The New Woman and the Empire

Jusova, Iveta

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ITERARY promoters and protagonists of the British *fin-de-siècle* women’s movement, as illustrated in the preceding chapter concerning Sarah Grand, were hardly exempt from the prevalent Victorian impulse to construct their ideas for a “new woman” upon the existing traditions and practices of British nationalism. The mediation of Grand’s feminist interests through her identification with the fears and agendas of the English upper class, her fixed and hierarchized concept of races and classes, and her investment in British colonialism arguably represent an instance of the New Woman looking to relocate herself in, rather than fundamentally reshaping, the existing sociopolitical cultural status quo. In suggesting the existence of such a tendency, I do not, however, wish to advance this scenario as an unchallenged overriding trend. As Grand’s feminist work can in large part be elucidated and explained through a consideration of her own cultural location, alternative positionings embodied by other New Woman writers hold out the prospect of differing approaches on many of the questions and issues taken up through my inquiries into Grand’s writing.

Compared to Grand, George Egerton’s (Mary Chavelita Dunne, 1859–1945) unstable social location, life experience of economically necessitated migration, and tendency to identify with the subaltern supplied her with a different, arguably more fluid, understanding of racial,
national, sexual, and class identity, yielding a model of womanhood and feminism with significant points of departure from Grand’s defense of culturally homogeneous imperial foundations. The circumstances of Egerton’s personal heritage—her mother being from Wales, her father a rebellious, bohemian, and penniless Irishman with scorn for conventional English tastes and values, and herself being born in Australia, where the relations between Irish and English populations were particularly vexed—served to problematize any simple sympathetic identification with English bourgeois interests and conventional sensibilities. While her feelings for Ireland fluctuated from passionate identification to abject criticism, Egerton’s distaste for the English, who in her eyes epitomized conventional morality and hypocrisy, was more consistently apparent. The main character in “A Cross Line,” the story (set in Ireland) that opens Egerton’s first book, *Keynotes,* seems to express the author’s own sentiments toward English culture when commenting thus on English literature: “It would be a greater book if he were not an Englishman. He is afraid of shocking the big middle class. You wouldn’t care about it.”

From her early childhood and on through her middle age, Egerton moved frequently, mostly for financial reasons. Born in Australia, she traveled with her parents to New Zealand, Chile, and Wales, before finally reaching Ireland, where the family lived until the mother’s death. Egerton’s childhood was spent in poverty, and she remained financially constrained throughout her mid-life (until she married her second husband, the drama critic Reginald Golding Bright). Although her father, Captain Dunne, served several years in the British army, his eccentric and rebellious character and Irish pride left him ambivalent toward the British imperialist project and ill-prepared to deal successfully with his financial circumstances. He seems to have lacked the bourgeois sensibilities and the sense of identification with middle-class morality (and its emphasis on restraint, asceticism, and purity) that were considered, as Ann Stoler has pointed out, essential for the proper representation of the British as culturally “superior” in the colonies. His disregard for conventions and middle-class values encouraged Egerton’s own disdain for conventional lifestyles and thinking. However, these same eccentricities also contributed to keeping the family in permanent debt and perennially on the move. Egerton’s experience with colonialism was thus fundamentally different from Grand’s sheltered life in the colonies. Although white, Captain Dunne’s family was also Irish and poor—two qualities that distinguished it from the European colonial elite and that brought young Egerton into direct, everyday contact with people of various cultural backgrounds in the colonies and later with
the poverty of Dublin streets. Egerton’s experience is reflected in her characters’ restlessness; in frequent images of unrestrained hybridization; and in the sense of liminality, transition, and homelessness conveyed by her writing. Purity was not one of Egerton’s concerns; intermixing (of races, classes, genders, and sexes) was not in her writing accompanied with anxieties or controlled by artificial codes, but was instead depicted as an everyday experience. Her decision to run off to Norway with Henry Higginson, an eccentric married adventurer, suggests that her disregard for conventions included dismissal of the traditional restraints on feminine behavior. Upon his death Higginson bequeathed her 220 pounds annually, and thus the only steady income that Egerton seems to have earned originated from her adulterous relationship.

