win the affection of a gentleman (486n.217).
I see the gray eyes flash in the moonlight at the bare idea of that visit.

‘Nelly Lancaster! Eleanor Lancaster! How pretty it sounds!’ I cry, pensively, plucking a moon washed rose, and sniffing at it.

‘Nelly Lestrange is prettier, and Nelly M’Gregor is prettiest of all, isn’t it, darling?’ asks Dick, gathering me closer than ever to himself (367).

Nell’s teasing reinforces Dick’s attempts to secure her devotion to him through marriage. Knowing Nell’s susceptibility to his touch, he also makes his suggestion of her becoming his wife coincide with a physical act of affection as he ‘gathers’ her close.

The reader is already aware of the enjoyment Dick gets from her company and her beauty: “it’s rather nice, don’t you know? Having a foolish sort of little girl to kiss and make love to” (274). Erotic desire is mediated through playful discourse; while sight is the register in which the cultural construction of aesthetic experience is most evident in this novel, Dick also takes pleasure in his physical contact with Nell. He enjoys kissing and holding his feminine possession, “raining kisses on [her] lips, thick as leaves in autumn” (367). Broughton’s focus on the physical love between Nell and Dick positions the text within the conventions of romance fiction in terms of heightened sexual experience. Dick, “a great big noble-looking young soldier” (258) is a virile hero. Donald J. Mrozek argues that “the military institutions’ seeming descent from the ancient roles of hunter and defender make them a relatively easy place in which to identify with masculinity and manliness” (220). Thus, the Victorian cultural cliché that associates the soldier with manliness underpins Dick’s characterisation in the novel.

The first description of Dick in the novel reveals a great deal about his romance hero status. Although Nell insists that her first meeting with Dick does not necessarily conform to the customs of a storybook romance, she nonetheless signals early on that Dick is the hero of the story:

As he passed I looked up at him, and he looked down at me, and our eyes met. There was nothing impudent in his gaze, none of the fervent admiration with which, at a first introduction, the hero in a novel regards the young lady, who at a later period of the story is to make a great fool of, or be made a great fool by him. It simply expressed a moderate amount of curiosity with which a young Englishman regards a young Englishwoman whom he sees for the first time. ‘Are you pretty I wonder? It’s almost impossible to tell by this light.’ So said those dark, gray eyes, and that was all they said (219).

In this depiction Dick is characterised as being mysterious in order to invoke the curiosity of not only the heroine, but in addition, the reader. It also signals the conditions by which the
hero and heroine gauge each other, because their relationship is certainly generated out of their mutual appreciation of each other’s shared physical beauty.

The couple’s reciprocated pleasure and erotic feeling problematises the balance of power between the hero and heroine in Cometh Up as a Flower. In most romance novels the male protagonist may take pleasure in the beauty of his object of affection; however, Broughton’s heroine reverses this stereotype. Nell actively admires Dick’s physical appearance and her eyes fasten on “his face, and feast[t] on its beauty” (285). His attractive face not only designates him as an object of aesthetic interest, it consolidates his characterisation as the novel’s hero. Dick’s “very curly saxon hair” and “beautiful bronzed face” (232), though unusual because most nineteenth-century literary heroes had darker hair and lighter complexions, puts him in direct contrast with the novel’s other hero, Sir Hugh Lancaster.

Regardless of his gentlemanly characterisation and aesthetic appreciation of Nell, Dick’s poverty, which Nell takes to be a sign of his gentility (306), also sets him apart from Sir Hugh in Cometh Up as a Flower. “The source of the character’s income,” as Janice Carlisle, argues, “among other things such as birth, occupation and manners is the central determinant of class in novels of the 1860s” (3). Adrian Le Strange, Nell’s father, himself poverty-stricken, seeks to improve his daughter’s prospects by encouraging her to marry well. He disguises his distaste for Dick’s lack of social standing and financial security with a defamatory remark when he catches his daughter holding hands with him: “‘He wants a good kicking, that’s what he does. Uncommon free and easy, indeed! Walking into another man’s garden, without saying ‘by your leave’ or ‘with your leave!’ Those may be Manchester or Brummagem manners, but they won’t go down here, I can tell him’” (245). Adrian doubly insults Dick because his use of the epithets ‘Manchester and Brummagem’ implicate him as being middle-class and nouveau riche, two social categories which would be inappropriate for Nell to marry into. When Nell engages herself to the “money-less, position-less, expectation-less” (373) Dick without her father’s knowledge it becomes clear that their relationship is predestined to fail essentially because their social classes are at odds. Her sister Dorothea (Dolly) sums it up when she describes Dick as “a man magnanimous enough, or selfish enough, to be willing to starve with [her], and effectually prevent [her] doing anything towards raising the poor old family again” (376). In short, Dick does not have the economic, social or cultural capital that he needs to marry the novel’s heroine. He is conveniently removed from the narrative to make way for the novel’s other hero, Sir Hugh, who fulfils the necessary social and economic criteria to make Nell his wife.

Sir Hugh, a wealthy aristocrat, is also in love with Nell and eventually marries her.Introduced early in the novel as “a jolly-looking, short dark man, considerably past his
première jeunesse” (236), Hugh’s maturity is a direct contrast to the youthful virility of Dick and consequently his masculinity is compromised. Nell is very aware of Hugh’s age and contemptuously comments about his lack of youth (239). She also bemoans his physical inferiority compared with Dick. Nell’s indifference towards Sir Hugh, coupled with her awkward impression of his sexual advances, serve to destabilise his masculine position in the novel. Most notable is Nell’s comment that he “must have been lacking some of the ingredients that go to compose a man” (316). His lack contrasts with the implied plentitude or completeness of Dick. Unfortunately for Nell, it is clear that her father perceives this hero to be an ideal suitor for his daughter (239, 372, 395).

Broughton emphasises Sir Hugh already having so many things with her descriptions of his home and estate. Wentworth, Sir Hugh’s family home, expresses Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital and the cultural superiority communicated through one’s possessions (Distinction 11). Sir Hugh’s elevated class status is certainly endorsed by his ornately decorated property and possessions. If taste is “the surest sign of true nobility” (Bourdieu 11) then Sir Hugh’s estate locates him in the realm of aristocratic aesthetics. His ’47 Port, his lavishly decorated furniture and his hundred-lighted chandelier not only indicate his wealth, they distinguish him as a man of socially acceptable taste. The relationship between taste and nobility is reciprocal. Bourdieu argues that a peerage implies the possession of a certain amount of embodied cultural capital:

> Whereas the holders of educationally uncertified cultural capital can always be required to prove themselves because they are only what they do, merely a by-product of their own cultural production, the holders of titles of cultural nobility – like the titular members of an aristocracy, whose ‘being,’ defined by their fidelity to a lineage . . . is irreducible to any ‘doing,’ to any know-how or function – only have to be what they are, because all their practices derive their value from their authors, being the affirmation and perpetuation of the essence by virtue of which they are performed (Distinction 23).

His belonging to the upper class and his displaying cultural taste legitimate Sir Hugh’s position as a gentleman in the traditional aristocratic sense of the word. He is defined by this label and categorised according to the sets of cultural expectations that accompany the British peerage, as Bourdieu argues: “taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier” (6). On one hand his cultural capital (embodied and objectified) is synonymous with his elevated class position, and on the other hand his cultural capital (legitimate works of art and good taste) affirm his superior class position.
The fact that his cultural capital would be transferred to his wife is significant because it also makes him a very eligible gentleman in the Victorian marriage market. His marriageability is clear in the novel: “mothers chased him” and “daughters smiled at him” (270). Nell colourfully describes her own sister’s attempts to win the affection of Sir Hugh: “Few, indeed, were those of the families dwelling round Le Strange that had not contributed a combatant to the siege of Sir Hugh Lancaster. Le Strange itself was no stranger to the general rule; we had sent forth to the fray, and, after a protracted campaign, had returned to us, worsted, indeed, but in good order” (129). Despite attempts from many of the local women to secure him, until he meets Nell, “his big red house [has remained] mistressless” (129). Nell’s own impoverished family situation leads her to gain improved economic, cultural and social capital from a marriage to Sir Hugh, a wealthy aristocrat. The marriage essentially seals her economic and social status. Sir Hugh holds sufficient cultural capital and acts appropriately within the boundaries of his class and is rewarded with a beautiful wife. Thus, aesthetic judgement and social competence, not to mention economic means, in Cometh Up as a Flower, are shown to be equally beneficial in terms of finding success on the Victorian marriage market. Although ‘taste’ is a fundamental source of power, money is also an essential tool in the world of Cometh Up as a Flower, and it serves as a key element in the materialistic and capitalist world of the novel. Money is the ultimate power that underlies aesthetic commodification because Nell is ‘bought for a price.’ It is not by chance that Broughton incorporates finance in the novel’s matrimonial exchange. The commodification of women as exchange objects through marriage, or more specifically, as socially-sanctioned prostitutes is apparent in this text because both Nell and Dolly are victims of patriarchal exchange, commodities on the Victorian marriage market.

The market conditions of Nell’s marriage arrangement contribute to her commodification, most notably when she becomes engaged to Sir Hugh and endures his visit:

His arm is around my waist, and he is brushing my eyes and cheeks and brow with his somewhat bristly moustache as often as he feels inclined—for am I not his property? Has he not every right to kiss my face off if he chooses, to clasp me and hold me, and drag me about in whatever manner he wills, for has he not bought me? For a pair of first-class blue eyes warranted fast colour, for ditto superfine red lips, for so many pounds of prime white flesh, he has paid down a handsome price on the nail, without any haggling, and now if he may not test the worth of his purchases, poor man, he is hardly used! (399–400).

Nell refers to her ‘first-class’ eyes, ‘superfine’ lips and ‘prime’ white flesh and alludes to the male response to her as being as it would be towards varying types of marketable goods such
as fabric, or a sale-yard animal. She undercuts Sir Hugh’s perception of her as aesthetic by deconstructing the language of possession and representing herself as a catalogue of parts of female beauty in the market rather than being chosen as a wife for her aesthetic appeal. It follows that Hugh’s experiencing of Nell’s beauty is pleasurable and he does ‘test the worth’ of his purchase and shows his pleasure by embracing his fiancée, his soon-to-be property. The language of ownership is prominent in this passage and is highlighted also by the rhetoric of commercial exchange.

Nell is not the only female in the novel to be subjected to a similar process of commodification. Her sister, Dolly, the mastermind behind Nell’s marriage to Sir Hugh, finds her own marital success and ends up, “marrying a lord with £80,000 a year” (437). The difference between the two sisters is that unlike Nell, Dolly would willingly “sell [her] soul for gold” (371). While the depiction of Dolly’s physical appearance in the novel parallels Nell’s in that she too is represented as a series of body parts, Dolly remains the opposite of her sister in many ways. In the first instance, she is physically different. Nell directs the reader’s imaginative gaze onto Dolly’s flawless beauty:

Dolly was a very fair woman to look upon; a small oval face, liquid brown eyes that had a way of looking up meekly and beseechingly, that no man less self-contained than St. Senanus19 could resist, a little sharp-cut nose absolutely perfect, a sweet grave mouth, and an expression nun-like, dovelike, Madonna-like; she looked as if her life must be one long prayer (228).

Ironically Dolly’s more traditional feminine and even ‘sacred’ beauty is tempered by her dark hair with its snake-like associations (Sanjay Sircar 175). She has a “small snaky head” and “coiled cables of ink-black hair” (349). These allusions to malevolent femininity prove accurate as Dolly uses her feminine beauty and cunning to manipulate those around her. She knows how to accentuate her beauty and manoeuvre her body and features in such as way as to display them to her best advantage: “Dolly is sitting on a prie-dieu, right under the big, hundred lighted chandelier, and the waxlights are blazing down dull on her shimmery sheeny garments, on her round pearl-white shoulders. . . . She is looking up under her eyes in a way I know, a way I cannot do myself” (320). The prie-dieu that Nell alludes to is not a typical piece of drawing-room furniture; the low-padded prayer stool, “diverted from its original use this evening” (320), communicates a religious connotation that Dolly exploits in order to exhibit her beauty in a pious manner.

19 A sixth-century Irish monk who fled to Scattery Island and determined that no women were permitted to land there.
Given the juxtaposition between the two sisters, it is little wonder that when Dolly encourages Nell to beautify herself: “Do make yourself a little bit tidy before you go to him,” Nell refuses to be “made up for sale” (390). The sisters are indeed aware of each other’s value in the Victorian marriage market but whereas Nell miserably accepts her feminine responsibilities, Dolly understands her position as a female aesthetic commodity and is quite happy to be absorbed into the patriarchal structure of the novel’s world. The inclusion of female fashion as a desirable adjunct to the marriage market for feminine beauty is also valid here. Compared to Nell with her outdated hairstyle (231) and faded clothing (265), Dolly’s fashionable version of femininity is conspicuous. She reads fashion magazines (286) and is conscious of the way she dresses in order to provoke both male and female attention. Given William Acton’s 1857 entreaty to connect a “love of dress and admiration” with women being compelled to prostitution (quoted in Mariana Valverde 175), consider the serious implications of Dolly’s sentiments: “if I could have my body left me, my nice, pretty, pleasant body, with plenty of money to keep it well fed and well dressed, I’d give my soul its congé with the greatest sang froid imaginable” (371). Dolly, doll-like, is literally part of the economic exchange operating in nineteenth-century Britain. Pykett argues that the undertones of prostitution in narratives such as Cometh Up as a Flower act as a counter discourse to patriarchy because Nell is a victim of “male economic and sexual power” (Sensation Novel 64). Dolly, on the other hand, is perfectly happy to beautify herself, even to “eat a little dirt” in order to secure herself a “lord with £80,000 a year” (442). The aesthetic commodification of women in Cometh Up as a Flower is represented as a product of the Victorian context in terms of both literary and historical justification.

-Truth in Nature-

Let me shift focus to how the commodification of female beauty is naturalised by the Victorian context in yet another way. Nell’s aesthetic status, as she presents herself to the reader, is grounded in her being at home in the natural world. She picks and arranges flowers, is an active gardener, and dwells on splendid descriptions of the landscape around her. As we will later witness with Clara in The Egoist, or Vere in Moths, women’s beauty and aestheticisation are both naturalised, or indeed, products of nature; however in the context of

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20 This idea was originally put forward by Mary Wollstonecraft in A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792). She argues that women were thought of as being no more than ornaments to society or property to be traded in marriage as “legal prostitutes” (quoted in Heller xxxviii). The sense of marriage as prostitution was later taken up by women novelists of the 1880s and 90s (Pykett, Sensation Novel 48), with writers such as Mona Caird commenting on women being “bought and sold as if they were cattle” (190).
the novel at hand, I draw on a post-romantic network of natural imagery to reveal how the heroine’s beauty is validated in *Cometh Up as a Flower*.

Broughton relies heavily on her contemporary reader’s knowledge of floriography, or the language of flowers, which allows her to communicate meaning and sentiment that is not necessarily obvious at first. Prior to the appearance of *Cometh Up as a Flower* a number of floriography publications entered the earlier nineteenth-century botanical book market, with Charlotte de Latour’s *The Language of Flowers, or, Floral Emblems of Thoughts, Feelings, and Sentiments*, still remaining relatively well known today. John Ruskin, too, contributed to the emergent culture of floriography publications. In *Prosperina: Studies of Wayside Flowers* (1868) he writes: “and these are the real significances of the flower itself. It is the utmost purification of the plant, and the utmost discipline. Where its tissue is blanched fairest, dyed purest, set in strictest rank, appointed to most chosen office, there—and created by the fact of this purity and function—is the flower” (64–5). Ruskin’s botanical symbolism betrays the ‘truth to nature’ philosophy that he applied to all art. His observations of nature led to many discussions of the natural world around him, but his aesthetic approach prevented his records from becoming too scientific or Darwinian in their application. Ruskin captures something of floriography’s reliance on the interpretation of the physical form of a flower to enact meaning (Elaine Shefer 17). For example, according to *The Language of Flowers*, a rosebud “with its leaves and thorns, indicates fear with hope” (viii). Drawing on a longstanding eastern tradition, the Victorians embraced the language of flowers as a means of codified and sentimental communication, for the Victorians “loved nature not only for its beauty but also for its inherent moral message” (Shefer 14).

*Cometh Up as Flower* opens with the heroine’s vision of her death. Interred in the earth she hopes her sister will “plant a rose at my head, and a gillyflower at my feet” (217). Broughton’s choice of flower prepares the reader for the rich use of floriography that the novel comes to rely on. A rose, even in its most generic form, devoid of specific colour or bloom phase, stood for beauty in Victorian culture, but also a kind of fragile beauty for “on the day its beauty is fully mature it perishes” (de Latour 71). On the other hand the gillyflower at Nell’s feet implies lasting beauty, a condition relative to the wider implications of declining female beauty in the novel. Nell’s association with floral emblems is relentless; expressly in the context of mortality certain blooms become associated with death and visions of the

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21 Originally published in French as *Le Language des Fleurs* in 1819, de Latour’s handbook was quickly translated into English, and adapted by Frederick Shorbel in 1834 so as to better reference English botany. Other floriography texts include Anne Pratt’s *The Flowers and their Associations* (1840), Samuel William Partridge’s *Voices from the Garden: Or the Christian Language of Flowers* (1849), and J. L. K.’s *The Voice of Flowers* (1871). I take de Latour’s text to be the main source for my examination of floral imagery in this chapter.
afterlife. Nell’s imagining of her funerary flowers also includes being surrounded by a “deluge of white flowers” (225) on her deathbed. It is the novel’s title that establishes the equation of death with flowers, for the full biblical references reads: “man that is born of woman is of few days and full of misery. He cometh up as a flower and is cut down” (Job 14:1–2). Such a truism points to the fleetingness of human life and denotes all too plainly Nell’s tragic death. Not only that, the floral reference connotes the brief flowering of beauty in that the delicate and fragile state of flowers aligns with Nell’s delicate beauty and existence.

Romantic love is the other distinct condition through which floral imagery operates as an ambivalent force in the novel. Ivy (221, 367, 421, 426), roses of various varieties (241, 367), honeysuckle (227, 289), and white lilac (275, 310) envelop the romance between Nell and Dick, and serve to underpin the sexual feeling between the two characters. Charlotte de Latour records ivy being a symbol of friendship and fidelity given that “a branch of it was presented to a new married beauty as a symbol of an indissoluble knot” (133). Similarly, she notes that honeysuckle symbolises the “bonds of love” (47); however the Pre-Raphaelites could be said to have extended the meaning of this flower to include sexual love. Ruskin’s reaction to Rossetti’s “Venus Verticordia” (c. 1863–8) with its depiction of a nude woman surrounded by open roses and honeysuckle blooms gives some indication of how flowers became sexualised in the hands of Pre-Raphaelite painters. Ruskin wrote to Rossetti in 1865: “I purposefully used the word ‘wonderfully’ painted about those flowers. They were wonderful to me, in their realism; awful – I can use no other word – in their coarseness: showing enormous power; showing certain conditions of non-sentiment which underlie all you are doing — now . . .” (137). Broughton certainly picks up on the more risqué implications of flower symbolism as it began to be associated with female sexuality in the period. However the sexual feeling between Nell and Dick is also moderated by floral imagery. For example, white lilacs, like any white flower, convey a certain degree of purity. Similarly the “biggest, sweetest primrose star” (258) that Nell gives to Dick connotes both youth and love. The gift of a particular flower between lovers is loaded with meaning, for, as de Latour notes, “a flower in the hand often expressed more than the most tender written communication” (195). Thus, Broughton attempts to dampen the problematic sexual overtones of their relationship by framing their love beneath a canopy of natural imagery.

The floral clues Broughton weaves into her novel also provide comedy, for who cannot help but see the irony implied in the flowers that accompany the scene in which Nell and Sir Hugh are confined at the inn? Even a reader not completely versed in the language of flowers must have some clue as to Nell’s description of the blooms outside the window. She notes:
“when the landlady came in to clear away the tea-things, she found us both sitting on the little window seat, quite *lovely*, looking out on the gooseberry and currant bushes, and the sweet basil and mint and marigolds” (336). This little kitchen garden contains a wealth of meanings that relate to the situation at hand. The gooseberry bush, for example, points to the presence of the landlady as a chaperone to the young couple, or a kind of unwelcome presence. In this case Nell is more troubled that there is someone to bear witness to this “horribly honeymoonish” scene (336). The sweet basil has a more ominous allusion – hatred – that mirrors Nell’s ill-feeling towards Sir Hugh (de Latour 262). Coupled with the marigolds and mint with their doubled implications of grief (de Latour 226, 261), the arrangement of these loaded symbols makes for a comic yet very poignant scene that is in direct contrast to the floral imagery that accompanies the passionate and happier moments of the novel.

Nell’s vision of Dick before her wedding day to Sir Hugh is also a striking application of floriography. The kind of natural beauty that she herself possesses is embodied by Dick: “I had a very fair dream; a vague sweet dream of flowers—great, beautiful flowers, crimson and white and azure, and of a garden. And among the flowers, and in the garden, I saw Dick; saw him in all his beauty” (403). In her despair, Nell finds some comfort in her vision of Dick’s beauty so closely entangled in nature. In this moment there is all the sexual energy, passion and young love that is lacking in the marital union between Nell and Sir Hugh. The vision proves to be one of a few floral moments in the increasingly wintry and barren landscape that accompanies Nell’s journey to wifehood. She is sharply reminded of her actual situation upon waking whereupon the “bouquet of delicate hot-house ferns and whitest hot-house flowers” presented to her by Sir Hugh does not rouse her interest (404–5). She finds no comfort in the artificially cultivated blooms, nor the “tedious monotony” of Sir Hugh’s formal gardens (441) which goes against her upbringing as a ‘child of nature’ in the Wordsworthian sense of the term.

When spring returns and the white violets are “poking their noses out of doors” and the celandines are “spreading their gaudy carpet” (440), Nell admits that she is “growing to love Hugh” (441). Naturally is it not a romantic or passionate feeling but she allows herself a kind of respect for her husband. Violets and celandines both herald the coming of spring so it is to be expected that they feature in this context.

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22. Note that Dick has already set up this meaning for gooseberry when he and Dolly come across Sir Hugh and Nell in the garden and he laconically points to a bush (300).
23. When Dolly refers to Nell as a ‘child of nature’ (379) she alludes to William Wordsworth’s poem, “To a Young Lady” (1807), in which he addresses the reader as: “Dear Child of Nature” (line 1) as a reproach for taking long walks in the country. Nell epitomises the Wordsworthian prestige ascribed to nature and Broughton conveys the impression that it is a spiritual force in the novel. I would even go so far as to argue that nature takes on a maternal role in relation to Nell given the lack of effective mother figures in *Cometh Up as Flower*.
24. William Wordsworth (1770–1850) wrote that celandines appear “the first moment that the sun may shine” (“A Lesson” line 3).
Nell is broadly associated with nature in the novel. She has “spent [her] life” in the garden (243) and contends: “I don’t like the word Nature, it sounds hard and dry and unfriendly; a chilly abstraction of the homely familiar assemblage of green fields and hedges and muddy lanes, and cows and donkeys, and rivers that it is intended to represent” (293). Nell’s definition is akin to a Romantic preoccupation with nature, whereby nature elicits a state of imagination and self-awareness. She is at home in nature to the point where butterflies land on her when she is at rest (294) and she finds solace in nature when times are difficult (223). The surrounding gardens and landscape of her ancestral home provide a heaven on earth for Nell. Mindful of the decay of the old manor, but choosing not to let it unsettle her, she seeks to separate “our Eden” (271) from the outside world. These edenic spaces, most likely drawn from Broughton’s early life at a grand country house, point to Nell and her father relying on their garden not only as a food source but also as a foundation of pleasure and beauty (226, 241). Ruskin, who has been described as a “botanical moralist” (Beverley Seaton 278), is renowned for the personification of nature in his writing, a characteristic that Broughton shares in her novel. Seaton points out that Ruskin achieves this through the value words he attaches to plants (275) while Broughton, with an almost Wordsworthian flourish, imbues flowers and other aspects of nature with human emotion and action (217–8). The seasonality attributed to nature serves as a metaphor for moments in Nell’s life particularly in her “crossing the narrow brook”25 from childhood to womanhood (230). Similarly, she also experiences sadness at her father’s decline in terms of “the sunlight had gone out of the grass and trees and shining pebbles” (373). She also blames Dolly for turning “the jocund garden of [her] young life into a desolate wilderness” (427).

The realistic detail that Broughton uses is in harmony with Ruskin’s impulse to cite nature as a source for authentic art. When he wrote in Modern Painters (1843), “go to Nature in all singleness of heart, and walk with her laboriously and trustingly, having no other thought but how best to penetrate her meaning, rejecting nothing, selecting nothing, and scorning nothing” (151), as advice to Pre-Raphaelite painters, he could not imagine how this philosophy would be adopted more broadly in Victorian art and literature, or that it would become a kind of contrast to the later Aesthetic Movement with its rejection of nature and claims of Art’s superiority over anything belonging to the natural world. The subsequent chapters of this thesis will trace this on-going dialogue between art and nature and its relevance to feminine beauty. In the case of Cometh Up as a Flower this tension is personified by the difference in appearance between Nell and her sister, Dolly. While Judith Page and Elise L. Smith point out that “floral beauty and female beauty were related, both

being considered ornamental and in a sense non-functional” (173), Broughton’s novel subscribes to an entrenched historical association between women and nature that calls upon the state of innocence associated with the natural world. Broughton also problematises such an association by having a heroine who alternates between being a lily and a rose, or being innocent and passionate. Her dramatic complexion, approximating floral colouring, is indicative of this claim. Nell assures the reader that “my rosy cheeks did not come out of the rouge pot” (450) but at the same time the sexual connotations of her flushed cheeks emerge if we observe Valerie Steel’s claim that: “the ideal complexion was rather pale, but with light pink cheeks” (119). Thus Nell’s heightened colouring, although most likely attributed to her later consumptive disease, deviates from these norms. I turn now to consider how Nell’s physical appearance is also bound up in the discourse of Pre-Raphaelitism.

-Embodying the Pre-Raphaelites-

In 1862 Mary Elizabeth Braddon brought to literary life the subject of Pre-Raphaelite paintings. *Lady Audley’s Secret* contains one of the most prominent examples of a Pre-Raphaelite beauty in Victorian literature. Lady Audley’s extraordinary portrait, as it is regarded by George Talboys, is assumed to have been painted by a Pre-Raphaelite, for: “no one but a pre-Raphaelite would have painted, hair by hair, those feathery masses of ringlets with every glimmer of gold, and every shadow of pale brown” (72). In this extract it is possible to see Braddon’s precise use of a contemporary artistic rhetoric; she communicates both the Pre-Raphaelite artist’s attention to detail and the particular focus on women’s hair that characterised paintings of that school. In the same way that Braddon used ‘art to elevate the sensational’ (quoted in Sophia Andres 4), Broughton’s more subtle invocation of a Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic adds an intertextual layer to her novel that is unlike her other examples of her widespread use of high art and popular culture references. That Rhoda Broughton was familiar with the work of the Pre-Raphaelites is a given, for her novel is in conversation with an artistic movement that characterised the time in which she was writing. *Lady Audley’s Secret* had already established the context in which Pre-Raphaelitism and its new types of female beauty reached a popular audience in the mid-nineteenth century. The focus on physicality and the feminine body – as recounted by the heroine in *Cometh Up as a Flower* – is categorically a factor in the aesthetic commodification of its heroine. Aesthetic language is a part of the cultural context to which the novel belongs and is evident especially in the way

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26 In *Analysis of Female Beauty* (1833) Wilson Flagg catalogues various examples of female beauty of the period. His description of the consumptive woman details a “crimson hectic flush more like a new-blown rose than virgin blush” (29).
the heroine views herself, and thus, Nell’s version of her own beauty as it is bound up with Pre-Raphaelite discourse comes across differently to the male responses to her that I have already particularised in the preceding sections.

Nell’s slender figure, pale complexion and ruddy coloured hair draw on the Victorian Pre-Raphaelite feminine ideal. Nell in many ways resembles Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s lover and the subject of his paintings, Elizabeth Siddal, a “truly a beautiful girl; tall, with a stately throat and fine carriage, pink and white complexion, and massive straight coppery-golden hair. Her large greenish-blue eyes, large-lidded, were peculiarly noticeable” (W.M. Rossetti 273). In this quotation the likeness between the two women appears conspicuous with both Nell and Lizzie sharing unusual height, not to mention their similar abundant and striking red hair. In casting her heroine as a redhead, Broughton invokes the essence of the mid-century Pre-Raphaelite muse who was immortalised in many famous paintings and accordingly transformed red hair into an aesthetic attribute for women.27 Broughton’s physical description of her heroine shows her awareness of the cultural influence of Pre-Raphaelite art, a genre dominated by images of women. In particular many artworks focused on certain aspects of feminine beauty such as eyes, lips, skin and most of all hair. As Jan Marsh notes, “loose, luxuriant hair was an emblem of female sexuality in Pre-Raphaelite painting” (23). By the same token, I will demonstrate how the obvious focus on Nell’s hair in Cometh Up as a Flower positions her as a particularly sensual heroine.

Our only physical descriptions of the heroine come from Nell herself. In the beginning of the novel, Nell is self-conscious about her appearance: she has “untidy ruddy locks” (222) and “a wide mouth” (228), and she is unusually tall (287, 294). As a consequence of such a specific account of her faults, Jeanne Fahnestock argues that, “the minutely described heroine has a much harder time being perfectly beautiful” (329). Nell’s drawing attention to her irregular features, especially in relation to her sister Dolly, is at odds with more classical ideals of feminine beauty, where “the general idea is that perfect beauty is invariable symmetry, a harmony of just proportion” (Fahnestock 330). Nell builds on this idea when she claims that her face is no “calculated to make men’s hearts ache” (227). However in an 1868 essay, entitled “Women’s Faces,” it is suggested that “men no longer sigh for the perfectly beautiful woman” (quoted in Fahnestock 333). This change of taste in beauty indicates that in Cometh Up as a Flower the heroine’s physical imperfections – like those of Jane Eyre, or even Lizzie Siddal – do not diminish her overall beauty. Pre-Raphaelite models experienced a similar discrimination, with many of them not being recognised as beauties in their time:

27 For a thorough examination of literary representations of Siddal see “‘Keeping Myself Alive’: The Afterlives of Elizabeth Siddal” (2008) by Angela Dunstan.
“some would have been generally regarded as tall, ungainly and plain, at a time when petite, delicate prettiness was admired” (Marsh 24). Broughton sets up the same dynamic between Nell and her sister, Dolly; however, the attention of both of the eligible males in the novel is firmly fixed on Nell instead of Dolly, the conventional, symmetrical beauty.

While Nell’s initial “belief in [her] own ugliness” (236) makes her resolve to try and emphasise her other accomplishments (228), both Dick and Sir Hugh see past her social limitations and shabby clothes and recognise and admire her youthful beauty and naïveté (Lindsey Faber 156). Nell’s beauty intensifies with her growing maturity in the novel, but it is her child-like manner and looks that initially attract the attention of the two heroes. Her “big blue eyes,” which look, “rather well with that air of childish enquiry in them” (260) are irresistible to Dick. At the same time, Sir Hugh is attracted by her childlike innocence: “[she] has no notion of how to turn these charms on or off. At the croquet party, Nell does not comprehend that her confused and demure responses to Sir Hugh and her unawareness of his attempts to single her out are only making her more attractive” (Faber 156). As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that Nell, though a “raw recruit in the ranks of the beau monde” (232), is an aesthetically appealing young woman.

This narrative progression from Nell’s self-prescribed unattractiveness to her eventual realisation of beauty parallels the “Ugly Duckling” fairy-tale. Dolly, like the farmyard animals in Hans Christian Anderson’s story, contributes to Nell’s low opinion of her physical appearance (Sanjay Sircar 190). Early in the novel Nell, trusting her sister’s mature and worldly judgement, apprehensively asks Dolly to evaluate her, to which she replies: “‘I don’t admire you,’ she said . . . ‘but that’s no reason why somebody should not. Some people might like red hair and a wide mouth’” (228). In Dolly’s evasive yet cutting response, Nell is reduced to two body parts that are commonly associated with feminine beauty. The emphasis on Nell’s lips and hair continues through the novel and becomes evidence of her attractiveness. Her abundant Pre-Raphaelite red hair (226) becomes “burning gold” (321); together with her “great blue eyes” (321), it substitutes for Nell’s overall beauty. She eventually learns the societal value of her unique feminine features at the Lancasters’ Ball: “men seem to like fern wreaths, and red heads, and ignorance. It is quite a new light to myself that I am a beauty, but I am fortunate to learn that the bay filly28 is considered quite one of the best things out” (360). Just like the ‘ugly duckling’ Nell becomes socially admired, especially by the opposite sex (Sircar 190). As I have mentioned before, the fact that Sir Hugh does not

28 Note that the “bay filly,” a reddish brown young female horse which refers to Nell was changed in the 1877 edition to “I am” (Heller n.360a.525). The regulation of language in the later edition invalidates the earlier joke that the men are admiring various women at the party in the “equine tongue” (360).
choose to marry anyone prior to Nell says something about his taste in women. He forgoes Dolly, the conventional Victorian beauty, in favour of Nell.

Broughton’s emphasis on Nell’s body parts, particularly those associated with the female form, is interesting. Nell is referred to by her “big blue eyes” (260), and her blue eyes, “quite China blue, like tea cups!” (274); her lips are also “full” and “soft” (258) and “youthful” (252). These numerous descriptions give a disjointed sense of Nell’s aesthetic attributes and she is effectively fetishised by this emphasis on her fragmented parts. In fragmenting Nell’s beauty, Broughton succeeds in conferring on her an aesthetic value that is more and less than just the sum of all her parts. For example, the emphasis on her mouth in particular betrays a sexual connotation because of its metonymic associations with appetite and sensuality (Fahnestock 342). The descriptions of Nell in Cometh Up as A Flower are enveloped in codified language. Helena Michie examines images of heroines in literature and argues that writers encase their descriptions of heroines in literature and argues that writers encase their descriptions of heroines in codified language that both acknowledges and diminishes their physicality (84). For example, Nell is represented through a series of images, or dead metaphors, relating to her hair, her eyes, her lips, her throat and her figure (226, 258, 260) which consign her body to a clichéd state. Her individual qualities are simultaneously conventional, reminiscent of, and undifferentiated from other literary heroines.

The hand in particular serves a synecdochal role in the Victorian novel in that it often substitutes for the female body (Michie 98). The symbolic nature of the synecdoche allows writers to use simple and familiar parts of the female body – such as hands and arms – to stand in for the female body as a whole (97). Consider the following passage from Cometh up as a Flower in its entirety:

What is there in nature or art so pretty, so appealing to the senses as a beautiful arm? Mine was beautiful, round and firm, and polished like marble, that some god had kissed into warm life; with dear little nicks and dimples about elbow and wrist…. Mahogany faces can look loving and pitiful just as well as alabaster ones, though they don't do it so becomingly. Hugh's did now… Why, in the name of common sense, could not I look loving too? Why could not I feel loving? Why could not I tumble straightway into his honest ready arms, as he stood there with ‘The lights of sunset and of sunrise mixed’ upon his face: stood there, unkempt, unshorn, grizzly as a mechanic on a week day? To fall into his arms was to fall into the arms of £12,000 per annum, and a house in May Fair. It included the ideas of clover for life; fine clothes, high feeding, and other delights. ‘Poor little arm,’ he says, ‘we must get some plaster for it; let me kiss the place to make it well!’ (340).
Nell’s arm, ‘polished like marble,’ figuratively represents Nell herself through synecdochal coding. This artistic simile of Nell’s marbled arm is also an example of what Michie calls the **metatrope**, which translates to the heroine being described through a chain of metaphors that often relate to music and art. Like the other two codes – the cliché and the synecdoche – the metatrope frames the heroine within familiar discourse but also distances the female body from the reader (102) because she appears more as a work of art than a physical being. On one hand, it foregrounds her aesthetic attributes, and on the other hand, it commodifies her through her symbolic associations with objects of art.

The description of a woman’s arm in this extract may seem rather familiar, especially for readers of George Eliot. Tamar Heller, editing the *Varieties of Women’s Sensation Fiction* edition of *Cometh up as a Flower*, notes that Broughton’s lyrical ode to the female arm is suspiciously similar to George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), which reads:

> Who has not felt the beauty of a woman’s arm?—the unspeakable suggestions of tenderness that lie in the dimpled elbow, and all the varied gently lessening curves down to the delicate wrist, with its tiniest almost imperceptible nicks in the firm softness. A woman’s arm touched the soul of a great sculptor two thousand years ago, so that he wrought an image of it for the Parthenon which moves us still as it clasps lovingly the time-worn marble of a headless trunk. Maggie’s was such an arm as that—and it had the warm tints of life (quoted in Heller 491n.337).

Heller argues that the similarities between the texts – such as the rhetorical questions and aesthetic vocabulary – indicate that Broughton was influenced by Eliot’s novel and indeed are evidence of the high cultural references that pervade her own writing. While Eliot’s heroine ends up snatching her arm away from the man she eventually elopes with, Nell snatches hers away from the man she cannot love. Alluding to the Pygmalion myth, Nell has instead been ‘kissed into warm life’ by her lover Dick but remains inanimate towards Sir Hugh, that is, she cannot feel ‘loving’ towards him. Thus, she remains detached and aloof towards Sir Hugh, which he mistakenly interprets as shyness. In this extract Nell’s feminine vulnerability and ‘victim status’ is aestheticised and the reader is keenly aware of her discomfort at being subjected to and unable to escape Hugh’s ‘loving’ gaze.

Pygmalion the sculptor is a legendary figure from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* who falls in love with a statue he has made because it is so realistic. He offers the statue gifts and eventually prays to Venus who takes pity on him and brings the statue to life. They marry and have a son. The fundamental Pygmalion narrative has been widely used in literature, music and art through the centuries. By the nineteenth century, the story often becomes one in which the awakened beloved rejects Pygmalion; although she comes alive, she is initially cold and unattainable.
Nell’s candid sense of herself as an interface between commodification and aestheticisation is exemplified many times in the novel, and because Broughton’s text is written from the perspective of its heroine, Nell’s own sense of the aesthetic commodifying process is necessarily foregrounded. Her mode of first-person representation and centralising of herself in the narrative focalises her as an aesthetic commodity through her conscious choice of aesthetic language. On her wedding day, Nell gazes at the “very miserable-looking face the looking-glass gave back to me, but a very lovely one, as I could not help seeing: lovelier in its colourless, hopeless wistfulness, with its great blue eyes, and its ruddy, billowing hair, than even Dolly’s. . . ‘I’m worth my price,’ I say to myself bitterly (404). Furthermore, during the marriage ceremony when she says her vows with “as much life and animation as a doll shows when she opens her eyes, the string at her side being pulled” (405) she embodies the ultimate female aesthetic commodity, the doll figure. During the nineteenth century, the production and consumption of dolls was a large industry (A.F. Robertson 31). A doll is a commodity in its most fundamental form because it is bought, sold and collected. Nell alludes to her own participation in such a circuit of exchange and the way in which she functions as a collected aesthetic commodity, sold by her father and purchased by her new husband as a way of nullifying her family debt. As we shall see in Ouida’s Moths, this kind of familial duty permits a similar version of marriage exchange when Vere marries a wealthy aristocrat in order to cancel out what she believes are her mother’s debts.

Nell’s narrative, recounted at a later stage in her adult life, continues to confirm her awareness of herself as an aesthetic commodity of matrimonial exchange with her references to her “transplantation” (417) from her father’s home to her husband’s. Nell describes herself as her husband’s property, a “chattel as much as his pet lean-headed bay mare” (418). To all intents and appearances, she figures as a possession in her husband’s household, and her presence there delights him. Evidently Nell is a fixture in Hugh’s home that he wants to show off, as Nell observes, “Hugh's men friends complimented him (so he told me) on his wife's beauty” (449). Beth Newman proposes that feminine display in the Victorian period served an important role in showcasing a husband’s wealth and social status (2). Nell is on display in the domestic sphere; she is the beautiful wife charged with exhibiting Sir Hugh’s economic and cultural capital. It is already evident that Nell’s physical appearance is a source of aesthetic pleasure for her husband, but her actual presence in his home shows his secured ownership of her; he gains a “pretty young white face opposite to him at dinner every day” (418). As Bourdieu might argue, Nell represents objectified cultural capital and seems to serve the same aesthetic purpose for her husband as a work of art. Nell expresses her sense of this experience: “All through the wintry morning I sat on a gilt chair, clad from head to foot in
thickest silk and blackest crepe, in the yellow drawing room, every stick of whose ugly furniture spoke to me of him” (419). In her place amongst other aesthetic objects – the gilt chair and the silk clothing – Nell is on display in her husband’s drawing room amongst other valuable possessions which connote Hugh’s wealth and taste.