A year spent at a Roman Catholic convent school in Germany when she was eighteen provided Egerton with a lasting hatred for Catholicism, organized religion, and the ascetic lifestyle. She was sent to Germany with money spared from 50 pounds provided by Admiral Bynon (her mother’s uncle living in Chile) for her mother’s funeral. Quite untraditionally, Captain Dunne decided to spend the money on his daughter’s rather than his sons’ schooling. Although Admiral Bynon’s connection to the family was distant, he provided another link between British imperialism and Egerton. Like the rest of Latin America, soon after achieving political independence from Spain, Chile turned gradually during the nineteenth century into a British economic colony. The British navy in the region, in which Egerton’s uncle was highly positioned, was considered a salient reminder for other European powers of the strength of British armed forces and was expected to protect British economic interests in Latin America. However, Egerton managed to turn the only money the family seems to have received from the rich colonial uncle toward quite anticOLONIAL (or at least antibourgeois) ends—she developed a loathing for religion and learned the German language, which would later enable her to discover Nietzsche (the arch-critic of bourgeois morality) long before his philosophy became known to English readers. Furthermore, the German convent became a model for the girls’ boarding school portrayed in Egerton’s “The Psychological Moment at Three Periods” (Discords), where she quite ingeniously describes the construction and manipulation of (homo)sexual desires in girl-pupils through restriction of their free socialization with other girls and through constant surveillance by convent sisters. In a manner perhaps foreshadowing Michel Foucault’s historical studies of cultural disciplinary practices, Egerton’s story exposes the nuns’ manipulation of their pupils’ infatuation with them in order to assert discipline.
Prior to the appearance of *Keynotes* in 1893, Egerton thus had spent most of her life living abroad, largely indifferent to English cultural currents, surrounding herself instead with German and Scandinavian literatures generally unknown to the English public. The literary discourses that informed Egerton’s early texts were consequently distinct from the ideological and narrative frameworks that shaped Grand’s and other English authors’ writing, helping to make her work appear unique in England at the time. Whereas Grand’s feminist discourse was marked by the author’s engagement with theories of social Darwinism and with the narrative of degeneration popularized in England, Egerton’s short stories are informed by her interest in Nietzsche, his Scandinavian followers Ola Hansson and Knut Hamsun, as well as in Ibsen and Strindberg. The different discourses engaged in Egerton’s writing, combined with her unconventional upbringing and freedom to pursue outdoor activities, seem to account for the uniqueness of Egerton’s concept of individual and social evolution and of her image of a “healthy community,” which differed substantially from Grand’s. While Grand sought the path toward social salvation in ascetic morality, purity, and restraint, for Egerton those were the instruments of degeneration, alienating women and men from their “nature,” from their bodies and instincts. Grand and Egerton would agree in their critique of women’s conventional education and upbringing. For instance, in “Virgin Soil” (*Discords*) Flo’s harsh words to her mother, who had married her off to a promiscuous man at the age of seventeen entirely ignorant of sexual matters, are reminiscent of Grand: “you reared me a fool, an idiot, ignorant of everything I ought to have known . . . my physical needs, my coming passion, the very meaning of my sex, my wifehood and motherhood to follow. You gave me not one weapon in my hand to defend myself against the possible attacks of man at his worst” (157). However, while Grand would pursue solutions for women within the existing system (and be eventually engulfed by it), Egerton’s characters seek (not necessarily successfully) a way out of that system.

Her first collections of short stories, *Keynotes* (1893) and *Discords* (1894), made Egerton notorious for her explicit references to sexual desires in women and men previously excluded from the mainstream of Victorian fiction. This aspect of Egerton’s fiction, along with her pioneering exploration of the genre of the short story, has been at the center of critical attention for Egerton scholars.

My objective in this chapter is to examine the model of women’s subjectivity constructed in Egerton’s texts from the nexus of race/sex/empire and ascertain the location of her project in relation to Victorian imperial-
ist discourse. The post-colonial focus of my analysis suggests a prospective parallel with Laura Chrisman’s insightful examination of Egerton’s short stories, although many of my conclusions diverge from her arguments. I agree with Chrisman that Egerton’s articulation of femininity maintained rather than escaped hierarchical binary oppositions between nature and culture. However, unlike Chrisman, who concludes that Egerton’s texts metaphorically assimilated blackness in a manner discursively analogous to contemporary colonial missionary tactics, I argue that Egerton’s disrespect for conventional English middle-class values and sensibilities, her lack of direct investment in the maintenance of the British Empire, and her engagement with Nietzsche’s philosophy freed her to explore, in her early work collected in *Keynotes* and *Discords*, discursive strategies subversive of both middle-class values, and, in some instances, the colonial project.

**EGERTON’S APPROPRIATION OF NIETZSCHE’S CONCEPTS OF EVOLUTION AND ETHICS**

Nietzsche is the most frequent literary reference in Egerton’s texts, and soon after his name became known in England (particularly following the English translation of Max Nordau’s *Degeneration* in 1895), her writing was recognized as an application of his philosophies. Nietzsche’s determined denunciation of traditional bourgeois morality and institutional surveillance, his concept of the “transvaluation of values” with its reaffirmation of body, senses, and instincts, along with his explicit scorn for (particularly English) middle classes, understandably appealed to Egerton, who found in Nietzsche’s discourse a philosophy singularly in accord with her own life experiences. At the same time, Nietzsche’s derogatory or blatantly misogynist remarks concerning women (while encouraging her unrelenting censure of the feminine ideal) kept Egerton from uncritically adopting his philosophy in its totality. While Egerton’s interest in Nietzsche reinforced her alienation from conventional English middle-class ethics, it simultaneously implicated her writing in the narrative of evolution and degeneration that also fueled the dominant English discourses she disrespected. However, Egerton’s (and Nietzsche’s) interpretations of the evolutionary narrative were distinctly different from Grand’s.

Although Nietzsche was openly suspicious of contemporary scientists’ discussions and their claims of objective noninvestment, he did follow debates in natural sciences. He did not dispute the idea of evolution as
such and indeed developed his philosophy in dialogue with the theories of evolution. His famous concept of the “overman” can be interpreted as his alternative to scientific solutions for the perceived degeneration of “man.” Like many of his contemporaries, Nietzsche refused Darwin’s early assumption that the progress of man is guaranteed by natural selection. His argument, preached by Zarathustra, that instead of leaving further development of human species to nature, man must become an agent of his own overcoming resembles Francis Galton’s eugenics and the theories of selective breeding popular in Britain at the time. Where Nietzsche most departs from popular middle-class interpretations of evolutionary theories is in his conception of evolution as a sequence of ruptures and appropriations rather than as a gradual progress and, most of all, in his understanding of what would be the desirable direction of further human development. Nietzsche’s concept of evolution rested in reaffirmation of senses and instincts rather than in the ascetic repression of the body.

This is where the ideological similarities between Egerton’s and Nietzsche’s writings become most conspicuous and where they most diverge from the discourses that informed Grand’s narrative: whereas the English middle classes conceived of human evolution in terms of a further affirmation and refinement of spiritual and moral (“civilized”) values and a suppression of the sensuous, Nietzsche dismissed such values and repulsions as prejudices responsible for the decline of man’s greatness. Thus while the popular English theories of regeneration, which influenced Grand, called upon the disciplinary measures of state and church control to assert ascetic values, according to Nietzsche, traditional moralities, social institutions, and the entire concept of disciplining individuals needed to be disposed of and replaced with a new ethics, which would be self-directed and self-affirming, characterized by spontaneity and affirmation of the body. The traditionally pejorative term savage acquires in Nietzsche’s philosophy positive connotations, while the concepts of culture, civilization, and Christianity become suspect as instrumental in the destructive “domestication” of man’s spontaneous instincts through manipulation of socially fabricated concepts of guilt, bad conscience, and sin.

A similar inversion of values can be found when we compare Grand’s and Egerton’s writing. Whereas Grand subscribed to the prevalent imperialist concept of the progress of human species (that is, progress toward the cultivation of the spiritual, moral, and “civilized”), Egerton was suspicious about the idea of evolution in which “progress” would be synonymous with (man-made) civilization. Consequently, where Grand’s Evadne based her arguments about the desirability of women’s emancipation on her
knowledge of (patriarchal) scientific theories, one of Egerton’s women protagonists typically gives this advice to her acquaintance: “All the systems of philosophy or treatises of moral science, all the religious codes devised by the imagination of men will not save you—always you must come back to yourself.”

Egerton’s interest in Nietzsche’s philosophy is reflected in her characters’ freedom from feelings of guilt or remorse, their confidence in their own bodies, their nihilism and disapproval of organized religion, and their rejection of social control over women’s sexuality.

Nietzsche’s occasional use of biological metaphors and his acceptance of many racist prejudices from the evolutionary discourse that he interrogated implicated his writing in contemporary racism. Similarly, his ambiguous or misogynist comments concerning women make it difficult to consider him a profeminist writer, particularly since his remarks about women’s emancipation were directly hostile. At the same time, his opposition to institutional interference in the lives of individuals distances Nietzsche’s philosophy from the technologies of “state racism” that were becoming the major forms of racism in the late nineteenth century, and from “biopower,” a bourgeois political technology of controlling life that prescribed and utilized for political ends women’s sexual restraint. As discussed in my Introduction, Foucault points to the disciplining of individual bodies and the regulation of human populations as the major technologies (of biopower) used in the system of state racism—technologies that deploy the already existing popular forms of racism for the purposes of the European middle classes.

Nietzsche addresses both of these technologies—called by him “taming” and “breeding”—in a chapter of The Twilight of the Idols. By opposing here and on other occasions the principle of disciplining human bodies through moral institutions and by objecting to intrusions of the bourgeois state in all fields, including the production of populations, Nietzsche’s philosophy opposed the technologies of power that both supported the state form of racism and produced the restrictive feminine ideal. Thus although reading Nietzsche would not necessarily be an explicitly antiracist or profeminist experience for Egerton, it provided her with a much more radical philosophical framework than the popular English discourses of degeneration and femininity that informed Grand’s narrative. While Egerton could not easily elude an engagement with the prevalent theories of evolution and degeneration, her concept of evolution (mediated as it was through Nietzsche’s discourse) was distanced from the version popular with members of the English middle class, characterized by their fear of miscegenation and their anxiousness to separate themselves from “lower” classes and races through control of (women’s) sexuality.
Although Nietzsche's influence is discernible in most of Egerton's writing, her stories “A Cross Line” (*Keynotes*) and “The Regeneration of Two” (*Discords*) perhaps most conspicuously engage his philosophy, interrogating it from women's perspective and appropriating it for women. “The Regeneration of Two”\(^23\) is Egerton's most explicit intervention in contemporary discussions on evolution, as the title and the introductory epigraph—“Love is the supreme factor in the evolution of the world”—indicate. The protagonist’s optimism about the future of humanity, her celebration of physical activity and sensual enjoyment, and her rejection of conventional morality and of institutional control over the lives of individuals all suggest the author's engagement with Nietzsche's philosophy. Even more conspicuously, the story is Egerton's response to her brief relationship with the Norwegian writer Knut Hamsun and to *Hunger*, his nihilistic novel about a starving writer who lives on the fringes of society, acts on instinct, and seems to lack not only a sense of bad conscience but also self-awareness in general.\(^24\) But if Egerton was influenced by her reading of Nietzsche or Hamsun, she also critically interrogated the ideological implications of their censure of bourgeois moral values for women and appropriated them for her own purposes. Like the female protagonist of her story, who eventually surpasses and redirects the nihilistic philosophy of the male character in this story—the “poet” (initially her critic)—and redirects her own nihilism to the service of a community of outcast women and neglected children, Egerton also overcomes the limits of Nietzsche's and Hamsun's separatism and extreme individualism, as well as their misogynist implications.