Nell shows her own cultural competency and artistic knowledge in the way she organises her narrative as a series of pictures. The first painting she carefully draws to the attention of the reader as a way of invoking an appropriate emotional context is John Everett Millais’s “Ophelia” (1851–2) (figure 1). Famously modeled on Elizabeth Siddal, Millais’s picture has become a hallmark image of Pre-Raphaelite painting as much for its legendary model as the work of art itself. Its famed meticulous depiction of flowers appears to be emulated by Broughton in her novel which is analysed in section three of this chapter. Taking as its cue Gertrude’s account of Ophelia’s gathering of flowers – “crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples” (4.7.169) – before she drowns offstage, Millais envelops the drowned Ophelia with a mass of floral emblems that can be interpreted using de Latour’s system of classification. The prominent red poppy, for example, is a symbol of sleep and death (de Latour 287, 314), so acknowledged because of its anaesthetic properties. Although Millais depicted flowers that would not necessarily bloom in the same season he did strive to capture a botanically accurate waterside. William Holman Hunt recalls scouting out a suitable background location for Millais’s painting in Surrey until they found a “large lonely tarn, well-nigh carpeted with duckweed and white blossom” (50) which provided the perfect riverbank setting. Nell consciously imagines herself in the place of Ophelia as she lies drowned in a pool of water: “should I practise some picturesque form of suicide? Should I drown myself in the garden pool and be found with my long red hair inextricably entangled among the duckweed?” (313). While Nell trivialises the emotional effect of seeing Millias’s painting, her desire to construct a ‘picturesque’ suicide tableau invokes the visual finery of “Ophelia.”

Nell also consciously arranges herself in a tableau when she and Dick “pose ourselves in the attitude of the famous ‘Huguenot’ picture” (310), that is, more specifically, John Everett Millais’s “A Huguenot on St Bartholomew’s Day, Refusing to Shield Himself from Danger by Wearing the Roman Catholic Badge” (1852) (figure 2). An early work of Millais’s, the painting has been hailed as the “originating image in Victorian courtship pictures” and an “archetypal Pre-Raphaelite composition” (Susan P. Casteras 72); it depicts a couple joined together in a dramatic embrace whereby the woman tries to make her Huguenot lover identify

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30 See Flora Symbolica: Flowers in Pre-Raphaelite Art (2003) by Debra N. Mancoff for a more comprehensive discussion of the floral imagery in other Pre-Raphaelite paintings.
himself as catholic to save himself from massacre. Nell’s invocation of the tragic circumstances of Millais’s painting foreshadows her own ill-fated union. Later, when Dick returns to England to find Nell wed to Sir Hugh the two lovers share their last embrace and Nell’s “hair fell in its splendid ruddy billows over his great shoulder,” and as he “so kiss[es] and clasps [her]. A great blackness come[s] over [her] eyes” (425). Millais’s image is thus translated to a moment in literature and Broughton brings to life the emotion and drama surrounding his characters. As Nell’s circumstances change for the worse, the paintings she invokes have a much darker palette. The shift from Nell’s Turneresque visions of nature with their “great breadths of colour, infinite nobility and harmony” (374), to her subsequent allusions to Rembrandt, hinges on the narrative trajectory. Fast upon her marriage to Sir Hugh and her father’s decline she pronounces: “I have put away all the bright colours of my paint box, for they have gone out of my life; so I need no longer lake, or carmine, or ultramarine. My few more pictures are as dark as Rembrandt’s; without his forge, and fires, and patches of crimson light to set them off” (407). A combination of grief, thwarted love and unfulfilled sexual desire contributes to the overcast atmosphere in the last of Nell’s series of life pictures.

Unfortunately, Nell Le Strange does not quite fit with her husband’s estate and can only sustain this existence as long as her former lover is alive. Her emotional shock at the news of the death of her Dick begins her slow physical weakening and eventual death from consumption. Nell grows thinner in her marriage to Sir Hugh, as is predominantly obvious in the final chapter:

  But surely, surely I was getting oddly, unaccountably thin: my rings took to slipping off my fingers, and rolling into remote corners, and all ‘me frocks,’ like Glorvina’s, of love-lorn memory, ‘had to be took in.’ Also I somehow stopped very often, and leant against the carved banisters; as I went up the shallow, broad oak steps of the grand staircase (450).

In Victorian literature it is common for women to waste away as they near death, but it is only now that literary and cultural scholars are starting to recognise anorexia as a factor in such contexts. The term ‘anorexia nervosa’ was coined by William Withey Gull in 1873. He proposed that a refusal to eat stemmed from a form of nervous disease that was particularly associated with young women (Erin O’Connor 535). Anna Krugovoy Silver suggests that anorexia, institutionally recognised in Britain, France and America in the mid-nineteenth century, was a product of the Victorian cultural context:

  The anorexic woman’s slender form attests to her discipline over her body and its hunger, despite the persistence of that hunger, and indicates her discomfort with or even hatred of her body and its appetites, which may or may not
include her sexuality. If one reads the disease metaphorically, then, it becomes evident that the pathology of anorexia nervosa and predominant Victorian constructions of gender subscribe to many of the same characteristics (3).

In *Cometh Up as a Flower* Nell has been forced to suppress her sexual appetite so perhaps her other appetites have suffered also as a consequence. Nell is ‘unaccountably’ thin which again invokes further biographical similarities with Elizabeth Siddal. Anorexia nervosa is a disease that Siddal was rumoured to have suffered from with numerous reports of her refusing to eat and consequently growing thinner and thinner. Even so, both women, despite their gaunt physical appearances, continued to be aestheticised by male admirers. Ford Madox Brown, in his diary of October 6, 1854, wrote that he “saw Miss Siddal, looking thinner and more deathlike and more beautiful and more ragged than ever” (quoted in W.M. Rossetti 293). The anorexic (and dying) female body is aestheticised in this context despite its obvious lack of nourishment. In this instance the similarities between the two women go beyond physical appearance with Nell’s internal struggle, outwardly masked by her waif-like ‘beauty,’ perhaps being reminiscent of Siddal’s own tortured mind being hidden by her beautiful facade.

*Cometh up as a Flower* reverberates with deathly allusions, especially in the novel’s opening and closing lines. The novel begins with Nell’s musings on her own death, where she enthusiastically supposes that she will make an “interesting young corpse” (225). In Victorian fiction, it is routine for novelists to aestheticise the dying female body and to emphasise “the beautiful feminine corpse” (Elisabeth Bronfen xi); however, unlike Siddal, whose deceased body was rumoured to have remained beautiful and undecomposed, the reader learns that Nell’s wasting body loses its beauty and “her poor thin carcass” becomes “ugly” (229). The loss of her beauty is just one stage in a process of wasting away whereby Nell completely escapes her physical life. While her death at the end of the novel is a suitable conclusion to Broughton’s narrative in appropriating the conventions of sensation fiction, I would argue that her death is an escape from her commodified status rather than a simple punishment for her adulterous desires. When Nell loses her aesthetic qualities, Broughton also nullifies her presence as a commodity by removing her from the narrative so she can be with her beloved Dick: “God was very good and pitying; he was going to release me from the long pain of existence, and through the grave and gate of death I should pass to my beloved; should see his hero face immortal then in its beauty” (451). Nell is contradictory in her final moments in the novel: she longs to see Dick’s beauty, which arguably would arouse a passionate response in her, but in drawing her dying breaths she tries to picture to herself “that land of unpictured, unpicturable, passionless bliss” (334). Such a notion is far removed from her earlier aversion to a “bodiless” and “sexless” (273) existence — which we might call a
Broughton’s return to the conventional perhaps signals that Nell’s desire to escape her physically attractive body that has been such a determinant in her miserable marriage to Sir Hugh is her overarching sensation; her death eliminates on earth her aestheticised and commodified body which has been a source of unhappiness for her because it has aroused a sexual response in a man who does not attract her at all, and has induced him to purchase her.

As I have signalled in this chapter, George Meredith’s Clara shares some of the same characterisation as Nell in that she provides a natural antidote to Sir Willoughby Patterne’s artificial sensibilities. In the 1870s Pre-Raphaelitism made way for what we now know of as the Aesthetic Movement. In the following chapter I will trace this shift and explore the implications it has for the commodification of female beauty in The Egoist.
In 1879 George Meredith published his thirteenth novel, *The Egoist*, the tale of narcissistic Sir Willoughby Patterne’s efforts to furnish himself with a desirable wife. Jilted by his first fiancée, Willoughby’s admiration wavers between the adoring Laetitia Dale and the more enlightened Clara Middleton. Willoughby’s courtship of Clara and her increasing resistance to marital imprisonment form the main plot of the novel as does Clara’s gradual recognition of Willoughby’s egoism, and of his desire for women to serve as a mirror for his own aesthetic sensibilities. Indeed, Willoughby’s real criterion for a wife – apart from her being rich, healthy and beautiful – has curiously much to do with her being able to reflect his aesthetic pretentions. In Chapter One I discussed how Pre-Raphaelite ideas of beauty in the mid-Victorian period can be seen to influence Rhoda Broughton’s *Cometh up as a Flower*. This chapter is in many ways an extension of the more general argument presented there, here specifically focused on how Meredith’s novel thematises Aestheticism. As I argued earlier, the aesthetic commodification of women active in Broughton’s popular novel of the late 1860s is intrinsically linked to stylisations of nature. I now explore the way in which, eleven years later, Meredith takes up similar themes and presents a peculiar discourse of natural versus artificial aesthetics. This chapter will be oriented within several intellectual frameworks that are relevant to the novel including Aestheticism and the marriage market, Victorian proto-feminist thinking as regards women’s subjugation in marriage, and the Victorian literary tradition of complementary relationships between the sexes, concluding with a discussion of how Meredith reconciles the seemingly unconnected Darwinism and Aestheticism as two significant discourses of the period; my approach links the two through focusing on women’s beauty in *The Egoist*.

-A Popular Desire-

Although *Diana of the Crossways* (1885) is widely considered to be Meredith’s most commercially successful novel, *The Egoist*, described in Angus Wilson’s 1963 Afterword as

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31 Current work on Meredith and his writing has tended to focus on Darwinian theories of natural selection. Major works in the area include Carolyn Williams’s “Natural Selection and the Narrative Form in *The Egoist*” (1983), Jonathan Smith’s “‘The Cock of Lordly Plume’: Sexual Selection and *The Egoist*” (1995), and more recently, Anna Maria Jones’s, “Eugenics by Way of Aesthetics: Sexual Selection, Cultural Consumption and the Cultivated Reader in *The Egoist*” (2005).
“the turning point in George Meredith's career” (501), nonetheless has its place in Victorian popular literature. Ioan Williams chronicles the ups and downs of Meredith’s literary reception, arguing that it wasn’t until the 1880s – after the publication of The Egoist – that he finally found popular appeal: “eventually he gave up the attempt to reconcile his artistic vision with public taste. Ironically this happened just as his work began to meet with enthusiastic approval and public response” (8). Prior to that, Williams argues, Meredith did indeed try “to reconcile his artistic purpose with the demands of the reading public, [but] his work met with an inadequate and disheartening response” (1). In fact, many contemporary reviews of Meredith’s work are full of musings about his popular status, with A.J. Butler opining in 1871 that: “It is not probable that Mr Meredith will ever be a popular author” (167). G.P. Baker Jnr., reflecting at a later point in Meredith’s career, pronounced in 1887 that his writing lacked “the common standard for a work of fiction, that it must interest and amuse in the briefest brightest possible way” (307), but should instead be viewed as an “intellectual storehouse” (309). Meredith’s letters are an interesting source for finding out more about the author’s awareness of the Victorian popular fiction tradition. Early in his career it is clear that he wanted popular acclaim. In 1864 he admits that he was making “a spanking bid for popularity” (143), and in 1870 he wrote to William Hardman that he was “drumming to make the public hear me at last (215). However, Meredith’s obsession with the popular readership (Judith Wilt 3–4) soon turned to his being less receptive to the wishes of the masses, preferring instead to be faithful to his own artistic values.

Meredith worked as a publisher’s reader from 1860 to 1895 and was at one point a part-time reader for Chapman and Hall. While he rejected East Lynne twice and thus denied the publishing company a great commercial success, he did champion Olive Schreiner and Thomas Hardy (Mervyn Jones 220–1), giving them literary advice, and recognising their talent. In 1930 Arthur Waugh summed up Meredith’s contribution to the publishing industry:

As against a few emphatic refusals of books, some of which afterwards attained success, there is to be set a long array of early appreciations, encouragements, and advices, which prove him to have shown extraordinary versatility in the post which he so long and so patiently occupied. . . . He was bound to support the claims of literature, and to reject what was illiterate. If he missed a few successes by the way, he at least preserved his own self-respect, and the firm’s as well. Too little has been said about the shining integrity of his literary ideals, and the consistent encouragement which he gave to the promise which he himself was often the very first to perceive (quoted in Siegfried Sassoon 69).
Meredith’s approach to a role that was fundamental to the Victorian publishing industry mirrored his own literary objectives in that he tried to bridge the gap between art and popularity in his writing. In the Victorian period, the publishing industry began to show signs of a split between artistic and popular concerns.

As John Lucas pointed out in 1971, Meredith appeared to cross this gap: “[he] indeed could easily become the hero for all those writers who in the last years of the nineteenth century saw a wedge being driven between art and popularity and for whom the rise of the best-seller spelled the doom of the novel as a serious literary form. From now on the good was to be unpopular” (544). Indeed, whether Meredith was too intellectually demanding for the popular fiction readership is something which was, and still is, debated continually:

Mr Meredith’s novels are not bought at a railway station to beguile a journey, or carried in the hand down to the seaside to while away the tedium of a semi-fashionable autumnal holiday. They are not amusing. A man or a woman must be really in earnest to care much about them at all; and the grand requisite of the popular novel of our day undoubtedly is that it shall require no thought or trouble of any kind. But those who read steadily through Meredith’s books will find themselves rewarded for their pains, if they have brains and culture enough in themselves to appreciate brains and culture in their author (Justin M’Carthy 124–5).

M’Carthy’s comments from 1862 are echoed by nineteenth and twentieth-century critics alike. For example, Arabella Shore’s review – “an Early Appreciation” – appeared just before the publication of The Egoist and attempted to pinpoint reasons for Meredith’s lack of popular recognition; she concluded that his “subtle and profound thought” was too much of an exertion for the popular reading public (192). Likewise, L.T. Hergenhan, writing about what he calls the ‘third phase’ of Meredith’s literary career, the one in which he eventually found popularity with novels such as Beauchamp’s Career (1875), The Egoist, and Diana of the Crossways (1885), notes that in them the writer “allowed his individual artistic interests freer rein” (1247). Not only did Meredith all at once find the popular acclaim he had originally sought, but he produced novels of arguably more exceptional artistic integrity. Even though he is not necessarily a popular author in the way that we view writers like Rhoda Broughton or Ouida, he did become the centre of a critical discussion which at least put him in public consciousness.
The Egoist first appeared serialised as Sir Willoughby Patterne: the Egoist in the Glasgow Weekly Herald, from June 1879 until January 1880. Two interesting points to note here are that Meredith was against both the title change and the fact that his novel was serialised without his consultation (Michael Collie 43–4). When the novel was later published as a three-volume edition it met with mixed criticism. While the Examiner abhorred it for its “want of intelligibility” (“Review of The Egoist 202), W.E. Henley instead remarked that the novel's depiction of the human character and human mind was “strikingly original” (210). It is acknowledged that The Egoist caused quite a stir when it was first published in 1879 because of its satiric representation of Victorian social relations, especially marriage relations. With its extraordinary version of the Victorian marriage narrative The Egoist does not fit the usual patterns of sentimental and romantic fiction that are associated more with Broughton or other popular writers; in this it is quite unlike the other novels I am exploring in this thesis. Among Meredith’s novels The Egoist’s relatively high and lasting popularity, and its continuing readership outside of English department curricula, not to mention its significance as a culture cache for the way in which fiction responded to its wider cultural environment – any English novelist subsequently addressing aesthetic values within romantic fiction would have read The Egoist – cements its inclusion in my examination of how Victorian texts reflect on and mediate the concerns of Aestheticism.

-Aesthetic Pattern(e)s-

In chronological terms Meredith’s novel is positioned near to the beginning the Aesthetic Movement — about the time that Aestheticism was becoming known to a wider public. The novel appeared two years after the well-known Grosvenor Gallery opening. It also uses imagery associated with Pre-Raphaelitism in its portrayal of female beauty, a subject I will refer to. Meredith was in fact associated with the Pre-Raphaelite group. Firstly, two years before Meredith’s first wife, Mary Ellen Nicolls, left him for the artist Henry Wallis, Meredith was the model for Wallis’s early Pre-Raphaelite painting, “The Death of Chatterton” (1856). He later included in his circle of friends Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Charles Algernon Swinburne and William Michael Rossetti, the younger brother of the poet and painter. The four men shared a house together in Chelsea in the 1860s and it is recorded that each of them also shared a mutual regard for each other’s work (Stewart Marsh Ellis 152). The Egoist, a product of the late 1870s, is perfectly positioned to span both the Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic Movements, and, as we will later witness with George du Maurier in Trilby,
Meredith was close enough to both movements to be able to self-consciously interrogate them. In particular his enthusiasm for Aestheticism must be noted, although, as Ellis observes, more so than his artistic associates, Meredith was “a man of the world and a man of society, scrutinising all sorts of things, and using them as his material in the commerce of life and in the field of intellect” (152). *The Egoist* therefore offers both a contemporary understanding, and a critique, of Victorian culture and aesthetics. This section will largely focus on how Willoughby functions as an aesthetic commodifier. It will draw on socio-historic factors such as the history of china and the Victorian commodity market, and the Aesthetic Movement. The growing commodity culture and capitalist economic system of 1870’s Britain provides a context for the social relations that transpire in the novel, especially in terms of marriage and familial exchange, and my reading of *The Egoist* sees the text putting these contexts into play with the expectation that Victorian readers would have picked up on them. I will also show how Willoughby is depicted as an aesthetic prize himself and in turn how this occasions his own commodification of women.

In this novel, women are not the only objects of admiration. The novel opens with discussions of Willoughby’s value. Introduced early in the novel as “rich, handsome, courteous, generous” and someone who, “excited his guests of both sexes to a holiday of flattery” (10), Willoughby would seem to be a typical dashing Victorian hero. In the beginning, Willoughby demonstrates all the respectable attributes of a true gentleman. His title indicates inherited nobility and he initially presents himself as dignified and well-bred. However his true nature reveals itself when he arrogantly refuses to see a poor relative (9) and this certainly undercuts his gentlemanly status. After this ‘minor incident’ it is easy for the reader to decode the narrator’s subsequent descriptions of Willoughby’s elevated social and cultural reputation. As the novel progresses, it becomes ever clearer that Willoughby is an object of ridicule rather than an object to be admired by the reader and his social circle. Initially, the narrator documents Willoughby’s social and cultural standing, adding that, “adulation of the young Sir Willoughby’s beauty and wit, and aristocratic bearing and mien, and of his moral virtues was common” (11). These nouns, more often associated with surfaces and external markers of status rather than true character, pertain to other instances in the novel when the difference between appearance and reality is consistently called into question. In that way, Willoughby has the lustre of an aristocrat but lacks the moral substance of a true gentleman: “Willoughby Patterne stands for the upper-class Englishman of the nineteenth

33 The ‘minor incident’ in Chapter One is a reference to Willoughby’s pretentious refusal to see his relative, Crossjay Patterne. Although Willoughby attempts to make up for his indiscretion by mentoring the younger Crossjay, this incident serves not only to evidence his self-centred nature, but occurs in front of his first fiancée, Constantia, and effectively terminates her affection for him.
century, and Meredith satirizes in him the fatuousness and smugness, the callousness and heartlessness, of the type” (Rachel M. Brownstein 186). In his characterisation of Sir Willoughby, Meredith shows his awareness of the more negative and impotent associations of the British aristocracy at that time as well as the effect of Darwinian theory on new models of masculinity in Victorian England.

It is apparent that Willoughby adds to his natural graces and aristocratic education: “he cultivated himself, he would not be outdone in popular accomplishments” (13). In this way the narrator gives a reason for Willoughby’s interest in science and related misinterpretation of Darwin’s theories of evolution. Despite his close association with science, *The Egoist* signals very early on that Willoughby is embroiled with aesthetics, or at least a parody of the movement; his name emphatically signals an Aestheticist and interrelated commodity culture context. The name ‘Willoughby’ comes from the old English meaning ‘willow town’ and according to Robert D. Mayo it was used commonly in the satirical comedy tradition (“The Egoist and the Willow Pattern” 71). But, it is its combination with ‘Patterne’ that makes it truly significant in the context of the concerns of this thesis. His name, Willoughby Patterne, according to Mayo, implies a direct connection with ‘willow pattern,’ a blue-and-white china design, and Mayo also points out that Willoughby’s name produces other significations connected to the willow pattern legend. Readers of *The Egoist* would no doubt have been aware of the significance of this allusion because, according to Mayo: “the blue Willow Pattern, named for the willow tree which figures in its centre, is undoubtedly the most popular single design ever to be employed on English earthenware” (71). Therefore, by invoking all the relevant associations of the willow pattern, Meredith cleverly contextualises his own narrative within a familiar framework.

The willow pattern is evocative because of its relationship with Victorian mass culture. The popularity of generic blue-and-white designs and their status as a mass culture product is evidenced by Gerald Reitlinger’s *The Economics of Taste*: “the strangest factor in making blue-and-white popular was that there was enough for everybody” (207). Reitlinger attributes the “cult of Chinese blue-and-white porcelain” to the aesthete James Whistler’s original penchant for the designs in 1863. By 1880 he had amassed quite a collection of chinaware (202). The cult later spread as a decorator craze in Victorian homes from the 1860s (202–3); as Reitlinger points out, blue-and-white china went “decidedly well” with the fashionable Victorian oak panelling and sideboards (203). The mass production of blue-and-white china

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34 Interestingly, this design’s connection with the domestic space contrasts with its coincident prominence as cultural artefact: its “rise to cultural and financial prominence has been mapped from Chelsea, where it was idolised as an *Objects d’art* by an artistic elite, to London’s exclusive West End” (Anne Anderson 220).
was made possible through the development of the process of transferware, a technique which allowed for a greater amount of it to be produced; prior to that the manufacturing of china was limited by hand painting practices. Transferware was made in similar fashion to printed engravings and involved literally transferring an illustration onto a piece of china and then setting it in the kiln. Despite this association with mass production – the capitalist economic system of nineteenth century Britain was a culture that revolved around the production and exchange of material goods – the designs were highly prized and famous collectors included Rossetti, Whistler and Wilde. Concurrently, the sheer volume of consumption of blue-and-white china has led to its more negative status as a ‘popular’ obsession\(^\text{35}\). It is also associated with late Victorian Aestheticism because blue-and-white designs came to be ubiquitous symbols of the movement (Sara Stambaugh 498), most likely because of Wilde’s “impassioned collecting” of them (Patricia O’Hara, “Willow Pattern that We Knew” 430).

The aesthetic world of Victorian Britain and the commercial market for pottery plays out in the background of *The Egoist*. An early comparison between Willoughby and Vernon, whereby Willoughby is described as an “English gentleman wherever he went,” as opposed to Vernon Whitford, the “new kind of thing, nondescript, produced in England of late, and not likely to come to much good himself, or do much good to the county” (23), suggests British market conditions. Of course this skewed apprehension of the social differences between the two men\(^\text{36}\) comes from the views of Willoughby’s admiring community with Meredith’s use of indirect thought and speech allowing for such transitions between perspectives. Nevertheless this assessment dramatises the commodity market of Victorian England by making reference to mass production and fears about the downfall of British good taste. John Ruskin’s mid-century concerns about mass-produced goods, and the altered quality and value of British artistic goods, sparked debate about the aesthetic and economic tensions embodied by commodity culture throughout the rest of the nineteenth century. Changes in commercial activity that allowed individuals a growing access to mass-produced goods were responsible for the perception of the diminishing quality of national art in the Victorian period (Patrick Brantlinger, “Household Taste” 91). Charles Eastlake’s 1872 manual critically evaluated the deficiency of English taste:

> It is unfortunate for the interests of Art at the present time that in civilised countries it has come to be regarded as the result of theories utterly remote from the question of ordinary taste, totally distinct from those principles which

\(^{35}\) Here the parallels between popular fiction and the collecting of china become apparent with the corresponding societal debates about commercial markets versus high art forms.

\(^{36}\) It is later revealed in the novel that Vernon is more of a ‘new kind of man’ in a Darwinian sense. He proves to be the more ‘evolved’ of the two characters.
influence manufacture and structural science, and independent of any standards of excellence which we might expect to be derived from common sense (1).

While Eastlake in part blamed the feminine predisposition to subscribe purely to fashion and novelty when selecting home furnishings (2–3, 8), he also held mass-production and the growing availability of goods of inferior workmanship\(^{37}\) responsible for depreciating English design.

Willoughby makes his own civilised distaste for urban spaces of mass consumption and production apparent: “one day Sir Willoughby, in the quiet manner which was his humour, informed [Laetitia] that he had become a country gentleman; he had abandoned London, he loathed it as the burial place of the individual man. He intended to sit down on his estates. . .” (25–6). Thus Meredith utilises the rhetoric of the condescending aesthete in his characterisation of Willoughby and also incorporates the Victorian cultural context as a way of further emphasising this particular quality of Willoughby’s. Willoughby’s desire to abandon London altogether is consistent with his fantasy to hide his bride-to-be from the outside world, an impulse that is attributed to his jealous and narcissistic nature, and perhaps to the knowledge that he does not rule outside of his home. In a statement that suggests the ideals of aesthetics, Willoughby says to Clara: “It is our poetry! But does not love shun the world? Two that love must have their substance in isolation,” to which he later adds: “The purer the beauty, the more it will be out of the world” (55). He wishes them to “feel their oneness” by dividing themselves from the world (55).\(^{38}\) While Willoughby wants to exercise his exclusive rights to Clara’s person, such an impulse is at odds with his desires to live a fully Aestheticist lifestyle because a lovely object acquires value from being seen.

But the rather small group of people associated with Patterne Hall seems to be the only social audience Willoughby requires. A self-confessed “prince in popularity” (236), Willoughby believes that if Clara sees how admired he is in his county then she will join in with the “showers of adulation” (14). Jenni Calder contends, “Patterne Hall is full of ladies only too ready to admire and obey Sir Willoughby and to enhance his self-image” (“The Insurrection of Women” 473), even as Willoughby’s favour in society encompasses a very

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\(^{37}\) Eastlake particularly laments the deterioration of Birmingham metal work, regarding it as: “a cheap and easy method of workmanship – an endeavour to produce a show finish with the least possible labour, and, above all, an unhealthy spirit of competition in regards to price, such as was unknown to previous generations – have combined to deteriorate the value of our ordinary mechanics’ work” (4).

\(^{38}\) This is not the only instance where Willoughby aestheticises his ‘love’ for Clara. In fact Willoughby is more concerned with aestheticising love rather than experiencing it: “he was indefatigable in his lectures on the aesthetics of love” (41). Indeed he is fixated on the intangibility of love and he aestheticises his ‘love,’ particularly for Clara, as a spiritual notion. In actuality Willoughby’s emphasising the aesthetics of love is all part of his plan to “retain her at the Hall” (242).
limited consortium. The claustrophobic country setting, where Willoughby is “lord of the Hall, the feast, and the dance” (Meredith 10) is symptomatic of his desire to control, what Sophie Gilmartin calls his “ruthlessly possessive nature” (171). Willoughby’s sexual jealousy motivates him to try to keep Clara hidden away from the world. Really, Willoughby uses the pretext of the lover’s desire to be out of the world to mask his chronic insecurities and jealousies. He tells Clara that “they can’t enjoy the sense of security for their love unless they fence away the world” (40), in order to hasten his engagement to a wedding and thus he obscures his need for control over Clara.

Willoughby is incongruously aware of the world and what it thinks of him yet he is desirous only to shut himself away from society. In due course he misguidedly comes to the conclusion that his “making a solitude about himself” (248) is what is actually driving Clara away (241). In his absurd egoism, Willoughby has no idea that Clara rejects him rather than his social standing. Failing to grasp Clara’s true feelings, he resolves to display his wealth and aesthetic grandeur in the form of banquets and balls in order that she might “attach herself to whatsoever is the most admired, most shining” (248). He wants “Clara to see her affianced shining, as shine he could when lit up by admirers, there was the probability that the sensation of her littleness would animate her to take aim at him once more” (241). Here, Meredith plays with aesthetic ideas of women’s supposed attraction to shiny surfaces and novelty items. Willoughby depends on this stereotypical feminine predisposition to subscribe purely to fashion and novelty in his attempts to exact from his fiancée the same high regard he is accustomed to from his “ancient admirers” (248).

Willoughby’s association with the world of art is worthy of note especially given that one of the first descriptions of him in the novel is of a portrait of him hanging in his family home: “the portrait of him at the Hall, in a hat, leaning on his pony, with legs crossed, and long flaxen curls over his shoulders, was the image of [Laetitia’s] soul’s most present angel” (18). This image records a description of a lover via an artistic refraction, in this case, Laetitia’s childhood memory, and is a significant – and figurative – pronouncement about Aestheticism in the way it anticipates Basil Hayward’s “full-length portrait of a young man of extraordinary personal beauty” (5) in The Picture of Dorian Gray (1890). Or, like Gilbert Osmond in Henry James’s The Portrait of a Lady (1881), Willoughby typifies the more harmful values of the movement; and also like Osmond he is an artificial aesthete because his life is governed by a sense of appearance. Both men illustrate the difference between truly appreciating aesthetics

39 As I have already mentioned, in his manual Charles Eastlake condemned the feminine inclination to subscribe purely to fashion and novelty when selecting items such as carpets and curtains and made clear his intention to educate and cultivate women’s tastes in household objects (3, 8, 12, 13).
and being obsessed with giving an aesthetic impression (Stambaugh 501). Furthermore, with so many references to Italy in *The Egoist*, also the primary setting of James’s novel, Willoughby is associated with a country of a rich artistic history, and a well-documented location of high culture and taste. He holds it up as a space of ideal aesthetics and romance – he “knows Italy well” (30) – and uses it as a ruse to win over Laetitia many times in the novel by associating her with it as well, by playing on her own aesthetic inclinations (30, 31, 260–1, 331). Thus Italy becomes associated with the relationship between Laetitia and Willoughby, a space he intends to bring her home from as “a blooming bride” (332).

If a true aesthete is someone who prides “themselves upon having found what is really beautiful in nature and art, their faculties and tastes being educated up to the point necessary for the full appreciation of such qualities” (Walter Hamilton vii), then *The Egoist*’s Prelude’s point about egoism hiding beneath “a mask and in a vein of fineness” (7) aligns with this notion. True, Willoughby is only cultivating the trappings of an aristocratic lifestyle, but his desire to control his female commodity as well as his firm association with the domestic space, his lack of productivity, and his aesthetic ideology – that is, his personal adherence to aesthetic values – also sit within the cultural context of the late-nineteenth-century Aesthetic Movement (Jonathon Freedman 147). Willoughby resembles the stereotypical English aesthete figure in his interest in beauty, pleasure and himself (Freedman 147). When Vernon says to Willoughby: “We have too many of your gentleman already” (87) he criticises the drawing-room gentleman for his desire to live an unproductive life surrounded by beautiful objects. In painting Willoughby’s aestheticism as a “voracious aesthetic gluttony” (92), Meredith shows how Willoughby displays some of the negative qualities that became associated with the aesthetic and later decadent movements: Willoughby’s indolent lifestyle combined with his narcissism places him very much in the aesthetic tradition or what Kathy Alexis Psomiades calls “lifestyle aestheticism” (168).

If the world and the masses outside Patterne Hall are his enemy (18), unfortunately, Willoughby Patterne’s name forever associates him with a common and popular collector’s item, as Mayo acknowledges: “daily reminders of the legend lay on English tea tables by the tens of thousands” (“Sir Willoughby’s Pattern” 363). The willow pattern is often used to refer to blue-and-white china in general but the legend behind the actual willow pattern design is a central concern in terms of *The Egoist* because both narratives share similar themes and trajectories, as Elizabeth Hope Chang has recently pointed out: “Meredith adds additional layers to his use of the material object by writing the willow pattern plate and the willow pattern legend into the novel as cultural reference points that the characters can discuss and as material commodities that can be displayed, exchanged, or destroyed” (91). Whether or not
the story is derived from Chinese fables, or whether it was invented to increase pottery sales, is irrelevant. Not only was the commodity itself circulating in Victorian mass culture, but the legend behind it had currency. The romantic story of the Mandarin’s daughter has been recognised by Mayo and others to be of significant cultural impact with its numerous manifestations in Victorian culture.\(^{40}\) Mayo outlines the story as follows:

The rich and influential mandarin who inhabited the stately mansion depicted on the right of the design was a widower possessed of a lovely daughter named Koong-see. He intended to marry his daughter to a wealthy suitor of high degree, but the maiden opposed her parent’s wish. She had chosen for her lover a poor and honourable man serving as her father’s secretary and had exchanged vows with him in clandestine meetings under the blossoming trees of the Willow Pattern (73).

In these lines connections to *The Egoist* emerge. At the most basic level Clara and her father take on the roles of the widower and his lovely daughter. Likewise, Willoughby and Vernon face off as the ‘wealthy suitor’, and ‘poor and honourable’ lover. Even the blossoming trees have significance in both narratives in their associations with the clandestine relationship of the lovers. The outcome of the two narratives differs because one is a tragedy and one is a comedy, but the basic elements of an undesirable marriage exchange are present in both tales. As Patricia O’Hara points out, “*The Egoist* recapitulates the tale of the figures on the plate, and both the novel and the legend recapitulate the history of sexual relations and marital negotiations” (“Willow Pattern that We Knew” 432). Not only that, Meredith harnesses an excess of oriental motifs in order to comment upon the Victorian marriage market with its implications of marriage for money and status, as Gilmartin notes: “Meredith’s novel is obviously full of many of the orientalist assumptions of nineteenth-century anthropology and popular myth” (Gilmartin 179). *The Egoist* dramatises oriental customs which also come into play in Clara’s mental impressions of Eastern harems and bondship arrangements (50, 168)\(^{41}\) in relation to Willoughby’s intentions.

The willow pattern and its narrative associations serve as a basis for a comic moment in the novel where Willoughby and Mrs Mountstuart discuss Clara’s dismissal of porcelain wedding gifts:

\(^{40}\) For example, P.H. Hale’s *The Mandarin’s Daughter* (1851) and F.C. Burnand’s *A Tale of Old China* (1875) (Mayo, “*The Egoist and the Willow Pattern*” 72); “The Story of the Common Willow Plate” (1849) and “Ballade of Blue China” (1880) (O’Hara, “Willow Pattern that We Knew” 423).

\(^{41}\) This pattern of images around harems and practices of sati in a sense contribute to an idea of Willoughby as a primitive man and consequently feed into related Darwinian ideas of his unfitness for reproduction.
‘I must ask her to help me on the subject of my wedding-present, for I don't want to have her making mouths at mine, however pretty — and she does it prettily.’

‘Another dedicatory offering to the rogue in me!’ she says of porcelain.

‘Then porcelain it shall not be. I mean to consult her; I have come determined upon a chat with her. I think I understand. But she produces false impressions on those who don't know you both. “I shall have that porcelain back,” says Lady Busshe to me, when we were shaking hands last night: “I think,” says she, “it should have been the Willow Pattern.” And she really said: “He’s in for being jilted a second Time!”’(286).

This famous scene from the novel not only invokes a direct narrative comparison with the willow pattern legend – through the ladies’ intuition that Clara will follow in the pattern of Constantia and the maiden from the willow legend – it also corresponds with Mrs Mountstuart’s earlier epigram for Clara: “dainty rogue in porcelain’ (36).42 Clara’s ‘flaws’ in this case are significant, as Mayo has pointed out:

The description has quite properly been taken to suggest the fresh and delicate quality of Clara’s beauty, her elusive charm, and inflexible spirit. But its primary meaning, which Mrs. Mountstuart persistently refuses to explain . . . is the identification of Clara with the rebellious maiden of the Willow story (“Sir Willoughby’s Pattern” 362).

In the earlier scene the conversation is also epigrammatic. Meredith’s novel is loaded with epigrams and in this case he uses the image of pottery to cleverly comment on the fragility of women’s natures by invoking the fragile qualities of porcelain as well as the potential for flaws in its material makeup.

Parallels between women as commodity and porcelain as commodity are made many times in The Egoist. Anderson remarks that: “porcelain has to be shaped and moulded before it has any form, painted and fired and affixed with a price. Girls also had to be shaped before they had any value in the marriage market” (222). Perhaps the most significant passage in the novel in terms of this idea appears in the chapter, “The Double-Blossom Wild Cherry Tree,” where the narrator comments about Willoughby’s ideal of femininity. I quote this passage

42 In Robert M Adams’ edition of The Egoist he points out that ‘rogue,’ apart from its connotations of mischievousness, also means a defect in ceramic terms (36n.4).
almost in full because of its relevance and notoriety in discussions of the representation of women in *The Egoist*:

[women] have turned themselves into *market produce* for [the egoist’s] delight, and have really abandoned the *commodity* in ministering to the lust for it, suffered themselves to be dragged ages back in playing upon the fleshly innocence of happy accident to gratify his jealous greed of *possession*, when it should have been their task to set the soul above the fairest fortune, and the gift of strength in women beyond *ornamental* whiteness. . . . But the *devouring* male Egoist prefers them as *inanimate overwrought polished pure-metal precious vessels*, fresh from the hands of the artificer, for him to walk away with hugging, call all his own, drink of, and fill and drink of, and forget that he stole them (93, my emphasis).

Not only are the moral implications of the Victorian marriage market invoked in this testimonial, and also the Victorian idea that women have a higher moral duty, it thematises the commodity culture of the Aesthetic Movement by translating the acquisition of artistic objects to the relationship between the egoist and his choice of bride. The artifice surrounding femininity as it is represented in this extract is not unusual given the context in which Meredith was writing. But, it also goes a step further by picking up on Willoughby’s aestheticising of female purity. The male egoist prefers his choice of mate to be ‘fresh from the hands of the artificer’ in order that she may serve as his unique aesthetic possession.

In the *Egoist* there is a “male demand for a chaste vessel” (Carolyn Williams “Unbroken Patternes” 54). A self-professed “connoisseur” of porcelain with his unmatched collection of *china* (307) Willoughby sees himself as an aesthetic collector and transfers this evaluating impulse to his apprehension of women. According to the narrator Willoughby’s vision of women is as follows:

Women of mixed essences shading off the divine to the considerably lower were outside his vision of woman. His mind could as little admit an angel in pottery as a rogue in porcelain. For him they were what they were when fashioned at the beginning; many cracked, many stained, here and there a perfect specimen designed for the elect of men (92).

Willoughby clearly thinks of women in terms of a commodity market, ascribing value to them in the way in which an art collector might evaluate a painting or objet d’art. Clara’s father shows that he is complicit in this process when he remarks: “‘I have but a girl to give!’” (161). The yearning to possess a wife of matchless value, euphemistically represented as having “no history,” is a motivating force for Sir Willoughby and he longs to be the “first
heading” in Clara’s chapter (161). But the marriage market is clearly represented as a circuit of exchange in *The Egoist*. Willoughby exchanges Constantia for Clara; Clara exchanges “a father for a husband” (46); Willoughby exchanges Clara for Laetitia and, Clara exchanges Willoughby for Vernon. According to Anna Maria Jones:

Meredith imagines Woman in a vexed relationship to culture; that is, by dint of social constraints, she is part free agent and part object. She is, in many ways, a product of circulation on the marriage market, with limited powers of choice, hampered by social conventions, class distinctions, and economic concerns; insofar as she has agency, it is in her ability to exercise her aesthetic taste as a consumer (*Problem Novels* 95).