The protagonist of “The Regeneration of Two” begins as an egocentric, discontented English widow (called here “Fruen”), living in Norwegian Christiania and searching unsuccessfully for a purpose in life. She refuses the options traditionally available to her as an English middle-class woman, including philanthropic work for “poor little niggers in Zanzibar” (166), organized by the Church, and the “English ladies’” suffrage movement. Fruen's character at the opening of the story is a mix of egocentrism and nihilistic disdain for “Society,” the Church, and philanthropy. The other major character in the story, a poor poet, resembles the homeless writer from Hamsun's *Hunger*, except that he is much more expressive and articulate in his dismissal of conventional society and morality. His eloquent objections to the religious notion of sin, to asceticism, and to bourgeois morality echo Nietzsche's arguments in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *The Genealogy of Morals*. The poet describes what he sees as ailing his society as follows:

\(-56-\)
Shall I tell you what I see? . . . a heart robbed of all healthy feelings by false conceptions, bad conscience, and a futile code of morality—a code that makes the natural workings of sex a vile thing to be ashamed of; the healthy delight in the cultivation of one's body as the beautiful perfect sheath of one's soul and spirit, with no shame in any part of it, all alike being clean, a sin of the flesh, a carnal conception to be opposed by asceticism. . . . Look down to the market-places of the world and watch the jugglers at play; the jugglers of religion and morality.25 (189–90)

The poet's criticism of women that follows, particularly of their interests in fashion, provokes Fruen's passionate reply, in which she reminds the poet of centuries of moral constraints on women's behavior and of men's role in the maintenance of the feminine ideal. This moment rouses her from apathy, and she decides to put an end to the moral coercion of the feminine ideal of restraint and self-denial in her own and other women's lives. When the reader meets her again after three years have elapsed, she is not the anemic woman in a restraining dress and corset from the beginning of the story, but a physically strong and self-confident woman, dressed in a crimson gown, which makes her look "very big" but "is spun and woven on her own place and she is very proud of it" (211). She is glowing with health and enjoying her healthy, muscular body. Most importantly, she has applied her rejection of bourgeois conventional moral values and femininity not only to herself, but also for other women's benefit, turning her house into a commune for poor women, gypsies, orphaned children, and social outcasts. Fruen not only decides that "from this out I belong body and soul to myself" (241) but also teaches the same creed to other women. Together the residents revive old home industries and grow most of their food—Fruen working along with the rest of them and enjoying it. The narrator's description of how the enterprise originated distinguishes Egerton's writing and philosophy from Grand's characters' fear of contact with women from different cultural and social locations: "It began when Captain Sorensen turned his pretty daughter out of doors. [Fruen] took her in, and kept her until the trouble was over . . . Then a gypsy woman brought her newly-born in her apron, and craved admission, and so the thing grew of its own accord" (205).

As Chrisman has argued, Egerton in this story emulates one of the scenarios common in the colonial narrative wherein a wearied representative of the English middle class becomes regenerated and replenished by a retreat from "society" into a "primitive" culture or lifestyle.26 Fruen remains the central figure from the beginning to the end of the story, while her
housekeeper/companion and the other occupants of her commune seem to be added only as witnesses of Fruen's accomplishments and goodness. Still, the story is remarkable, particularly when compared with Grand's writing, in creating a picture of a successful group of women managed by a woman who does not judge others by conventional moral standards and who, instead of religious repentance and ascetic self-restraint, prescribes music, dance, laughter, and cooperative work. Although this story is perhaps a utopian fantasy, Egerton here manages to draw a picture of what she would consider a healthy society and lifestyle for women and men. While she refuses the exclusive aspect of Nietzsche's philosophy, his fear of crowds (the working class), and his scathing criticism of women, Egerton applies his censure of bourgeois morality to expose and dismiss normative pressures on women's behavior and to picture a new kind of communal ethics.

GENDER, SEX, AND DESIRE IN KEYNOTES AND DISCORDS

Egerton's resistance to the bourgeois ascetic ideal of feminine behavior and duties and her engagement with Nietzsche's transvaluation of values and re-assertion of the body freed her discourse from the preoccupations with purity and racial and social classification characteristic of Grand's narrative. However, Egerton's exposition of femininity as socially constructed also entails a totalizing notion of the "essence of womanhood" that, even while it enables her to envision a socially transcendent experience of womanhood, occasionally leads her writing toward essentialism. Furthermore, Egerton's expressed assumption that underneath femininity there is a repressed but recoverable "woman's nature" re-asserts the traditional unproductive binary division between (female) nature and (male) culture.

This essentializing tendency becomes particularly conspicuous in the following passage, an inner monologue of the story's protagonist in "A Cross Line":

Ay, she mutters musingly, the wisest of them can only say we are enigmas. . . . They have all overlooked the eternal wildness, the untamed primitive savage temperament that lurks in the mildest, best woman. Deep in through ages of convention this primeval trait burns, an untamable quantity that may be concealed but is never eradicated by culture—the keynote of woman's witchcraft and woman's strength. But it is there, sure enough,
and each woman is conscious of it in her truth-telling hours of quiet self-
scrutiny—and each woman in God’s wide world will deny it, and each 
woman will help another to conceal it—for the woman who tells the truth 
and is not a liar about these things is untrue to her sex and abhorrent to 
man, for he has fashioned a model on imaginary lines, and he has said, “so 
I would have you,” and every woman is an unconscious liar, for so man 
loves her. And when a Strindberg or a Nietzsche arises and peers into the 
recesses of her nature and dissects her ruthlessly, the men shriek out louder 
than the women, because the truth is at all times unpalatable, and the gods 
they have set up are dear to them. (21–23)