Indeed the “brutal realities of the marriage market” (Jones 114) in *The Egoist* are contained within Patterne Hall, the name of the ancestral home itself denoting a space of ownership and a confining social model. Meredith demonstrates Clara’s subjective existence by having her throw off Willoughby and instead choose Vernon as her husband. What Meredith seems concerned to do is have Clara exercise her individual taste and in this way it becomes possible to read *The Egoist* as a proto-feminist Victorian novel as I shall now illustrate.

-Women in *The Egoist>*

In *Diana of the Crossways*, Meredith reaches the pinnacle of his proto-feminist vision but *The Egoist* also lends itself to an analysis of how contemporary discourses pertaining to women have their effect on the substance of the novel. Meredith dedicates a lot of space in *The Egoist* to individual and collective apprehensions of, and physical descriptions of, female beauty. I begin with a discussion of Laetitia – “the lady of his first and strongest affections” (21) – because she is the female who is eventually aesthetically commodified by Willoughby through marriage. Laetitia is mentioned in the second chapter as a passing admirer of Willoughby but her first real appearance in *The Egoist* occurs in Chapter Three when he compares her to Constantia Durham in his effort to choose a suitable wife. Meredith presents details of Constantia’s beauty as it is filtered through Willoughby’s gaze: “She was pretty; her eyelashes were long and dark, her eyes dark blue, and her soul was ready to shoot like a rocket out of them at a look from Willoughby” (15). The focus on female eyes in this sketch relates to the novel’s wider depiction of reflective surfaces, a notion that I will take up in further detail in a later section. We learn that Willoughby is “susceptible to beauty” (17) and thus his attention is focused firmly on Constantia’s more prominent beauty. However, the egoist in him cannot ignore Laetitia’s open admiration of him: “He stood between the queenly
rose and modest violet. One he bowed to and the other bowed to him” (17). Regardless of Laetitia being an “attractive and marriageable woman” in her own right as well as “the county favourite for Willoughby’s wife” (Gilmartin 171), on this occasion Willoughby makes a superficial choice and becomes engaged to Constantia. After being jilted by this woman he deludes Laetitia for another chapter before he again casts her aside after his successful pursuit of the ‘perfect’ Clara Middleton. At this point in the narrative Laetitia has to settle for being Willoughby’s “image of the constant woman” (32), an epithet that indeed proves correct by the novel’s close.

The actual significance of Laetitia’s role in the plot becomes apparent when Willoughby is going to be jilted for the second time. Growing uneasy with Clara’s constant appeals for release from the engagement, Willoughby focuses his attention on the ever-faithful Laetitia as a possible replacement bride, and as a potential way to avoid public embarrassment (264). He counts on her “keeping her taper alight” (30) for him and formulates a plan to release Clara without leaving himself “naked and alone” (264). Before he can follow through on his plan his jealous and possessive impulses make him unable to give up Clara (287). It is only when it becomes painfully obvious to Willoughby that everyone else is aware of Clara’s imminent defection that he turns his attention to Laetitia with a newfound admiration for her constancy. He justifies her suitability as his mate by cloaking her in aesthetic language and finally recognising her inner character as a determinant of true beauty (317). In fact he sees himself as a benefactor in extending an invitation of marriage to Laetitia and becomes transfixed by his own aestheticisation of her:

Forthwith he set about painting Laetitia in delectable human colours, like a miniature of the past century, reserving her ideal figure for his private satisfaction. The world was to bow to her visible beauty, and he gave her enamel and glow, a taller stature, a swimming air, a transcendancy that exorcised the image of the old witch who had driven him to this.

The result in him was, that Laetitia became humanly and avowedly beautiful. Her dark eyelashes on the pallor of her cheeks lent their aid to the transformation, which was a necessity to him, so it was performed (317).

Imbued with the power of the artist, with his gaze he idealises her, focusing on parts of her physical appearance that please him and lend themselves easily to being overtly described in the language of art. His gaze is aesthetic, and interestingly, this is also the first instance in the novel where we get any detailed physical description of Laetitia. The old-fashioned quality ascribed to Laetitia – as a ‘miniature of the past century’ – places her in the same category as a painting, thereby objectifying her.
In attempting to secure an aesthetically pleasing and socially approved wife Willoughby does waver once in his apprehension of Laetitia: “but she was a faded young woman. He was aware of it; and systematically looking at himself with her upturned orbs, he accepted her benevolently, as a God grateful of worship, and used the divinity she imparted to paint and renovate her” (318). Willoughby believes that Laetitia still worships him, of which he finds evidence in her eyes, and this is how he reconciles himself to her suitability as his ‘third-choice’ wife; albeit Laetitia’s ‘faded’ beauty certainly highlights Willoughby’s own faded status with his circle, a truth which of course he does not recognise or chooses to ignore. His eventual proposal to Laetitia in the climactic chapter “Midnight: Sir Willoughby and Laetitia; With Young Crossjay Under a Coverlet,” occurs in the form of a clandestine declaration of his love for her, which she is compelled to refuse (330–2). It is only in the closing chapters of the novel that Laetitia accepts the position of ‘Lady Patterne,’ much to the approval of Willoughby’s adherents: “I see her like a flower in sunshine. She will expand to a perfect hostess. Patterne will shine under her reign; you have my warrant for that. And so will you. Yes, you flourish best when adored. It must be adoration’” (372). Mrs Mountstuart’s endorsement of the match for the novel’s ‘hero’ satisfies Willoughby’s concerns for his reputation and he is even more delighted to realise that Laetitia “had not passed through others’ hands in coming to him” (389). Therefore he maintains his position and satisfies his own marital requirements by obtaining a female commodity that has been untouched by other dealers’ hands. Significantly, the pattern of comparing Laetitia to aesthetic objects – a ‘painting,’ and a ‘flower’ – only happens near the end of the novel, especially when the narrator uses the vocabulary of a painter or collector to describe Willoughby’s appreciation of her, for Laetitia is aesthetically commodified through her entering a marriage arrangement with Sir Willoughby.

Unfortunately in studies of The Egoist there is little mention of Constantia Durham because of the small role she has in the novel. However, in the context of my thesis she is important because she, too, functions as a female aesthetic commodity. Unlike the typical Victorian novel The Egoist presents an engagement breaking up in its opening chapters. Introduced in Chapter One as “beautiful and dashing” (9), Constantia’s actual implications for the narrative manifest themselves in the later chapter dedicated to her. But her marriageability is made clear from the outset: “she had money, and she had health and beauty: three mighty qualifications for a Patterne bride” (15), and this succinct description establishes Constantia as a perfect match for Willoughby who, “had never seen so beautiful a girl as Constantia Durham” (17). However, Willoughby’s attraction to Constantia increases because her beauty is communally recognised; her “beauty was of a kind to send away beholders aching” (17). It
follows that she is “hotly pursued” by eligible men in the world of the novel and realising his competition, Willoughby swiftly and successfully proposes to her (17). So, the aesthetic appreciation of Constantia in this context is both individual and social. While Constantia’s aesthetic position is communally appreciated and serves to justify Willoughby’s choice of bride, the attention given to her arouses his jealousy. Even though he secures her as his future bride he laments that “she had not . . . come to him out of cloistral purity, out of a perfect radiancy. . . . He wished for her to have come to him out of an egg-shell . . . as completely enclosed before he tapped the shell, and seeing him with her sex’s eyes first of all men” (18).

He not only commodifies beauty but via an extreme version of infantilisation he seeks to commodify female purity in general. As O’Hara notes, he has an “erotic appetite for female purity that turns women into objects for consumption” (“Primitive Marriage” 10). As I will later discuss in the context of Darwinian theory, in The Egoist the emphasis on female purity is at odds with the idea of a commodity that acquires its value on the market, a notion which comes out of the Victorian social context whereby women were valued for their virginity and its associated implications of genetic integrity.

In the relationship between Willoughby and Constantia her exposure to other men does prove fateful; she jilts him and elopes with Captain Oxford, the man that was “foremost in the swarm pursuing [her]” (18). Rather than admitting her defection to Laetitia, Willoughby instead declares “there is no Miss Durham to my knowledge” (20). Unable to successfully commodify the aesthetically pleasing Constantia and to claim full ownership of her through a marital union, Willoughby ceases to acknowledge her existence at all. She is effectively ‘off the market.’ This nullifying impulse not only relates to his commodifying tendencies, it is his attempt to retain some sort of dignity in his social world. The egoist manages to turn the tale around by painting a picture of himself as being “fortunately, if not considerately, liberated by Miss Durham” (20). Thus, Willoughby opens himself up to receive the next possible Patterne bride without too much public humiliation. At this point in the narrative it appears that Laetitia will be the likely choice with her “abundant merits” and her “gentleness, liveliness and cleverness” being collectively approved by the county (21). In spite of this Willoughby seeks more of an aesthetic gratification – similar to his experience with Constantia – “another dashing girl” (32) in order that he might garner even more cultural capital and communal admiration.

Clara Middleton is the novel’s unconventional heroine. Her aesthetic commodification is not just attributed to Willoughby. Both her father, and Vernon to some extent, contribute to her being represented as an aesthetic commodity. Not only that, the whole community participates in apprehending her beauty and marriageability. The collective apprehension of
Clara’s beauty, akin to a chorus effect, plays a role in her aesthetic commodification since Willoughby’s community is very interested in him acquiring a beautiful and accomplished wife (28). Willoughby’s reference to Clara’s beauty as a “prize to be won and possessed” (33) dramatises the competitive basis of the Victorian marriage market with Clara being the prize of courtship. Willoughby is not the only character who recognises this. Laetitia is complicit in elevating Clara’s beauty to an almost spiritual level. Before even seeing Clara, Laetitia imagines her as “sweeter than beautiful, high above drawing-room beauties as the colours of the sky” and possessing “the grace of poetical attractiveness” (29). As a result, by the time the aestheticised Clara actually enters the novel, the reader is prepared to receive a beautiful Victorian heroine. Mrs Mountstuart, who intends to “see her, and study her, sharply” (28), is responsible for the first physical description of Clara in the novel; she “critically observes” her which results in a long passage detailing her physical appearance (35).

The rather poetic episode includes phrases which invite comparisons with the natural landscape such as: “aspens imaged in water, waiting for breeze, would offer a susceptible lover some suggestion of her face,” and “the wild woodland visage from brow to mouth and chin,” and her “winter-beechwood hair” (35–6). This, the narrator’s first detailed description of Clara, relies heavily on natural imagery to convey her physical beauty which is inadvertently summed up by Vernon’s earlier report to Laetitia that “She gives you an idea of the Mountain Echo” (29). A kind of remote, or unspoiled, uncultivated nature seems to be the main idea here. It has already been recognised that Meredith describes Clara with similar natural imagery to that which had previously been used to describe the Comic Spirit in his Prelude (Maaja A. Stewart and Elvira Casal 215, and Sean O’Toole 512). However Clara’s association with nature in The Egoist, a major factor in her characterisation, makes advances on the aesthetic pattern of Cometh Up as Flower where Nell’s beauty is also closely linked with nature. In this way both women recall a Pre-Raphaelite visuality which is also confirmed of Clara, that she “had the wonderful art of dressing to suit the season and the sky” (140). This claim could be taken as evidence that Clara is a Pre-Raphaelite beauty, as such were often depicted in nature, or in relation to symbolically associated natural objects like flowers or fruit. Also, she appears to reject highly structured fashion preferring instead beautiful and flowing fabrics (245). Aesthetic fashion of the 1880s and 90s was a popular manifestation of the Aesthetic Movement (Talia Schaffer and Kathy Alexis Psomiades 1) and it has its origins in Pre-Raphaelite stylisation and artistic dress. Christine Bayles Kortsch gives a more specific account of this form of dress culture: “artistic costume . . . consisted of loose, dropped waists seemingly absent of corsetry, fabric with an easy drape, puffed sleeves, and unconventional colours” (81). Along with floral symbolism and ornate natural backdrops, these costumes
came to exemplify the essence of Pre-Raphaelite art. What can be construed as Meredith writing into the world of Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics, a world which he knew well, is also evident in Clara’s earthly qualities which are represented repeatedly in the novel; she is a: “dazzling offender . . . really insufferably fair: perfect in height and grace of movement; exquisitely-tressed; red-lipped, the colour striking out to a distance from her ivory skin: a sight to set the woodland dancing” (139). A rural perspective is evident in this depiction and the contrast between her red lips and her ivory skin is appropriately set against natural scenery.

Clara shows that she has a personal connection to the country landscape. Despite feeling little affection for Willoughby, she adores the natural landscape of the Patterne estate:

She gazed over dear homely country through her windows now. Happy the lady of the place, if happy she can be in her choice! Clara Middleton envied her the double-blossom wild cherry tree, nothing else. One sprig of it, if it had not faded and gone to dust-colour like crusty alpine snow in the lower hollows, and then she could depart, bearing away a memory of the best here . . . she threw up her window, breathed, blessed mankind: and she thought: ‘If Willoughby would open his heart to nature, he would be relieved of his wretched opinion of the world.’ Nature was then sparkling refreshed in the last drops of a sweeping rain-curtain, favourably disposed for background to her joyful optimism (150).

Clara’s geographical association with this picturesque area is significant because she feels more at home in nature than as a wife to Willoughby, even as his lack of understanding of the natural environment parallels his misapprehension of Clara. I will later show how against the backdrop of the natural world, a romantic attachment between Clara and Vernon is permitted to flourish and in doing so unites nature with aesthetics in a more positive sense.

References to Clara’s beauty also appear in otherworldly forms: she is ‘dazzling’ and her ‘starriness’ is what attracts Willoughby to her in the first place (32–3). To tie in with Laetitia’s earlier spiritual vision of Clara, Meredith surrounds his heroine with images of shimmering on these occasions in order to have her correspond with Willoughby’s desire to have a wife who would “cast a lustre on his reputation” (288). The gleaming quality of Clara, which can be construed as relating to either nature or to a piece of china, or both, establishes her as being valuable in both senses of the word ‘lustre.’ An aesthetically pleasing female’s ability to reflect Willoughby’s own aesthetic sensibilities is similar to the way objectified cultural capital attests to its possessor’s aesthetic disposition. In The Egoist Clara serves a dual purpose as an aesthetic commodity: on the one hand she provides aesthetic pleasure for
Willoughby, a pleasure that is understood to be both sensual gratification and self-congratulation on his superior capacities. On the other hand she is expected to reflect his own aesthetic pretensions. The egoist’s critical admiration of a woman relates to how her beauty comes to signify and reflect his own aesthetic pretentiousness: “his grander dream had been a marriage with a lady of so glowing a fame for beauty and attachment to her lord that the world perforce must take her for witness to merits which would silence detraction” (236). Willoughby’s sense of his identity is emphatically bound up in what others think of him: “the breath of the world, the world’s view of him, was partly his vital breath, his view of himself” (312). Thus he believes that having possession of Clara’s ‘starry’ beauty and wit would ensure his reputation is equally ‘dazzling.’

The ‘attachment’ between Willoughby and Clara is symbolised by her hand. She knows only too well the significance of the synecdochical image when Willoughby seeks out her literal and figurative ‘hand’: “he fondled her hand, and to that she grew accustomed; her hand was at a distance. And what is a hand? Leaving it where it was, she treated it as a link between herself and dutiful goodness” (51). Likewise Willoughby equates the female hand with a secured ownership of her heart and soul: “he had won Miss Middleton’s hand; he believed he had captured her heart” (39). Meredith plays on this popular literary and cultural synecdoche countless times in the novel, notwithstanding the negative implications of Willoughby securing Clara’s hand in terms of an ultimate possession (45) and his later more sinister action:

Dr Middleton, Laetitia and the ladies Eleanor and Isabel joining them in the hall found two figures linked together in a shadowy indication of halves that have fallen apart and hang on the last thread of junction. Willoughby retained her hand on his arm; he held to it as a symbol of their alliance and oppressed the girl’s nerves by contact with a frame labouring for breath (246).

Clara’s hand is the focus of this moment and the implications of it are clear: Willoughby “considers her hand as an emblem of his exclusive prerogative” (Roger B. Wilkenfeld 272). Writing on behalf of the heroine, Meredith emphasises her feminine powerlessness and the reader is intensely aware of her discomfort at being subjected to and unable to escape Willoughby’s firm grip.

-Aesthetic Complementarity-

In this section I take my cue from this latest image of ‘two halves falling apart’ as a starting point to show how Willoughby’s continual reference to his ideal of complementarity is yet another factor in the aestheticisation of women in The Egoist. The symbiotic representation of
men and women – aside from its obvious biblical implications – has its origins in classical philosophy with Plato’s assertion: “so ancient is the desire of one another which is implanted in us, reuniting our original nature, seeking to make one of two, and to heal the state of man” (*Symposium*). The aesthetic implications of this ancient philosophical sentiment, which suggest a kind of masculine/feminine complementarity, are very significant as I will demonstrate.

The idea of a complementary relationship between the sexes, based on the uniting of their differences, is captured in Alfred Tennyson’s 1847 poem “The Princess,” most notably in the lines:

For woman is not undeveloped man,
But diverse: could we make her as the man,
Sweet Love were slain: his dearest bond is this,
Not like to like, but like in difference.
Yet in the long years liker must they grow;
The man be more of woman, she of man;
He gain in sweetness and in moral height,
Nor lose the wrestling thews that throw the world;
She mental breadth, nor fail in childward care,
Nor lose the childlike in the larger mind;
Till at the last she set herself to man,
Like perfect music unto noble words;
And so these twain, upon the skirts of Time,
Sit side by side, full-summed in all their powers,
Dispensing harvest, sowing the To-be,
Self-reverent each and reverencing each,
Distinct in individualities,
But like each other even as those who love ("Canto VII," lines 3097–114).

Tennyson’s famous articulation of the harmonious relation between men and women as it is governed by biological and psychological differences is not a new idea to the Victorian period and Sara Coleridge’s 1848 review of this poem recognises “the simple truth that woman, in soul as in body, is no duplicate of man, but the complement of his being” (442).

The physiological, social and intellectual differences between genders in the Victorian period are documented by Cynthia Eagle Russett. She attributes the idea of complementarity to the “great principle of division of labour” and distils this idea further into the dictum: “men produced, women reproduced” (12). The prevalence of these defined gender roles, also
referred to as ‘separate spheres’ in feminist studies, in the Victorian period was also broached by John Ruskin in 1865. The lecture, “Of Queen’s gardens,” a comment on the literary representation of relationships between the sexes, articulates his vision of an ideal relation between man and woman, and explicitly states: “each has what the other has not: each completes the other, and is completed by the other: they are nothing alike, and the happiness and perfection of both depends on each asking and receiving from the other what the other only can give” (Sesame and Lilies 77). Willoughby unmistakably endorses this sentiment when he refers to the “exquisite unlikeness” (37) between Clara and himself. In his mind, it is their physical dissimilarity that makes them complementary. Sir Willoughby is recognised by his community as “a splendid creature, only wanting in a wife to complete him” (28). Thus Meredith immediately introduces the concept of a harmonious and natural relationship between the sexes. This kind of idea is reworked many times throughout the novel and in the next chapter it becomes apparent that Clara is the woman to ‘complete’ Willoughby (37). The words ‘complement’ and ‘complete’ appear in various forms in relation to this concept throughout the narrative. That Willoughby subscribes to the Victorian social idea of a complementary relationship between the sexes is unquestionable: “Willoughby expects Clara to fit his Pattern, to be his complement, at once dependent and fitted to his Shape” (Carolyn Williams, “Unbroken Patternes” 53). He seeks a wife that will “complement” him (78) and he imagines that Clara will be “in harmony with him” (91).

In The Egoist this idealised complementary relationship between the sexes is unequivocally an aestheticised concept. Meredith’s satirical take on male egoism is exposed through the two central women connected to the egoist; both serve a reflective function, not only in terms of the Victorian marriage market, but also in relation to Willoughby’s heightened sense of his own self-importance. On one hand Clara’s “exquisite unlikeness” provokes an aesthetic response in Willoughby (37) and her features are “treated as the mirror for himself” (39). The significance of their physical complementarity, literally the matching beauty between male and female partners, is evident when Willoughby muses about having a ‘companion picture’: “certainly they looked well side by side. In walking with her, in drooping to her, the whole man was made conscious of the female image of himself by her exquisite unlikeness. She completed him, added the softer lines wanting to his portrait before the world” (37). Willoughby, a cultivated male, draws on the notion of complementarity in his appreciation of Clara as his ideal wife. The beauty of the matched couple is on display here, and it is impossible to ignore the aesthetic implications of this passage because Meredith adopts the language of art to describe their relationship. Clara is Willoughby’s visual complement: “it was the fashion to exalt her as one of the types of beauty: the one
providentially selected to set off his masculine type” (36). It would be a mistake not to read this description Ironically since we know that providence is not responsible for bringing the pair together. Meredith later employs the same rhetoric when he alludes to the breakdown of their relationship: Willoughby and Clara become “two figures linked together in a shadowy indication of halves that have fallen apart and hang on the last thread of junction” (246).

On the other hand the idea of sexual complement is also underpinned many times in the novel through Willoughby’s act of looking. In *The Egoist* the power of the male gaze reduces women to a mirrored surface and Meredith surrounds his male protagonist with the language of mirrors and reflections in order to emphasise that Willoughby’s idea of love is inextricable from his desire to have a wife who acts as a reflection of him. Willoughby meditates on the reflective properties of women in chapter seventeen, concluding that, “once gained, they are your mirrors for life, and far more constant than the glass” (134). Women’s role as a mirror for the egoist materialises in ways that are related to the idea of complementarity. Another instance from the novel illustrates this phenomenon. Laetitia’s mirroring function is varying similar and dissimilar to Clara Middleton’s. There is an indelible moment when Willoughby gazes into her eyes in order to seek out his own reflection and he not only sees himself in her eyes, but he “squeezes himself passionately” (24). Meredith dramatises the reflective properties of the human eye and grounds Willoughby’s male gaze in a corporeal form. This act, while redolent of narcissistic allusions, is also a compelling example of how the aesthetic of complementarity works in the novel as the hero uses women to reflect his ego. As a model of aesthetic experience, this image also establishes the terms under which Willoughby eventually marries Laetitia. He resolves near the end of the novel to make her his bride. He rationalises marrying Laetitia instead of Clara by placing value on her faithfulness rather than physical beauty:

> The exceeding beauty of steadfastness in women clothed Laetitia in graces Clara could not match. A tried, steadfast woman is the one jewel of the sex. She points to her husband like the sunflower; her love illuminates him; she lives in him, for him; she testifies to his worth; she drags the world to his feet; she leads the chorus of his praises; she justifies him in her own esteem. Surely there is not on earth such beauty! (317).

In this passage Willoughby not only prescribes Laetitia an active purpose as an aesthetic commodity and marker of his cultural capital, he aestheticises what he imagines to be her steadfast love and admiration for him. Laetitia is subjected to Willoughby’s ‘mirror’ expectations when he realises near the end of the novel that she is a better choice of wife for him: “It would be a marriage with a mirror, with an echo; marriage with a shining mirror, a
choric echo (317). As Williams points out, “‘real’ women are not allowed to reflect anything but the mask of idealised male Egoism” (“Unbroken Patternes” 55). Thus, Meredith’s use of language closely associated with shiny surfaces and reflective properties underlines the aesthetic implications of Willoughby’s egoism.

-Selecting Aesthetics-

In this final portion of my chapter I hope to tie together the ideas that have furnished my reading of The Egoist up to this point. Darwinian theories of natural selection inform Meredith’s depiction of marriage in the novel, particularly in relation to Willoughby’s courtship of Clara Middleton. In this section I will read, and to an extent adjust this model against a treatment of aesthetic value in the novel in terms of Darwinism, concluding with an examination of how these two discourses are integrated in the relationship of Vernon and Clara.

When Meredith employs the rhetoric of evolution and natural selection he does it in an aestheticised way. For example, in his courtship of Clara, Willoughby knows to put forward his best attributes:

A deeper student of Science than his rivals, he appreciated Nature's compliment in the fair one’s choice of you. We now scientifically know that in this department of the universal struggle, success is awarded to the bettermost. You spread a handsomer tail than your fellows, you dress a finer top-knot, you pipe a newer note, have a longer stride; she reviews you in competition, and selects you. The superlative is magnetic to her. She may be looking elsewhere, and you will see — the superlative will simply have to beckon, away she glides. She cannot help herself; it is her nature, and her nature is the guarantee for the noblest races of men to come of her. In complimenting you, she is a promise of superior offspring. Science thus — or it is better to say — an acquaintance with science facilitates the cultivation of aristocracy. Consequently a successful pursuit and a wrestling of her from a body of competitors, tells you that you are the best man. What is more, it tells the world so (33).

This extract is quoted in its entirety because it evokes meanings of both sexual and natural selection.43 Firstly, the narrator comments on Willoughby’s obvious misapprehension of

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43 In The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex, which appeared eight years before Meredith’s novel, Darwin identifies the difference between the two concepts: “Sexual selection depends on the success of certain individuals over others of the same sex in relation to the propagation of the species; whilst natural selection depends on the success of both sexes, at all ages, in relation to the general conditions of life. The sexual struggle is of two kinds; in the one it is between the individuals of the same sex, generally the males. In order to drive away or kill their rivals, the females remaining passive; whilst in the other, the struggle is likewise between the individuals of the same sex, in order to excite or charm those of the opposite sex, generally the females, which
Darwinian logic, namely his “egoistic, ethnocentric evolutionary self-confidence that nature has selected him from the pack” (O’Hara, “Primitive Marriage” 9). He supposes that Clara’s choice of him among the other suitors will confirm the success of sexual selection and, therefore, his own masculine superiority. Ironically, and comically, Willoughby interprets the rhetoric of Darwin in his own favour, assuming that his advanced understanding of science puts him in the most favourable position as a suitor because not only does he think of himself as the exceptional male specimen, he knows how to ‘spread a handsomer tail’ so as to display his physical attractiveness to his best advantage. In this instance Meredith is commenting on the superficiality of the Victorian marriage market, and reverses the traditional idea of women being on aesthetic display. Instead it is Willoughby who is forced to “air his amiable attributes” (33) in order to stand out from other suitors and to secure a wife.

Secondly, this passage also contains the language of evolutionary reproduction, a concept which is referred to often throughout the narrative. Meredith involves his novel in the discourse of Darwinism through Willoughby’s idea that natural selection governs the creation of ‘superior offspring.’ In this case Willoughby’s ‘cultivation of aristocracy’ as a product of a successful marriage is important because The Egoist centres on the idea of aristocratic ancestry. The opening of Chapter One satirically contextualises Willoughby within his aristocratic lineage (7). As the novel progresses Willoughby idealises his family line through his constant invoking of it. Because Willoughby’s “duty to his House was a foremost thought with him” (16) he chooses women to suit his own pedigree. Willoughby’s obsession with ‘the survival of the Patteneres” (35) drives his marriage choices with Constantia, Clara and Laetitia all subjected to his simultaneous biological and aesthetic evaluation. He reveres various criteria, including ‘money,’ ‘health’ and ‘beauty,’ as a prerequisite for fitting his pattern(e) (35), and in Clara, seeks a wife who performs both an aesthetic and reproductive function (35). Unfortunately, his scientific approach to finding a wife to harmonise with his family line does not succeed: as Gilmartin contends, Clara fights the “destiny of the family tree onto which she is being grafted against her will” (164). The irony is that by the end of the novel, Willoughby is forced to select the anaemic Laetitia Dale (130), who, while capable of reflecting his aesthetic sensibilities to some degree, is possibly incapable of bearing children; thus his genetic pattern is discontinued.

Grant Allen’s “Aesthetic Evolution in Man,” published a year after The Egoist, posits that: “the beautiful for every kind must similarly be (in the main) the healthy, the normal, the
strong, the perfect” (449). Although The Egoist looks ahead to the eugenics movement of the 1880s, it certainly equates women’s health with physical beauty, an idea circulated and subscribed to earlier. Woman’s beauty in literature became charged with new meaning after the publication of Descent because it also came to signify health and reproductive ability (Gillian Beer 198). Meredith shows his awareness of this current of thinking when Willoughby deems Clara to be: “young healthy, handsome; she was therefore fitted to be his wife, the mother of his children” (37). Clara Middleton is the genetic and aesthetic prize of the novel and when she accepts Willoughby’s proposal, she acquiesces “in the principle of selection” (34).

Female purity is also a factor in the novel and Clara’s purity is particularly accentuated in terms of the continuation of the Patterne bloodline: “purity in women is essential to evolutionary order and progress in his eyes, and of course this is particularly true of patrilineal inheritance” (Gilmartin 173). He justifies his exaggerated notion of female purity as it relates to paternity so that he may guarantee not only the survival of his genetic pattern, and his manifest superiority. As the narrator observes:

[Willoughby] looked on her, expecting her to look at him. But as soon as he looked he found that he must be in motion to win a look in return. He was one of a pack; many were ahead of him, the whole of them were eager. He had to debate within himself how best to communicate to her that he was Willoughby Patterne, before her gloves were too much soiled to flatter his niceness, for here and there, all around, she was yielding her hand to partners — obscurant males whose touch leaves a stain (33).

Not only do Clara’s ‘shop-soiled’ gloves also bring to mind a market context (Gilmartin 173), the underlying image of a dance serves as a metaphor for the Victorian marriage market in which suitors attempt to attract the attention of the prized female. Willoughby’s use of the word ‘obscurant,’ meaning unenlightened, indicates he thinks himself to be the more evolved and progressive frontrunner for Clara’s hand in marriage.

Yet it is Vernon, Willoughby’s cousin and secretary, who is rewarded with the female prize at the end of the novel. Vernon represents an alternative model of Victorian masculinity, one that embodies many of the paradigms of self-help and ideal manliness that permeated nineteenth-century Britain. David Foster argues that in conspicuous contrast to Willoughby, Vernon is “a man of steady principle and soundly reasonable conduct” (546). Foster is,

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44 The term ‘eugenics’ was coined by Sir Francis Galton in 1883 to refer to the idea of selective human breeding in order to improve biological traits (John C. Waller 457–6, 460).
45 Foster also mentions that Meredith based his characterisation of Vernon’s rationality, literary aptitude, and even his love for mountaineering, on his friend, Sir Leslie Stephen (546).
however, also careful to point out that Vernon and Willoughby are not “grand antagonists, irrational egoist against rational lover” (549). The dramatic plot of *The Egoist* is much more complicated than rival suitors competing for the hand of the heroine. Instead the more important relationship between Vernon and Clara fulfils the conventions of a romance narrative while merging into it Darwinian and aesthetic conditions. The moment where the two cultural forces of Darwinian theory and Aestheticism in fact come together in *The Egoist* is through the double-blossom wild cherry-tree. Clara is already aware at this point that Vernon “worships” the double-blossom wild cherry-tree (65); it provokes an aesthetic response in him. The aesthetic value of the tree comes from its purely ornamental existence, as Dr. Middleton points out: “[the gardener] has improved away the fruit” (65). In this instance the artificially hybridised cherry tree is at once evolved, and aesthetically satisfying.

Darwin made an attempt to explain hybridity, both naturally occurring and synthetic, in *The Origin of Species* whereby he claimed that although the hybrid, a cross between two different plant varieties to get the valued attributes of each variety, has its reproductive ability compromised, it survives because of its advantageous combination of traits (248–9). Thus the hybrid exists purely for the sake of itself. One of the major principles of Aesthetic culture was that the value of an object was not necessarily signified by its usefulness. Discourses of use-value versus pure aesthetic contemplation were prominent in the work of writers such as Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde. In essence, the Aesthetic dictum, ‘art for art's sake’ maintained that aesthetic significance should not be governed by anything other than autonomous value. While the cherry tree is a natural image, there is also a degree of artificiality about it since it is the result of cultivated gardening. In the same vein, Aesthetic culture did not subscribe to the natural value of the everyday and instead strove to improve upon nature through stylisation.

The double-blossom wild cherry tree, according to Foster, is the “genesis” of the passion between Clara and Vernon (549) and for that reason it has both natural and scientific implications. At first Clara notices Vernon asleep under the tree:

She turned her face to where the load of *virginal blossom, whiter than summer-cloud* on the sky, showered and drooped and clustered so thick as to claim colour and seem, like higher *Alpine snows* in noon-sunlight, a *flush of white*. From deep to deeper heavens of white, her eyes perched and soared. Wonder lived in her. Happiness in the beauty of the tree pressed to supplant it, and was more mortal and narrower. Reflection came, contracting her vision and weighing her to earth. Her reflection was: ‘He must be good who loves to lie and sleep beneath the branches of this tree!’ (95 my emphasis).
As I have already discussed, nature is also closely associated with Clara’s virginity in *The Egoist*. Her “ornamental whiteness” (93) is a quality much appreciated by Willoughby not only for its reproductive meaning but for its aesthetic value. Meredith essentially makes obvious Clara’s virginal quality through reference to Vernon’s apprehension of her being communicated through white blossoms and snow. O’Hara picks up on this excess in description, arguing that: “like the tree’s double blossoms, the ‘ornamental whiteness’ of Clara’s objectified purity is shown to have originated in natural whiteness” (13). The kind of position articulated by O’Hara is refined by Rachel M. Brownstein, who argues that the power of the cherry tree and associated images of snow have both an aesthetic and narrative purpose:

As the Alps are, the tree is an astonishing, exhilarating, awesome natural wonder: the sight of it helps to liberate Clara from her oppressive personal situation. In their softness and abundance the blossoms epitomise sensual beauty, and yet their whiteness, which recalls flushed Alpine snows, is cold and chaste (184).

In this context nature with its connotations of innocence and perfection is linked to the pure relationship between Clara and Vernon since it is under the double-blossom wild cherry tree that Clara begins to recognise her attraction to Vernon (95).

Vernon shares Clara’s aesthetic moment in his vision of her standing under the cherry tree. He dreamingly looks up at her and merges reality with fantasy:

Looking upward, not quite awakened out of transient doze, at a fair head circled in dazzling blossom, one may temporise awhile with common sense, and take it for a vision after the eyes have regained direction of the mind.

Vernon did so until the plastic vision interwound with reality alarmingly (96).

The pure aesthetic moment shared by the lovers is both sublime and stylised through the presence of the double-blossom wild cherry tree, and accordingly it is an effective emblem of Darwinism and Aestheticism. In the end nature trumps Willoughby’s artificially constructed Patterne Hall. In the following chapter Clara and Vernon discuss their shared fondness for the mountains (98–99), a “metaphoric ground in which they imagine themselves climbing freely” (Margaret Harris xviii); Meredith later reincorporates the phase ‘mountain echo’ at the end of the novel when he relocates the lovers to the Swiss Alps, a space of purity, and most importantly, freedom. This setting offers a radiant promise of the future.

The profound ambivalence about Aestheticism that marks *The Egoist* is perhaps prophetic, given that writers after Meredith continued to thematise its key concerns in various ways. My argument about Aestheticism adds a new emphasis to our critical understanding of this novel in that my discussion of the commodification of female beauty here builds towards a
Darwinian perspective, rather than taking it as its starting point. Whereas in Broughton nature is incorporated into the representation of the female figure, Meredith starts with this point and moves towards Darwinism, delicately balancing nature with artificiality in his own version of the aestheticised female. I take up this line of enquiry in the following chapter in the context of Ouida’s *Moths*, a novel which dramatises the confrontation between nature and artifice, by embodying these elements in her female characters’ physical appearances.
As the 1880s dawned, the cultural environment surrounding Aestheticism began to change; the movement began to find a new outlet as a literary genre. Ouida is nowadays identified as being one of the founders of the aesthetic novel and Ouida scholarship is a growing field of interest in Victorian literary and cultural studies. In the past her sensational biographical story has attracted scholars, thus obscuring her literary significance to the Aesthetic Movement in late-Victorian Britain. At the time she wrote *Moths*, a novel which attempted to counter while exploiting the immorality of the fashionable world, Ouida had been living in Italy for nine years, and a shift in the setting of her novels from London to various European sites accompanied her own relocation to the Continent. This novel is also the first in my study to move away from the English geographical and social context. As a result *Moths* is conveniently positioned between *The Egoist*, the novel about a British aristocrat attempting to simulate an aesthetic lifestyle, and *Wormwood*, the story of a decadent Frenchman addicted to the pleasures of absinthe.

In the first part of this chapter I briefly mention some aspects of Ouida’s life in order to contextualise her as a popular Victorian writer. I go on to discuss the natural and artificial binaries Ouida relies on for her depiction of female beauty. I also highlight the commodity relations at work in the novel before concluding with a section on female aesthetes that draws out what makes this novel a work of Aestheticism, one which complicates and enriches my underlying thesis. The immediate focus of this chapter is the language and characterisation in *Moths* and its bearing on the thematic implications of female beauty and my analysis will reveal how the aesthetic commodification of women, as it is strongly related to Ouida’s critique of the Victorian marriage market, is formulated in *Moths* through an aesthetic rhetoric. *Moths* depicts a marriage between a foreign aristocrat and an English beauty that is shrewdly constructed by the heroine’s iniquitous mother, Lady Dolly. Although Vere is in love with Corrèze, the handsome opera singer, she is tricked into fulfilling her mother’s wishes, reluctantly agreeing to marry Prince Sergius Zouroff, a much older suitor. This narrative provides a rich source for examining not only the practice of aesthetic commodification, but also how the heroine responds to and participates in the Victorian marriage market. As Natalie Schroeder and Shari Hodges Holt suggest, Ouida’s novel
responds to the recognised market conditions of Victorian marriage arrangements (189), but much weight is also given to the aesthetic implications of the heroine’s career.

-A Woman of Importance-

Renowned just as much for her eccentric lifestyle as for her highly popular fiction, Ouida’s sensational existence has invited a reasonable amount of critical attention over the last century and a number of biographical books and essays of varying quality position her as a woman who was vivacious, outspoken and socially rebellious. As Malcolm Elwin notes: “Ouida is a good subject for a biographer, because she was a colourful personality, essentially, though curiously, feminine, impressed other people strongly, and talked a lot about herself” (311). Only in the last decade or so have scholars such as Talia Schaffer, Natalie Schroeder and Carla Molloy really begun to interrogate Ouida’s novels. This is the approach to Ouida scholarship that my own research will acknowledge and extend.

Ouida, born Marie Louise Ramé, enjoyed a variable literary reputation during the last third of the nineteenth century, as Bonamy Dobrée identified in 1970:

Yes, she was enormously read, but her books were not allowed to lie about drawing room tables. She was too glamorous; she was, they said ‘unwholesome’; but then that was part of the thrill, for she was in rebellion against rigid Victorian conventions, current moral, religious, and domestic ideals . . . (193).

Her writing was notable for its extravagant settings and sensational plotlines and according to Yvonne Ffrench “amongst her more than twenty-six novels, Moths epitomises Ouida’s penchant for melodramatic subject matter and ‘grand regal manner’” (131). Some reviewers found fault with the novel’s over-accentuated language and breaking of sexual taboos, not to mention its “offending against propriety” (A.K. Fiske 552). On the other hand, the Morning Post recognised its literary power, heralding it as “not only the author’s finest work, but one which marks a new epoch in fiction” (“Review of Moths”).

Ouida’s publisher in the late 1870s, Chatto and Windus, originally intended to release the novel in time for the autumn season in 1879 (M.J. Nieman 14), but by the time she managed to send the manuscript to the publisher they decided to release Moths in January 1880 (16). By April, Chatto and Windus, influenced by the initial controversy of the reviewers and fearing that Moths might ‘injure’ Ouida’s popularity, began considering publishing a cheaper edition46 in order to stimulate interest (19), a decision which infuriated Ouida (Monica

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46 Chatto and Windus produced cheap editions of the novel in 1880, 1881, 1886, 1919, 1924 and 1932.
No wonder Ouida wrote a string of strongly-worded letters to her publisher; such a determined attempt to generate sales of the novel was unusual in Victorian publishing practice. According to Richard D. Altick:

As a rule, so long as the demand for the original edition continued at the libraries and the booksellers, a reprint was out of the question; and even when a book was no longer called for at the libraries, reprinting was delayed until the unwanted copies found buyers in the second-hand market (298).

Altick proposes that the common time period between first edition and a cheaper reprint varied but was usually between one to three years (298). Therefore, the hasty reprint of Ouida’s novel perhaps signalled her publisher’s reluctance to stand behind their author and her polarising work of fiction.

Chatto and Windus first had to check with Mr Mudie that such an unusual decision would not impact his business interests, but it appears that he assured the publisher that he did not require further copies and was even considering withdrawing the book as a result of its earlier unfavourable evaluation in *The Saturday Review* (Nieman 21). This conservative publication attacked Ouida for “writing rant and filling her books with folly,” and concluded by criticising the novel’s apparent lack of morality: “rant, however, might be forgiven, and folly might be laughed at. But there is much in this ignorant, dull, and disgusting story which no person whose mind is not utterly corrupt can either forgive or make a subject of laughter” (“Moths” 550). Within an intermingling of critical opinion, the Victorian reading public could not get enough of Ouida’s latest work. It appears the book’s supposed lack of morals did not affect its popularity. The publishing success is documented by many of Ouida’s biographers — Eileen Bigland, for example, notes, “the libraries were besieged by people clamouring for copies, the booksellers could not keep pace with the demand” (152). A favourable review of *Moths* appeared in the *Times* a month after the book’s initial publication and stated that: “we doubt whether ‘Ouida’ has ever written a more clever novel than *Moths*. . . . It displays her powers as strikingly as it displays her extravagances” (“Recent Novels”). Ouida believed herself able to get away with such extravagances in her writing by distancing herself from English novelists and their lack “of knowledge of the world” (“Letter to the Editor”). As a writer of romance fiction Ouida relied on the exoticism and glamour of a continental setting as well as the resonances of the French literary tradition to present a picture of society that was, in her own words, “nothing that I have not seen” (“Letter to the Editor”).
Ouida’s extremely repetitious writing style offers the reader a litany of mutually reinforcing binaries around feminine beauty, and urban and rural landscapes. To begin with, I will explore the significations of geographical space and the social relations which transpire there. The economic and social aspects of the opposed urban and natural settings of Moths offer different opportunities for the display of feminine beauty; the spatial meanings ascribed to the urban and the natural affect how beauty is represented in each setting. Here, I adapt Raymond Williams’s dichotomous method of uncovering the cultural meanings of the rural and urban spaces. Individually the concepts of the country versus the city are created by processes of urbanisation (Williams Keywords 81). Country people and country life are distinguished from areas of financial and commercial concentration, (Williams 55), and by geographical size and population size. Although Williams’s discussion in The Country and the City is primarily related to an English context, the relationship between location and community can still be usefully applied to other contexts that experienced similar phenomena of modernisation. For example, while French industrialism did not occur at the same pace as in England, France took incentive from the English Industrial Revolution by importing British machines and workers (Alfred Cobban 49). The population of the French countryside grew to capacity, causing a movement towards towns such as Paris, which in 1848 had 65,000 industrial undertakings (118). The development of the railways was the key factor in producing the shift from country to city, and at the same time country towns became less isolated, a change which invited greater mobility between the areas (166). The growing urbanisation of the French countryside resulted in a distinction between urban and rural spaces.

Arranging the country and the city in a binary is the simplest way of physically and culturally differentiating them. Binary constructions are created to make sense of social differences; they establish certainties for each category, both positive and negative. The predominant difference between country and city is the contrast in the use of landscape, followed by the contrast in ways of living: “on the country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence, and simple virtue. On the city has gathered the idea of an achieved centre: of learning, communication, light” (Williams Country and the City 1). An idealisation results from this dichotomy of rural and urban lifestyle, so Williams also recognises some of the more negative myths bestowed on both spaces: “on the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation” (1). The attitudes towards these spaces are shaped by what a nation’s economy is based on, be it agriculture or industry (2). Nostalgia also creates meanings and geographical
narratives: “a memory of childhood can be said, persuasively, to have some permanent significance” (12). Nostalgia for formerly known places, as well as cultural expectation, fuels the myths and ideas of that space.

The many meanings of country life are informed by the “physical awareness” (3) of the natural landscape, and how the land is used/conquered and negotiated (3). Eden from the Bible serves as an original idealised rural location. The acts of immorality committed in Eden, with Adam and Eve’s eviction to another space, are the catalysts, in Williams’s view, for the virtue/vice dichotomy between the country and city. The meanings of city life are created by the management of people and the difference of physical environment. The crowds of the city interact differently within the artificially-created landscape, negotiating an architecturally defined and heavily populated space. City structures function as “markers of civilisation and intellect” (Williams 5); and the excitement of moving people, “the pulse” (5), creates rhythms of motion through synthetic spaces.

Placing the various settings of Moths in a country/city binary works on one level, because the novel perpetuates the myths of location, especially the corresponding vice/virtue discrepancy. For example Paris and the Alps of the Valais embody the spatial meanings associated with the urban and the rural, and can therefore operate in opposition to each other. Likewise Ouida sets up a similar construction between England and the Continent with Vere’s beauty being attributed just as much to her being a rural Englishwoman as it is to her body. Here, I want to particularly focus on the natural spaces of the novel because Ouida’s love of nature, as it is documented by Monica Stirling (90), is an identifiable influence for her conception of female beauty as it is tied to idealised external spaces in Moths. While she may be renowned for over-accentuated language in much of her writing, in Moths Ouida is very deliberate and careful in her use of the words, ‘beauty’ and ‘beautiful.’ In particular, Ouida employs the word ‘beautiful’ when she describes natural landscapes (85, 333, 352, 376, 385, 410, 450), and flowers (216, 494). It is fitting, then, that like our previous set of lovers, Clara and Vernon, both Vere and Corrèze are firmly associated with the natural landscape – it is the space where they meet, re-encounter and finally retreat at the end of the novel – and indeed with natural beauty itself.

However, the word ‘beauty’ is used frequently in the novel to refer to various women, including Vere, and in this way the word becomes a nominalisation for an attractive woman. Alternatively the word ‘beautiful’ is used more deliberately, especially in relation to Vere and Corrèze. This distinction is recognised often by lady Dolly, most emphatically when she pronounces that her daughter “‘will be beautiful; she won’t be a beauty’” (109). She articulates the same line of thinking directly to Vere when she states, rather cruelly: “‘as for
you—handsome though you are, and you really are quite beautiful they say—you look scornful of everything, and so indignant at any little nonsense, that I should wonder in the least if you never even got called beauty at all’’ (112). This difference between ‘being a beauty’ and ‘being beautiful’ that Ouida sets up appears to relate to having ‘chien,’ or sex appeal, something which Zouroff’s mistress, Jeanne de Sonnaz, is very aware of: “to be merely faultlessly beautiful is nothing, or next to nothing; you must know how to display it, how to provoke with it, how to tint it here, and touch it there” (361). Thus, beauty in this sense is not a static quality. However, Vere, who refuses to submit to any kind of artificial beauty, is the true valorised ‘beautiful’ woman in the novel, both externally and morally.

Vere is a beautiful object, and a morally superior character, and as such, references to her beauty often take the form of natural imagery. Ouida introduces the white rose motif in relation to Vere’s beauty early on in the novel when we are told:

She was a very lovely girl, and despite her height still looked a child. Her small head was perfectly poised on a slender neck, and her face, quite colourless, with a complexion like the leaf of a white rose, had perfect features, straight, delicate, and noble; her fair hair was cut square over her brows and loosely knotted behind; she had a beautiful serious mouth, not so small as her mother’s, and serene eyes, gray as night, contemplative, yet wistful (62).

This is one of the first physical descriptions of the heroine and it establishes the rhetoric through which Vere comes to be repeatedly signified. Ouida extends the metaphor to incorporate Vere’s emotions by expressing beauty through natural imagery when she writes: “Vere coloured all over the white rose-leaf beauty of her face” (66). Later Vere’s white rose paleness becomes more of a peculiarity which I will soon explore; but before doing so I want to point out that the white rose image is associated more with Vere’s relationship with Corrèze, rather than Zouroff. Against the backdrop of the French natural landscape, which is the romanticised setting in the novel, Corrèze and his “wild white rose” (94) share both physical beauty and moral integrity.

In that sense, the word ‘beautiful’ in Moths comes to stand for somewhat more than the physical. It encapsulates something of a moral essence as well. G.S. Street wrote in 1895 that one of the qualities that underlies Ouida’s work is her “genuine and passionate love of beauty” which is constantly found “in her descriptions – accurate or not – of the country, in her scorn of the elaborate ugliness as contrasted with homely and simple seemliness. . . . It is not confined to physical beauty” (573). With this sentiment in mind, consider Corrèze’s triad of what makes a woman beautiful “you have truth, innocence, and serenity; treasure them. The women of your day will ridicule you, and tell you it is an old-fashioned triad, out of date.
like the Graces; but do not listen. It is a triad without which no woman is truly beautiful, and without which no man's love for her can be pure’” (98). Essentially Corrèze and Zouroff both contribute to the fetishisation of Vere’s purity but the difference between them is their motivations. Corrèze is a collector of beautiful things (186); he is an aesthetic connoisseur and one who is “beguiled” by nature (334) – as opposed to Zouroff and his hot-house flowers (123) – and that is why he is deserving of the novel’s beautiful heroine. He appreciates her beauty, her innocence and serenity, while Zouroff, who is more governed by a merely possessive impulse, only sullenly venerates Vere’s moral worth (274). Zouroff’s idealisation of Vere as virgin comes from a carnal impulse; Corrèze, a character governed by his “old faiths” (106), appears to be more concerned with: “the fancy of what a woman should be, might be, unspotted by the world, and innocent in thought, as well as deed” (106).

Corrèze advises Vere: “‘keep yourself ‘unspotted from the world’” (97). Vere takes this advice quite literally, as Wendy Parkins points out: “Vere’s dress matches her pale complexion, signifying an interiority coterminous with her appearance, an insistence on purity that is also a desire to keep a psychic, moral distance between herself and her milieu” (55). To borrow from Freud’s terminology, Vere’s preference for wearing white and keeping herself ‘unspotted from the world’ makes her the perfect object of male fetishism. The unspotted motif recurs throughout the novel, with Vere repeatedly invoking Corrèze’s warning (112, 159, 170, 194, 215, 324, 339, 345, 471). In this instance, Ouida’s well-known tendency to repetition produces a corollary effect in the novel in that Vere appears to be obsessed with proving to Corrèze that she has kept herself ‘unspotted from the world.’ In the end the motif becomes emptied out when Corrèze, admiring her “inmost beauty and holiness of the soul,” admits, “‘You have indeed kept yourself unspotted from the world!’” (494).

In turn, the ‘beautiful’ Corrèze is subjected to a kind of physical appreciation by Vere (257, 97, 278, 89, 169, 294, 84), who in doing so comes to occupy a subject position that departs from her typically objectified status. Female passion is in this sense recorded as an aesthetic response. Conversely, Vere takes some sort of delight in Corrèze’s gaze: “the gaze of Corrèze had a magic for all women, and she vaguely felt that magic as she met those eyes that were the eyes of Romeo or Faust” (84). Vere is disgusted by Zouroff’s open appreciation of her but this moment suggests that Vere does possess sexual feeling. Corrèze’s touch, too, invokes a sensual response from her: “it gave the child a strange thrill” (85). While Dolly and others, who judge Vere from her physical appearance and cold manner, expect her to be sexually reserved, Ouida’s depiction of Vere’s passionate inner life, in particular her unrecognised attraction to Corrèze, is a major component of the novel.
Vere and Corrèze function as the male and female complement of each other. Ouida surrounds both characters with countless adjectives pertaining to their beauty and purity and accordingly the two qualities become inextricably linked, a factor which is further enhanced by these characters’ association with the natural world as opposed to the more commercial urban spaces of the novel. The added layer of geographical interest in Moths is that it is an English novel that switches between several European locations including France, Russia, Austria and Poland. The community that inhabits these spaces is largely aristocratic, morally-inept, glamorous, exotic, superficial and obsessed with conspicuous consumption, thus maximising opportunities for social display. Jane Jordan has pointed out that Moths was notorious because of its “unflinching portrayal of immorality in the highest circles” (95). Such scenarios in Ouida’s writing led her to be compared to Émile Zola, a writer who detested the hypocrisy and extravagance of the French Second Empire (Douglas Parmée ix). In point of fact Moths and Zola’s infamous Nana appeared in the same year. A.K. Fiske’s much-cited review of both novels because they were rivals “on the fashionable book stalls” (550) condemned them for “the gross sensuality that Zola pictures, and the yielding to lust in which ‘Ouida’ revels” (554). The continental setting, while contributing to the romance novel elements of Moths, sets up some interesting spatial binaries between the urban and rural, and public and private. Away from the drawing rooms of London, the exotic setting, chiefly Paris where a great deal of the novel’s scandals take place, perhaps deflates the impropriety of the numerous occurrences of adultery with mistresses and prostitutes, and marriages of financial convenience, an observation which is made by Natalie Schroeder and Shari Hodges Holt (173). Conceivably the foreign landscape also allows Ouida to explore significant social concerns, especially the oppression of women through marriage (Jane Jordan 97).

The other prevailing binary at work in the novel is the public/private boundary and its differentiated spaces. Ouida upsets the analogous male/female public/private tradition by offering Vere no consoling domestic space in the novel. One reviewer was quick to criticise Ouida’s destabilisation of the Victorian home: Fiske describes her as a “foreign purveyor of infection” and writes: “it is evident she has known nothing of home influence, and has no appreciation of the graces of character it produces. She has no understanding of home relationships or of their value in the conservation of purity and health in human society, and she has no respect for them” (551). I would argue that Ouida’s novel offers a re-visioning of marriage and domestic space and in doing so undercuts some of the paradigms that permeated Victorian society such as the ‘angel in the house’ ideal, or the idea of marriage as a sanctuary for women. According to Jordan, “Moths created a critical furor because of the openness with which it treated of women’s sufferings at the hands of unscrupulous husbands” (97). In Moths
Ouida opens the door on marital abuse and makes public “such as the world does not even care to name” (Ouida 167). The resulting disruption of conventionally gendered spaces in the novel is eventually resolved when Vere finds sanctuary in nature at the novel’s conclusion.

In a perhaps overwrought fashion, Ouida concludes the story of Vere and Corrèze by relocating them to the French Alps, on the shores of a beautiful lake (540), literally miles away from the social constraints of the artificiality and affectation of “false civilisation” (542). Vere is no longer expected to function as her husband’s cultural capital — as the narrator reflects: “What is the world to them? What is the bray and the tinsel of a mountebank’s show to those who watch the stars and dwell in the gracious silence of the everlasting hills?” (541). What is also significant about the ending of the novel is that Ouida manages to reincorporate most of the motifs associated with Vere’s beauty. The lovers are at home “in the heart of the Alps of the Valais” (540) and are surrounded by snow and roses; they sit at a marble table, Vere is wearing white clothing, and “her face had regained its early loveliness” (540). Perhaps such a contrived scene is exemplary of Ouida’s energetic literary style, but it is still satisfying to the reader that these characters are able to retreat from the other heavily stylised regions of the novel. In this context, nature with its connotations of innocence and perfection is linked to the uncontaminated relationship between Vere and Corrèze since it, too, is a space of purity, and most importantly, freedom from the corrupted urban and commercial environment for “what is the world beside nature . . . ?” (540).

-Commodifying Uxorial Beauty-

In spite of Vere’s firm association with the natural world, and her distaste for over-cultivated urban spaces, she is treated or regarded as a commodity in the novel, especially by her husband. In going beyond the economic implications of the term, Jeff Nunokawa’s argument that “the essence and ornament of a domestic sphere defined by its distance from the marketplace, the angel of the house is a kind of value that transcends the commodity form” (The Afterlife of Property 6) shows specifically the moral and spiritual value of a woman as her husband’s property. These qualities are added to in Moths in that Ouida introduces Vere’s aesthetic value. Rather than showing the economic condition of her husband, Vere acts more as evidence of his taste, of his cultural and social capital. The popular phrase and cultural stereotype, ‘the angel in the house,’ connotes ideal Victorian womanhood. It originates from Coventry Patmore’s poem, “The Angel in the House” (1854) which associates women with the “traditionally feminine values — love, intuition, beauty, virtue” (Carol Christ 146). The poem serves as a reference point to extend these thematic implications as they come to bear on Ouida’s novel. Here, I want to explore the ideological presentation of women’s passivity
and how this is constructed through processes of commodification and the fetishisation of female purity.

In a novel that criticises the decay of modern society owing to capitalism and excessive lifestyles (Parkins 50), Vere’s ‘oldness,’ yet another motif that Ouida sets to work, stands out and physically distinguishes her as a virtuous character. Her mother, the artificial and self-serving Lady Dolly, laments that Vere has “gone a hundred years back” (109) and as a consequence will be difficult to marry off because she is not a beauty “in the way men like now” (109). When Vere enters the world of the French resort town of Trouville at the beginning of the novel, it as if she steps out of the past. In comparison, the American heiress, Miss Fuchsia Leach, while in effect another intruder in the European landscape, is the “rage because she was a great beauty and a great flirt” and was “made for the age she lived in” (134). While the rest of the female characters are desperately trying to separate themselves from the mid-Victorian ‘angel in the house’ aesthetic, Vere retains much of this quality. The novel is filled with a variety of religious images, most notably in descriptions of Vere and Corrèze, and Corrèze’s first encounter with Vere offers the reader a version of the ‘angel in the house.’ He sees a “girl, who had been in heaven, dropped to earth” (77) and his perception of Vere reveals both her angelic physical appearance and her ethereal demeanor, in a style akin to Patmore’s. We witness this admiration of feminine beauty in Patmore’s poetry, notably in the lines:

Her disposition is devout,
Her countenance angelical;
The best things that the best believe
Are in her face so kindly writ
The faithless, seeing her, conceive
Not only heaven, but hope of it (lines 11–6).

Thus Corrèze endows Vere with an angelic potential that is similarly seen in Patmore’s poem.

In many ways, Ouida’s version of ‘the angel of the house’ responds to a commodity culture context. Vere, urged by Lady Stoat to “make her life beautiful and useful” (164) in order to function advantageously in the age they live in, later becomes firmly situated as an object on display in this world. Vere frequently shows her awareness of this social expectation; most notably, the narrator observes: “It was what I was sold to be,’ she used to think bitterly. Her husband was fastidious as to her appearance, and inexorable as to her

47 Making one’s life ‘beautiful and useful’ would appear to be a contradiction in terms, especially taking into account the dictums of Aestheticism.
perpetual display of herself” (223). Her sense of herself as a purchased woman in point of fact derives from her grandmother’s reaction to the engagement announcement. The old woman, unaware of the truth behind the circumstances of Vere’s marriage arrangement, chastises Vere for selling herself “to the first rich man that asks” (191) and therefore brands her as “no better than the shameless woman” (191). From the receipt of this letter, Vere is cut off from her old life and is completely at the mercy of the “follies and vices of the world” (193).

Notwithstanding her associations with childhood and youth, Vere is of the old world both in terms of physical beauty and moral principles. It is her traditional values – “her grandmother had reared her in old-world ideas of duty” (230) – that render her a victim on the marriage market that operates in the novel. The various machinations at work in the novel that lead to Vere’s ultimate acceptance of Zouroff’s proposal are initially refused by the heroine. Lady Dolly’s constant persuasion, in the form of urging, and arguing, and abusing, entreating and sobbing (158) at her daughter are firmly resisted by Vere. It is only when Lady Dolly, in a last-ditch effort, eventually invents a story about owing Zouroff money and his being in the possession of some letters that could compromise her reputation, that she is able to exploit effectively her daughter’s Christian propensity for self-sacrifice, a state of affairs that strongly repeats the way Nell’s marriage is orchestrated in Cometh Up as a Flower. Believing that she is performing a filial duty to her mother, Vere eventually agrees to marry Zouroff. In actuality she believes herself to be an object of a literal exchange between her mother and her husband because her marriage cancels out her mother’s debts to him, which we later learn never existed (429).

Zouroff also contributes to Vere’s sense of herself as traded object and leads her to think of herself as being no better than her husband’s mistresses (227), a view which Zouroff himself confirms: “he knew very well that his wife and his belles petites were creatures so dissimilar that it seemed scarcely possible that the same laws of nature had created and sustained them. He knew that were as unlike as the dove and the snake, as the rose and the nightshade, but he treated them both the same” (226). Even the supposed sanctity of the Victorian marriage does not protect Vere from becoming an object of consumption on the same kind of level as a prostitute, and, equally, the erotic significance of the commodity is primarily demarcated through the rhetoric of exchange. Ouida has already evocatively positioned Zouroff as a trader of aesthetic objects in the chilling descriptions of his ancestors:

Only a generation or two back his forefathers had bought beautiful Persian women by heaping up the scales of barter with strings of pearls and sequins . . . his wooing was of the same rude sort. Only being a man of the world, and his
This scathing critique of marriage arrangements is interesting because this kind of exchange is comprised of objects rather than money; while ‘pearls and sequins’ attest to wealth, they also stand alone as aesthetic objects.

Vere fulfils the criteria of what constitutes a commodity: she participates in a circuit of exchange and is assigned value through Zouroff’s desire to own her. I draw attention to the quotation that this chapter takes its title from – ‘a lovely woman whom he had bought’ – because it not only illuminates some of the more sinister implications of male ownership of the female aestheticised commodity, it again brings into focus Vere’s aesthetic status. The passage in its entirety is:

He only saw a lovely woman whom he had bought as he bought the others, only with a higher price.

He took hold of the loose gold of her hair in his hands with a sudden caress and drew her into his arms.

Pardieu!’ he said with a short laugh. ‘A very calm proposition for a separation! That is what you drive at, no doubt; a separation in which you should have all the honours as Princess Zouroff still! No, my lovely Vera, I am not disposed to gratify you,—so. You belong to me, and you must continue to belong to me, nilly-willy. You are too handsome to lose, and you should be grateful for your beauty; it made you mistress of Svir. Pshaw! How you shudder! You forget you must pay now and then for your diamonds’ (390).

In this instance, Ouida is not exactly subtle in her representation of marital rape and its correlation with the Victorian marriage market, and this general concern has already been the subject of many critical discussions of woman novelists of the fin de siècle, including Lyn Pykett’s The Improper Feminine. Talia Schaffer also points out the more Gothic implications of scenes such as this and argues that Ouida’s depiction of the helpless Victorian heroine’s response to “Gothic incarceration” (Forgotten Female Aesthetes 128) is to promote her feminine passivity as a coping mechanism; her “silent endurance only endorses her pre-existing virtues” (129). I would also argue that Vere’s extreme feminine passivity in the novel is revalorised as part of her aesthetic significance. The imagery of ice, marble and diamonds surrounding Vere, as well her propensity to dress in white (a condition that has almost become a cliché for the material display of women’s purity in Victorian fiction) serves to reinforce her purity, her uniqueness and her related aesthetic value.
Although Ouida constantly refers to Vere as a prize that is bargained for and profitably sold, her true value on the marriage market derives from her “subtle, nameless, unattainable ‘something’” (135). Thus, Vere’s ‘aura,’ as Walter Benjamin might call it, emanates from a combination of her matchless physical beauty and her ‘virgin bloom’ – so conspicuous against the uncommonness of virginity in the novel – and indeed guarantees her unique aesthetic position. In this novel, a successful marriage to an aesthetically desirable Victorian female reflects, or enhances, the social status of her husband. The ethereal and classically aesthetic Vere complements the Russian prince’s priceless collection of art treasures and reinforces his taste for old-world fine art. The visual display ascribed to her position as Zouroff’s wife is unmistakable: “she seemed to herself, always to be en scène, always to be being dressed and being undressed for some fresh spectacle” (223). As Schroeder and Holt observe: “to Prince Zouroff, likewise versed in the cultural signs of a commodified world, a wife is a piece of property to display the enhancement of his own status” (189). Whilst Vere is effectively ‘en scène’ and her beauty is available to a wider audience, the possessor, in this case Zouroff, retains custody of the original artefact. The unique value of Vere, or her ‘aura,’ remains firmly attributed to her (Benjamin 20), but, by association, Zouroff experiences the reflected cultural value of his possession. As Bourdieu might argue, Vere represents objectified cultural capital and seems to serve the same aesthetic purpose for her husband as a work of art. Zouroff enjoys the reflected glory of his wife’s striking beauty and it pleases his “pride to hear the world tell him that he had the most beautiful woman in Europe for his wife” (215).

Vere’s beauty, a peculiar amalgamation of youthfulness and old-world allure – a “blending of sculptural calm and childlike loveliness (136-7) – is excessively represented. But while Ouida commits much of the novel to detailed descriptions of feminine beauty, it is Vere’s physicality that receives the most aesthetic treatment. Ouida captures Vere’s aesthetic qualities quite explicitly, describing her in the language of art:

She was not like her world or her time. She was beautiful, but no one would have ever dreamed of classing her with ‘the beauties’ made by princely praise and public portraiture. She was as unlike them as the beauty of perfect statuary is unlike the Lilith and the Vivienne of modern painting (223–4).

Two paintings that Ouida might be referring to here are Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s Lady Lilith (1863) (figure 3) and Edward Burne-Jones's The Beguiling of Merlin (1872-1877) (figure 4). The main correlation between these two paintings, apart from their quintessential Pre-Raphaelite stylisation and subject matter, is that Lilith and Vivien are femme fatale figures. They also serve as a visual representation of what Ouida’s heroine is presumably unlike in
comparison, both in terms of physical beauty and the related implications of being conscious of one’s seductive power. Instead Ouida’s high cultural validation of Vere’s old world beauty positions her within a different aesthetic framework. Vere represents high art and sculptural beauty that it is Corrèze’s function to preserve.

As I have already discussed in relation to Cometh Up as a Flower, the tendency to write about feminine beauty in artistic terms produces the effect whereby the female appears more as a work of art than a physical being. Such metonymic coding serves not only to foreground Vere’s aesthetic attributes but also to emphasise how she is constantly treated as an object in the novel. Zouroff is not the only character who is responsible for this practice; his mistress provokes several discussions that supplement the reader’s perception of Vere as a sculptural woman. For example, Jeanne de Sonnaz, masking her jealousy, comments: ‘“but,’ she added, with a smile, ‘people say so because she is faultlessly made, face and form; they say so, and there is an end. It is like sculpture; people go mad about a bit of china, a length of lace, a little picture, but no one ever goes mad about marble. They praise—and pass’” (360). After planting this seed of thought, she “carries her cardinal red skirts, and her musical silver heels over the stones” (362), after which two minor characters, the old diplomatist and Prince Traoï, continue to discuss and objectify Princess Vera. The Prince states:

‘Princess Vera is as beautiful as a Titian; but one gets tired of looking at a Titian that one knows will never come into the market. Or rather she is like a classic statue in one of the old patrician museums in Rome. You know nothing will ever get the statue into your collection: you admire and pass’ (362).

Similar to the way in Clara Middleton’s beauty is communally discussed, Vere, too, is subjected to aesthetic evaluation and assigned limited value by these ‘men of the world.’ It would seem that she is unaware of these collective apprehensions of her physical beauty: “unconsciously she stretched out her arms into the vacant air, those slender beautiful white arms, that Paris said were sculpturally faultless, and that her husband liked to see bare to the shoulder at her balls, with a circle of diamonds clasping them” (356). Certainly she is conscious of the wealth and social status that her adornment connotes but she is not so concerned with dressing herself in the way fashion (and her husband) dictates, not buying into female adornment like the other highly born women (222–3).

Corrèze warns Vere about the ‘women of [her] day’ and in doing so alludes to the title of the novel:

‘This world you will be launched in does no good for a woman. It is a world full of moths. Half the moths are burning themselves in feverish frailty, the
other half are corroding and consuming all they can touch. Do not become either kind. You are made for something much better than a moth (97).

Ouida constantly invokes this difference between genuine aesthetics and the notion of novelty. Vere is also physically encoded in this binary through constant references to her marbled appearance. She is also associated with reflective surfaces such as diamonds and ice. For example, at a great costume ball in Paris with her husband:

She, by a whim of his own, was called the Ice-spirit, and diamonds and rock crystals shone all over her from head to foot. Her entrance was the sensation of the evening; and as he heard the exclamations that awarded her the supreme place of beauty where half the loveliness in Europe had been assembled, that vanity of possession which is the basest side of passion revived in him (266).

Even though Vere renders “every man envious and every woman unhappy” (267) by her striking appearance, she does not take delight in this, unlike her husband’s mistress, Jeanne de Sonnaz, who “was all in red, a brilliant, poppy-like, flame-like, Mephistophelian red” (267), and deliberately attempts to attract both male and female attention because she is “a woman who loved admiration and who loved display” (227). While the moral differentiation between the two women is obvious through Ouida’s explicit use of colour, there is a more subtle detail at work here, in that she dramatises the world of female commodification. In this novel the heroine’s aesthetic value, on display, surpasses the beauty and extravagant ornamentation of other female characters.

Since I am interested in how female beauty functions in the novel, particularly as it is delineated through the heroine, I find Vere’s several stages of beauty which mirror the narrative trajectory of the novel and are variously valorised to be a valuable site of investigation. As I have already mentioned, one of the first physical descriptions of Vere depicts her as a child, and it is this child-like beauty and its associated connotations of innocence and purity which arouse the interest of both Corrèze and Zouroff. During the course of the novel, especially during her cruel marriage, Vere retains some of her child-like charm (222), yet Vere’s aesthetic value grows when she is married, as Corrèze remarks: “‘She is at the height of fame and fortune, and charm and beauty’” (259). Not long after her marriage she is heralded as ‘the new beauty, Princess Zouroff’ (202). The narrator omnisciently sums up this aesthetic paradox:

That fair, grave, colourless face, so innocent yet so proud, so child-like yet so thoughtful, with its musing eyes and its arched mouth, became the theme of artists, the adoration of dandies, the despair of women. As a maiden she would have been called lovely, but too cold, and passed over. Married, she had that
position which adorns as diamonds adorn, and that charm as of forbidden fruit, which piques the sated palate of mankind (222–3).

The processes of consumption stand out in the passage. Such imagery accords with Zouroff’s appetite for women, and also makes reference to the terms in which Zouroff desired to marry Vere in the first place — so that he would have exclusive ownership of her person. Furthermore, this distinct transition from child to adult and its accompanying aesthetic meanings is a prominent theme in Moths. On other occasions, the narrative draws attention to the aesthetic effects of marriage, noting “her beauty was only greater for her extreme pallor and the darkness beneath her eyes. But it was no longer the beauty of an innocent unconscious child: it was that of a woman,” (180) and, “she was more beautiful than she had ever been, but she looked much older than she was; her youth was frozen in her, the ice seemed in her veins, in her brain, in her heart” (275). What connects all three of these examples is the evocation of the idea that in her marriage to Zouroff, Vere has left her childhood behind, as the narrator later forcefully explicates: “she was only sixteen still, but she was no more young. Her girlhood had been killed in her as a spring blossom is crushed by a rough hot hand, that meaning to caress it, kills it” (198).

Ouida’s treatment of Vere’s loss of virginity is excessive, but its emotional impact leads into a significant meditation on marriage arrangements in the nineteenth century:

Society had set its seal of approval upon this union, and upon all such unions, and so deemed them sanctified. Year after year, one on another, the pretty, rosy, golden-curled daughters of fair mothers were carefully tended and reared up to grace the proud races from which they sprang, and were brought out into the great world in their first bloom like half-opened roses, with no other end or aim set before them as the one ambition of their lives than to make such a marriage as this. . . . To marry well; that was the first duty of a woman (199).

Ouida reemploys the motif of the young virgin as an unpicked flower as a way of showing not only Vere’s objection to the marriage arrangement she has been coerced into, but also her brutal (in many senses of the word) marital union with Zouroff. In that sense it is not only Vere’s beauty that is commodified in Moths, but also her virginity:

to Sergius Zouroff innocence was nothing more than the virgin bloom of a slave had been to his father—a thing to be destroyed for an owner’s diversion. It amused him to lower her, morally and physically, and he cast all the naked truths of human vices before her shrinking mind, as he made her body tremble at his touch (225).
This scene demonstrates the guarded way that Ouida gets to write about the sexual connection between Zouroff and Vere and is perhaps one of the immoral elements some reviewers found fault with because it casts a very disturbing light on the male appetite for female purity.

Zouroff’s aesthetic preference for a virginal woman, something he has in common with Sir Willoughby Patterne, suggests a kind of commodity fetishism through his initial preoccupation with her beauty and childish inexperience (123–4). Although the valuing of the virgin bride is an ancient social idea, both Ouida and Meredith introduce this ancient preference through a new discourse of commodity culture. The emphasis on the exchangeability of Vere in the novel resembles Marx’s concept of commodity fetishism which dissolves interpersonal relationships by making them appear as relationships between objects or things, for example, commodities and money. Moths consistently invokes Vere’s status as an article of consumption, emphasising the passivity and objectification associated with such a status. Vere’s marriage to Zouroff is represented as “a luxurious and ornamented slavery” (273) which she cannot escape:

Up and down the length of this stately place a woman moved with a step that was slow and weary, and yet very restless; the step of a thing that is chained. The woman was very young and very pale; her skirts of olive velvet swept the white stone; her fair hair was coiled loosely with a golden arrow run through; round her throat there were strings of pearls, the jewels of morning. All women envied her the riches of which those pearls were the emblem. She was Vera, Princess Zouroff.

Vera always, now (197).

In this passage the novel’s unrelenting representation of the marriage as an act of acquisition is further compounded by the depiction of Vere’s status as a thing; the actual word is used, here, in ‘a thing that is chained.’ Moreover, Ouida employs the language of entrapment to emphasise Vere’s symbolic confinement through marriage. The golden arrow invokes an image of an animal that is pursued and ‘run though’ by a hunter. At the same time, the strings of pearls seem to point more to the capture and detainment of live prey in that they metonymically function as the chains that bind her to Zouroff.

Ouida relates Vere’s swift journey to adulthood explicitly to her marriage to Zouroff, a fact which Vere is all too keenly aware of: “I was a child three years ago, but I am not a child now” (303). Even before Vere is represented as a beautiful woman, as a young girl, she shows promise of feminine beauty. Corrèze is the one who initially subjects her to his gaze: “what an exquisite face that child has,—that lovely tint like the wild white rose, there is nothing like it. It makes all the women with colour look vulgar,’ he said, after a prolonged
gaze through a friend’s field-glass” (55). Corrèze, via an instrument of visual perception, establishes the way in which men come to continually objectify Vere and her absorption into a structure of power is normalised by what seems to be a cursory act of admiration. Beth Newman writes of the objectifying quality of the male gaze as “the long history of the woman’s construction as an object of visual pleasure for the male spectator” (148). Moreover Zouroff’s first meeting with her prompts him to think what a beautiful child she is (123) and soon his “dull fierce eyes” fasten on her (143).

However, after securing possession of Vere though marriage, Zouroff eventually grows indifferent to his wife (224); he is even irritated by her “passive obedience” (230) and prefers the company of his mistresses. This attitude is shown to be deliberate as he “meant to forget her, once married to her” (230). However, it is significant that when he hears rumours that Vere might have committed adultery, Ouida captures his sense of covetousness and in a distinctly possessive manner:

A curious jealousy took possession of him, which was half hatred and half remorse. He felt like one of those princes who own a classic and world-renowned statue, and shut it in a cabinet, and never care to look at it, yet who being menaced with a loss, suddenly rise to fury, and feel beggared. Not because the classic marble was any joy or marvel to themselves, but because the world had envied it to them vainly, and it had made their treasure-house that desired of others. He suddenly realised that the loss of his wife would, like that of the statue, make him poor in the eyes of Europe, and leave his palaces without their chief ornaments (451–2).

Ouida relies on Vere’s sculptural beauty to suggest the cultural significance her marriage to Zouroff proclaims. However this extract demonstrates that the real pleasure Zouroff gains from having married Vere results from his primordial experience of ownership rather than from any real aesthetic response to her beauty. It also points to his being aware that his cultural capital, both embodied and objectified, is threatened if his wife leaves him.

Interchangeably an angel, a saint, a statue, a flower through her meekness and dazzling physical appearance, Vere embodies the angelic potential of Patmore’s aesthetic. This chain of metonymic associations endorses her position as the novel’s beautiful heroine, and contributes to her being a victim of commodity fetishism. From the point of view of Zouroff and others, Vere is without doubt a female aestheticised commodity; however, she herself does not buy into this cultural value: “she draws a final distinction between herself and the women of her society who deliberately commodify their sexuality for their own gain” (Schroeder and Holt 192). The other female aesthetic commodities that consciously subscribe
to these circuits of economics, aesthetics and sexuality, are quite happy to be absorbed into
the patriarchal world of the novel in their pursuit of pleasure.

-Ouidaen Aesthetics-

British Aestheticism signifies a number of cultural meanings pertaining to literature, art,
fashion and lifestyle that inform the novels of Ouida, Corelli and du Maurier, among others.
The touchstone text of this movement is widely recognised to be Joris-Karl Huysmans’s
Against Nature (1884) which I believe serves as a contemporary adjunct for the highly
artificial interior spaces of Moths. For example, Zouroff’s hothouses full of Japanese lilies
and Chinese blooms (123), and lavishly decorated properties not only exemplify some of the
familiar emblems of Aestheticism; they also share a certain aesthetic resemblance to Des
Esseintes’s cultivated domestic environment. Schaffer advocates for Ouida being an important
catalyst for British Aestheticism and argues that “Ouida’s life, like her writing, was highly
aesthetic” (“Origins of the Aesthetic Novel” 213). In a text that is lavishly decorated, a
Ouidaean trope that is inflated further in Princess Napraxine (1884), it is befitting for the
characters to be subjected to the same kind of emphasis on materiality. In this section I want
to relate the novel to its socio-historic context by showing how the dictums of the Aesthetic
Movement were applied to the representation of feminine beauty. As Charles Bernheimer’s
“Fetishism and Decadence: Salome’s Severed Head” describes, decadent aesthetics with its
emphasis on “the primacy of artifice over nature, [and] the value of cosmetic ornament . . . ”
(63) serves as an important template for thinking about women and the performance of beauty
in the late nineteenth century.

What Moths demonstrates foremost is a remarkable distinction between Vere and Lady
Dolly that relates to my earlier discussion of binaries between the natural and the artificial;
whereas Vere is overtly associated with nature, both in terms of her physical beauty and her
purity, Lady Dolly embodies artificial feminine beauty. Thus the novel stages a battle between
the natural and the synthetic, which includes a demarcation between the two women through
their names. Vere, a name associated with faith and truth, is conspicuously contrasted with
Dolly, whose name suggests the fundamental female aesthetic commodity. Sharon Marcus
writes about dolls in the nineteenth century as a symbol of masculine desire for femininity
(166) and also as objects of circulation. In this sense, Dolly, like the villainess of Broughton’s

48 ‘Vere’ derives from the Latin, vérus, which means ‘true.’ Zouroff also remarks the name ‘Vera’ means ‘faith’
in Russian (142). The name ‘Vere’ had special significance in the time Ouida was writing, “as the Dictionary of
National Bibliography points out, Vere was a ‘household word’ in the nineteenth century. It was made so in part
by a long-standing tradition that used it as a symbol of birth and honour and in part by Macaulay's famous
panegyric to the ‘old earls of Oxford’ as the ‘longest and most illustrious line of nobles that England has ever
seen’” (quoted in Alice Chandler 86).
novel, personifies the nuances of her name, especially in Vere’s perceptions of her: “her mother was this pretty foolish painted toy, with false curls in a sunny circlet, above her kohl-washed eyes” (128). Everything about this image is synthetic, from the falseness of her wig, to the cosmetic enhancement of her face. Lady Dolly is emblematic of the artificial and decadent landscape of the novel, as Parkins notes:

By metaphor and metonym, then, the women embody the excesses and moral decline of modern culture; foremost among the moths is Lady Dolly, the heroine’s dissolute mother. A woman attentive to the nuances of fashion, affecting a style of dress and cosmetic enhancement that belie her age, Lady Dolly is an irredeemable figure of hypocrisy, greed and selfishness throughout the novel (50).

Lady Dolly establishes her status as a self-serving character in a number of ways and this relates mainly to her obsession with appearing younger. The novel opens, rather strangely, with her not looking forward to the arrival of her daughter: “Lady Dolly ought to have been perfectly happy. She had everything that can constitute the joys of a woman of her epoch” (47). Ouida goes on the list the various superficial joys that Lady Dolly derives pleasure from, and concludes the opening paragraph with: “[she] had shown that she must still be a pretty woman, pretty even in daylight, or the men would not have looked at her so” (47). Thus, the objectification of female beauty is signalled right from the beginning of Moths and Lady Dolly exemplifies the ideal visual object of the male gaze.