Egerton in this passage depicts femininity as a masquerade, a play of 
appearances, upheld by women both for their own sake and for the sake of 
men. She also exposes (and manipulates) the cultural obsession with solv-
ing the “enigma of woman” and herself locates the key to the riddle with-
in “woman’s nature,” accessible (with some exceptions) exclusively to 
women—securing in this way her own credentials (as a woman) to speak 
with some insight on the subject. While disputing men’s ability to discov-
er the truth about women (masked by femininity), Egerton does not dis-
miss the notion of this truth itself.27 Anticipating the trend in twentieth-
century feminism (represented perhaps best by Hélène Cixous and Julia 
Kristeva), which assumes the existence of prediscursive (and subversive) 
femaleness and which seeks, as an alternative to the dominant patriarchal 
philosophical system, the “imaginary” associated with women’s bodies and 
sexualities, Egerton seems to consider women’s instincts and desires capa-
ble of resisting (and possibly even subverting) the repressive and manipu-
lating effects of civilization. Although suppressed by “culture,” women’s 
instincts (located in their bodies) remain, according to Egerton’s sugges-
tion, mostly unchanged, concealed, and preserved underneath the façade 
of femininity, providing a link with pre-industrial, pre-discursive “nature.”28 This assumed ability of women to resist on an instinctual level 
the repressive effects of civilization, along with their knowledge that fem-
ininity is a cultural product, provides a common bond among Egerton’s 
women that transcends all social barriers. For Egerton’s characters in 
Keynotes and Discords, the categories of race and class are less significant 
than the bonding experience of womanhood. Furthermore, the closer con-
nection that women supposedly have with their instincts and nature, an 
essentialist assumption, secures a privileged place for them in Egerton’s 
and Nietzsche’s philosophical systems, which both opposed the effects of 
civilization and looked for an “outside” to culture’s prohibitive laws.
Scholars commenting on the above-quoted passage focus on Egerton’s commendable exposure of femininity (gender) as a cultural construct. However, with the important exception of Chrisman, they tend to ignore the implications of her appropriation of the vocabulary and iconography of Victorian scientific evolutionary discourse in her description of women, her confirmation of the traditionally asserted affinity between nature and femaleness, and her totalizing gestures when speaking about womanhood. The connotations of the evolutionary vocabulary adopted here by Egerton might have easily colored the Victorian reader’s interpretation of her text, and the passage would then have simply reasserted the predominant placement of women on a lower level of the evolutionary ladder. Even if the inversion of values that Egerton performs here managed successfully to assert her intended interpretation of women and the “uncivilized” as superior, adjusting the reader’s interpretation of the evolutionary narrative itself, the result might simply be taken as an invocation of the old nostalgic and generalizing idealization of the “savage” and the “primitive.”

The totalizing notion of a true or essential womanhood and the notion of a precultural nature and body, free from institutional disciplining influences, in fact bind Egerton’s discourse to the traditional hierarchical systems of thinking that she seems to be attempting to escape. Both of these assumptions (inherited to some extent from Nietzsche’s philosophy) are, however, in the end undermined by Egerton’s own discourse. If Egerton subscribes to truth claims about womanhood, the pluralism and fragmentation of her writing end up locating this “truth” in the context of a plural and diverse being. Arguing that the truth about femaleness is located in women’s desires, Egerton creates in her stories a gallery of characters whose desires are as diverse as they are numerous. Some of her characters desire danger and adventure, others want children (usually without the husband), still others seek influence and power in their community, while some women aspire to achieve success in their careers. Despite the totalizing monological potential of her belief in the existence of an essence of womanhood, concealed beneath femininity, repressed by culture, and capable of disruptive disclosure (anticipating Freud’s concept of the “unconscious”), Egerton presents a pluralistic vision of these suppressed essences.

Egerton’s tendency to conceive of “women’s nature” as something that is precultural subscribes to the conventional notion of antagonistic dualism and division between (uncivilized, female) nature and (civilized, male) culture. Although Egerton inverts the usual hierarchy between culture and nature, celebrating the precivilized as superior, the adopted dualism reasserts the conventional idea of linear evolution. However, while she
explicitly asserts the notion of nature, sex, and desire as prediscursive and culturally and politically undetermined (unlike socially constructed gender), Egerton’s own writing exposes this postulate as impossible and locates presumably precultural “nature” and desire within a larger concept of culture. This argument has been expressed by Ann Ardis, who has pointed out that “nature,” as characterized in the following passage in Egerton’s “A Cross Line,” is presented as “something defined by culture as the place where culture’s most cherished ideas and ideals can be kept safe from history.”

She fancies herself in Arabia on the back of a swift steed. Flashing eyes set in dark faces surround her, and she can see the clouds of sand swirl, and feel the swing under her of his rushing stride... Then she fancies she is on the stage of an ancient theatre out in the open air, with hundreds of faces upturned towards her. She is gauze-clad in a cobweb garment of wondrous tissue. Her arms are clasped by jewelled snakes, and one with quivering diamond fangs coils round her hips. Her hair floats loosely, and her feet are sandal-clad, and the delicate breath of vines and the salt freshness of an incoming sea seems to fill her nostrils. She bounds forward and dances, bends her lissom waist, and curves her slender arms, and gives to the soul of each man what he craves, be it good or evil. And she can feel now, lying on the shade of Irish hills with her head resting on her scarlet shawl and her eyes closed, the grand intoxicating power of swaying all these human souls you wonder and applause. She can see herself with parted lips and panting, rounded breasts, and a dancing devil in each glowing eye, sway voluptuously to the wild music. (19–20)

This passage is the most frequently commented-on in Egerton scholarship. It is quoted by Sally Ledger, Gerd Bjørhovde, Lyn Pykett, and most other critics writing on Egerton as an example of the author’s unconventional openness about the erotic desires of her characters. Along with other similar episodes in her texts that acknowledge the existence of sexual desires in women, the above-quoted passage shocked Egerton’s Victorian audience, earning her a place among the so-called “erotomaniacs,” along with Ibsen and Wilde. Egerton here not only describes her protagonist’s sexual desires, but portrays aggressively assertive sexuality (with allusions to promiscuity) in terms unacceptable for Victorian middle-class women.