This contention is also supported by her entrance into the novel as she splashes “semi-nude with all the other mermaids” (47); thus, her body is codified as a site for male pleasure and signals her status as an object of lust. Ouida emphasises the sensuality of Dolly’s partially-clothed body, bobbing and dancing in the waves, as she considers the impending arrival of her much younger daughter and its threat to her social status as an aesthetic object: “Lady Dolly was not old; she was not quite thirty-four, and she was pretty as if she were seventeen, perhaps prettier; even when she was not ‘done up,’ and she did not need to do herself up very much just yet, really not much, considering . . .” (48). There is a certain degree of self-consciousness in this reflection which Ouida later exploits when Dolly appears in the novel devoid of costume and make-up when she pleads with her daughter to marry Zouroff: “Lady Dolly dropped on her knees beside the bed; her real hair dishevelled on her shoulders, her face without false bloom and haggard as the face of a woman twice her own years” (173). Vere, used to seeing her mother “in full war-paint” (117) is affected by seeing her mother’s real face, and Ouida emphasises this realness. The fact that Vere then promises “what her mother had asked” (173) attests to the genuineness Dolly is attempting to promote.
However, the depiction of a youthful and beautiful Lady Dolly becomes a standardised image in the novel. For example at Vere’s debutant moment, “Lady Dolly looked sixteen herself. She was exquisitely painted; she had a gown cut en coeur which was as indecent as the heart of woman could desire; jewels sparkled all over her; she was a triumph in art” (117). In the world of artifice and enhanced female beauty, Dolly is a master of the art of feminine display (Schroeder and Holt 187). Just as female purity is fetishised by Zouroff and others, so are the more artificial elements of female beauty. Drawing on the work of Charles Baudelaire, Bernheimer points out that make-up permits woman to “construct herself as a fetish” (63). Baudelaire wrote in 1863: “woman performs a kind of duty when she endeavours to appear magical and supernatural; she should dazzle men and charm them; she is an idol who should be covered with gold in order to be worshipped” (quoted in Bernheminer 63). Thus, Baudelaire attributes the fetishism of women’s beauty to a deliberate attempt to appear ‘dazzling.’ One ostentatious description of Lady Dolly, in particular, compels such a reading of the novel:

Lady Dolly had always been, and was, very pretty: she had lovely large eyes, and the tiniest mouth, and a complexion which did not want all the pains she bestowed on it; when she had not the perruque on, she had dark silky hair all tumbled about over her eyebrows in a disarray that cost her maid two hours to compose; and her eyebrows themselves were drawn beautifully in two fine, dark, slender lines by a pencil that supplied the one defect of Nature. When she was seventeen, at the rectory, among the rosebuds on the lawn, she had been a rosebud herself; now she was a Dresden statuette; the statuette was the more finished and brilliant beauty of the two, and never seemed the worse for wear. This is the advantage of artificial over natural loveliness: the latter will alter with health or feeling, the former never; it is always the same, unless you come in on it at its toilette, or see it when it is very ill (60).

This extract not only typifies what differentiates mother from daughter in terms of natural beauty versus artificial enhancement, it presents a description of the female form that is fragmented into a series of body parts.

Variously Dolly’s eyes, mouth, hair, eyebrows are perhaps evocative of the Petrarchan tradition of female beauty in which the body of Laura is celebrated and fragmented (Eliane Françoise DalMolin 35). Certainly, in this instance there is a fetishisation of the female body.

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49 Ouida was certainly aware of Petrarch and there are references to him in Held in Bondage (1863). Ouida was also living in Italy when she wrote Moths and as a literary woman would have been aware of the Italian poet’s legacy.
The word ‘fetish’ is significant in this case, particularly considering its linguistic meaning, as Charles Bernheimer clarifies:

Etymologically, the fetish is a decadent object. The word comes from the Portuguese feitico, ‘artificial, skillfully contrived,’ which in turn derives from the Latin facticius, ‘made by art.’ The sense of human fabrication as opposed to biological origin, of cultural signs replacing natural substance, is at the basis of other words in the Romance languages deriving from the same Latin root: Spanish afeitar, ‘to make up, adorn, embellish,’ and afeite, dress, ornament, cosmetics’; French feint, ‘feigned, simulated’ (63).

Ouida’s Lady Dolly is certainly ‘skillfully contrived.’ Drawing on the work of Jean Baudrillard, Schroeder and Holt point out: “in her artfully polished beauty, she is a walking advertisement for the success of the feminine model of consumption, a prime example of commodity culture’s invitation to ‘women to play dolls with themselves’ (Baudrillard quoted in Schroeder and Holt 187). For Lady Dolly, and for her set, appearance – aesthesis – is everything. In the novel, Lady Dolly, conspicuously doll-like, is simultaneously an object of the male gaze and a powerful agent of the marriage market at work in the narrative. Unlike Vere, she is not at the mercy of the male gaze; on the contrary, she wields power over men in the novel. Dolly possesses the ability to occupy a controlling subject position, even though she functions as an object of spectacle and consumption. Ouida, who is credited with popularising the “glamorous world of aesthetic fashion” (Schaffer, Forgotten Female Aesthetes 122), has crafted a novel in which Lady Dolly stands out as a character who is conspicuously aware of beauty and its implications for social power.

Fuchsia Leach, like Dolly, is also a consciously beautiful character: “exquisitely pretty, perfectly dressed, as dainty to look at as porcelain . . . she, like many of her nation, had found herself, to her own surprise an object of adoration” (134). She, too, is a commodity in the Victorian marriage market of the novel, but unlike Vere, she harnesses the power of her beauty to her advantage. Furthermore, once she is successfully married to Vere’s cousin, Frank Herbert, and enjoys all the privileges of being a duchess, she is able to turn her husband’s appreciation of her beauty into an instrument of power (242). While this sort of manipulative behaviour would seem to position Fuchsia more as a character that belongs to the commercial and decadent landscape of the novel, she proves in her humble visit to Vere that she has effectively retreated from the commodified continental setting of the novel, and

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50 In her marriage to Vere’s cousin she emphasises her predisposition to commercialism when she compels him to turn the family estate over to the coal industry and to generate an income from it (243).
she is thus redeemed and forgiven by Vere. She is also one of the only female characters of her class to recognise Vere’s aesthetic value; she muses: “that girl’s worth five hundred of me, and yet they don’t see it!” (135). In that way, Fuchsia, “good natured, and less vain than she looked” (135), acts as an intermediary between the two different extremes of femininity at odds with each other in the novel and serves to reconcile the Victorian domestic as a space for a successful marriage.

Ouida later revisits the same kind of dynamic between the mondaine and the ingénue in Princess Napraxine, published four years after Moths. The representation of women as aesthetic commodities in this novel reconsiders some of the character tropes and themes from Moths that are more strongly identifiable with Aestheticism. When Princess Napraxine appeared after Moths, the Star, a Christchurch newspaper, acknowledged that it was an improvement on Moths but also referred to it as “the same old story” (“Ouida’s Latest”) most likely because this narrative contrasts two very different (and familiar) female characters — the aesthete and the angel, or the mondaine and the ingénue. Princess Napraxine is married to a Russian Prince, and she rejects the romantic advances of Count Othmar, a foreign merchant of incredible wealth. Smarting from the rejection he hastily marries the strikingly beautiful Yseulte, in a bid to save her from a life in a convent. While the two live a relatively happy married life for about a year, and Yseulte firmly idolises her husband and believes in his love for her, Othmar cannot shake off his powerful attraction to Napraxine. In a twist of circumstances, Napraxine’s husband is killed in a duel, and Yseulte receives a letter intended for Othmar from Napraxine which once and for all rejects him. Yseulte’s resulting epiphany about her relationship with Othmar leads her to remove herself from the path of the two lovers and she dramatically commits suicide so Othmar can marry Napraxine.

In a novel that is laden with objects, the commodity fetishisation of the two beautiful female characters is not incongruous. Aesthetic connoisseurship, especially as it is attributed to Princess Napraxine herself, is implicit in the lush descriptions of domestic interiors, as Schaffer notes: “Princess Napraxine inhabits the aesthetic dreamscape, with multiple beautiful homes all decorated in exquisite Watteau shades. Her boudoir is visually luscious, combining signifiers of wealth and virginity, delicacy and power” (Forgotten Female Aesthetes 141). Ouida emphasises Napraxine’s association with a world of aesthetic commodities, luxurious decor and crowded with exotic wares:

She often took her chocolate in a boudoir opening on to the terrace: a little nest of white satin and looking-glass and Saxe china; the ceiling was a mirror painted with little doves and flowers; the carpet was of lambskins; the corners were filled with azaleas, rose and white, like her gown. She looked only a
larger flower as she sank down on one of the couches. The chocolate was served on Moorish trays, in Turkish cups, by a little negro, who, gorgeous in his dress and immovable as a statue, was often taken by new-comers for an enamelled bronze cast by Barbédiéenne . . (511).51

The boundary between people and objects blurs in the highly stylised setting of mirrored surfaces and oriental motifs with an assemblage of objects also suggesting a variety of geographical locations. Carla Molloy argues that Napraxine’s role is complex because she is an “extraordinarily accomplished female aesthete – superior, indeed, to every single other character in the novel – who simultaneously embraces consumerism” (271).

While Princess Napraxine is a fascinating character within this context of women as aestheticised commodities, for “she was one of those women who naturally made a picture of herself” (537), I want to also recognise Yseulte and her treatment in the novel. Othmar sums up the major difference between the two women: “beside the cultured mind of the woman he loved, with its fine skepticism, its delicate ironies, its contemptuous rejections, its intellectual scorn, no doubt this simple, narrow, unintelligent faith was foolish and childish and out of date; yet it touched him” (492). Yseulte arouses in Othmar the same kind of sexual fascination with her girlish purity that characterises the relationship between Zouroff and Vere. Princess Napraxine is a curious reworking of some of the ideas that Ouida had already created in Moths. I also believe that in examining the feminine binaries in both novels it is useful to compare these works in terms of the way they both draw upon the Bluebeard fairy tale,52 a cautionary narrative about the dangers of marriage. Since considerable parts of her life were spent in England and France and Italy, and given her Anglo-French heritage, Ouida would have been familiar with the European fairy-tale tradition, particularly the works of Charles Perrault. Casie Hermansson’s Bluebeard: a Reader’s Guide to the English Tradition documents the Victorian-era fascination with Bluebeard as figure of chapbooks, drama and fiction. Reading Moths I had suspected that Ouida was in some way referencing Perrault’s French fairy tale, Bluebeard. My suspicions were confirmed when I turned to Princess Napraxine with its upfront reference to the Bluebeard figure; Othmar tries to reassure his young bride: “You know I am not Blue Beard, my dear” (683). His casual attempt at reassurance becomes quite chilling when one takes into account the end of the novel. Given that he was so well-known in Victorian England, Ouida’s allusions to Bluebeard are not

51 Ferdinand Barbédiéenne (1810–1892) was a French metalworker known for his reproductions of antique sculptures and for producing decorative objects in the later nineteenth century.
52 Charles Perrault’s “Le Barbe Bleu” was first published in France in January 1697 in Histoires ou Contes du temps passé. Victorian versions of the fairy tale include Anne Thackeray Ritchie’s “Bluebeard’s Keys” (1871), and Walter Crane’s The Bluebeard Picture Book (1875).
unusual, but as I will briefly explain, Ouida offers two quite different re-visionings of the Bluebeard narrative.

*Moths* is a feminist re-visioning of Bluebeard in that the heroine must save herself from her tyrannical husband. Vere has no male rescuers (like the brothers in the fairy-tale) to rescue her from the isolated Polish castle and when she discovers that Zouroff has shot Corrèze in the throat (533): “she drew the marriage-ring off her hand, and trampled it under her foot” (534) and “prepared for a long and perilous journey” (535). Ouida later makes it known that Vere “had come across the middle of Europe in the winter weather, over the snow plains and frozen rivers, unaided, unaccompanied” (539) to get to her lover’s bedside. Later, as Perrault tells us, his heroine is remarried to “a very honest gentleman who made her forget the ill time she had pass’d with the *Bluebeard*” (109); so, too, Vere remarries and finds happiness.

The trampling of her wedding ring is a significant act where women’s jewellery serves as a symbolic bond between a husband and his wife as well as attesting to wealth. In this fairy-tale world of men’s dominance the gift of pearls that Vere receives upon her engagement to Zouroff are: “the largest and purest pearls that ever Indian diver plunged for into the deep sea. When they were clasped about her they seemed in no way different, save in their beauty, from the chains locked on slave girls brought for the harem” (180). The symbolic association of the pearls with the chains of wedlock is further endorsed with Zouroff’s “momentary instinct to tear his pearls off her, and bid her to be free” (181). Likewise, in *Princess Napraxine* a pearl necklace holds comparable emblematic currency. Yseulte receives a similar gift from Othmar when they are engaged: “within the casket was a necklace of great pearls” which are as a big as ‘pigeons’ eggs’ (559). However, unlike Vere, Yseulte enjoys being her husband’s possession: “she thrilled through all her nerves as she suddenly realised that she was altogether his, to be used as he chose” (583). *Princess Napraxine*, although sharing many of the themes and narrative patterns of the earlier novel, offers a much more Gothic conclusion. Even though the lovers are brought together at the end of the novel, just as they are in *Moths*, Yseulte, unexpectedly filled with knowledge of her husband’s true character (like the girl in the Bluebeard story) “with a step that never paused or faltered . . . threw her arms outward as a bird spreads its wings, and fell, as the stone falls, through the empty air” (8). Yseulte in her death resembles Bertha Rochester in *Jane Eyre* (1847), a novel which also refers the reader to Bluebeard, as has long been recognised. While Vere and Yseulte experience entirely different conclusions they both show their old-world faith and courage and in the end find solace in nature.

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53 For example, see Heta Pyrhönen’s *Bluebeard Gothic: Jane Eyre and its Progeny* (2010).
In “Ouida at Home,” a Tuapeka Times article from 1894, the London correspondent for the small New Zealand newspaper takes pains to describe the Florentine villa where she resides, an account which echoes scenes from the aforementioned Princess Napraxine:

For the past twenty years Ouida has resided on the outskirts of Florence, in a villa which formerly belonged to one of the Medici. The room in which she works is truly picturesque. Its walls are painted with exquisite old Italian frescoes, and inlaid tables laden with pots of flowers (lilies and hyacinths abounding) line the walls. There is a priceless Persian rug before the hearthstone, where she likes to lie and dream.

Ouida’s earlier extravagant life at the Langham hotel in London is often well noted in her biographies. W.H. Mallock recollects her sitting-room there as a “glade of the most expensive flowers” (125).

In her early years in London, Ouida was renowned for entertaining various society figures including Oscar Wilde and Robert Browning. These days the Langham hotel proudly recognises one of its most famous guests from the nineteenth century where

[Ouida] lived an exotic life for four years, receiving visitors while lying in bed and writing manuscripts. Her preferred way of work was by the light of scores of candles, with black velvet curtains forever drawn to keep out obtrusive daylight, surrounded by masses of purple flowers; she frequently ran up florist bills alone of £200 per week (“The Langham, London”).

If the semi-autobiographical correlation between Ouida and her character, Napraxine, is not yet obvious, perhaps Mallock’s testimony to her physical presence and keen interest in fashion will prove illuminating. He remembers Ouida arriving one evening “trimmed with the most exuberant furs, which, when they were removed, revealed a costume of primrose colour—a costume so artfully cut that, the moment she sat down, all eyes were dazzled by the sparkling of her small protruded shoes” (125). Ouida was truly a practitioner of Aestheticism and as her financial circumstances altered for the worse she was able to live out her fantasies of fashion and interior decoration through her fictional female aesthetes like Princess Napraxine or even Lady Dolly.

By reading Moths as an aesthetic novel and thinking about how Ouida was closely involved in the Victorian art world (indirectly, though she herself painted) it is possible to get some idea of what Ouida’s philosophies of what good and bad art might be. The high culture school of aesthetics that Vere represents is opposed to the artificiality of Lady Dolly’s beauty. Also taking into account the characterisation of the female aesthete as villain in Princess

54 The hotel even has a loyalty programme called ‘Ouida’ which rewards its frequent visitors.
"Napraxine" creates a precise commentary on the moral importance of good art. What also emerges are complex overlaps between people and things in both novels which are governed by a kind of market for pleasure and beauty. In the following chapter I turn to Marie Corelli and her reliance on decadent tropes, that we saw the early stages of in Ouida’s writing, as a way to refract her own narrative of beauty.
"I Love Beauty — And I Study It Wherever I Find It, Dead Or Living": Marie Corelli’s *Wormwood*

The last of it goes off to Mr Bentley tomorrow morning. So my soul is free from my dreadful Parisian man—he has crawled away out of my horizon and has disappeared... Mr Bentley is charmed, horrified, startled and excited all together with my book—he says it will make a furore, so that is all right (quoted in Bertha Vyver 93).

So said Marie Corelli of her popular ‘anti’-decadent novel, *Wormwood: A Drama of Paris* (1890) forthwith referred to as *Wormwood*. The rise of Aestheticism in the late nineteenth century and its perceived threat to social and moral stability encouraged public debates on decadence and immorality, and on the problem of writing decadence. Corelli, too, added her voice to this debate, in the form of *Wormwood*. In this chapter I partly move away from my previous interest in cultural capital and commodity theory to follow up on the previous chapter’s focus on beauty, both female and male, as it is refracted through the lenses of Aestheticism, decadence and religion. I conclude by contextualising the novel within Corelli’s oeuvre, including her non-fiction writing, as it relates to her distinctive perception of the Victorian marriage market.

-Best-Selling Aesthetics-

Marie Corelli was born in 1855 and raised in Surrey by her adoptive father, Charles MacKay. While her mysterious familial origins are the subject of much speculation, her upbringing and education are of more interest since they contribute more directly to her literary career. A neighbour of George Meredith, Corelli received a domestic education from her father who introduced her to literature and music (Annette Federico 5), but she was sent to a convent on the Continent sometime around the age of eleven. Chester Clarence Huff Junior speculates that the Catholic convent environment cultivated the fascination with ritual and spirituality that permeates her novels (7–8). Corelli’s pseudonym is much deliberated. Her real name was Mary (Minnie MacKay) but from the time she began to publish with Bentley she transformed herself into the more mysterious, and foreign-sounding, Marie Corelli. Although she attempted a career as a musician, and did find success in some of her piano recitals, her true passion was for literature. She had her first article published in *Temple Bar* in 1885 and then began writing novels. *A Romance of Two Worlds* (1886) was Corelli’s first novel and like much of Corelli’s later fiction after that it was immensely popular with the reading public, but not so favoured by the critics. This first novel was rejected by the literary reader, Hall Caine,
which subsequently led the publisher, George Bentley, supposing the novel might have commercial potential, to publish it.

Since she was a prolific figure of both popular culture and popular literature, not to mention a marketer of her own literary profile, there are a number of biographies dedicated to Marie Corelli. However, among this assemblage of historical researches only two studies really offer much to the literary scholar — Annette Federico’s recent Idol of Suburbia (2000) and Bertha Vyver’s Memoirs of Marie Corelli (1930), the latter an insightful glimpse into her life by her companion. Vyver lived with Corelli until the writer’s death in 1924. Their relationship has been categorised variously as that of live-in companions or lovers, with Rita Felski suspecting that Corelli’s conspicuous descriptions of female beauty in her fiction are charged with new meaning in view of a possible romantic relationship (130). Their long intimacy makes Vyver the ideal biographer: whilst offering some interesting details of Corelli’s early life, Vyver explains that was difficult to put together an entirely accurate portrayal of the writer because she only kept fragmentary diaries and preserved few letters (7). Corelli’s literary career is also touched upon, especially her determined work ethic: “Marie was determined to succeed, and put her best into all she did with an intensity of purpose that was stimulating to watch” (47).

The years 1892–7 are considered to be her most productive and Corelli’s approach to literature could only be described as professional, as Vyver documents: “unlike many writers, Marie was scrupulously careful in the preparation of her manuscripts” (59). Indeed such careful and meticulous exertions also took their toll on Corelli’s health (62). For example:

the writing of The Sorrows of Satan had taxed Marie heavily—with imagination so developed as hers, she so often felt; and in this instance in particular, that her words had not done justice to her theme, and, when the manuscript had gone to the printer I found her sobbing in her study. ‘It is going to be a failure,’ she said (Vyver 137).

This personal evidence of the author’s relationship to her work is especially poignant when one takes into account that this particular novel went on to be of one the best-selling novels of the nineteenth century (Teresa Ransom 81). Sorrows also has its place in the history of popular literature because it was the first novel of which Corelli refused to send an advance copy to the reviewers. This defiant act did little to dampen its popularity.

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55 A ‘Special Notice’ on the manuscript reads: “No copies of this book are sent out for review. Members of the press will therefore obtain it (should they wish to do so) in the usual way with the rest of the public, i.e. through the Booksellers and Libraries.”
Corelli celebrated her relationship with the Victorian popular reading public despite critics’ disavowals of her work; her position in the ever widening gap between popular culture and high art in the late nineteenth century makes her a key figure in this thesis. Corelli wrote at a time when publishers were “keen to attract wider public appeal” (Teresa Ransom 80) and this shift in market conditions in the nineteenth century, to do with the availability and readership of fiction, allowed her to be a very successful author for much of her career. Corelli’s relationship to the Victorian book market is already reliably traced in Federico’s *Idol of Suburbia*, in which she labels her “a cultural icon and barometer of Victorian taste” (2).

She had, too, an uncanny propensity for self-marketing so as to expand her readership. In different archives I have found at least two instances of her writing letters to draw the recipients’ attention to one of her novels, or even to make contact with someone she thought might be influential. These little-known letters form the lens through which I wish to explore Corelli’s ‘best-selling aesthetics.’ In 1883 she wrote to Algernon Charles Swinburne in a “slight act of homage” to tell him that she honoured him as “the only truly great poet now living in England” (Corelli). She also included with this letter a spray of orange blossom from the grave of John Keats to accompany her homage. Later in her career Corelli wrote to Professor N.W. Sidgwick to alert him to the fact that her novel, *The Secret Power* (1921), demonstrated scientific theories of power that resembled his research. She enclosed a copy of the novel and urged him to “read the book patiently, and not despise it because its author is not of the ‘stronger sex.’” (Corelli). Sidgwick’s executor, Sir Keith Murray, noted in 1963 that he had come across an unopened parcel containing the book “with her blue pencil marginal markings of the parts she hoped and believed would interest him.” (Murray). Unfortunately, as Aitken later acknowledged, Sidgwick’s failure to unpack the parcel “was characteristic of serious people’s opinion of her” (Aitken), and by the end of her life, despite attempts to put her fiction in the hands of people she thought might help her career, Corelli’s books were considered out-of-date and had fallen out of favour with a twentieth-century readership.

The issue at stake here, however, is her 1890 novel and its contemporary popularity because it was a cutting-edge exploration of the matters of the day. Perhaps Corelli took her cue from a *Times* article in 1889 reporting that absinthe was a “powerful but destructive nerve stimulant” (“The Manufacturing of Absinthe In France”), or as Ransom has noted, perhaps her adoptive father, Charles Mackay’s, unpublished article on the dangers of absinthe was her

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56 Corelli and Swinburne were already acquainted from the time that he had admired her setting his poetry to music. However she must have changed her mind about the poet by the time she wrote *The Sorrows of Satan*, because Swinburne’s poetry is blamed for the heroine’s moral decline (325).
inspiration (58). The agreement to publish *Wormwood* was signed on 1 September 1890, despite the publisher’s misgivings about the novel’s content. According to Ransom: “the public read *Wormwood* with a horrified fascination and the November 1st edition was sold out in ten days” (59). The young aesthete-turned-absinthe-addict, Gaston Beauvais, and his horrific treatment of his unfaithful fiancée, Pauline de Charmilles, and her lover, Silvion Guidèl, captured the imagination of the Victorian reading public. The novel’s setting and circumstances allowed Corelli to address perceived social threats – in this case decadence, French culture and society’s turning away from religion – in a very self-righteous and condemning fashion.

-Decadent Aesthetics-

Corelli’s *Wormwood* is part of a continuity of discourse concerning decadence and degeneration that characterised fin-de-siècle Britain. Appearing in Britain in 1895, Max Nordau’s *Degeneration* captures something of that social anxiety. First published in German as *Entanrang* in 1892 and later translated into English, Nordau’s attack set the precedent for mis-conflating Aestheticism with decadence. Whereas recent re-readings and reinterpretations of the late nineteenth century now agree that the terms cannot be used interchangeably, Nordau’s argument, in which he mingles the two cultural movements under one chapter heading, is heavily dependent on contemporaneous confusion.57

What seems to offend Nordau most is the artifice of fin-de-siècle society, particularly the effect of art and aesthetics on everyday life. He accuses men in society of not “expressing their real idiosyncrasies” and “modelling themselves after some artistic pattern” (9). This impulse to emulate what is popular in art, while a description of a genuine behaviour to some extent, is useful in thinking about how Corelli’s novel fits within its own cultural landscape. *Wormwood* is characterised by a number of familiar themes and motifs of the decadent genre such as night-time, mystery, duality, desire and a fascination with death and the dead. The idea of absinthe is also a key trope in this creative era, especially in decadent poetry. One could be forgiven for thinking that Arthur Symons’s “The Absinthe Drinker” for example, with its hedonistic representation of the intoxicating effects of absinthe, is analogous with Gaston Beauvais’s absinthe-induced narrative. Symons’s poem appeared in 1892, a year after Corelli sent a copy of her novel to him.58 I am not trying to make a case for Symons’s

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57See Ruth Temple’s famous 1974 article which claims: “Aestheticism is not decadence. Aesthetes are by no means all decadents. Decadents are not necessarily aesthetes” (219).
58Symons’s letters show that the poet was quite surprised to receive a letter and copy of *Wormwood* from Corelli in 1891. He writes: “a letter has come from Marie Corelli saying that she is sending me one of her novels as ‘a tribute of’ etc. etc.!” (76).
replicating Corelli’s impressions of absinthe, but rather to claim that both texts are a product of their era. Prior to the 1890s there were also a number of French paintings that depicted absinthe culture with Edgar Degas, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Édouard Manet and Vincent Van Gogh being particular practitioners of this bohemian subject matter. Degas’s “L’Absinthe” (1875–6) (figure 5), in which two down-trodden figures are seated in a cafe with a glass of absinthe positioned on the table, was exhibited in London in 1893 and like Corelli’s novel, caused much ‘furore,’ the assumption being that absinthe is the reason the two figures appear as wretched as they do. While Walter Crane commended its artistic merits: “here is a study of human degradation, male and female, presented with extraordinary insight and graphic skill” (“The New Art Criticism”), the painting also provoked numerous meditations about what was appropriate subject matter in art, with one reviewer commenting: “[if you] have been taught to think that a dignity of subject and the endeavour to portray a thing of beauty are of the essence of art, you will never be induced to consider ‘L’Absinthe’ a work of art” (“The Philistine”).

Despite its reputation as an anti-decadent text Corelli’s novel is, as Annette Federico pronounces, “completely dependent on decadent tropes” (72). Gaston is not simply an absinthe addict, he is a degenerate creature of the night, and his fleeting encounters, troubled conscience and a “deadly fascination” (69) – in this novel an obsession with the deceased – make him a representative decadent ‘hero.’ If, as Ian Fletcher notes, “the crucial distinguishing feature of the Decadent is the nature of his retreat from reality” (28), then Gaston’s descent into the underworld of absinthe culture fits within this demarcation. The motivation that is behind his need to write such a narrative is characterised as a desire to “write the history of my life and thought; to strip my soul naked, as it were to the world’s contempt” (Corelli 75), which is revealing of self-consciously decadent tendencies that mimic the style of late nineteenth-century French writers such as Joris-Karl Huysmans or Paul Verlaine.\(^59\)

*Wormwood* opens with a mysterious narrator looking out over the river Seine in the middle of the night. Immediately it is a recognisably French urban setting and the narrator plays on this particular European city’s association with vice and immorality via its lively night life. He observes: “Paris is not so clean of conscience or so pure of heart that its inhabitants should compose themselves to rest simply because it is midnight” (69). Corelli’s engagement with the discourse of Francophobia, as Kirsten MacLeod points out, is in line

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\(^59\) French ‘Symbolism,’ the literary genre to which these writers subscribed to was evident as early as the 1860s. Although it has been conflated with decadence for its espousal of similar themes of immorality, sexuality and self-destruction the two styles belong to their respective countries of origin, France and Britain.
with the British viewpoint on France at the fin de siècle which “permeated a number of popular discourses and was strongly linked to many Britons’ fears of national and cultural decline” (“Marie Corelli and Fin-de Siècle Francophobia” 79). The narrator deliberately positions himself within this context of vice and ruin, calling himself “a wreck cast on the shores of vice” (70). Thus, Corelli establishes early the cautionary tale element of this narrative, and calls into question the reliability of her narrator. J. Barrow Allen, a reviewer at the time, noted: “Gaston Beauvais, the victim of absinthe, who relates with a fiendish sort of pride the stages of his ever-increasing brutalisation that mark his downward career, ought to be sufficiently terrible to banish all inclination for indulgence in the vice” (379).

A decadent aspect of the text as it relates to the wider concerns of my examination of Aestheticism is the aestheticising of the dead female body. Gaston’s proclivity for morbid fascination is announced in the opening lines of the novel. Gazing down into the ‘cold sparkling water of the Seine’ Gaston sees the faces of dead people: “—water that to my mind, resembles a glittering glass screen, through which I can see faces peering up at me, white and aghast with frozen wonder? How they stare, how they smile, all those drowned women and men! Some are beautiful, all are mournful” (69). In this uncanny introduction to the novel Corelli also sets the tone for what is to follow. The River Seine in fact becomes an accomplice to Gaston’s crimes by washing away his association with the corpses of Silvion and Pauline.

While Gaston finds no trace of beauty in Silvion’s distorted features post-mortem (244, 261–3), Pauline in the morgue, the ultimate passive object, permits an aesthetic viewing. Referring specifically to the magically preserved and displayed body of Snow White, Elizabeth Bronfen writes: “this representation of an arrestation of/by death illustrates how the aestheticisation of a woman’s dead body serves to repress the so-called ‘destructive’ forces of nature. It elicits and allows a kind of spectatorship” (102–3). Equally Bronfen’s argument applies to the moment where Gaston sees the body of Pauline in the morgue. After Pauline’s death, Gaston awaits her arrival there until he is rewarded by seeing “the fair, soft, white body of the woman I had loved and hated and maddened and driven to her death, laid out on the dull hard slab of stone like a beautiful figure of frozen snow” (337). In some ways this description does indeed play with the conventions of the Snow White story in that the beautiful, serene, pale, dead woman is exposed to public view behind a glass screen. As a dead body Pauline is also subjected to the erotic touch of the river which has preserved her beauty, “caressed her gently” (337) and “fondled her!—had stroked her cheeks” (338). Gaston, too, is complicit in the eroticising of this corpse; his gaze takes in “every detail of that delicate, half-nude form” (338), blaming what Bronfen refers to as “the aberrant fascination for the preserved body” (338) on his absinthe-influenced senses. Likewise the mortuary
attendant finds pleasure in gazing at the beautiful female form and admits to Gaston: “This girl-suicide is as beautiful as you say,—I have contemplated her face and figure with much pleasure” (340).

In attempting to disguise his decadent sexual deviance, Gaston exhibits, to all intents and purposes, the refined judgment of an aesthete. He is at once enthralled and agitated by Pauline’s preserved condition to the point where his conduct attracts suspicion. Gaston denies ‘knowing the corpse’ and proclaims that his interest is purely aesthetic: “The girl, though dead, is beautiful! I am an artist! I have the soul of a poet!’ and I laughed ironically. ‘I love beauty—and I study it wherever I find it, dead or living,—is that so strange?’”(339). In amongst the other “morbid spectators” (337), Gaston’s presence in the morgue is not unusual – he had in fact visited it earlier with the artist Andre Gessonex to find sources of artistic inspiration – so that the novel turns death into a spectacle to be publicly witnessed, an activity that produces a similar aesthetic effect to going to an art exhibition; death has made of Pauline “so wondrous and piteous a picture” (338).

Perhaps the most powerful aesthetic element of this scene is the fact that Pauline is compared to Ophelia — Gaston refers to her receiving an honourable burial like “Shakespeare’s Ophelia” (338). Evident literary allusions aside, Pauline’s death by drowning, and the image of her lying on the marble table, having been treated gently by the river, recalls a quintessential Pre-Raphaelite work of art, John Everett Millais’s “Ophelia”60 (figure 1). Painted between 1851–2, and exhibited at the Royal Academy, it was inspired by Queen Gertrude’s description of Ophelia’s death in Hamlet. Corelli’s suggestion of the painting differs from Broughton’s earlier use of it to represent her heroine as a Pre-Raphaelite stunner. Both Corelli’s novel and Millais’s painting in their depictions of a deceased woman seem to capture a moment in time, besides recording a moment of great beauty. The inner life of the heroine is completely nullified so that the celebration of female beauty directly corresponds with her complete static objectification. In Wormwood I believe Corelli achieves something similar to visual art in her ability to create a scene that takes on the qualities of a painting.

Whereas Gaston’s feelings towards Pauline’s cadaver are a mixture of attraction and repulsion, in his later perception of Héloïse’s dead body he relies on religious aesthetic

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60 Corelli demonstrates her awareness of Millais’s art five years later in The Sorrows of Satan, whereby Geoffrey Tempest proclaims: “I am one of those who think the fame of Millais as an artist was marred when he degraded himself to the level of painting the little green boy blowing bubbles of Pears’ soap. That was an advertisement. And that very incident in his career, trifling though it seems, will prevent his ever standing on the same dignified height of distinction with such masters in art as Romney, Sir Peter Lely, Gainsborough, and Reynolds (80–1). Such an accusation resulted in Millais writing to Corelli to defend himself, to which Corelli replied: “It is out of the high and faithful admiration I have for you as a king among English painters, that I get inwardly wrathful whenever I think of your “Bubbles” in the hands of Pears as a soap-advertisement” (190). Millais’s son, John Guile Millais, adds, that Corelli’s apology was ‘heartily accepted’ — the offending passage was removed from subsequent editions of the novel and Corelli became a friend of the Millais family (191).
language, which I will clarify in the subsequent section. Indeed his artistic sensibility and idealised vision of femininity is restored in his description of Héloïse on her funeral bed:

I gazed distractedly upon that maiden image of sweet wisdom and repose; the loose gold hair, unbound to its full rippling length, caught flickers from the sunlight through the window-pane,—the fringed white eyelids fast closed in eternal sleep were delicately indented as though some angel’s finger-tips had passed them down caressingly,—the waxen hands were folded meekly across the bosom, where a knot of virgin lilies wept out fragrance in lieu of tears.

Dead—dead! (359).

In this image created by superfluous language of purity and passive femininity, Héloïse is reduced to an object with all the markers that signify death. Moreover, from her closed eyelids and her folded hands, to the accumulated pattern of religious imagery, the genuine pathos attributed to Héloïse’s aesthetic state undercuts Gaston’s earlier decadent fascination with death.

-The Male Experience of Female Beauty-

Wormwood is unique in this thesis in that it presents a first-person narrative from a male persona. Compared to Cometh Up as a Flower with its first-person female narration or the detached narrators of The Egoist and Moths the female author cross-writing as a male persona offers a new kind of analysis. As Rita Felski makes clear, the male narrator allows for “greater narrative licence to explore the erotically thrilling dimensions of feminine beauty than would otherwise have been possible” (131). I shall now interrogate how this aspect of the text comes to shape the experience of female beauty in relation to the wider concerns of my research. Gaston’s apprehension of both Pauline and Héloïse mediates between aesthetic and religious discourse and both strands are worthy of investigation. I will focus first on Pauline before turning to Héloïse.

One of the defining features of the novel is Gaston’s preoccupation with Pauline. His somewhat ‘hazy’ first impression of her is as follows:

The Swiss wild-roses had left their delicate hues on her cheeks, the Alpine blue gentians had lost their little hearts in her eyes. She was dressed that night in quaint Empire fashion—^a simple garb of purest white silk, with a broad sash

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61 In this image, Pauline cuts what is a called an ‘empire’ silhouette — in this case a variation on ‘artistic’ dress. The term is still used today to describe dresses that are cinched just under the bust line. Here the word ‘Empire’ refers to the period of the First French Empire. Such fashions were embraced during the Aesthetic movement in its drawing inspiration from medieval and classical styles. Gaston compromises the fashionability of Pauline’s dress by describing it as ‘quaint’ as if her style is outdated.
drawn closely under the bosom—her rich curls of dark brown hair were caught
up in high masses and tied with a golden ribbon (79).

Understood in this passage, too, via its stylisation is the heroine’s classical beauty, especially
via the clichés concerning nature and whiteness. Pauline’s association with the Swiss Alps
likewise calls to mind the descriptions of Clara in The Egoist and Vere in Moths. Gaston
subjects Pauline to his gaze, which is thinly veiled in his narrative as an artistic endeavour: “I
had been absorbed in a fascinated study of her eyes, her hair, her pretty figure, her small
hand” (80). While such a fragmentary picture of the object of his affection would not be at
odds with Victorian literary convention, his next euphemistic thought — “that she is fresh as a
flower just bursting into bloom” and “that she has no idea of the power of her own beauty to
rouse the passions of men” (80) is somewhat more threatening. Gaston takes on the same role
as Willoughby, or Zouroff in his glorification of female purity. After what he thinks is his
securing of Pauline via the terms of their engagement, he becomes more and more infatuated
with her. Correspondingly his behaviour towards her becomes more and more physical and he
blames this on her beauty: “she looked so ravishingly pretty and enchanting that I was about
to snatch her in my arms and kiss her again and yet again” (99). The implications of sexual
violence are somewhat dampened here since Pauline’s mother walks in on the couple and
“glances smilingly” at them (99). However, I believe this is still a latent part of Corelli’s text,
and becomes foregrounded as Gaston’s behaviour worsens.

While deriding Pauline and other women for being influenced by Silvion’s beauty,
Gaston, himself, provides evidence of his own superficiality. In a diatribe on his idea of an
ideal wife he admits: “Men never fall in love at first with a woman’s mind; only with her
body. They may learn to admire the mind afterwards, if it prove worth admiration, but it is
always a secondary thing” (83). The line, ‘if it prove worth admiration’ is the crux here
because Gaston clearly only thinks of Pauline as a shell. At this stage of the novel he has
given as little thought to her inner life as he has fully “studied every detail of her loveliness”
(83). This comes after he has admitted that Pauline’s beauty is what allures him, but it also
comes before he acknowledges his attraction towards Héloïse, a character who possesses
beauty, intelligence and talent. Her “soft, serious eyes” (83) which seem to represent her inner
life and intelligence in this context, haunt him and provoke a different kind of aesthetic
reaction as I will soon illustrate.

Gaston’s preference for the external rather than the interior is articulated not long after he
acknowledges: “practical-utility persons were never attractive to me” (85). This declaration is
not indicative solely of his preference for female beauty, but also of his aesthetic tendencies,
for the central ‘art for art’s sake’ tenet of the Aesthetic Movement clearly devalues the
usefulness of art objects and esteems instead ornamental value. In *Wormwood* part of the narrator’s enjoyment of his betrothed’s beauty relates to his infantilisation of her. Pauline is eighteen years old, and, according to Gaston, child-like in her physical appearance and demeanour (80). Her “youthful grace” and “child-like rapture and enthusiasm” (135) are what make her a candidate for Gaston’s affections in the first place and continue to delight him in their engagement. This attitude culminates in a disconcerting image where Gaston instructs his fiancée to come to him and sits her, “like a little child on [his] knee” (136). Gaston’s fascination with Pauline’s infantile qualities is also important in the narrative in that it almost leads him to forgive her for falling in love with Silvion. He tells the reader:

> Poor little child!—for she was not much more than a child;—and thinking of her youth, her impulsiveness, and her unutterable misery, my heart softened more and more towards her. She loved Silvion Guidèl – Silvion Guidèl loved her;—they were both young, both beautiful,—they had not been strong enough to resist the insidious attraction of each other’s fairness (156).

Pauline’s offence can almost be attributed to this childish ‘behaviour’ and Gaston tries to make the reader think that forgiveness would have been the path he would have chosen had it not been for the intervention of absinthe. Talia Schaffer points out the weakness of this claim, arguing that “it is very much in Gaston’s interest to present himself as a good man suddenly possessed by a malevolent spirit external to himself” (“Modernist Mental States” par. 8).

From then on, Gaston’s experience of Pauline’s beauty is bound up with his deterioration into decadence. While absinthe affects his personal relationships and behaviour it appears to heighten his aesthetic awareness. Specifically, it also gives him a more critical eye with regard to Pauline. Pauline’s admission of her secret love affair is the main impetus for his change of affections, and consequently Gaston’s gaze becomes more and more critical of her. For example, Pauline’s “deliriously brilliant” eyes and her “unnaturally scarlet” lips, evidence of her emotional turmoil, become almost repulsive to Gaston (187). At the same time, his aversion to Pauline becomes more and more noticeable, to the point where her beauty leaves him “cold as ice” (191). Gaston expresses this feeling, which he attributes to the work of absinthe: “curious and significant too, among my other sensations was the dull aversion I had taken to the always fair, though now sorrowful face of Pauline” (199). Just as Gaston’s experience of absinthe is very much grounded in his sensations, in his growing cynicism about the world (175), he begins to feel that female beauty is a superficial quality. While he still recognises Pauline’s beauty, it does not have the same aesthetic impact on him any more because it is not grounded in anything meaningful. He studies her features “with a cold scrutiny” (201) and he sees her outward expressions of anguish as being superficial and
affected: “she seemed to me to have merely the stagey sentiment of the French melodramatic heroine” (200), to which he adds: “it was in this particular phase of her character that she had grown hateful to me,—while her physical beauty remained what it always had been in my eyes,—exquisitely captivating to the senses, and irresistibly adorable” (200). The experience of female beauty, in other words, is fundamentally altered by Gaston’s addiction to absinthe and the realisation that Pauline no longer loves him.

Noticeably, Gaston’s public humiliation of Pauline occurs within moments of his meditation on the power of female beauty. In fact it seems to strengthen his resolve, surely to act against Pauline. He affirms: “a curse, I thought on all such haughty, beautiful women who dare to wound with a glance, and slay with a smile! Let them learn to suffer as they make men suffer! —nothing less will bring down their wantonness or impress upon their arrogant natures the value of humanity” (209). Of course, it is Héloïse that incites such a meditation from him, but it would not be too much of a stretch to suppose that he is really referring to Pauline. Thus, he sees his revenge as an act of honour in that he is teaching womankind a lesson. He justifies his cruelty by envisioning himself as a sort of moral crusader, which is ironic given that the narrative is written after his descent into absinthism and his own immoral deeds. As Sharon Crozier-de Rosa notes, “a very Christian-centred notion of spirituality is never far from the surface in Corelli’s highly didactic writing” (229), and thus the presence of religion is mentioned in most Corellian biographical and literary studies. On a closer inspection of *Wormwood* religious themes are prevalent especially concerning Gaston and his moral choices. In the opening chapter, Gaston puts forward his denial of the existence of God and he sets this in the context of the age in that “we need not trouble ourselves with God anymore” (71). Yet there are religious motifs and imagery in the way he aestheticises women.

The imagery surrounding his feeling of simulated religious ecstasy is evident in language he uses to describe Pauline, at least at the beginning of their relationship. She is referred to by Gaston as a “little angel-harp” (118), a “little Sainte Vierge” (131), and a “veiled woman” (143). Her sweet blue eyes are “heaven’s own light to his soul” (139), while she is faithful to Gaston, but when he learns of her love for Silvion she instead becomes a “broken angel in a ruined shrine” (191). Such a heavy-handed treatment of Pauline’s indiscretion is what may have annoyed Corelli’s critics, and unfortunately it is not the only marked example of Gaston’s observation of her. At an early point he has spelt out to readers that in his eyes she has changed from “a playful pretty trifler” to a “wild tragedy queen” (148). The language in both instances relates to a loss of innocence. Pauline’s virginal purity is compromised by her desire and passion for Silvion.
Instead Héloïse, Pauline’s cousin, comes to stand for Gaston as the image of ideal femininity. Part of the narrative trajectory of *Wormwood* tracks Gaston’s growing attraction to and idealisation of Héloïse. Despite Gaston’s admission that he “hate[s] golden-haired women” (84), he cannot help but study the “abundant locks of Héloïse” which are, in his words, “a matchless hue; a singularly pale gold, brightening here and there into flecks of reddish auburn close to the smooth nape of her neck” (84). Perhaps even more incriminating as to his true attraction to Héloïse is the fact that he “often caught [him]self staring at these little warm rings of colour on the milky whiteness of her skin” (84). Yet again, Gaston proves himself an unreliable narrator in that he says one thing but his actions reveal a deeper truth.

In another peculiar moment, especially considering he is about to engage himself to a girl whose beauty engrosses him, he finds himself acknowledging Héloïse’s unique beauty. Gaston’s experiences of Héloïse’s beauty are often compounded by other aesthetic circumstances, mostly through her exceptional playing of the violin. The music, combined with her beauty, provides a heightened aesthetic experience for him. I quote the first of the instances at length:

I listened amazed and entranced; it was a violin that discoursed such a wild melody; someone was playing it with so much verve and and fire and feeling, that it seemed as though every throbbing note were a burning thing alive, with wings to carry it to and fro in the air for ever. I pushed open the door of the drawing room suddenly, and stared at its solitary inmate dumbfounded; why it was that pale and quiet Héloïse St. Cyr who stood there, her bow lifted, her features alight with enthusiasm, her bright hair ruffled, and her large eyes ablaze! What a face! What an attitude! She was actually beautiful, this woman, and I had never perceived it before! (93).

Standing in the drawing room, Héloïse could have stepped straight out of one of Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s paintings. In fact two particular works of his come to mind when I read this scene — “The Blue Bower” (1865) (figure 6) and “The Garland (La Ghirlandata)” (1873) (figure 7). In both images Rossetti depicts an instrument (a Japanese koto and a harp) to represent music, a recognisable symbol for love. Furthermore the images of both women are pale and red-headed. We already know that Héloïse has an abundance of golden red-hair so it cannot be a coincidence that she resembles the women in both of Rossetti’s paintings.

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62 Her musical talent denotes Corelli’s shared ideas with her heroine.
63 Although I cannot find evidence of Corelli’s engagement with Rossetti’s work specifically at this time, two years after *Wormwood* was published she wrote another novel, *The Soul of Lilith*, which has an opening inscription of a line from Rossetti’s poem, “Eden’s Bower” (1868), which reads: “Not a drop of her blood was human, But she was made like a soft sweet woman.”
Gaston fortifies this image later when he watches Héloïse, playing in front of an audience this time, noting, “while she played she was a fit study for an artist” (108). Corelli captures the sexual allure and dynamism of Héloïse, as well as the more artistic stillness:

[Héloïse] stood within the arched embrasure of the window, where the fall of the close-drawn rose-silken curtains provided a lustrous background for her figure; clad in a plain straight white gown, without a flower to relieve its classical severity, her rounded arm had a snowy gleam, like that of marble, contrasted with the golden-brown hue of her Amati violin (108).

Here, I believe Corelli is also drawing on Aestheticist artistic conventions. The figure of the woman clad in classical attire is naturally framed within the window. Gaston’s aesthetic eye is able to translate the artistry of this experience. It is both aural and visual and again captures something of the symbiotic relationship of earlier Pre-Raphaelite imagery and verse as it captures a moment in time. Another painting comes to mind — Rossetti’s “Veronica Veronese” (1872) (figure 8). Again, a flame-haired woman is playing a musical instrument and the ‘lustrous’ background behind her resembles the backgrounds of many paintings associated with the movement. Corelli is able to encode cultural messages of aestheticised femininity in her novel for the painting was prominent enough for her readership to be aware of it.64 The focalised object (in this case a violin) acts as an extension of the female subject and not only connotes the traditional metaphor of love but endows her with artistic ability. “Veronica Veronese” is strikingly similar to Corelli’s image of Héloïse with their respective violins and ‘lustrous’ backgrounds. Rossetti himself noted: “the girl is in a sort of passionate reverie and is drawing her hand listlessly along the strings of a violin which hangs against the wall, while she holds the bow with the other hand, as if arrested by thought at the moment when she was about to play” (“To Frederick Richards Leyland” 228). What is even more remarkable about this painting is that later Rossetti wrote to his patron, advising: “I mean to call the violin picture ‘Veronica Veronese’ which sounds like the name of a musical genius” (“To Frederick Richards Leyland” 236). Rossetti’s conceptualisation of his work expediently corresponds with Gaston’s image of Héloïse.

However, Aestheticist conventions are not the only conditions under which Héloïse is aestheticised. Gaston begins progressively to hold up Héloïse as the image of an ideal woman for her beauty and wisdom, “a vision of a pure, pale, proud face, set like a classical cameo, in a frame of golden hair, and lightened into life by the steady brilliancy of two calm star-

64 Vernon Lee viewed the painting in London in 1883 when it was exhibited at the Royal Academy in London. (Giuliana Pieri 35). The painting was also reviewed by Frederic George Stephens in 1875 in the Athenaeum.
splendid eyes, flashed suddenly across [his] mind” (169). While the reader is already aware that Gaston is attracted to Héloïse, he only admits to it mid-way though the narrative. He confesses:

For she was beautiful,—I who had formerly been loth to admit this, acknowledged it at last. There was more colour in her face,—and she possessed a tranquil, almost imperial stateliness of manner that was singularly attractive. My gaze dwelt upon her with a sort of fascination (188).

Unfortunately, his ‘open admiration’ (189) of Héloïse is socially inappropriate in the context of his engagement to Pauline. He takes this social impropriety further by taking a devilish delight in her embarrassed reaction to his gaze and touch: “I saw the colour rush over her fair pale cheeks like a sudden glow of sunset on alabaster! I suppose it must have been the growing devil within me” (196). Notwithstanding Gaston’s fiendish behaviour, this is the second time that he has aestheticised Héloïse for the striking contrast of her reddened cheeks with her pale skin. This kind of female beauty is unlike the women of paintings I have mentioned, seen in their static moments; Corelli gives Héloïse an even more dynamic form of beauty.

While Gaston’s Aestheticism descends into decadence, Héloïse is perhaps the true aesthete of the novel. In the first instance her clothing is carefully chosen and aesthetically appropriate.65 She is also a talented musician. When she begins lessons with a ‘great violinist’ Gaston observes: “she was straightaway drawn into an artistic musical circle which was considerably divided from ours” (199). Insofar as Aestheticism generates ideas of collective experience of beauty, and groups of like-minded individuals that subscribed to its principles, then Héloïse fits the profile of an aesthete. Thus, Corelli gives a much more rounded portrait of her than of Pauline who is more closely associated with physical beauty and surfaces. In addition Gaston attempts to assure the reader that his growing interest in Héloïse is a different kind of attraction than what sparked his original interest in Pauline: “it was only the indefinable attraction of her personality that overpowered my senses” (204). As opposed to the physical desire and sense of ownership that defines his relationship with Pauline, upon learning of Héloïse’s former love for him, he contextualises their relationship by way of a trope from romantic fiction: “we two had always been on the verge of love unknowingly,—and yet, by reason of something in ourselves that refused to yield to the attraction of each other’s presence, and something in the whim of chance and circumstance, we had wilfully let

65 Published in 1878, Mary Haweis’s The Art of Beauty encouraged women to dress in accordance with the elevated principles of art: “In modern days—so far removed from those when dress was regarded as a mere covering, and aspired to be no more. . . we no longer look upon a gown as a shield against wintry cold, or a modest veil drawn between ourselves and the outer world. We expect it to be a work of art” (11–12).
love go beyond all possible recall!” (310). In effect Gaston idealises his ill-fated union with Héloïse and does not take any responsibility for its not being successfully carried out.

We really cannot take Gaston at his word that it is Héloïse’s personality that attracts him, when he devotes so much space to describing her physical beauty. As I have already noted, his perceptions of Héloïse are highly artistic and draw on known creative forms such as painting, jewellery, and sculpture. His absinthe-affected brain leads him to have hallucinations; for example when Gaston comes “upon what at first seemed like a picture of a woman reading,—till at last it resolved itself into substantial fact and form” (302) he realises that this image is actually Héloïse. Corelli reverses the process of painting from life as Gaston studies her from a distance, noting her face, form, her background and her attitude; the moment fills him with “a sense of sudden awe” (302) in the same way that observing a painting might have a similar aesthetic effect.

Gaston, then, in addition to gaining a subliminal experience from absinthe, transfers his attention to Héloïse and the spiritual effect she provokes in him. Gaston’s interest in Héloïse is almost prefigured by Pauline’s measured description of her cousin. I am not completely sure what Corelli is trying to do here, but given that Pauline later asks to be released from their engagement, there is a possibility that she is deliberately trying to turn Gaston’s attention to her cousin so that he will not be so affected by the disintegration of their engagement. The reason that this aspect is ambiguous, again, is that it is Gaston’s personal narrative and we cannot be sure of the truth in his recollections of exchanges with other characters. Nevertheless I reproduce Pauline’s description here because it is useful to think about in terms of the relationship between the two women. Apparently she remarks:

It is beautiful to see her face looking as pure and sweet as an angel’s!—and her lovely closed eyelids just like shut-up shells,—and she has such long lashes, Gaston!—longer than mine! She reminds me of a picture that used to hang in one of the chapels at the convent of the Sacré Cœur,—Santa Filomena it was, crowned with thorns and lilies (137).

Given the nature of the narrative, the reader already has some indication that something is awry with Pauline and this moment perhaps indicates that she has a sense of guilt for some unnamed thing. Adopting a strategy of diversion, Pauline seeks to transfer Gaston’s notice to her cousin in an attempt to conceal her guilty conscience.

Upon seeing Héloïse not long after Pauline’s later confession of her love for Silvion it is obvious that Gaston has shifted attention to her, becoming “spiritually dazzled” by her beauty (190). That Gaston transfers his heavenly desire to Héloïse is significant. He regrets not yielding “to the fiery impulse” (190). Despite his declaration being spiritual on the surface it
does not disguise his obvious physical desire for Héloïse, where his ‘fiery impulse’ is more likely to be of a sexual nature, than the divine impulse he attempts to communicate: “I should have clasped that fair angelic woman in my arms and called her love, salvation, hope, rescue!” (190–1). The physicality of this statement is clear and very similar to Gaston’s earlier encounters with Pauline, where he effectively worshipped her (91) to the point where it becomes obvious that it is a disguised physical lust — his impetus to be engaged to her arises from the desire to “clasp [his] darling in his arms unreproved” and to “kiss those soft sweet lips” (91). Such a desire is made all the more sinister when one considers his earlier admission that he is “mad with a passion of longing that [he] could hardly restrain—a passion that consumed [him] hotly like a fever” (86). In the end it is the ‘mad’ nature of his love for Pauline that leads him down the wrong moral path — he tries to make an argument that his cruel behaviour is a manifestation of his love for Pauline:

‘Love her!’ I cried, ‘I loved her with such a passion as she never knew! I hallowed her with worship such as she never dreamt of! She was everything to me—life, soul, hope, salvation!—and you ask me if I loved her! Oh, foolish woman! you cannot measure the love I had for her! such love that once betrayed, must and ever will, turn to loathing for its betrayer!’ (220).

The fact that he uses virtually the same words to describe his past love for Pauline as his future desire for Héloïse — ‘love, salvation, hope, rescue’ versus ‘life, soul, hope, salvation’ — is evidence of his duplication of feelings. Héloïse is the one to point out to Gaston that his worshipping of women is selfish and artificial: “Such love is not love at all!” she said. “It is selfishness;—no more!” (220).

This accusation is in keeping with the novel’s earlier episodes that conflate women’s beauty with religion. Moving beyond Gaston’s experience alone, one factor that unites him and Silvion is that they both experience female beauty via a projection of religion. Silvion is complimentary towards Gaston’s new fiancée, describing her as “‘some fair saint in a sculptured niche where the light falls through rose-coloured windows’” and “‘the very model of what we might imagine Our Lady to have been before the Annunciation’” (104). Silvion’s description is both religious and aesthetic and calls to mind Renaissance paintings such as Raphael’s “The Annunciation” (1503–4) or Sandro Botticelli’s “Annunciation” (1489–90) or “Annunciation” by Luca Signorelli (1491), all three of which depict the Virgin Mary posing amongst similarly sculptured domestic interiors and washed in a rosy glow.66 It is quite safe to

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66 Alison Brown writes: “the Annunciation was another monotonous theme transformed by Renaissance innovation” (191), while Lene Østermark-Johansen points out that the Renaissance Period emerged as a historical construct at the beginning of the nineteenth century and since then had been a subject of fascination and critical enquiry (1).
assume that Corelli’s readers would be aware of such works. Both Walter Pater’s *The Renaissance*, (1873) John Symonds’s *The Renaissance in Italy* (1875–1886), along with photographic reproductions67 of various famous works being in circulation, contributed to the burgeoning Victorian interest in the Renaissance arts. Also significant is that Silvion is referred to twice in the novel by Gaston as being “Raphaelle-like” (327, 207) in that his face has such awe-inspiring beauty that he comes across himself as being a subject from one of Raphael’s paintings.

In his conversation with Gaston, Silvion imbues beauty with religious value, calmly asserting: “the beauty of women is one of the gifts of God to gladden our eyes;—it is not to be rejected or deemed unsacred. I should love to preach of beautiful women! they are the reflexes of beautiful souls!” (104–5). Silvion’s religious homily could be said to justify Gaston’s feelings towards both Héloïse and Pauline but Corelli highlights Silvion’s naivety through Gaston: “there are lovely women at the cafes-chantants . . . who possess not a shred of characters, and who have been veritable harpies of vice from their earliest years” (105). The same kind of discourse about women’s immorality emerges in Corelli’s other writing, so that Gaston can be treated as a spokesperson for the writer at this point. Corelli’s sentiments, here, are repeated in *The Sorrows of Satan*, whereby the beautiful female turns out to be adulterous and contaminated. Equally under scrutiny in *Wormwood* is that the worship of a fiancée’s beauty is not a sound foundation for a successful marriage.

The moralistic tone of Corelli’s opinion about Victorian marriage arrangements, a theme to which I will return shortly, infuses the relationship between beauty, marriage and religion when Gaston and Pauline discuss worship from male and female perspectives. Gaston labouredly exploits the literary convention of foreshadowing when he patronisingly explains (to both Pauline and the reader): “‘worship is a strong word, my sweetest,’ I replied. ‘It is for me to worship! Not for you! And I do worship the fairest angel under heaven’” (106), after which he says to the reader: “I remembered her words afterwards—afterwards, when I learnt the fact that a woman can indeed ‘worship’ a man with such an idolatrous fervour, that she will allow herself to be set down in the dust of contempt for his sake, aye!” (107). The

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67 Due to the development of photography and other means of reproduction, the Victorian period was saturated with prints and paintings. The invention of the specific process in the early nineteenth century is generally attributed to Thomas Wedgwood and Sir Humphrey Davy and the actual process of reproducing works of art via a solution of nitrate spread on white paper or leather is explained by Davy and Wedgwood in their 1802 article, “An Account of a Method of Copying Paintings upon Glass, and of Making Profiles by the Agency of Light upon Nitrate of Silver”: For copying paintings on glass, the solution should be applied on leather; and in this case it is more readily acted on than when paper is used. After the colour has been once fixed on leather or paper, it cannot be removed by the application of water, or water and soap, and it is in a high degree permanent (quoted in John Werge 7–8).
worship of another is actually shown to be an irreligious experience, not to mention unnatural. In spite of this conventional theme, *Wormwood*, also offers an innovative vision of male beauty, one that is made even more complex by the fact that it is a female author cross-writing as a male persona.

-Masculine Beauty-

In my last chapter I touched briefly on the subject of male beauty as it related to Ouida’s heroine’s response to Corrèze. In this chapter I want to extend this idea further because it is such a prevalent theme in Corelli’s novel. In *Wormwood* the extensive descriptions of male beauty are concentrated around one character, Silvion Guidèl. We first learn of Silvion’s existence through his uncle, who describes him as being: “an intellectual marvel; a positive prodigy of good looks and wisdom combined” (90). Although this view is actually recounted from a mother’s perspective, given our prior knowledge of the narrator’s unreliability, such a combination of attributes would signal that Silvion is the real hero of this narrative.

Within the space of ten pages, Silvion makes his first entrance into the novel and it is indeed a marked occurrence. Gaston is almost stunned by Silvion’s physical appearance and subjects him to the same kind of visual survey that he has already imposed upon Pauline. Silvion’s presence is ‘astonishing and bewildering’ because that was the first effect his singular beauty made upon the most prejudiced and casual observer. It was not that he was in the first flush of youth, and that his features still had all the fine transparency and glow of boyhood upon them; it was not that his eyes, grey-black and fiery, seemed full of some potent magnetic force which compelled the beholder’s fascinated gaze; no; it was the expression on the whole countenance that was so extraordinarily interesting; an expression such as an inspired painter might strive to convey into the visage of some ideal seraph of patience and wisdom supernal (100–1).

Although Gaston attempts to conceal his homo-erotically charged appreciation of Silvion within the language of painting and art, his response to the young man’s beauty is laden with erotic meaning and is decipherable as an intrinsically gratifying discourse, and I will pursue this idea further on. Gaston’s next description of Silvion reinforces the sense that he is the novel’s true hero. We are aware that his magnificent eyes have “the expression of a rapt saint” (103), so when Gaston describes his countenance as being “like that of a pleading angel” (104), the reader is already prepared to accept Silvion under these divine terms. This powerful image is further substantiated when Silvion himself remarks that Pauline is “like some fair saint in a sculptured niche” (104). The reader cannot help but speculate that Silvion is the
better partner for Pauline since the language of the complementarity of the sexes surrounds these two characters.

It is significant that later in the novel, Silvion’s beauty turns from being angelic, to accursed (179) and Gaston becomes aware of the fact that his jealousy is obvious. Margot, the housekeeper where Silvion is staying, says to Gaston: “try not to be jealous of young men whom God has made better-looking than yourself!” (179). Such a reprimand leads Gaston to meditate about the mutual attraction between men and women. Of course, we are already aware that Gaston’s idea of love and attraction is one-sided, and he believes women are incapable of the same kind of worship as men. Interestingly he expresses his distaste for mutual attraction by drawing on animalistic imagery:

Physical perfection generally enchains us far more than mental,—as the tiger paces round his mate attracted by her sinuous form, her velvety skin, and fiery eyes, so we court and ogle the woman whose body seems to us the fairest,—so women, in their turn, cast amorous eyes at him whose strength seems the best comparison to their weakness (179).

In this passage Gaston is really showing his unreliability as a narrator since it was not that long ago in the narrative that he ‘courted’ and ‘ogled’ Pauline. What makes this description even more remarkable as a cross-written moment is that Gaston is most offended by the fact that women seem to be influenced by men’s physical appearance, especially Silvion’s.

During Gaston’s final meeting with Silvion he is struck by how his beauty is only heightened in the moonlight: “the wonderful spiritual beauty of his face was intensified by the moon’s yellow lustre” (237). The decadent coding in this moment is implied through the references to beauty, the night, and the colour yellow. The two men struggle with each other and Silvion incites Gaston’s rage by telling him: “‘for my darling never loved you! Your touch never wakened in her one responsive throb of passion’” (239). Because Gaston suffers from delusional episodes it is unclear whether Silvion actually says this. His unreliability as a narrator leaves this moment open to our reading and it is more likely that Gaston invents such details as justification for what happens next. Eventually Gaston is incensed enough to murder Silvion and he does it in a manner that is suggestive of a crime of passion; his two hands “were closed fast on that smooth, full, tempting throat” (241). The word ‘tempting’ is particularly evocative when it is combined with Silvion’s throat for its connotations of feminine vulnerability.

Finally, after his climactic murderous act in which he “presses all [his] weight upon the swelled and throbbing arteries” (241), Gaston is able to effectively purge Silvion’s beauty: “I stared down at my work,—and smiled! There was no beauty in this lifeless lump before
me,—death by strangulation had so blackened and distorted the features that their classic regularity and fairness was no longer perceivable” (244). Although Silvion’s beauty is no longer physically ‘perceivable’ it still haunts Gaston. His guilt over his crime materialises in the form of a delirious vision of Silvion where the young man is returned to his former beauty and Gaston is haunted by his “wistful, beautiful impassioned eyes” (277). Schaffer points to the highly erotic nature of the murder and argues that “attacking Silvion is the only way Gaston can achieve a physical closeness to this magnetically charismatic man” (“Modernist Mental States” par. 26). In her examination of the “erotic relation between men” (par. 25), in this novel, I am fairly confident that Schaffer appears to draw on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s influential Between Men and its ‘erotic triangle.’ Sedgwick’s work reframes male homosocial desire within “the structural context of triangular, heterosexual desire” (16), with the most distinguishing example of such a dynamic being the rivalry between two men for one woman. Drawing on various theoretical sources, Sedgwick makes clear that such an arrangement is a familiar organising narrative structure in nineteenth-century fiction. What is particularly applicable to the relationship between the male rivals in Wormwood, however, is that the bond between them is just as important as their respective bonds with Pauline. As Sedgwick notes: “the bonds between rivals in an erotic triangle [are] stronger, more heavily determinant of actions and choices, than anything in the bond between the lovers and the beloved” (21).

Gaston attempts to deflate Silvion’s threat to his fiancée by saying to Pauline: “‘He is very handsome!’ I admitted. ‘Too handsome for a man—he should have been a woman’” (113). I would argue that Gaston’s statement is not only indicative of his discouraging his fiancée’s interest in his rival, but of some form of latent regret that Silvion is not a woman. When Gaston says to his father — “‘there is something in him I mistrust’” (114) I would read this not only as Gaston admitting Silvion’s threat to his relationship but also the feeling of desire he awakens in him.

The other reason that I draw so much attention to this erotic triangle in Corelli’s Wormwood is because she repeats the same structure not long after in The Sorrows of Satan. Male beauty is also a very significant theme in this novel. Like the handsome Silvion from Wormwood, Lucio is a particularly attractive male character who captures the gaze of the novel’s beautiful heroine and in turn leads her to compromising behaviour. One description of Lucio is especially significant:

As I looked straightly at him, I thought I had never seen so much beauty and intellectuality combined in the outward personality of any human being. The finely shaped head denoted both power and wisdom, and was nobly poised on such shoulders as might have befitted a Hercules,—the countenance was a pure
oval, and singularly pale, this complexion intensifying the almost fiery brilliancy of the full dark eyes, which had in them a curious and wonderfully attractive look of mingled mirth and misery. The mouth was perhaps the most telling feature in this remarkable face,—set in the perfect curve of beauty, it was firm, determined, and not too small, thus escaping effeminacy . . . (17).

In this lengthy erotic inventory of Lucio’s various features, Geoffrey subjects him to the same kind of anatomical appraisal that is more often applied to female characters. Indeed, like Silvion, Lucio is feminised in both his physical appearance and his mannerisms, despite Geoffrey noting that Lucio’s face is not effeminate. Sybil is not immune to Lucio’s beauty and charisma either and it is Corelli’s sustained fictional effort to represent female desire to which I now turn.

- Corelli’s Marriage Market -

Corelli holds a distinctive position in this thesis in that she is the first author to overtly implicate women as responsible participants in the Victorian marriage market. While texts such as *Wormwood* and *The Sorrows of Satan* are symptomatic of her thoughts on this issue, it wasn’t until 1897 when she published “The Modern Marriage Market” that her position was more fully articulated. In brief, Corelli blames women’s desire to live with wealth as the reason for the success of the Victorian marriage market. While I cite the 1898 version of this text, the article first appeared in 1897 in “The Lady’s Realm,” a periodical which had a mainly female readership, a fact which Corelli picks up directly: “I am addressing you,—women, most of you” (14).

Corelli claimed that modern barbarisms such as slavery were still being practised in the society in which she was writing (17). Corelli might have had Edwin Long’s 1875 painting (figure 9) in mind when she wrote: “British women shall never, for example, stand stripped in the market-place to be appraised and labelled at a price, and purchased by a sensualist and ruffian for so much money down” (18). The relevance of Long’s provocative painting of young women being auctioned into marriage becomes even clearer when Corelli later adds: “What of London? What of the ‘season’ when women are as coolly brought out to be sold as

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68 Meredith to some extent subscribes to this notion in the narrator’s remark that women “have turned themselves into market produce” (93), but the novel ultimately relates this kind of discourse to women being victims of the appetite of the male egoist.

69 Edwin Long’s “Babylonian Marriage Market” had been recently exhibited in London as part of a provoking exhibition, “The Price of Beauty.” The painting depicts young women being auctioned into marriage arrangements. In particular, one young woman is on display facing a crowd of potential purchasers as the auctioneer gestures towards her and manages the bidding. Similarly Meredith’s *The Egoist* and Ouida’s *Moths* exercise an oriental rhetoric in the way that they portray marriage arrangements that resemble this kind of transaction.
any unhappy Armenian girl that ever shuddered at the lewd gaze of a Turkish tyrant?” (19). In such a statement as this, which is reminiscent of Meredith’s *The Egoist* or Ouida’s *Moths*, it would seem as if Corelli’s article is going to be about holding men responsible for “trafficking in human bodies and souls” (37). While such a reading of the marriage market positions men as the key architects, Corelli turns this idea around by putting the blame just as much on women. In fact Corelli puts the answerability on women to “refuse to set themselves forth in the market” (39).

Corelli’s idea of an ideal marriage is of “becoming one in flesh as well as in spirit” (21). Platonic allusions aside, she elevates love as being the main contributing factor to an ideal marriage – “marriage is a crime without supreme attraction and deep love” (54) – based on the idea that marriage vows are about love. However, she concedes, “love is not enough for our modern young English women” (29) and this is where we start to see Corelli’s unusual suggestion that women hold just as much responsibility as men for the Victorian marriage market. Wealth rather than female beauty is here the key incentive for marriage, and while Corelli admits that “a man who marries a woman for her money only is really one of the most despicable objects” (40), at the same time, “the woman who marries for money is quite as blameworthy” (41). Corelli gives two reasons for this: firstly it puts woman in a weakened position and gives the man potential to show that he has bought her (42), and secondly it puts her in the position of being no more than a “household figure ornament” (42).

In subscribing to the idea that women “choose to be marketable commodities” (51) Corelli goes against the grain of other condemnations of the marriage market. Corelli leaves her women readers with the following advice: “think well, fair women, before deciding your destinies” (49). In her final invocation of the market conditions of marriage arrangements Corelli writes: “the London market will be open to you in May, and the bidders will assemble as usual. They will consider your value in face, figure, skin, eyes, hair, and general complexion . . . just as they note the condition of their thoroughbred mares” (49). In recalling thoroughbred mares at a market, Corelli does at least acknowledge the way in which women’s physical appearance is a contributing factor to marital selection.

Lastly I also want to draw attention to another pattern of imagery that Corelli uses to write about the marriage market, and that is the language of degeneration. She employs phrases such as ‘apathetic inertia’ and ‘fatal disease’ ‘sickly belief,’ ‘sickly spirit’ and ‘weak in our nerves’ (11–2) which pre-empt Nordau’s taxonomic treatise of degeneration and relate to the fin-de-siècle context in which she is writing. I also think this pattern ties in efficiently with the decadent tropes of *Wormwood* that she put forward ten years earlier.
Bertha Vyver was witness to Corelli’s strong opinions about women and marriage. Further to what Corelli wrote in “The Modern Marriage Market,” Vyver adds: “at times we note the faltering of her faith as she describes modern society, deplores sordid marriages and open slavery in the name of wifehood, and regrets that ‘sweet girls are becoming scarce’ and the designing, mercenary, man-hunting, wealth-wanting women only too plentiful” (276). Again, on the one hand Corelli is “full of pity for the sisters sold to the bidders in the market, deprived of love, and wasting their lives in regret and despair” (277), and on the other she implicates women in this state of affairs. Unfortunately, for Corelli the marriage market stirred her to pity, indignation righteous wrath not only on account of the shame of the bargain in flesh and blood, in the desecration of love, and in the shattering of hope, but because the whole demeaning transaction meant that woman forfeited her rights, risked her progress, subordinated her power, and placed herself on a lower human level than that which was designed (281).

Corelli’s feminist sensibilities are therefore tied to her idea of an ideal marriage between a man and a woman and she views anything else as being compromising to a woman’s position. Although Corelli was against the suffrage movement, Vyver is quick to point out that instead she was “an ardent champion of womankind’s freedom and advance” (277). Despite what Vyver refers to as Corelli’s “passionate love of the beautiful” (283) she mentions that Corelli did not respect “masquerading beauties without souls, worshipping gold and devildom” (281), and “the mere love of physical beauty, and of unions which are other than spiritual” (278). These ideas of Corelli’s, as diffused through Vyver, are certainly apparent in her fiction. Vyver herself points out that The Sorrows of Satan is a “fearful and repugnant illustration of an unhallowed and loveless marriage between mercenary Sybil Elton and the self-absorbed millionaire” (282).

Within the context of a commercially-driven late-Victorian society, Sorrows is upfront about love being purchasable, as Geoffrey frankly remarks: “I want neither assistance nor advice nor patronage—I can buy them all! Titles, honours, possessions,—they are all purchasable,—love, friendship, position, they are for sale in this admirably commercial age and go to the highest bidder!” (13). Unfortunately this rather cynical sentiment proves true

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70 Interestingly in her later years in the post-war period, Corelli had a change of heart when it came to female suffrage: “[W]hen it was forced on me that man was more ready to deride than worship woman, and that as a matter of fact men denied to women such lawful honours as they may win through intellectual achievement, and that in certain forms of their legal procedure women were classed with ‘children, criminals, and lunatics,’ I began to change my mind. In the war women worked instead of men without demur or hesitation, and taking their full share of the hardest and most menial labour . . . it was and is no longer possible to deny them equal rights with men in every relation of life and every phase of work. By every law of justice they should have the vote — and I who, as a woman, was once against it, now most ardently support the cause” (quoted in Ransom 201).
and via Geoffrey’s coming into wealth we are able to witness his ability to move up the social ladder and gain himself a wife of an aristocratic affiliation. The part about buying love is probably the most relevant to my discussion of the Victorian marriage market in general as this narrative clearly demonstrates Corelli’s thoughts about this social phenomenon, as it presents both a female tempted by wealth, and a male blinded by his wealth and her beauty. This novel explores many of the same themes as *Wormwood*, and also reinforces Corelli’s position on women’s culpability in the Victorian marriage market.

Like Gaston, Geoffrey finds himself destabilised by the fact that the object of his affection does not end up being pure and moral in her desire for another man. Geoffrey comes to the stark realisation that Sybil’s “lovely body and angel-face were but an attractive disguise for the soul of a harpy” (241). In *Sorrows*, Corelli blames Sybil’s offering herself to Lucio on her reading “soul-corrupting fiction written by ‘tainted hand,’” Swinburne being amongst the accused (325). Felski attributes this kind of moment in Corelli’s fiction to her being “against the figure of the sexually liberated and sophisticated New Woman” (128), to borrow from Janet Galligani Casey,

While Corelli supported the general spirit of feminism, vaguely advocating respect for the female intellect and acknowledgement of woman’s contributions to society, she also cherished her role as a Victorian woman who must necessarily recoil from any discussion of a frankly sexual nature and politely avoid the sordid and radically unconventional (165).

The problem with female desire in *Sorrows* is that it upsets Corelli’s vision of a balanced and loving marriage arrangement. The familiar figure of the woman as an object consumed by desire shifts her position from passive to active and unsettles the more conventional aspect of Corelli’s feminist stance.

Female desire is certainly present in *Wormwood* as well, and one of the more interesting examples of this is conflated with religion. Silvion’s gift of St John lilies to Pauline is noted by Gaston:

She had shown me these [lilies] with a rather wistful look, so I fancied, and had asked me whether it would not be well to place them in a vase near the Virgin’s statue in her own little private oratory? I agreed; I never attached importance to the girlishly-romantic notions I knew she had on the subject of religion; in fact, I thought with her, that such pure, white, sacred-looking blossoms were much more fitted for an altar than a drawing-room. And so she put them there, and I encouraged and approved the act—like a fool! Those lilies were allowed to occupy the most honoured place in her sleeping
chamber—to send out their odours to mingle with every breath she drew—to
instil their insidious message through her maiden-dreams! (119).

Traditionally the lily symbolises purity, chastity, and innocence. White lilies in particular in floriography are the emblem for the Virgin Mary. The Angel Gabriel was often painted presenting Mary with a white lily when he announced to her that she would give birth to the Son of God. Thus, the lilies in this scene go against their traditional associations with feminine purity; they are instead conflated with female desire. Silvion’s gift also alludes to his earlier comment that Pauline is a fit model for the Annunciation. Combined with the fact that Pauline has used the church as a cover for her clandestine meetings with Silvion, the lilies come to symbolise their relationship in that Silvion is the man who actually accesses the ‘most-honoured’ place, her heart. For Crozier-de Rosa, in Corelli’s fiction, “only women who possess religious faith are ‘true’ women. Women who doubt, on the other hand, are ‘unsexed’” (259). I want to alter this formula slightly by suggesting that in this novel, only women who are ‘true’ are religious. Women who are ‘sexed’ are irreligious. In that sense her ‘decadent’ heroines, both Pauline and Sybil, upset the ‘angel in the house’ ideal that Corelli endorses in her non-fiction writing.

The idea of marriage is very peculiar in *Wormwood* and is redolent of Corelli’s general theory of marriage. Following the tendency of much of Victorian fiction, Gaston tells us in the early stages of the novel that “the beginning of my history is—love. It is the beginning of every man and every woman’s history” (78). Thus we are set up to perhaps believe that this novel will follow the conventions of other romance narratives. We have the traditional elements of a romance plot, including a courtship, betrothal and wedding ceremony, but these are cruelly turned on their head when the bridegroom publicly announces his fiancée’s infidelity in the middle of the marriage ceremony. Prior to that, during Gaston’s proposal to Pauline he imagines himself as a Romantic hero of the old order:

> I caught her hands and held her fast, and all the pent-up longing of my soul found utterance in words. Her beauty, her irresistible sweetness, the happiness we would enjoy when once united,—these were the themes on which I discoursed with the fiery eloquence and pleading of a troubadour (97).

Schaffer acknowledges Gaston’s outdated mode of expression of love and says that it is simplistic (“Modernist Mental States” par. 21). While Gaston scarcely “knows what he has said” because “so overwhelming was the realised tide of my excitement and ardour” (98), we as readers can instead attribute his foggy recollection to the effects of absinthe amnesia.
The marriage ceremony itself is also worth mentioning not only because it serves as a turning point in the protagonist’s downward spiral, but because of the language Corelli employs to describe the series of nuptial events. I quote this section at length:

There was a hush of expectation,—the bright eyes of the lovely and fashionable women assembled were turned eagerly towards the door,—it opened, and Pauline entered, in full bridal attire, leaning on her father’s arm. White as a snowflake,—impassive as marble, — she seemed to be walking in her sleep, her eyes fixed on vacancy. . . . I was enraged!—what business had she, this fair, frail, help-less looking girl, to come to me as though she were a fawn being led up to have its tender throat slit!—how dared she pose before me like a statue of grief with that look of quenchless unutterable despair frozen on her face! (210–1).

Corelli relies on layers of feminine stereotypes to communicate the dreadful prospect of Pauline having to marry Gaston, and the use of mixed imagery here – Pauline is variously depicted as a snowflake, a marble statue and a fawn – especially brings to mind Broughton’s description of Nell on her wedding day as a lamb being led to slaughter in Cometh Up as a Flower. After Gaston makes his speech to the crowd about her supposed infidelity, Pauline remains statuesque and ‘like a veiled image, might have been carved in stone for any sign of life she gave” (211). Rather than reacting to Gaston’s announcement in the way that he expects, Pauline chooses to remain locked in the feminine stereotype of polished and unyielding marble.

Not long after, Gaston chooses an alternative marriage for himself, one that forever cements his position as an absintheur:

It was the perfect ideal of a marriage day! And in my heart of hearts a wondrous wedlock was consummated,—an indissoluble union with the fair wild Absinthe witch of my dreams!—she and she alone should be part of my flesh and blood from henceforth, I swore!—why even the words of the marriage ritual could be made to serve our needs! (217).

In some ways this idea of marriage does not differ from his earlier expectations of a marriage to Pauline. In both instances it is all about satisfying his needs for corporeal pleasure. This fact is further underlined by Gaston defending his unwholesome behaviour to his father: “this rupture of a marriage which was to have been the completion of a life’s happiness for me” (222). In this sentence there is nothing mentioned of his betrothed’s happiness. Indeed Gaston’s original desire for marriage stems rather from a selfish wish than thought of mutual
happiness. His bitterness continues in the novel and he cannot even appreciate the beauty of a young girl without drawing conclusions about the marriage market. He deliberately avoids those avenues where the pretty young girls of Paris may be seen . . . walking demurely along with their downcast eyes and that affectation of perfect innocence which does so charm and subdue the spirits of men,—well!—until they find it is all put on for show, to ensnare them into the marriage-market! (302).