Although the quotation is one of the best examples of Egerton’s frankness about women’s sexuality, perhaps more crucially, it is also one of the
moments in Egerton's writing that expose “women’s nature,” desires, and imagination as historically and culturally produced—in contrast to her claims for an essential nature located outside of history and culture. As Ardis has emphasized, Egerton here places her protagonist’s dreams about free sexual and artistic expression in a different cultural context, thus exposing “nature” as “culture’s vision of what lies below or behind itself in a primitive or archaic cultural formation.” Female desires (the expression of “woman’s nature”) are, in Egerton’s story, displayed either as created by the cultural norms and laws by which they are also supposedly suppressed or as existing prior to culture, but describable only through language and metaphors borrowed from the repressive culture, and thus mediated by it and defined in its terms. The ancient and oriental cultures identified by Egerton here as places where women could express their drives and desires freely are the same imagined places where Victorians typically situated their desires and fantasies. Similarly, images of witches and gypsies, which frequently reappear in Egerton’s writing to epitomize sexual and sensual freedom from conventional Victorian morality and from assimilation by repressive civilization, were familiar images in nineteenth-century English culture, although they were usually marginalized and vilified. As Nina Auerbach has pointed out, although Victorian culture officially presented femininity and the cult of domesticity as desirable, Victorian dreams, folklore, myths, and legends were dominated by images of sexually independent and assertive women—often women of lower classes, exotic races, or hybrid species—who transcended the domestic space. In describing bewitching, assertive, and confident women who trespass the domestic space and yearn to join gypsy culture, Egerton thus did not step outside the English culture. Rather, she worked inside the existing culture, bringing the popular and tabooed from the margins to the center of the cultural discourse. She recognized (and appealed to) the sexual fascination of Victorians with forbidden transgressions and hybridizations and used these for her own purposes as a writer to manipulate her audiences. At the same time, she rejected the previous equation of “lower” classes and races and of the exotic and sensual with vice and baseness, thus lifting in her writing the Victorian taboo, which was in fact partially responsible for the construction of these images into sexual objects in the first place.

Another supposedly instinctual and inherent (pre-cultural) female “desire” frequently explored in Egerton’s writing is the maternal instinct. In one of his most essentializing comments on women, Nietzsche’s Zarathustra locates the truth about women in their maternal desire: “Everything about woman is a riddle, and everything about woman has
one solution: that is pregnancy. Man is for woman a means: the end is always the child.” Several of Egerton’s minor characters conspicuously express their maternal drives, some of them maintaining that they would have children if they could accomplish it without having to marry. However, if mothering appears to be a matter of congenital instinct with some women, it is described as being at least as “inherent” in many of Egerton’s male characters, whereas with numerous other women, the mothering “instinct” is clearly a matter of socialization. When she describes women’s sexual desires in “A Cross Line,” Egerton seems possibly unaware of exposing them as embedded in the culture she dismisses. When exploring the maternal instinct in her stories, however, she is much more adamant in suggesting that it might be culturally constructed.

Egerton’s “The Spell of the White Elf” (Keynotes) represents the maternal instinct (the desire to mother and the instinctual knowledge of child rearing) as constructed, as a spell, spread discursively from one woman to another.” This sense of discursive dissemination is reinforced by Egerton’s narrative strategy: the narrator is simultaneously a woman character in the narrative who relates to the reader a story told to her by another woman character. This narrative technique enacts a discursive chain of women passing confidences and life experiences as if from one friend to another; it creates the impression of a bond between the reader and the characters, leading the reader to experience herself as a participant in this chain. The main character, an English writer, tells another independent woman how she became possessed with a desire for a child upon seeing the daughter of her distant family relative. In the process of telling the story, she “contaminates” her listener (who is the story’s narrator) with a mothering desire. The central figure through which the spell of mothering is disseminated in the narrative is the “white elf,” an ambiguously described child. The white elf bears a startling likeness to the woman writer, and this is explained (in a bizarre application of hereditary theories) as resulting from the hatred for the writer by the white elf’s mother. As the protagonist describes it, “It was as if the evil the mother had wished me had worked on the child, and the constant thought of me stamped my features on its little face” (81). After seeing and holding the girl, the thought of her keeps disturbing the writer’s work, and finally she persuades the (impoverished) mother to entrust the white elf to her custody. A series of changes in her thus far bohemian household follows, making it perhaps more cheerful, but also more orderly and conventional. While watching the little elf sleep, the agnostic writer begins to doubt her religious skepticism and even asks her husband to teach the child how to pray. She has to
rearrange her bookshelves and begins for the first time to think of books in terms of appropriateness and inappropriateness for a child—as she says, “one can’t be so Bohemian when there is a little white soul like that playing about” (88). The purchase of the white elf’s clothes takes precedence before the writer’s planned acquisition of a “pragtbinding” of Nietzsche. And instead of publishing her collection of worldwide nursery rhymes as she has been planning, she tells them now to the child.

The narrator’s ambiguous attitude leaves the interpretation of the elf’s influence to the reader. The otherwise worldly and accomplished woman writer’s reflections on her ironic lack of competence in childcare serve to suggest that the elf’s influence on her life may have been for the better. But Egerton’s descriptions of the child as an almost malicious supernatural being, her disclosures of the spell originating out of the jealousy and antipathy felt by one woman toward a more successful one, and her fierce agnosticism and anticonventionalism in other stories contained in the same collection would all seem to suggest a more unfavorable interpretation of the elf’s influence: as a sort of contamination of an otherwise unconventional household by a convention-enforcing lifestyle.

The story ends with the spell being passed from the character of the writer to her listener (the reader’s narrator), who, upon seeing a picture of the elf and upon being wished her own little elf by the writer, becomes possessed with a desire to mother. “I can’t say she is a pretty child,” the narrator remarks about the picture, “a weird, elf-like thing, with questioning, wistful eyes, and masses of dark hair; and yet as I look the little face draws me to it, and makes a kind of yearning in me” (89). Hearing the story and seeing the picture makes the narrator decide to accept a marriage proposal that she has previously repeatedly declined. The narrative’s conclusion finds her busy packing her luggage, which also contains baby clothes. By retelling the story to her readers, the narrator participates in the discursive dissemination of the spell—upon reading the story, the reader, as a part of the narrative chain, might herself become affected by the spell of the white elf.

Anticipating some aspects of Nancy Chodorow’s theories of the reproduction of mothering, Egerton exposes maternal desire as socially constructed and passed from one generation of women to the next. The metaphor of the “spell,” employed to describe the unconscious processes through which maternal drive is disseminated among women, could be interpreted as Egerton’s playful inversion of the Victorian fear of contagion; this reading would also explain the author’s choice to describe the elf as white. The concept of contagion, typically used to imply the dreaded pollution of the purity of English middle classes by the “contaminated”
blood of “lower” classes/races, is re-deployed by Egerton to refer to a “contamination” of unconventional independent women by conventional morality through the contagious maternal desire (disseminated discursively).

Yet however original Egerton’s application of the discourse of contagion in this story might be, locating the source of the “contaminating” spell in lower classes validates the existing class bias. Depicting the relationship between the girl’s impoverished biological mother and the character of the middle-class writer as antagonistic, the story is reminiscent of some of Olive Schreiner’s fictional texts that depict white women saving African children from their presumably incompetent black mothers.37 This classist move is perhaps counterbalanced by Egerton’s other stories. On most occasions, she presents motherhood as one of the experiences that link women of different classes into positive rather than antagonistic relationships. Maids and housekeepers (including the housekeeper in “The Spell”), who are typically also their mistresses’ companions and advisors, are the main source of information about child rearing for many of Egerton’s protagonists, and their knowledge often provides them with authority that is recognized, rather than disavowed, by their mistresses and the narrative. In this sense, Egerton’s texts diverge from Schreiner’s fiction, which frequently depicts characters of black nurses (for white children) unfavorably and which presents the relationships between African nurses and white mistresses from the hostile position of the latter. While Schreiner’s approach, on the one hand, perhaps leaves more space in her texts than in Egerton’s writings for descriptions of strategies employed by black nurses in subverting the colonial domestic system in which they were being exploited by the white mistresses, on the other hand, it indicates some limits to Schreiner’s visions of universal feminism.

**FRAGMENTATION OF THE VICTORIAN NARRATIVE OF FEMININITY AND EGERTON’S FORMAL INNOVATIONS**

Egerton’s ideological positions, her disrespect for conventional morality and for the evolutionary discourse (or at least its popular interpretations), are reflected in her numerous formal innovations: her preference for the short story over the novel and her break with the traditions of domestic fiction. One of Egerton’s accomplishments was her combination of unconventional radical ideology with similarly unconventional formal strategies—compressed style, stream of consciousness, and narrative
ellipses. Her lack of interest in the popular evolutionary discourse and its obsession with physiological appearances is reflected in the attention given to her characters’ mental associations and fantasies rather than to extended descriptions of their outward features. While Grand endeavors to leave no doubts about the whiteness of her heroines’ skin, the purity of their blood, and the refinement of their taste, and devotes paragraphs to descriptions of her characters’ appearances, these were not Egerton’s concerns, and consequently her descriptions are condensed and less prominent. Perhaps not surprisingly, as her involvement with the English literary community grew (following the publication of *Keynotes*), the emphasis on characters’ physiognomy increased in Egerton’s later work.

Another formal characteristic of Egerton’s writing, which complements her limited interest in the popular narrative of progress, is the fragmentation of her narrative and preference for impressionist over chronological, explanatory, and conventionally structured storytelling. With the exception of her later autobiographical novel *The Wheel of God* (1898), and perhaps “A Psychological Moment at Three Periods” (*Discords*), Egerton avoided the popular narrative of the evolution of a woman’s character, employed so frequently by Grand. Instead of chronologically following the gradual progress of her character’s growth, Egerton prefers to render impressions of individual moments in a woman’s (less often a man’s) life, favoring such moments that abruptly (rather than gradually) shift the direction of the character’s life. Rather than chart linear evolutionary progress, her writings tell stories of ruptures, breaks, and sudden shifts. Perhaps when considered in their entirety, Egerton’s stories might be taken to cover all of the periods in a white middle-class woman’s life that usually make up the chronologically sequenced chapters in domestic fiction—childhood, girlhood and education, marriage, motherhood. However, rather than being interconnected or sequenced in a compact whole, progressing from an originary moment to closure, in Egerton’s writing the structure of impressions remains fragmented and temporally and spatially disordered. Egerton’s stories thus challenge the concept of linear time and the normative expectations of development and progress shared by domestic fiction and evolutionary discourse.

Not only in “The Regeneration of Two” but on many other occasions, Egerton describes intimate bonds between women whose behavior happens to meet the conventional moral codes and those who trespass the artificial line between what is considered socially acceptable and what is not. In sympathetically depicting women who do not meet the prudish requirements of morality, and in exposing and criticizing cultural attempts to
repress women’s desires, Egerton’s writing deliberately opposes the conventional educational goal of domestic fiction. While Grand embraced the old Ruskinian notion of the moral superiority of women over men and adopted the feminine ideal asserted in domestic fiction to justify her arguments about the leading role of (select) women in further evolution, Egerton’s interest in Nietzsche’s notion of the reassertion of the body and senses often sets her model of women’s behavior directly against the traditional restrictive ideal. Grand’s upper-class, morally upright heroines who judge themselves and others by their ability to suppress their desires and imagination are replaced in Egerton with a gallery of (middle-class or poor) protagonists, including women who have extramarital sexual relationships, women who are divorced or who have left their husbands, prostitutes, mothers of illegitimate children, as well as heroines who have resorted to abortion (Flo in “Virgin Soil”). The moral judgment against women “who have sinned,” which played an important didactic function in the education of feminine asceticism, is explicitly dismissed and replaced with their sympathetic portrayals.