This invocation of the marriage market is a far cry from his earlier sentiments. The marriage market has been reworked in his imagination from something that he could profit from to something that has wounded him and thus Gaston learns Corelli’s lesson.

We realise, too, that the French marriage market is just the same as the English one. In describing his future father-in-law’s approval of his intention to wed Pauline, Gaston cynically comments:

He knew my father was rich, and that I was his only heir, and he laid his plans accordingly. He was like all French fathers; yet why should I specify French fathers so particularly? English fathers are the same; all fathers of all nations nowadays look to the practical-utility advantages of marriage for their children—and quite right too! One cannot live on air bubbles of sentiment (80).

Although Gaston is not condemning this practice – in fact he tends to celebrate it – one cannot help but hear Corelli’s strong opinion here as well. My knowledge of some of Corelli’s other writings, as I have demonstrated, leads me to believe that this particular sentiment is a rehearsal for what she later wrote in “The Modern Marriage Market.”

I am certainly not making a case for all of Corelli’s novels containing femme fatale characters who marry purely for beauty and wealth and thus I conclude this chapter by briefly mentioning one of Corelli’s other novels, *Ardath: the Story of a Dead Self*, to ensure that I do not paint a portrait of her writing as being wholly negative in its depiction of marriage arrangements. *Ardath* appeared in 1889 and can only be described as a mystical romance novel with its love story representing the kind of idealised union that Corelli endorses in her non-fiction writing. I cite here a particular extract from the text that brings together the themes that Corelli later disturbs in *Wormwood* and *The Sorrows of Satan*:

Love might be even on earth, between two whose spirits were spiritually akin,—whose lives were like two notes played in a tuneful chord,—whose hearts beat echoing faith and tenderness to each other,—and who held their
love as a sacred bond of union,—a gift from God, not to be despoiled by that rough familiarity which surely brings contempt (588, original emphasis).

We can surmise from this example that a successful union between a man and woman is one that embraces a spiritual essence and acknowledges God presiding over such a divine institution. Within the decadent landscape Corelli references later in *Wormwood* the kind of marriage she idealises is shown not to be possible.
“Love for love's sake”: George du Maurier’s *Trilby*

And you shall see nothing, hear nothing, think of nothing but Svengali, Svengali, Svengali! (52).

The immortal lines of George du Maurier’s best-selling novel of the late nineteenth-century, *Trilby* (1894) point to it as being particularly relevant to exploring the aesthetic objectification of women. The novel exemplifies multiple, but somewhat contradictory, anxieties about the construction of the female subject at the close of the nineteenth century. One narrative strand critiques the ‘fallen woman’ motif; another expresses discomfort at the beautiful heroine’s subjection to the gaze of the male aesthete. Trilby is first met working as an artists’ model; thus her body enters into the economic circuit of aestheticised commodification. She is a working woman, paid for being represented in, and as, an art object. Her later decline into death under the demonic surveillance of Svengali, as both a matchless producer of a priceless singing voice, and a powerless and exploited automaton whose song is only and entirely Svengali’s to exploit, replays her earlier career as essential to, but powerless in, the world of fine art. Whereas the main focus of critical attention on *Trilby* has been the relationship between Svengali and Trilby, my emphasis is instead on the relationship between Trilby and Little Billee as a way of commenting on an alternative aestheticising of the female. Trilby enters du Maurier’s amiable and satirical representation of the Bohemian world of art students and artists in Paris in the 1860s as a subject, a fictional romantic heroine, a character of importance and individuality, and a passionate lover, in a way which suggests late-century ideas about the New Woman.

Usefully, Trilby’s career covers the 1860s to the 1890s. Accounts of Aestheticism suggest that it was overwhelmed by parody in the 1890s, and du Maurier enters into this spirit of parody. But as a writer, as a practising artist, as his own illustrator, and as an enthusiast for, as well as critic of, aesthetic values, his position in the Aestheticism of the later nineteenth century is a complicated one as my first section will briefly establish. In what follows, I will explore the overlapping concerns of the objectification and commodification of the beautiful woman on three fronts. First, I will argue that the fin-de-siècle context has significances for the Victorian art world and the construction of the female subject. Second, I will trace Trilby’s reverse transformation from a fin-de-siècle New Woman to a caricature of the Victorian submissive woman before closing with a section that will go beyond the visual qualities of the novel to show that Trilby’s aestheticised commodification is also bound up in an aural framework that advocates a different kind of genuine aesthetic experience.
Trilby was serialised in 1894 in Harper’s Monthly. Before being published in book form the American serial faced a lawsuit brought about by James McNeill Whistler on the grounds of slander, for “the waspish artist declared that Joe Sibley, an unsympathetic character in Trilby, was entirely too true to life” (L. Edward Purcell 63). With the transgressive pictures and text removed, the novel was finally published by Harper Brothers in September of the same year. The American public went wild for the peculiar tale of a hypnotised opera singer, and by early 1895 the novel had sold over 200,000 copies thus making it one of the best sellers in America at that time (Purcell 64). The British could not ignore the American reading public’s enthusiasm for the popular novel but Trilby’s publication history in Britain did not follow quite the same pattern. Originally published devoid of its illustrations by Osgood, McIlvaine and Company in 1895 the novel found mediocre success until it was reissued as a one-volume illustrated version. Sales of the second edition improved dramatically in England from then on (Purcell 64).

Why Trilby was so popular has been the subject of both contemporary and modern enquiry. Purcell reasons that du Maurier “combined the elements of popular formula in a way that was distinctly his own” (66). The novel moves between being a romance, a Gothic tale and a sensation narrative and this multiplicity of genres constitutes one of its strengths. Du Maurier is also distinctive as a popular author in that he crossed over to writing from being a well-known illustrator and cartoonist. Du Maurier's success as an illustrator is certainly a factor in his later career as a novelist, as Richard Kelly notes:

After doing a number of random drawings, initial letters, and literary parodies, du Maurier began to develop a pattern and structure for his drawings in Punch that gave them a life of their own. Between the late 1860s and the end of the 1880s he created a fictional world as complex and self-contained as many a novel (George du Maurier 28).

Du Maurier acknowledged the literary grounding he received while working as an illustrator for Punch. In an interview with Robert H. Sherard in 1895 he maintained: “that was where I

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71 James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834–1903) was an American-born, British-based artist. In 1855, he rented a studio in the Latin Quarter of Paris and assumed a bohemian lifestyle. He was also a key figure in British Aestheticism. Du Maurier’s novel verbally and pictorially captures something of Whistler. One illustration in particular from the serial publication is recognisably a caricature of James McNeill Whistler but as the New York Times pointed out in 1903: “No one looked upon ‘Joe Sibley’ as a true likeness. . . . It was written and read as a joke, part true, but mostly false” (“JOE SIBLEY”).

72 For example, see Leonée Ormond’s George du Maurier (1969), Martin T. Wood’s George du Maurier, the Satirist of the Victorians: A Review of his Art and Personality (1913). See also Robert H. Sherard’s “The Author of Trilby: An Autobiographic Interview with Mr George du Maurier” (1895), and Joseph Benson Gilder and Jeannette Leonard Gilder’s Trilbyana: The Rise and Progress of a Popular Novel (1895).
received my training in literature” (391). His first novel, Peter Ibbetson (1891), autobiographical in the sense that it draws on du Maurier's childhood in France and his early years in London, was modestly successful.

For the plot of Trilby du Maurier drew on his personal experience and his familiarity with bohemian Paris. We can therefore allow his narrator to have some degree of biographical perspective. But the real du Maurierian hallmark of the novel is its illustrations: “the text of the book is the counterpart of its illustrations, for Mr du Maurier writes as he draws—with infinite precision and detail” (Joseph Benson Gilder and Jeanette Leonard Gilder 3). Henry James posited a similar sentiment in 1894 when he wrote: “the colour and shape of this author’s world are reflected, without a break, from his sense of human and personal beauty” (872). How a writer with such a visual capacity translates it into his literary pursuits is one of several subjects of this final chapter.

- Fin-De-Siècle Aesthetics-

In the preceding chapter I examined decadence as it relates to Marie Corelli’s Wormwood; while decadence has some bearing on this chapter in the sense that France meant ‘decadence’ to at least some English readers, the wider fin-de-siècle context that shapes Trilby has proven more relevant in assessing the aesthetic commodification of women. In a novel that relies heavily on a French cultural landscape it is fitting to explore it via a French term that has become common usage in Victorian Studies terminology, most especially in the context of late-Victorian fiction and culture. I view the fin de siècle as being a separate category from both Aestheticism and decadence but it is certainly a legacy of these cultural moments of the late nineteenth century. For the Victorians the 1890s shared an important relationship to its past and future, as Sally Ledger indicates: “British cultural politics were caught between two ages, the Victorian and the modern; a time fraught both with anxiety and with an exhilarating sense of possibility” (22). Because it is temporally and culturally ‘betwixt and between’ the Victorian and modern periods, it is difficult to regard the fin de siècle as a defined state. With its ever-changing political, cultural and literary status, it encompasses an overlap of the modern and the Victorian.

In thinking about the historical angle of Trilby, then, it is possible to read the novel as both looking towards modernism while also being nostalgic. Relating this historical setting to the art world it represents, Trilby approximately straddles the time period between Cometh Up as a Flower and the later novels in this thesis. With its recording of Pre-Raphaelitism through to

73 The term is believed to have come into usage in 1888 in F. de Jouvenot and H. Micard’s play of the same name (Lyn Pykett, Reading Fin-de-Siècle Fictions 1).
Aestheticism and decadence over the thirty-year time period it encompasses, *Trilby* overflows with aesthetic detail, including on the Latin Quarter art world it represents. The French setting of *Trilby* – “dear Bohemia and all its joys” (97) – provides a starting point to discuss the state of aesthetics in the novel. The often-cited article, “The Literature of Bohemia” (1862), had extracted the term ‘bohemian’ from its geographical context and put forward the idea it was: “a certain kind of literary gypsy, no matter what language he speaks or what city he inhabits” (32). Thus, although the term ‘bohemian’ was in use as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century, it took on greater currency, as represented in du Maurier’s novel, in the mid-nineteenth century.\(^{74}\) The 1862 article notes that the ‘ideal’ bohemian was: “devoted to literature or art, and sternly opposed to the conventionalities of the world in general” (32).

The unconventionality of du Maurier’s novel is striking. As Kimberley J. Stern rightly points out: “its depiction of Paris’s bohemian underground flouted mainstream Victorian values” (547). The opening of the novel reveals a cluttered domestic space with a mass of objects related to sport and high art, all grouped together in no apparent order. Amongst the boxing gloves, which denote the space as masculine, and the imitations of old masters, are three men occupied with various pursuits from twirling Indian clubs, to painting, to eating. The inmates of this “blissful abode” (5) are Englishmen, yet there is something very un-English about the scene. Compare Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) with its “peculiarly English” opening scene (19–20) and one is overwhelmed with the contrast between the novels’ representation of Englishness. Du Maurier, Anglo-French by birth, is quick to notify the reader that his novel takes place in a foreign setting, but still the space he describes is a fusion of British and French effects — there is a quintessentially British piano, that has arrived from England, and “two mustard pots (English and French)” (4). One of the primary aesthetic spaces of the novel, the artistic studio, stands in for the fact that while these English artists living abroad are keen to adopt a bohemian lifestyle they do not completely integrate with the Parisian setting and often appear more as spectators than inhabitants of the city (7).

Du Maurier’s “three musketeers of the brush” (27), are in Paris to ‘work,’ that is, to refine their artistic abilities and to absorb French artistic culture; for Paris was the centre of the nineteenth-century art world. Patrick Brantlinger posits: “Bohemia was a utopia where the values of art and freedom could be preserved against the growing pressures of commercialization and social rationalization” (“Bohemia Versus Grub Street” 27). Thus each man finds himself in Paris to not only hone his craft but to be present in a city where old masters meet new ones. They spend their days intermittently engaging in sports, or being

\(^{74}\) For example William Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* (1848) refers to a bohemian in the sense of a social gypsy.
“each opposite his picture” (79), or visiting the Louvre, after which, “surfeited with classical beauty, they all three went and dined together, and Taffy and the Laird said beautiful things about the old masters...” (9). Classical aesthetics infuse the French setting and at the same time the nascent aesthetic aptitude of Little Billee comes into focus.

Little Billee’s art background is “essentially English” (152); prior to his Parisian training at Monsieur Durien’s art studio he studied at a London art school (54), but his artistic talent is only gradually revealed. On the one hand it is endorsed by his fellow students – they “well knew what he was about, and respected him for it” (55) – and on the other hand the narrator progressively reveals Little Billee’s “rare genius” (87) and his true artistic skill:

Nature had given him a singularly light hand—or rather two, for he was ambidextrous and could use both with equal skill; and a few months’ practice at a London life school had quite cured him of the purposeless indecision of touch which often characterises the prentice hand for years of apprenticeship, and remains with the amateur for life. The lightest and most careless of his pencil strokes had a precision that was inimitable, and a charm that specially belonged to him, and was quite easy to recognise at a glance (55).

The narrator credits this unique artistic hand, as well as his imagination, with ensuring Little Billee’s future success as a professional artist. The retrospective narrative stance allows him to make comments about Little Billee’s later fame being the “highest probably that can be for a mere painter of pictures” (99). Nevertheless Little Billee’s career as recounted over the course of the narrative includes his production of some very famous works in the world of the novel. One painting in particular, the one that receives the most attention, is “The Pitcher goes to the Well” which enjoys both a successful Royal Academy debut and a profitable exchange history. In regard to the latter, the narrator acknowledges that “such a vulgar test is no criterion whatever of a picture’s real merit” (142–3) but Little Billee’s wide appeal – from masters, to art dealers, to popular acclaim – certainly seals his position as a preeminent artist in the world of Trilby.

The Victorian romanticisation of the country is also embodied in the character of Little Billee through his relationship with rural space rather than urban Paris. A week spent at Barbizon, for example, leaves Little Billee: “fascinated by all this artistic life . . . and [he] had sworn to himself and to his friends that he would someday live and die there—painting the forest as it is . . . leading a healthy outdoor life” (79). He is at home in a natural space and he envisions such a retreat to nature to be important for his future artistic inspiration. By briefly removing Little Billee from the urban Parisian setting Du Maurier illuminates and activates the binary of vice and virtue associated with the city and country, a familiar structure that I
have already shown Ouida to be responding to in her novel, *Moths*. Little Bilee exemplifies the codes of behaviour expected in both settings. In a point of contrast with the rest of the novel, Little Bilee briefly enters the provincial area on the outskirts of Paris at first as part of his essential French artistic experience, and later as a space of retreat from his horror at seeing Trilby posing nude. For Little Bilee the country location in *Trilby* is an idealised setting, full of peace, innocence, and simple virtue (Raymond Williams *Country and the City* 1). The emphasis on nature and harmony also inspires Little Bilee’s musings on art and love and on how the rural location provides an ideal setting for both: “We were to have lived together in Barbizon . . . all our lives—and I was to have painted stunning pictures . . . like those fellows there. . . . An artist’s life should be away from the world—above all that meanness and paltriness . . . all in his work” (134). He continues: “Love comes before all – love levels all – love and art…and beauty” (134). This outburst occurs within the context of Little Bilee having discovered his engagement to Trilby has ended and very close to the point where he suffers some form of “epileptic seizure” (135), or what could also be read as the beginning of a depressive disorder.

Little Bilee’s loss of innocence associated with his degenerative condition is supplemented by a newfound unease in the rural setting: “he never recovered the full use of that most precious faculty, the boon of youth and happy childhood” (122). Little Bilee’s “nature seemed changed” (135) and even though he retains his “quick, prehensile, aesthetic eye” (141) he no longer “found the simple country pleasures . . . quite so exciting as of old” (145). However, the advantage of turning away from his old life is made patent by the fact that his “one supreme faculty of painting might have the elbow-room to reach its fullest” (122). Upon his return to England he finds fame as a great artist (146) and becomes a marriageable man, a quality which is enhanced by his celebrity status in England. A change in name also accompanies his move to London where he goes by the more mature sounding, William Bagot, as way of complementing his new-found artistic triumph.

His artistic success also relies on his Englishness, and along with another contemporary artist, Frederick Walker,75 the narrator describes Little Bilee as being “essentially English and of [his] own time…” (152). As “progenitors of much of the best art work” (152) Walker and Bagot are described in Darwinian terms as a new kind of artist:

> It was a good time in England, just then, for young artists of promise; a time of evolution, revolution, change, and development—of the founding of new

75 Frederick Walker (1840-75) is noted for being a follower of the Pre-Raphaelites. His own artistic style followed a very similar social realist pattern to that of the Brotherhood. Whether or not he functions as both a contemporary and possible inspiration for Little Bilee is also relevant. Walker is associated with nature painting, died very young, and worked with du Maurier for *Once a Week* in the 1860s.
schools and the crumbling away of old ones—a keen struggle for existence—a survival of the fit—a preparation, let us hope, for the ultimate survival of the fittest (151).

The cultural implications of this statement resonate with the historical context. The narrator alludes to Darwin’s natural selection theory, which coincides approximately with the era he is referring to – Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* was published in 1859. This instance of linking Darwin with aesthetics follows a similar vein to George Meredith in *The Egoist* in that du Maurier draws on a contemporaneous cultural discourse as a way of narrating this particular time of ‘evolution’ in art. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood’s influence on English art in the mid nineteenth century is also signified here in the sense of the reformative nature of their art. The ‘evolution’ in art therefore extends not only to the Darwinian sense of the word, but to an existent cultural movement as well. In its depiction of the late 1850s *Trilby* engages with a Pre-Raphaelite milieu and the ‘three musketeers of the brush’ embody nuances of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The real-life inspirations for Taffy and Little Billie are noted to be Valentine Cameron Prinsep76 and Frederick Walker respectively, but I also cannot help but wonder if William Holman Hunt might provide some kind of foundation for the characterisation of the Laird. *Trilby* shows her natural sensibility for Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics in wanting to aid the Laird with his toreador painting; she brings him objects that will add to the authenticity of his pictures (32). The Laird in his quest for naturalism, also an indication of his own Pre-Raphaelite sensibility, questions Trilby’s authenticity: “‘What could she know of toreadors’ brides and their wedding-dresses?’ the Laird would indignantly ask—as if he were a toreador himself” (65). The comedy of this situation does not completely mask the gendered implications for possessing authentic knowledge. The Laird later finds himself making a pilgrimage to Spain to validate his understanding of toreadors “from the life” (151). Such an excursion mirrors Holman Hunt’s journeys to the Middle East in order to support his biblical paintings with accurate reference to geography and anthropology. Unfortunately for the Laird his work does not sell as well and he resolves to not “spoil his market” in the future. (151).

Du Maurier’s 1866 satiric illustration series for *Once a Week*, “The Legend of Camelot,” in which he parodies the medievalism that characterised Pre-Raphaelite art, would seem to point to his divergence from the movement; however I suspect that du Maurier’s treatment of Pre-Raphaelitism is more complex than this, given that the author was an intimate friend of John Everett Millais. Millais’s son, John Guile Millais, writes: “their acquaintance speedily

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76 Of Prinsep, du Maurier writes that he is “such a stunning fellow—six foot I, 23 of age, not an ounce of fat but weighs 16 stone 6! such a murderous looking arm of more than 14 inches!” (To Tom Armstrong” 119).
ripened into a friendship that became ever deeper as the years went by” (265). Martin Wood also notes that: “at heart he was much more in sympathy with the Pre-Raphaelites and the love of early romance, whatever his pretence to the contrary in his satire, ‘A Legend of Camelot’” (74). Wood further rationalises that in du Maurier’s illustrating style, especially in his early work, there was a “precise elaboration of form” (79) that could be said to be inherited from Pre-Raphaelitism.

*Trilby* relies for its meaning on the discourse of Pre-Raphaelite themes and imagery. I begin with the fallen woman motif as a way of showing how du Maurier draws on a characteristic of Pre-Raphaelitism. Despite the novel’s narrative trajectory offering a kind reversal of the fallen woman configuration – a “sinner that repenteth” (128) – the inclusion of this kind of theme is an allusion to the subject of many a Pre-Raphaelite painting. More generally of course, “the fallen woman has long been recognised as a popular theme for artists and writers during the nineteenth century” (Lyn Neade 26), and the proliferation of fallen women in Pre-Raphaelite works is unmistakable. William Holman Hunt’s “The Awakening Conscience” (1853) and Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s “Found” (c. 1853) are just two of a number of iconic variations on this theme. The fallen woman was not limited to painting; Swinburne’s poem, “Faustine” (1862), for example, offers an extensive treatment of a fleshy Pre-Raphaelite beauty. From Faustine’s “splendid hair that droops each side” (lines 7-8) to her “lithe limbs and lean” (70), she embodies the physical feminine characteristics we have come to associate with this artistic movement. Coincidentally this poem features in the novel as “strange and beautiful” and even more interestingly is known by heart by “our three enthusiasts” (197).

I am not the first to point out that the novel also rehearses Pre-Raphaelite stylisation in its portrayal of Trilby’s physicality. Katherine Byrne points out the connection between Trilby and Elizabeth Siddal, noting that both women do not initially conform to ideals of feminine attractiveness (107), and the narrator himself remarks:

Trilby’s type would be infinitely more admired now than in the fifties. Her photograph would be in the shop-windows. Sir Edward Burne-Jones—if I may be so bold as to say so—would perhaps have marked her for his own…

Rossetti might have evolved another new formula from her (90). Given the historical setting of the novel, it would not be incongruous to imagine Trilby as the kind of beauty that inspired Pre-Raphaelite art. Like Vere in *Moths*, Trilby is not of her time and is in remarkable “contrast” with the popular Latin Quarter style of beauty (90). The narrator points out:
Favourite types of beauty change with each succeeding generation. These were the days of Buckner’s aristocratic Album beauties, with lofty foreheads, oval faces, little aquiline noses, heart-shaped little mouths, soft dimpled chins, drooping shoulders, and long side ringlets that fell over them…. A type that will perhaps come back to us one day (90).

Trilby’s size is what essentially makes her different from Buckner’s album beauties with their delicate complexions and figures. Her peculiar features, and tall and thin figure, mark her as a new kind of beauty.

The true extent of her Pre-Raphaelite resemblance comes to the fore in her appearance as La Svengali the opera singer. Her body shape is “tall and thin” (259) and it makes her an ideal model for a Burne-Jones painting. In Burne-Jones’s work we find countless examples of tall, stately women. It is the accompanying illustration (figure 10) that really captures something of a Burne-Jones quality (211). The image demonstrates how du Maurier relies on the reader’s familiarity with Burne-Jones to fully appreciate both his characterisation and literal illustration of Trilby. She is a tall female figure . . . clad in what seemed like a classical dress of cloth of gold, embroidered with garnets and beetles’ wings; her snowy arms and shoulders bare, a gold coronet of stars on her head, her thick light brown hair tied behind and flowing all down her back to nearly her knees, like those ladies in hairdressers’ shops who sit with their backs to the plate-glass window to advertise the merits of some particular hair-wash (209).

While the narrator undercuts some of the artistic quality of this image by associating Trilby’s hair with the commodity market, the illustration is remarkably Burne-Jonesian. From the positioning of Trilby in relation to Svengali – not unlike a painter, with his baton/brush raised – in the image, to her tall and stately physical form it looks as if Burne-Jones would have indeed ‘marked her for his own.’ Burne-Jones’s cultural currency in the fin-de-siècle market remained strong. He is more associated with the later phase of the Pre-Raphaelites and his paintings were still widely circulated and admired in the late nineteenth century. Burne-Jones’s career bestrides a similar time period to the novel.

However, du Maurier’s well-known aversion to the Aesthetic Movement is unmistakable in Trilby. The culture of Aestheticism permeates the novel. References to Botticelli (3, 165)
and “aesthetic blue” wine stains (25) anchor the text in the realm of Aestheticism. Most studies of *Trilby* point to Svengali as being the key aesthete figure in the novel. This is an accepted factor given that Svengali “had but one virtue—his love of art; or, rather, his love of himself as a master of art. . .” (42). Du Maurier projects his anti-aestheticism sentiment through the figure of Svengali. When Svengali “blossomed out in beautiful and costly clothes of quite original colour and shape and pattern, so that people would turn round and stare at him in the street—a thing he loved” (73), the reader recalls Oscar Wilde and his cultivated dress sense. “Du Maurier's famous crusade against the Aesthetic Movement in England reflected his long-standing dislike of affectation and his distrust of change” (Kelly, *Art of George du Maurier* 32), and the contrived nature of this trend manifests in the Laird’s work in progress — a “Hari-kari in Yokohama.” The fact that the Laird has never visited Japan does not deter him: “(He had never been to Japan; but no more had anyone else in the early days)” (238). For example the Laird’s interest in painting Japanese subject matter mirrors James Whistler’s own interest in the theme and is indicative of a wider Japanomania craze that typified later nineteenth-century Aestheticism. Jeff Nunokawa writes: “A part of a long line of fashions given over to the celebration of the artificial, the rage for things Japanese was as much as anything else a longing for an exoticism removed from the realm of the real” (“Tame Passions of Wilde” 51). The superficiality of the Victorian art industry implied by these instances later manifests as Little Billee’s “miserable mind malady” (163) when he sees his profession as a trivial one: “for what did pictures matter, or whether they were good or bad, except to the triflers who painted them, the dealers who sold them, the idle, uneducated, pure-proud fools who bought them and stuck them up on their walls because they were told!” (162). Little Billee’s account of the world of art production and distribution is indicative of his unease. However, this sentiment is not exclusively his in the novel.

Accompanying Little Billee’s evolution in personality, which includes a “chronic plague of heart insensibility” (160) and “his lost power of being specially fond of special individuals” (159), is his enhanced aesthetic status. His loss of affect due to depression is significantly linked to his aesthetic success in *Trilby*. With his “fine studio and handsome suite of rooms” (153), Little Billee takes on the persona of an aesthete. His Fitzroy Square apartment, the location of Little Billee’s domestic space, is described in terms which stress its aesthetics:

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78 Sandro Botticelli is a key figure in nineteenth century Aestheticism. Walter Pater unearthed the Renaissance painter in *The Renaissance* and was one of the first British cultural critics to write admiringly of the painter (Jonathan Freedman 133).

79 For example Johnathan H. Grossman’s “The Mythic Svengali: Anti-Aestheticism in *Trilby*” (1996) and Nathalie Saudo-Welby’s “The ‘over-aesthetic eye’ and the ‘monstrous development of a phenomenal larynx’: Du Maurier’s Art of Excess in *Trilby*” (2009). Svengali will be the focus of a later section for his role in the aesthetic commodification of Trilby since it is necessarily worth exploring.
Beautiful specimens of his unfinished work, endless studies, hung on his studio walls. Everything else was as nice as it could be—the furniture, the bibelots, and bric-à-brac, the artistic foreign and Eastern knick-knacks and draperies and hangings and curtains and rugs—the semi grand piano by Collard and Collard (153).

The fusion of English with foreign objects as well as further suggestions of high and low culture are as noticeable as the opening lines of the novel with the English piano arranged in harmony with the Eastern knick-knacks. This setting informs our understanding of the cultural meanings ascribed to Little Billee — the visually luxurious room reflects the fine tastes of its decorator. His taste and gentlemanly status are materialised through physical objects, specifically his collection of bibelots and bric-à-brac. Problematically though, towards the end of the nineteenth century these types of curios were more associated with the female consumer (Charles Eastlake 3); thus, Little Billee’s penchant for bibelots qualifies his masculinity. In this way the contents of his apartment, both furniture and artistic collections, typify the gender stereotypes of nineteenth-century British Aestheticism.

Furthermore the fin-de-siècle mentality, evident in the French versus British instances in the novel, is used to confirm the superficiality of the cultural world. In the London home of the great sculptor, Sir Louis Cornleys, the ‘three musketeers of the brush’ find themselves at a private social gathering of artists and members of the aristocracy. In the company of the “comparatively few and well chosen” (164), they overhear the conversations of some of their ‘earnest’ fellow guests which include extolling the qualities of French culture over English. They talk of:

The great Zola, or Guy de Maupassant and Pierre Loti, and exult in beautiful English over the inferiority of English literature, English art, English music, English everything else.

For these high-minded ones who can only bear the sight of classical pictures and the sound of classical music do not necessarily read classical books in any language—no Shakespeare or Dantes or Molières or Goethes for them (165).

The narrator’s rather scornful attack continues:

And the mere fact that these three immortal French writers of light books I have just named had never been heard of at this particular period doesn’t very much matter; they had cognate predecessors whose names I happen to forget. Any stick will do to beat a dog, and history has a way of repeating itself.

Feydeau, or Flaubert, let us say—or for those who don’t know French and cultivate an innocent, Miss Austen (for to be dead and buried is almost as good as to be French and immoral!)—and Sebastian Bach, and Sandro Botticelli—
that all the arts should be represented. These names are rather discrepant, but they make very good sticks for dog-beating; and with a thorough knowledge and appreciation of these (or semblance thereof), you were well equipped in those days to hold your own among the elite of intellectual London circles, and snub the philistine to rights (165).

The extract is a fine example of a site where the historical contexts of the 1860s and 1890s collide in the novel. For “du Maurier’s bohemian Paris is as much an invention as a reality, and as much a projection of the 1890s as a recollection of the 1850s,” as Elaine Showalter claims (Introduction xi). As the narrator proceeds in this passage he acknowledges this fact in such a way as to complement Little Billee’s earlier elucidations about the superficiality of the art world. What is not a mixing of reality and fantasy is that du Maurier draws on the same kind of francophobic cultural strain that permeates Corelli’s Wormwood. But here it is parodied for comic effect rather than social caution.

As this last contention illustrates, Trilby cannot be separated from its fin-de-siècle context. The late nineteenth century also saw the entrance of the New Woman figure into both fiction, and the social order. Indeed the New Woman phenomenon was a product of the fin-de-siècle era and it shares an important relationship to both its past and its future. In The Gender of Modernity, Rita Felski refers to the New Woman both as “the label for the energetic and independent woman struggling against the constraints of Victorian norms of femininity” (146) and as, “an inspiratory symbol of modernity at the forefront of social change” (151).

Reassessing the accepted norms of gendered behaviour threatened moral and social existence. Accordingly the figure of the New Woman cannot be separated from the cultural context in which she emerged. According to Showalter in Sexual Anarchy, the end of a century suggests and “intensifies crisis” (2); cultural redefinitions of class, race and gender advanced those apocalyptic insecurities; any reaction to previous roles ascribed to women became exaggerated to crisis level.

The uncertainty operating at this time compounded the impact of the New Woman phenomenon. Society embellished the New Woman and in doing so, imposed heavy cultural ideals and myths, as Talia Schaffer in “Nothing but Foolscape and Ink” argues:

In her brief career, she was ascribed more opinions, positions, and beliefs than any real woman could have absorbed in a lifetime; she was used as a public relations technique: she was made to answer for every respect of British life the writer feared or despised: she was held responsible for vast declines and mythic changes (50).
Schaffer’s statement explicitly underlines the New Woman as an inflamed threat to the status quo, which emerged from fears that educating and expanding women’s roles from private to public spheres could only lead to a breakdown of the family unit, believed to be the stabilising force behind ordered Victorian society.

At the beginning of the novel Trilby presents a threat to normative femininity, or the contemporary feminine of the 1860s and 90s, in the sense that she subscribes to behaviours associated with both male and female genders. Her jumbled garments, cigarettes and watching men at sport (32) give her a certain masculine edge. There is one passage in particular that underlines Trilby’s bohemian New Womaness in which the narrator describes how Trilby made “herself a cigarette, and lit it and smoked it, inhaling the smoke in large whiffs . . . with a look of great beatitude” (16). Such a moment is reminiscent of Édouard Manet’s scenes of Paris; in particular his paintings from the late 1870s depicting women smoking in cafes. In “The Café Concert” (1878) (figure 11), he portrays a lower class woman smoking a cigarette. Slumped in her chair, she is depicted as shabby and forlorn. Her conspicuous eyebrow(s) and shaded face are suggestive of masculine qualities and along with the cigarette she is holding, a traditional phallic symbol, make her gender identity more ambiguous. Whilst for women, especially prostitutes and grisettes, to be smoking in Paris was not as scandalous as their English counterparts, du Maurier’s English readership would have been able to read the gendered coding of the image of Trilby smoking. As Dolores Mitchell acknowledges: “by the third quarter of the century, with cigarettes cheaper and more easily available, increasing numbers of women suffragists and new women adopted smoking as a highly visible way to challenge stereotypes about ‘natural’ female behaviour” (3). With the surfacing of the New Woman and her commandeering of the cigarette in the 1890s, attitudes towards the smoking woman shifted. Only once she gives up this status – “No more cigarettes for Trilby O’Ferrall” (87) – can Trilby pass through from the margins of bohemian French society, finally ending up in London. As Trilby becomes more of a womanly and domestic figure she gradually loses her New Woman identity and appropriates a more conventional type of Victorian womanhood. My feeling with regard to this novel is that it is conflicted in the way it buys into and satirises the New Woman figure. On the one hand du Maurier’s jumbled proto-feminist position seems to be speaking for the fallen woman in his treatment of subjects like sexual experience and sexual passion, and on the other hand the novel is activated by old-fashioned romantic, domestic and family feelings about love, marriage and the home. The complicated effect and shift in tone and direction with regard to Trilby’s metamorphosis is the subject of an extended examination hereafter.
‘There were two Trilbys’-

Trilby’s rendering of women as the inspiration for, and subject of, art is fitting for a thesis that investigates how popular fiction and aesthetic culture collide. Du Maurier’s version of feminine beauty is more closely imbricated in an art world, albeit a fictional one, than in the novels discussed earlier. Before turning to more general discussion of Trilby as a female aestheticised commodity, the ‘two Trilbys’ must be observed individually, for these versions of the same character offer different readings of the aestheticising and commodifying of women in a fin-de-siècle context. Unlike Nell, Clara, Vere and Pauline in earlier novels, Trilby is not valued for her virginal purity. Instead it is her beauty and ‘Trilbynes’ that comes to be prized the most. Her working-class origins also set her apart from the other women in this thesis. Despite her less than noble breeding, Trilby is a beautiful woman, and her beauty is variously aestheticised and commodified. However, Trilby is not merely an aestheticised object. At the beginning, “she is an assertive androgyne who challenges and threatens traditional Victorian concepts of gender and sexuality” (Nicole Therese Petroski i). I examine Trilby’s metamorphosis from New Woman to classical Greek goddess in order to contextualise these two different Trilbys.

From her early incarnation as a “most beautiful highland lassie of low degree” (27), Trilby undergoes a peculiar metamorphosis over the course of the narrative, what Laura Vorachek refers to as “from savage to diva” (205). In fact, the narrator wants us to think of Trilby as a kind of Mary Magdalene figure, one that has turned her back on her past indiscretions in order to function more advantageously in a higher social class, that of the English artists and their associates. Recounting Trilby’s earlier ‘downward career,’ the narrator puts Trilby in the same category as Mary Magdalene, and on her behalf, informs the reader that that she has repented and is worthy of forgiveness — she is a “poor fallen sinner” (111). Trilby’s “dawning of self-respect” (87) manifests in her altered behaviours. As Vorachek notes: “In response to her evolving relationship with the three artists, she changes both mentally and physically, becoming more properly feminine with pale skin, long hair, and more refined conversation” (201). Her circle of friends observe “a gradual and subtle change in Trilby” (88).

Trilby’s emergent ‘Englishness’ is what makes her a more acceptable member of this community, at least in the narrator’s eyes. Part of Trilby’s change is physical but part of it is also a change in behaviour. She becomes more refined, less ‘ferral’: “she grew more English every day; and that was a good thing” (64), and secures her place within the cult of domesticity. A change in dress also accompanies Trilby’s social and physical metamorphosis.

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in the novel. As the narrator remarks: “Trilby on this occasion came out in a new character, *en demoiselle*, with a little black bonnet and a grey jacket of her own making . . . she might have been the daughter of an English dean . . .” (70). Yet another facet of this transformation is physical. The narrator observes a positive change in her beauty:

She grew thinner, especially in the face, where the bones of her cheeks and jaws began to show themselves, and these bones were constructed on such right principles (as were those of her brow and chin and the bridge of her nose) the improvement was astonishing, almost inexplicable (90).

The use of the word ‘improvement’ candidly connotes an assenting judgement on the part of the narrator. Like Nell in *Cometh up as a Flower*, the change in the heroine’s physical size enhances her natural beauty to the point where other people acknowledge this change. Trilby further enhances her femininity by growing her hair, and as a result, her ears are revealed and her mouth becomes “firmer and sweeter” (90).

Another important aspect of Trilby’s metamorphosis from a working-class bohemian to a lady and artist is her awareness of this process. The inciting incident which provokes such a response is her realising Little Billee’s horror at her posing ‘in the altogether’ whereby Trilby discovers a “new-born feeling of shame” (82). The accompanying illustration for this event, entitled, “Repentance” (84), depicts Trilby lying “disconsolate on her bed all that day” (83).

In a novel which places much emphasis on the physicality of its characters it is apposite that the heroine experiences moments such as this corporeally. Later, Trilby acknowledges her overall metamorphosis in a positive way: “You have changed me into another person” (133). Admittedly this acknowledgement comes in the form of a farewell letter to Taffy after her broken love affair with Little Trilby. From here on, Trilby physically disappears from the narrative, but re-emerges later as another version of herself: La Svengali. Thus, her change in identity matches her change in physicality. Her altered appearance is even more apparent upon her re-entry in the novel, as the narrator points out: “her face was thin, and had rather a haggard expression, in spite of its artificial freshness . . .” (209). Anna Krugovoy Silver attributes Trilby’s increasing slimness to her being a victim of the vampiric Svengali: “Trilby’s new thinness represents her acceptance of selfless, passive femininity” (128). Trilby has gone from being natural and free-spirited to being artificially enhanced like some of the women we have already encountered in Ouida’s *Moths*. Other dramatic physical changes include: “well-marked differences. Her face was narrower and longer, her eyes larger, and their expression not the same; then she seemed taller and stouter, and her shoulders broader and more drooping, and so forth” (222). The tension of opposites apparent in this description relates carefully to the tension between the two versions of Trilby. The affectation of her
appearance is referred to as being disfiguring whereby the rouge and pearl powder meant to cover up Trilby’s ageing appearance instead make her appear grotesque to her three British friends (261)

Her decline is marked by other changes and her descent into ill-health is signposted by an ailing appearance: “they had not failed to note how rapidly she had aged, now that they had seen her without her rouge and pearl-powder; she looked thirty at least—she was only twenty-three” (261). Albeit, Trilby’s ageing does little to diminish her beauty: on the contrary it enhances it and she is remarked to have been “more of a siren than ever” (261). The reader must recognise the signs foreshadowing Trilby’s death: “she lost weight daily; she seemed to be wasting and fading away from sheer general atrophy” (264). The cause of Trilby’s illness remains a mystery; the only indication that it is fatal comes from the narrator’s remark: “it soon became evident, whatever her disease might be, Trilby had but a very short time to live” (266). In Trilby the process of death is an aesthetic one with the dying heroine growing more and more beautiful in the eyes of her acquaintances: “in spite of her increasing pallor and emaciation – her skin was so pure and white and delicate, and the bones of her face so admirable!” (266). Du Maurier is being sardonic here by parodying the popular romance novel’s propensity to aestheticise its dying heroine in the style of Rhoda Broughton’s deathbed scenes. Furthermore the collective observation of, and engagement with, Trilby, on her sickbed serves to underline this notion. The accompanying illustration, ironically entitled, “A Throne in Bohemia” shows the men going about their daily artistic occupations while Trilby lies placidly on her sick bed. With her beauty reaching a ‘pathetic’ stage, and completing her metamorphosis, Trilby continues to upgrade herself. Her redemption is complete. She regrets sitting for the figure because of its implications for her earlier social disenfranchisement from Little Billee’s family (274). Du Maurier, in a sense, moralises and rebukes his heroine for her earlier choices, a popular trope in Victorian fiction as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar acknowledge:

Whether she becomes an objet d’art or a saint, however, it is the surrender of her self –of her personal comfort, her personal desires, or both – that is the beautiful angel-woman’s key act, while it is precisely this sacrifice which dooms her both to death and to heaven (25).

Going from a woman who “thoroughly knew her own mind” (60) to a victim of mind control, Trilby epitomises the ultimate passive object.

The idea of beauty is dominant in the novel, not only within the context of art but as it applies to women. While Trilby’s beauty is almost enough of a redeeming quality for Mrs Bagot to think about her as a wife for her son, Little Billee makes his thoughts about men
marrying ugly women very clear. Referring to the impending union of one of their Parisian acquaintances with the very plain, but very rich, Miss Lavinia Hunks, Little Billee declares:

Why, she’s deformed—she squints—she’s a dwarf, and looks like an idiot! Millions or no millions, the man that marries her is a felon! As long as there are stones to break and a road to break them on, the able-bodied man who marries a woman like that for anything but pity and kindness—and even then—dishonours himself, insults his ancestry, and inflicts on his descendants a wrong that nothing will ever redeem . . . (233).

Ironically Little Billee does not prove himself to be an ‘able-bodied’ man and his genetic lineage is secured instead through his sister’s marriage to the much more healthy Taffy. Such a Darwinist outburst seems rather out of character with Little Billee’s usually reserved nature, but at the same time provides an insightful example of his candour. Little Billee, with his ability to see “deeper into beauty” (24), is particularly susceptible to aesthetic moments. His initial reaction to Trilby gives some indication of his true feelings for her. He simply states: “I think she’s lovely” and goes on to scratch out his impression of her “angel’s feet” (20). Thus through the relationship of Little Billee and Trilby the pattern of combining art and love commences. Unfortunately his being a “well brought-up, middle-class young Englishman” (35) does not make for an ideal union with Trilby. When news of his engagement reaches his mother and the full extent of Trilby’s undesirable social background becomes clear, Mrs Bagot is quick to dampen the flames of her son’s passion for the “model for the figure” (124). While Trilby’s beauty does come into consideration as an attractive attribute (124) it is not enough of a quality to make her a desirable wife. Furthermore “Trilby’s qualities of head and heart and person” (132) are still not enough for Mrs Bagot and she persuades Trilby that she is not a fit wife for her son. It is not until after Trilby leaves that Mrs Bagot acknowledges Trilby’s good qualities and sincerely wishes that her son could marry her (129).

The language of art is used repeatedly to evoke beauty. After introducing Trilby as “a small bare head with short, thick, wavy brown hair and a very healthy young face, which could scarcely be called quite beautiful at first sight,” the narrator qualifies his statement by adding, “besides, you can never tell how beautiful (or how ugly) a face may be till you have tried to draw it” (13). Trilby is at home in the bohemian art world of the novel. She sits for many artists (61), she gathers artefacts to increase the realism of her friends’ paintings and even in the Englishmen’s studio she fits quite naturally in this space: “in a very short time she became a persona gratissima—a sunny and ever-welcome vision of health and grace and liveliness and unalterable good humour . . .” (62). Furthermore, her desire “to make herself
both useful and ornamental” (61) makes her both an object of use and exchange value, and also an ideal woman by Victorian standards.

Trilby is a professional beauty. In posing for numerous artists she enters into a circuit of aesthetic commodification through her being literally represented as an object of art. However, Trilby unseats the artist as the active agent when it comes to the relationship between a painter and a model. The binary of the male active artist/female passive model is turned around in this novel, most especially through the female gaze. Trilby in fact resists being objectified, unlike her alter ego, La Svengali. Despite its 1850’s setting, du Maurier’s *Trilby* shows itself to be a product of the fin de siècle in that it shares themes with other late nineteenth-century texts. For example, in the tradition of Michael Field’s poetry, du Maurier gives a form of agency to the woman being painted. By focusing on the subject within the painting, in addition to the painter, du Maurier has the potential to make a strong feminist statement on the tradition of the male gaze. Trilby’s gaze – “her grey eyes fixed on [Little Billee] with an all enfolding gaze . . .” (65) – makes her a dominant figure in the novel and emphasises Little Billee’s passivity. I would not go so far as to say that this thereby objectifies Little Billee but it certainly unbalances the power dynamic usually at work between a male viewer and a female viewee. By reversing the male gaze with its traditional associations of an asymmetric power relationship, between viewer and viewed, du Maurier strengthens Trilby’s dominance over Little Billee. However such an unsettling gender relationship cannot be sustained and du Maurier does not wholly succeed in unseating the artist as the active agent because of Svengali’s hypnotic power over Trilby, which I will revisit in a later section.

Female beauty has power to unsettle the binary between object and subject. In the poetry of Michael Field, particularly in the *Sight and Song* collection, there is a strong desire to capture female beauty. For example, “A Portrait” confronts what Krista Lysack refers to as “the ways in which portraits of women traditionally have been painted in service of a male viewer” (949). The desire to capture beauty in this poem is more firmly attributed to the woman who is being painted – “she will be painted, she who is so strong in loveliness” (Field lines 15–6) – rather than the original painter, Bartolomeo Veneto (1502-46). The established relationship between literature and painting is said to be this: “literature, it is traditionally held, aims to appropriate the vividness and immediacy of painting, while painting strives to replicate literature’s power to depict actions, emotions, and ideas” (Arden Reed 1). This blurring of the borders between image and text adequately accompanies this upsetting of the

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80 Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper, writing under the pseudonym “Michael Field,” typify the fin-de-siècle cultural landscape with their poetry that unsettled the duality of masculine and feminine constructs.
objectification of women through Trilby’s beauty and dominating behaviour. In the same way, Little Billee, despite his remarkable talents as a painter, is overshadowed by Trilby. She does this through a combination of forceful personality, and sheer size, as well as her commanding beauty.

The process whereby a model sits to be painted is called ‘posing.’ Jonathan H. Grossman interrogates this word, ‘pose,’ in a very energising way and links it to the Aesthetic Movement. He writes: “the Victorians placed the blurry word ‘pose’ in the charged intersection of identity, the body, and art. Models posed. The Victorian thus invented the attitudinizing and artistic meaning of pose that figured on the new disparaging use of ‘poser’ or poseur” (534–5). While du Maurier does use the term in this sense (182) it is Trilby’s ‘posing’ that I find most intriguing, particularly when it comes to her posing “for the altogether” (15). Du Maurier is attributed with coining the phrase, ‘for the altogether’ as a euphemism for nude modelling. Nudity is an encumbered concept in this novel. As Alison Smith points out, “association with female models, professional or not, and of whatever class, presented problems for aspiring members of the artistic establishment” (199). Little Billee’s mother shows her awareness of such a social expectation when she dissuades Trilby from marrying her son. Even though Trilby’s modelling ‘for the altogether’ and its implications of her lost virginity is one of the reasons why she is socially unsuitable to marry Little Billee, the narrator dedicates a lot of space to justifying why the nude form is a noble part of the art world. In particular he draws on the aesthetic theory of Walter Pater. Walter Pater equated the human form with works of art: “the aesthetic critic, then, 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” (Renaissance 4). Pater believed that the quest for beauty surpasses ethical or moralistic inclinations, and thus the narrator draws on Paterian reasoning in his own diatribe on nudity (66–69), especially when he notes: “all beauty is sexless in the eyes of the artist at his work . . .” (67). Du Maurier engages the artist in an amoral pursuit to capture the holiness of the female nude form in art through the deliberate conflation of language — nudity with religion.

Part of the narrator’s argument for the chasteness of the nude form includes references to Venus dropping “her garments and step[ping] onto the model throne” (67). Sandro Botticelli’s “The Birth of Venus” (c. 1486) is undoubtedly in the mind of the narrator here and not only underlines this argument, it is part of a common set of Renaissance images that spoke to the aesthetes and decadents. Amongst the plethora of Venus paintings, I am thinking especially of Walter Crane’s “The Birth of Venus” (1877) in which the nude figure is almost a mirror
Alison Smith argues that even though the nude figure is contained within the Victorian painting through reference to classicism and antiquity, there was still an impulse to separate the nude figure from the nude model (119), which makes a novel such as *Trilby* all the more disconcerting to its contemporary readership. Smith writes: “the references to antique sculptural prototypes which abound in the classicising paintings of this period functioned to establish a distance between the nude and the artist’s model, reinforcing the aesthetic idea of beauty” (119). This idea of femininity being on display, that is not so apparent in classical paintings and Victorian reimaginings of the Venus theme, is more closely connected to our impression of Trilby despite the narrator’s expositions that nudity is a holy ideal. The female nude was not limited to painting as Abigail Solomon-Godeau points out: “the female nude became a widely employed motif in all aspects of decorative arts and architectural ornamentation” (116). Furthermore, the popular culture version of the female nude took the form of lithographic prints which were purchasable and widely distributed, especially in nineteenth-century France (Godeau 122). Even though Trilby “could be equally unconscious of self with her clothes on or without! Truly she could be naked and unashamed . . .” (66), Little Billee’s fantasy of possession is sharply undercut when he sees Trilby as the object of a mass masculine gaze. His extreme reaction to seeing Trilby’s nude form in Durien’s studio is “like a blow between the eyes” (80). We find out that Trilby is happily posing for students as they reference a contemporary work, “La Source” (81). The experience proves forceful for both characters with Little Billee returning to Barbizon to find solace in art and nature, and Trilby feeling rather “disquieted” by his reaction (82).

Trilby’s physicality, and furthermore, the fetishising of parts of her body, lends itself to this discussion as well. In this novel, the reader gains a concentrated corporeal sense of the heroine. It is a well-known feature of the novel that Trilby is fragmented into various body parts in the name of art. As Nina Auerbach notes: “her size is so important in the novel that she can be parcelled into fragments with a self-contained and totemistic value of their own, such as her majestic (but not Cinderella-like) foot, or the awesomely cavernous roof of her mouth” (17). In this sense it is Trilby’s foot that becomes the fetishised object rather than her naked body. With Victorian modesty still commanding widespread observance, a woman’s hemline continued to protect her modesty. Victorian clichés of ankles and piano legs aside, Trilby goes against social practice by proudly displaying both of her feet in the company of gentlemen. Not that ankles were particularly erotic objects on their own, but even glimpses of

81 The painting for which Trilby sits for students to reference is Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres’s famous “The Source” (1856) which represents a bare-footed nymph of a spring posing in a neoclassical fashion. In her hands she holds an urn which pours water into the spring below. This realistically proportioned figure conveys both a sense of chaste nudity and anatomical realism.
a woman’s feet supposedly exposed her moral character. Trilby, within two pages of entering the narrative, kicks off her slippers to reveal: “astonishingly beautiful feet, such as one only sees in pictures and statues—a true inspiration of shape and colour, all made up of delicate lengths and subtly modulated curves and noble straightnesses and happy little dimpled arrangements in innocent young pink and white” (15). In providing such an enthusiastic description du Maurier deflects some of the immodest undercurrents of the scene. This moment is comedic and satirical, but also the clever use of the word ‘innocent’ serves to transfer the attention to the object rather than to the person, thus Trilby’s foot becomes separated from her character, and indeed takes on a life of its own in the novel.

Working around the restrictions of Victorian modesty, Trilby’s nudity can be contextualised within the artistic world, but her proud exhibition of her bare feet presents quite a different challenge to the Victorian reader. Du Maurier surmounts this obstacle by having the men immediately recognise the artistic quality of her feet. The narrator also waxes lyrical about the superiority of nature when it comes to producing works of art, arguing that the human foot should not be hidden away in disgrace but is instead “a thing of beauty” that poor “human art” cannot hope to emulate (15–6). The foot, being a work of art crafted by nature, is admired by the painters and Little Billee’s “aesthetic eye” is quick to recognise that it is a “charming object to look at” (15). In the opening chapter of the novel he takes out a compass and scratches out an outline of ‘Trilby’s left foot.’ He draws her foot from memory, but — “slight as it was, this little piece of impromptu etching, in its sense of beauty, in its quick seizing of a peculiar individuality, its subtle rendering of a strongly received impression, was already the work of a master . . .” (20). Du Maurier accompanies this little episode with an illustration that is simply entitled “Trilby’s Left Foot” (22) (figure 12) Despite its title, the illustration does not show Trilby’s foot or the drawing at all, but rather the artist at work.

While we have already been subjected to several images of marbled female arms over the course of this study, du Maurier undercuts this convention by transferring the attention to a foot instead of an arm. There is a certain ridiculousness about the frenzy Trilby’s foot creates which the narrator refers to as a “dazzle of a pair of over-perfect feet in an over-aesthetic eye” (35). Du Maurier is playing here; by reducing Trilby to an unconventional body part he undercuts the ‘marble arm’ literary cliché. What makes this artistic reproduction of Trilby’s foot carry even more currency in the novel is that when the three artists return to Paris some

82 In “Footnotes on Trilby: The Human Foot as Evolutionary Icon in Late Victorian Culture,” Christine Ferguson shows that Du Maurier’s attention to Trilby’s feet, a recognisable part of his parody of Aestheticism, has wider significances in terms of evolution and eugenics.
years later it is like visiting a relic from the past that still has a very real significance for them. By now the chalk sketch is framed and covered by glass but still looks “as if it had been done only yesterday!” (200). While the Laird and Taffy are touched by witnessing this little object, Little Billee, the creator of it, has no emotional reaction to seeing the image (202). The narrator also admits that this is not the only reproduction of Trilby’s foot in circulation in the novel:

All three possess casts of Trilby’s hands and feet, and photographs of herself. But nothing was so charmingly suggestive of Trilby as the little masterpiece of a true artist, this happy fluke of a happy moment. It was Trilbyness itself, as the Laird thought, and should not be suffered to perish (202).

The Laird’s impulse to preserve the ‘little masterpiece,’ a metonymic reminder of Trilby herself, leads him to try to purchase the building so he can own the wall that the image is set on. Trilby, or as she is better known by this stage, La Svengali, is a commodity — at the height of her fame plaster casts of her feet are sold (238) and “her photograph is in the shop windows” (243). As the narrator has earlier pointed out: “those lovely slender feet . . . facsimiled in dusty pale plaster of Paris, survive on the shelves and walls of many a studio throughout the world, and many a sculptor yet unborn has yet to marvel at the strange perfection in studious despair” (15). The sales of reproductions of her feet make her a part of the commodity culture landscape of 1870’s Europe. Trilby’s feet being sold as plaster casts is a signal instance of fragmentation and objectification, a process which also mirrors her being photographed for the purposes of advertising marketable goods in department stores. Her body passes into homes as bits and pieces of unrelated cheap saleable objects and therefore firmly situates her in the contemporary commodity culture at work in the novel.

In terms of ownership, the heroine takes Svengali’s name. If we read Trilby as an object of beauty, or even just an object to be owned, then the novel’s plot traces the history of her ownership, in the same way as it details the various buying and selling processes of paintings. With much focus on the buying and selling of paintings, especially those of Little Billee, can we translate this kind of reading to Trilby? Trilby as La Svengali serves:

As a primary instrument through which the novel explores unsettling, epistemological questions about representation and transcendence, as well as ontological questions about bodily boundaries. As subject and object, a prized artist and a victim of Svengali, she as well as her mesmerist raise questions of what society willingly sacrifices or ignores in order to enjoy an unusual form of beauty (Grace Kehler par. 1).
Returning to Michael Field for a moment, these poets believed that an object of beauty belonged to who loved it best (Lysack 1) and perhaps this kind of dynamic influences the relationship between Little Billee and Trilby, or Svengali and Trilby. Svengali exploits people’s willingness to buy an aesthetic experience. That the audience will pay for a ticket to see her perform live makes her purchasable. Her performance name, “La Svengali,” is a textual marker of her change in marital status but it also speaks to the way in which Trilby becomes even more of an object. The name, with its determiner, ‘La,’ admittedly not so conspicuous in the French, stands out when transliterated to English because it makes her sound like more of an object than a person.

On stage La Svengali exemplifies the ideal visual object of the consuming male gaze. Her first entrance onto the Cirque des Bashibazoucks stage creates an excited reaction from the audience. The actress or the female performer traditionally shares cultural discourse with prostitution, especially related to the display of femininity and the female body. Trilby’s entrance evokes Emile Zola’s Nana in her role as “The Blonde Venus”83 — whereas Nana’s Venus is later shown to be an all-consuming morally corrupting force, Trilby’s Venus is of a much more modest category and transcends the negative connotations of women on stage. A classical trope that was re-invigorated in the late nineteenth century, Venus has already featured in the narrator’s defence of nude painting. But the imagery is even more potent in the Madame Svengali phase. Labelled both the “Venus Anadyomene” (238) and “Venus of Milo” (244), La Svengali invokes the famed beauty of the classical Greek goddess and the popular subject of painting and sculpture during the Renaissance period in Europe. According to Psomiades: “to be female is to be temporally out of place, to move around in a modern world in an ancient goddess-like body, to possess a modern consciousness under which lurks ancient primitive instinct” (55–6). The dual identities of the ‘two Trilbys’ similarly trace a curious repositioning, from the new to the old, and there is a very complicated and mobile set of images around this complex cultural situation.

-Sensing Aesthetics-

As most of the textual analysis of my earlier chapters is concerned with visuality, it is refreshing to have the opportunity to briefly discuss here the relevance of hearing and sound.

83 In Nana (1880) Zola emphasises the sensuality of Nana’s partially-clothed body: “she gave a sideways flick of her hip, so that the curve of her buttock showed under the thin tunic and, leaning back, she held out both arms, thrusting her breasts out towards the audience” (14–15). The attention to Nana’s ‘shapely curves’ (14) signals her status as an object of lust. However, Nana is not at the mercy of the male gaze, on the contrary, she mesmerises the audience with the movement of her body; she wields power over them: “Nana had asserted her domination over the audience and she held every man at her mercy” (26). On the stage, and indeed off the stage, Nana possesses the ability to occupy a controlling subject position, even though she functions as an object of spectacle and consumption.
to aesthetic experience, and indeed to the aestheticisation of women in popular fiction. In amongst the extensive patterns of eye imagery that complement the artistic subject matter of this novel (6, 82, 162, 175, 298), music, somewhat of a factor in the characterisation of Corrèze in *Moths*, and Héloïse in *Wormwood*, also reigns supreme in *Trilby*. I will return to the subject of visuality in regard to Svengali’s hypnotism of Trilby, but first I want to focus on the aural senses.

The most obvious aural aesthetic moment in the novel is Trilby’s operatic performance in Paris, yet by then, music has already come to be heralded as an aesthetic force. Little Billee, the most earnest aesthetic figure of the novel, is particularly susceptible to the imaginative power of music. The first time he hears Svengali play Chopin his “heart went nigh to bursting with suppressed emotion and delight” (12). Coincidentally this moment of “beauty and meaning” overlaps with the arrival of Trilby into the narrative (12). Her intrusion into the studio occurs only just after Svengali and Gecko have ceased playing and while her presence takes the form of an odd assortment of garments from low culture there is no indication that this character will later prove to be just as awe-inspiring a musician. Svengali, with his “absolute worship” for the singing woman (43), is not deterred by Trilby’s tone deafness. He privileges sound over sight in the sense that “even beauty paled before the lovely female voice singing in the middle of the note . . .” (43–4), and upon an inspection of Trilby’s pantheon-like mouth, coupled with her atmospheric speaking voice, he is determined to train her to sing. Gecko recounts this arduous process:

> We took her voice note by note—there was no end to her notes, each more beautiful than the other—velvet and gold, beautiful flowers, pearls, diamonds, rubies—drops of dew and honey; peaches, oranges and lemons! En veux-tu en voila!—all the perfumes and spices of the Garden of Eden! (296–7).

If the imagery of Trilby’s voice is exaggerated it is also a listing of beautiful things in their own right.

The power of La Svengali’s singing voice is reportedly enough to drive one mad (169) and the ‘three musketeers of the brush’ are witness to the power of her voice when they attend her Paris performance:

> But her voice was so immense in its softness, richness, freshness, that it seemed to be pouring itself out from all round; its intonation absolutely, mathematically pure; one felt it to be not only faultless, but infallible; and the seduction, the novelty of it. The strangely sympathetic quality! (211).

Not only is Trilby’s voice depicted as a most perfect aesthetic instrument — it also breaks Little Billee’s curse like a “sudden curing of deafness that has been lasting for years (213).
Here du Maurier privileges the aesthetic supremacy of music over art by saying that “you did not require to be a lover of music to fall beneath the spell of such a voice as that” (213). In addition, the mass of images Trilby’s voice conveys/evokes, from streams, to flowers, to happy children, make clear that “no words, no pictures, could ever do the like!” (218).

Little Billee regains his “old passion” for Trilby when he sees her perform as La Svengali at her debut in Paris (223). La Svengali is “belle comme un ange” (170), and a “handsome woman, with hair down to her knees” (171). His attraction to her is restored and this time it manifests as a physical torment. Trilby in her glory, both in terms of sound and her physical presence, is enough to renovate Little’s Billee’s disability; he

in some extraordinary manner had recovered after many years, at the mere
sight and sound of her, his lost share in our common inheritance—the power to
love, and all its joy and sorrow; without which he had found life not worth
living, though he had possessed every other gift and blessing in such
abundance (262).

In addition Little Billee’s pure aesthetic sense returns: “his old cosmic vision of the beauty
and sadness of things . . . came back” (214). Unfortunately that gift is again lost with the
death of Trilby. The death of his ‘muse’ leads to his own protracted ailment, his: “long illness,
his slow and only partial recovery, the paralysis of his powers as a painter, his quick decline,
early death, his manly, calm, and most beautiful surrender” (288). I am not sure which part of
this death scene could be labelled ‘manly’ for his exit replicates Trilby’s equivalent passing
away. Trilby and Little Billee both have a complex relationship to the conventions of fiction,
romantic love, and the marriage plot. The book appears to endorse convention – Trilby is
prevailed upon to leave Little Billee – but undercuts its own position as this decision seems to
kill both of them, and presumably readers then, as well as now, wanted them to marry. In the
end, both Little Billee and Trilby die of a broken heart, like the lovers of *Cometh Up as Flower*. This kind of sensationalist core to the novel works as an aspect surviving from an
erlier understanding of love and beauty and sits alongside du Maurier’s partly satiric, partly
sentimentalised plot.

Trilby’s voice is a product of her physiology, and whilst I have given centrality to the
relationship of Trilby and Little Billee, one cannot disregard the “big hungry spider” (52) that
coaxes it out of her. His “bold, black and beady Jew’s eyes” (44) are the tools he uses to
beguile Trilby, firstly in a pseudo-healing situation, and secondly as a technique to create a
supreme singing pupil. Unfortunately for Trilby she has a “quick and ready susceptibility to
Svengali’s hypnotic influence” (53) and when she becomes isolated from the other characters
she becomes the perfect object of Svengali’s hypnotic control. For, “with one look of his eye
...Svengali could turn her into the other Trilby” (298) and this hypnotic process effectively aesthetically commodifies the heroine. Of particular note is the way in which Svengali reverses the Pygmalion progression from statue to woman: with one look and one word “she suddenly became an unconscious Trilby of marble, who could produce wonderful sounds” (299). Instead of bringing a statue to life he is able to convert a living woman into a statue even though the traditional implications of a statue being a passive object are somewhat compromised by the fact the marble Trilby produces ‘wonderful sounds.’ The aesthetics of this moment are also diffused when Gecko refers to her as a “singing machine” (299). As both machine, and producer, Trilby is more akin to the world of commerce and industry than aesthetics. Thus the novel’s earlier celebration of her singing voice seems rather superficial in light of this later development. It also puts the novel in its sociohistoric context in the midst of the conflict between economics and aesthetics because Svengali has trained La Svengali to be not only a singing machine, but a money-making machine for himself.

The scene at Trilby’s death goes some way to restore her aesthetic quality. Weakened and on her death bed, in this case an “enchanted couch” (283) in London, Trilby sees a photograph of her former master with his “big black eyes . . . full of stern command” (282). The result of this cursory encounter is that she again falls under his hypnotic spell — her eyes are “fixed” (282). Even more disconcerting is that she begins to sing Chopin’s “Impromptu in A flat” (283). The narrator heralds her as a “consummate mistress of her art” (283) and her voice produces its usual emotional effects on its listeners. Trilby performs the proverbial ‘swan song’ and thus her death takes its place as one of the more memorable among those of Victorian heroines.

Remarkably Trilby the woman and Trilby the novel share a similar trajectory in terms of their place in popular culture as commodified ‘things of beauty.’ Kathy Alexis Psomiades’s Beauty’s Body posits a theory which I think is emblematic of what Trilby does as a text. She writes:

When aestheticism represents art as a beautiful female figure, it refers to an entire apparatus that characterizes femininity as private and domestic, spiritual yet sexualized; the irresistible object of desire and a certain kind of especially contemplative subject (4).

Trilby straddles the perceived high culture/popular culture divide of the Aesthetic Movement because she is at once revered and commodified. Trilby, the New Woman, makes way for Trilby, the lovely woman, which eventually gives way to Madame Svengali, a parody of the submissive woman. Trilby is a late book in the Aesthetic Movement and one which is quite conflicted or contradictory in its effects. While there is much valuing of art and artistic
endeavour, there is also a lot of movement in the narrative voice, and in the plot developments, between buying into Aestheticism and the cult of the ‘beautiful woman’ and satirising it by mocking aesthetic pretension and hypocrisy.

For all its anxiety about what and where true beauty resides, *Trilby* must be understood as part of a much wider process of the parody of Aestheticism in the nineteenth century. Four years earlier in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) Oscar Wilde depicted the Artist's Studio as a place of seduction and transformative power, (Lisa A. Golmitz 51) and du Maurier’s novel picks up on similar themes of sexual and gender transgression. Little Billee’s aesthetic ability is entwined with his effeminacy. Likewise Taffy’s athletic body is a “feast to the quick prehensile, aesthetic eye” (236). While “any degeneration signalled by Little Billee’s effeminacy is offset by his superior artistic talent” (Vorachek 199), it is only after the weaker member of the group is permanently removed from the narrative that the ‘three musketeers of the brush’ are disbanded and permitted to pursue normative, heterosexual relationships. As Vorachek notes,

Taffy is established as a highly masculine figure, muscular, strong, and brave enough in the face of war to amuse himself with physical games in the trenches. He is the only character to reproduce, thereby ensuring the race will continue, fathering three boys with Little Billee’s sister Blanche.

Appropriately, the soldier succeeds in the battle for genetic survival (199). The love between Taffy and Miss Bagot is shown to be the ideal relationship in the novel because, through them, “strength and beauty meet together” (du Maurier 141). Aesthetic value then continues to reside in a heteronormative relationship that secures Little Billee’s genetic inheritance through the marriage of his sister and her children, the paradox being that this new kind of artist does not succeed himself in the Darwinian sense.
-Conclusion-
Beyond Beauty

Let us go and lie on the grass and smoke cigarettes and enjoy Nature
(Oscar Wilde, “The Decay of Lying” 57).

In adopting the phrase, ‘women as aestheticised commodities,’ for the title of this study I intended to mark my indebtedness to Walter Pater’s argument against the commodification of art in that nature and human life are to be subjected to the same kind of aesthetic appraisal (28), and thus aesthetic experience should exist outside the range of any commercial market. The term ‘aesthetic commodity’ is an oxymoron and my understanding of this has come not only from linguistic determinacy but also from Pater, who, according to Josephine Guy, would have been in agreement: “art objects, then, are to be defined by Pater in explicit opposition to commodities” (161).

One goal of my project was to construct an image of the Victorian woman through the lens of Aestheti

(161).

Physical geography and the cultural implications of places and societies are motifs which emerge strongly in this thesis. In this thesis I have argued that the aestheticised female commodity in popular Victorian fiction is a site where discourses on feminine beauty are placed, contested and discussed. Texts were chosen for this thesis not because they were a convenient fit with the overarching theme, but because these books are in a continuum with one another as they reflect and engage with the changes in aesthetic culture in Victorian England.

Physical geography and the cultural implications of places and societies are motifs which emerge strongly in this thesis. In particular, the Western European settings of several of the texts and the almost universal absence of London create a remarkable tension between British Aestheticism and its European counterpart. With Paris taking the place of London as the urban centre of enlightenment in the novels of Ouida, Corelli and du Maurier, for example, both the popular mythology about aesthetics and Francophobia are permitted to flourish. In one sense these authors were probably deflecting decadent behaviours to non-British locales such as France, Poland, Austria and Russia, in order to ensure publication of their novels; besides which Ouida and du Maurier’s Anglo-French origins also allow a kind of displaced exploration of British anxieties.

The choice of two male and three female authors provides a rich vein of comparison in the way that they write about the aesthetic commodification of women under different conditions. The real contrast between the authors comes from the masculine writers being more playful, self-conscious and detached than the deadly serious Broughton, Ouida and also Corelli. It is of course noticeable that these similarities and divergences are contingent on each author’s frequently ambivalent reliance on, and critique of, Aestheticism. Relatedly traditional
ideologies of gender are put to work differently in that Meredith and du Maurier’s approach to the trope of feminine altruism is to create much more rebellious, strong-minded heroines, unlike the self-sacrificing female protagonists who inhabit some of the texts written by women.

As far as the relationship between gender and genre goes, however, the contrast between these authors is even richer when it comes to the way each of these texts has been received beyond the nineteenth century. Whilst in this thesis I track a progression from a focus on the sensation novel, to the aesthetic novel, to the anti-decadent novel, to the parody, I have also signalled the lasting popularity (or not) of each text. That Meredith and du Maurier ‘survived,’ in a sense, beyond the nineteenth century, both inside and outside of English department curricula, connects with what I have already signalled regarding their satirical and idiosyncratic take on the aesthetic commodification of women.

In Cometh Up as a Flower Rhoda Broughton’s heroine is a Pre-Raphaelite beauty whose striking self-representation embodies a natural aesthetic. George Meredith’s The Egoist extends Broughton’s imbrication of nature with natural beauty, re-energising it as a concept that is in conversation with Darwinian theories of natural selection. A close analysis of Ouida’s Moths has revealed a similar valuing of the natural over the synthetic, a re-valuing which the author sets to work in a commodity market that reduces women to objects of exchange. Marie Corelli’s version of male responses to female beauty in Wormwood condemns the immoral implications of the late-Victorian decadent movement, while George du Maurier’s parodic Trilby is caught between a discourse of the objectification of women through art and sympathy for women caught up in circuits of commodification.

Beauty has been employed in this thesis as a way of connecting five popular Victorian novels that have not yet been looked at together via this theme. This examination has yielded a number of interesting insights. First and foremost I have established that there is a particular form of commodification in marriage transactions that is dependent on aesthetic conditions. This thesis has tracked shifting ideas of female beauty and disturbance at commodification of women as aestheticised objects that corresponds to the thirty-year time period these novels encompass. However, within this shift certain ideas have remained the same. In The Egoist, Moths and Wormwood exists a fetishisation of female purity that is varyingly depicted as a male aesthete’s valuing of virginity, childishness and innocence. As I have already pointed out, the valuing of the virgin bride is an ancient social idea, but Meredith, Ouida, and Corelli introduce this ancient preference through a new discourse of commodity culture.

A related idea, the fragmentation of the female body, is characteristic of all the novels under investigation in this thesis. In most cases the author enacts a representation of hair, lips,
eyes and hands (not to mention marbled arms) through dead metaphors and synecdoches, which paradoxically emphasise and deflate the heroines’ physicality. I have shown that the fetishisation of beautiful women is not limited to popular fiction and I have given examples of poetry and paintings that were widely known at the time. The Victorian public were constantly bombarded with visual and textual examples of feminine beauty so it was a preoccupation not just of the five novels under review here.

In *Cometh Up as a Flower* and *Moths* a marriage based on a husband’s aesthetic choice is shown to be a destructive choice with Nell dying of consumption and Vere suffering several miscarriages. So, too, *Wormwood* and *Trilby* have added their own valuing of nature over ‘the artificial,’ and the heroines of these novels can only escape from their decadent and commercial environments through death. Vere and Clara, however, are offered a second chance at marital happiness in *Moths* and *The Egoist*, and the relationships between Vere and Corrèze, and Clara and Vernon, as they are respectively venerated by the natural environment, offer a brilliant promise of the future. Through my reading of each of these texts I have come to conclude that romantic relationships based in nature, and in harmony with the natural world, have a better chance in the Victorian popular novel.

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The recent *Cult of Beauty* exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and the Musée D’Orsay in Paris attracted over half-a-million visitors, led to numerous articles and reviews in British magazines and newspapers, and even inspired two Pre-Raphaelite-styled photography shoots that used red-headed models to display modern versions of artistic-style clothing in fashion editorials for *Vogue* magazine and the *Financial Times*. “This is such an extraordinary exhibition to me because it has so many paintings that are part of the fabric of our knowledge, culture and life. It’s just lush” (“The Cult of Beauty Private View”), wrote Suzy Menkes, a fashion editor for the *International Herald Tribune*.

Sales of vintage-style commodities have soared and everyone seems to be going mad over Victorian-style ornaments, houses, weddings, clothing, high teas, and hairstyles. I cite in particular the example of William Morris and the craze for his designs, which has not yet subsided — you can purchase Morris & Co patterned tea towels, cushions, and coasters, as well as fabrics and wallpapers in his original patterns. So, too, Oscar Wilde’s plays are reinvigorated all over the world, his epigrams persistently quoted and his image used to sell anything from stationery to foodstuffs. In such ways Aestheticism continues to capture our

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84 138,032 people saw the exhibition in London, with a further 424,414 in Paris (Nadia Holland, “Re: Cult of Beauty Exhibition.”)
imagination. Indeed while the commerciality of Aestheticism has been given a new face in the twenty-first century, the visual quality of the movement transcends time and has been repeatedly re-energised in the modern era.

Queen Victoria may have passed away in the first year of the twentieth century but that does not mean that sentiments and attitudes that we have come to label as being Victorian died with her. Decadence and fin-de-siècle culture as an extension of Aestheticism appeared beyond the end of the Victorian period as Fiona MacCarthy last year pointed out:

Did aestheticism lead anywhere? Of course it did. Morris’s total despair was premature. The cult of beauty was certainly destabilised by the Wilde trials of 1895 and his subsequent imprisonment, events which bore out the public’s worst suspicions of the sexual transgressiveness inherent in the movement. But this was really just a temporary blip in the socially progressive British art and design movement that gathered strength in the Arts and Crafts workshops and the garden cities of the early 20th century (“The Aesthetic Movement”).

In the past, the late Victorian and early Modern periods have been viewed in opposition with each other, whereas there are many complicated strands connecting the two. Jessica R. Feldman’s *Victorian Modernism: Pragmatism and the Varieties of Aesthetic Experience* (2002) makes some advances in this new way of understanding the relationship between Victorianism and Modernism. Given that the popular concerns of Aestheticism did not just stop at the end of the century, what emerges from this understanding is a complex valorising of the Victorian aesthetic.

We see this overlap most clearly in E.M Forster’s *A Room with a View* (1908), a novel that on the surface appears to be an Edwardian romance combined with a female coming-of-age narrative. Lucy Honeychurch, a victim of the repressed culture of Edwardian England holidays in Italy with her chaperone, a model of Victorian conventionality, Charlotte Bartlett. Coming into contact with Mr Emerson and his son George, who stand in for progressive values of the turn-of-the-century, goes some way towards liberating Lucy from old-fashioned Victorian values. In Part Two Forster relocates his characters to an English village in Surrey where Lucy faces the choice between marrying Cecil Vyse or George Emerson, her dilemma captured sardonically by the narrator: “Lucy loved Cecil; George made her nervous; will the reader explain to her that the phrases should have been reversed?” (132). While George and Cecil represent a binary of the superficial versus the natural, the novel stops us having clearly defined roles for the characters. Cecil is conscious of his decadence (85), and through him, Forster encourages the reader to question where true aestheticist ideals lie.
The chapter “Lucy as a Work of Art” draws on a discourse of the aestheticisation of female beauty witnessed in my earlier chapters, but charges this with new ironic meaning in light of its post-Victorian context. When Cecil attempts to kiss Lucy beside the ‘Sacred Lake’ it does not live up to his expectations of living one’s life as a work of art. Lucy is standing “flower-like by the water,” but her reply is “inadequate,” and their embrace is a “failure” (101). Indeed Cecil’s conception of passion is subject to the same kind of rules that govern aesthetic experience proposed by the likes of Pater or Wilde: “passion should believe itself irresistible. It should forget civility and consideration and all the other curses of a refined nature” (101). Admirers of George Meredith no doubt see his Comic Spirit at work in Forster’s novel as Cecil, in striving to make his life a work of art, like Sir Willoughby, does not realise that the Meredithian Comic Muse is working against him rather than collaborating with him (Malcolm Bradbury xx).

Forster, an author whose popularity has outlasted even the time in which he was writing, is dependent on key concerns of Aestheticism and decadence that go some way to assisting a transition between Victorianism and Modernism. One way that *A Room with a View* leaves behind Ruskin and high Victorian aesthetics is to privilege the decadent theme of wanting to explore Italy without a Baedeker guidebook. Forster sets up a flâneur, or sometimes flâneuse, approach of engaging with the Italian city of Florence within a paradigm of Aestheticism that takes over from the old Ruskinian notion of aesthetic experience. For example Eleanor Lavish, a novelist, shows Lucy the backstreets of Florence and forbids her from consulting her guidebook — “I shan’t let you carry it. We will simply drift” (17). Lucy is not completely comfortable with this kind of tourist experience and her uneasiness is compounded when Eleanor disappears and there is no one to tell her which of the sepulchral slabs would have been “most praised by Mr Ruskin” (19). Unfortunately for Lucy, Mr Emerson offers no help either. When she asks him – “do you know which is the tombstone that is praised by Ruskin?” (24) – his only solution is to try and guess which one it might be.

Art is central to the everyday experience of the characters of *A Room with a View* yet one of the episodes which marks Lucy’s transition into womanhood is when she tumbles down a bank into a Florentine field of flowers. “Light and beauty enveloped her” (62) and Lucy experiences an aesthetic moment of natural beauty. When George contemplates the sight of her he is moved to kiss her passionately: “he saw radiant joy in her face, he saw flowers beat against her dress in blue waves. The bushes above them closed. He stepped quickly forward and kissed her” (63). Forster is able to synthesise art, beauty, nature, and love in a way which the other novels in this thesis were not yet able to do. In the end, he relocates his happily married couple back to Italy where social boundaries are flexible and romance can
flourish, thus dismissing the Victorian idea of what is proper in society, and where Lucy and George’s shared aesthetic taste is especially determined by their love of views. However much the Modernists may have claimed they re-invented everything, the triumph of nature in this novel shows the continuing power of the themes discussed in my earlier chapters.
Appendix

Figure 1
“Ophelia”
John Everett Millais
1851–2, oil on canvas
76.2 cm × 111.8 cm
Tate Gallery, London

Figure 2
“A Huguenot on St Bartholomew’s Day, Refusing to Shield Himself from Danger by Wearing the Roman Catholic Badge”
John Everett Millais
1851–2, oil on canvas
92.71 cm × 64.13 cm
Private collection
Figure 3
“Lady Lilith”
Dante Gabriel Rossetti
1863, oil on canvas
96.5 cm × 85.1 cm
Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington, Delaware

Figure 4.
“The Beguiling of Merlin”
Edward Burne-Jones
1872–7, oil on canvas
186 cm × 111 cm
Lady Lever Art Gallery, Liverpool
Figure 5
“L’Absinthe”
Edgar Degas
1875–6, oil on canvas
92 cm × 68 cm
Musée d’Orsay, Paris

Figure 6
“The Blue Bower”
Dante Gabriel Rossetti
1865, oil on canvas
90 cm × 69 cm
Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham
Figure 7
“The Garland (La Ghirlandata)”
Dante Gabriel Rossetti
1873, oil on canvas
116 cm × 88 cm
Guildhall Art Gallery, London

Figure 8
“Veronica Veronese”
Dante Gabriel Rossetti
1872, oil on canvas
107.9 cm × 86.3 cm
Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington
Delaware
Figure 9
“Babylonian Marriage Market”
Edwin Long
1875, oil on canvas
305 x 173 cm
Royal Holloway College, London

Figure 10
“Au clair de la lune”
George du Maurier
1894, wood engraving
10 cm x 6.9 cm
*Trilby* as serialised in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, 89 (June 1894): 78
Scanned image and text by Philip V. Allingham
Figure 11
“The Café Concert”
Édouard Manet
1878, oil on canvas
47.5 × 30.2 cm
Walter Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland

Figure 12
“Trilby’s Left Foot”
George du Maurier
1894, wood engraving
14 cm x 8.5 cm
Trilby as serialised in Harper’s New Monthly Magazine, 88 (January 1894): 179
Scanned image and text by Philip V. Allingham
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