Egerton’s conviction that society, particularly state and church authorities, should not interfere with individuals’ personal decisions and that the existing version of morality imposed by public institutions needs to be replaced with a new kind of individual and communal ethics is reflected in her characters’ lack of interest in explaining their decisions to others. Thus although the heroine of “A Little Grey Glove” (Keynotes) has been wrongly accused of adulterous behavior, she will make no defense to the public, believing that she should not be held accountable for her personal decisions to an outside jury. It might damage her reputation, yet the concern of the story is not with defending the woman’s innocence but rather with voicing an objection to the control of public institutions over women’s sexuality. Formally, this concept of personal ethics translates into a nonexplanatory style and preference for narrative ellipses. Unlike with Grand’s narrative, in which the motives of characters are always explicitly voiced and explained, the reader of Egerton’s stories must herself fill in many blanks. While Egerton’s writing is not entirely free of philosophical discussions of women’s emancipation from puritanical morality and explanations of their behavior, her characters are preoccupied with actually doing and living sexual freedom rather than with contemplating and arguing about it. They do not seem to feel they need the readers’ permission for their behavior, and thus they are not pressed to plead with them about the rightness of their decisions in lengthy philosophical passages. Importantly absent from Egerton’s stories are discussions concerning what kind of
woman would be most useful for the future of the English race and empire. Egerton’s characters, in contrast to Grand’s, simply do not seem to care about the future of the British Empire.

Egerton’s writing also parts with the conventional bourgeois denotation of gender lines in relation to domestic space, which typically banished women to the private side of the public/private divide. The concept of public and private spheres upheld in (if not constructed by) the Victorian novel holds little sway in Egerton’s writing. Her model of ideal community depicted in “The Regeneration of Two” collapses the division between public and private with a pre/post-industrial community farm for outcast women, which serves both as a home and as a place of production. When the division between public and private spheres is sustained, as in “The Spell of the White Elf,” it is turned upside down, with the wife working professionally and the husband staying at home and tending the garden.

Unlike the writers of domestic fiction, Egerton also favors in-between spaces as settings for her stories: steamers, transatlantic ships, boarding houses and temporary lodgings, crowded streets, abandoned gardens, and the woods. The drawing-room settings that appear in her writing are only stopping places on the characters’ journeys. Her protagonists seem to be more comfortable in overgrown gardens and woods than in parlors—a characteristic that was not lost on the author of a *Punch* parody of “A Cross Line,” who described his character (based on Egerton’s protagonist) as leisurely “lying on her back in a bog-stream.”

The lodgings, steamers, woods, and streets in Egerton’s stories are liminal places, which bring into contact (unexpected and uncontrolled) people of different classes, races, cultures, and sexes. The consequences for a character’s life that these interactions have, whether negative or positive, passing or permanent, are never described in terms of pollution or contamination—perhaps with the interesting exception of the passing on of a mothering desire in “The Spell of the White Elf,” discussed above. Grand’s obsession with purity and control of the contact between differences is replaced in Egerton with the promotion of intermixing and hybridization. Her women characters freely trespass the artificial boundaries and limits set by the social code in their socialization with prostitutes, maids, gypsies, homeless, and outcasts.

Given Egerton’s ideological position, it comes as no surprise that the fetish of white complexion, which in Grand’s narrative represented both her characters’ racial identity and their identification with the model of upper-class feminine self-denial, does not figure in Egerton’s writing. It is replaced with eroticized fetishism of women’s (brown, white, yellow, or dusky) hands. I agree with Margaret Stetz’s observation that the images of
women’s hands, obsessively recurrent in Egerton’s stories, signify her characters’ erotic potential.\textsuperscript{39} The confession of the male protagonist of her later story “A Nocturne” (\textit{Symphonies}, 1897) seems to suggest Egerton’s awareness of the attention paid to sexual fetishism in late-Victorian psychiatric discourse: “I belong to the race of men to whom temptation comes in the guise of little feet. An instep or ankle appeals irresistibly to my senses; I acknowledge it frankly; it’s damned odd, but I can’t help it—the appeal I mean. My friend Foote says, delicately perfumed lingerie is his weak spot.”\textsuperscript{40} While in this particular story it is the feet that are fetishized, in nearly every other piece of Egerton’s writing, images of eroticized hands are much more prevalent. Thus a letter from her lover, read by the protagonist of “An Empty Frame” (\textit{Keynotes}), lingers obsessively on the image of her hands: “I kiss your hands (such little hands! I never saw the like), slim child-hands, with a touch as cool and as soft as a snow-flake!” (118). Even more pronounced is the fetishism of a woman’s hands and gloves in “A Little Grey Glove,” where the male protagonist becomes bewitched by a woman with “the prettiest hands” (103) and, after she leaves, comes to worship her glove obsessively, as if it were a fetish-object of some early magical religion. The male character/narrator confesses to the reader: “The glove is lying on the table next me as I write. If it isn’t in my breast-pocket or under my pillow, it is in some place where I can see it” (96). As he continues, the erotic quality of his fetishist adoration becomes quite unmistakable: “It has a delicate grey body . . . with a whipping of silver round the top, and a darker grey silk tag to fasten it. It is marked $5/4$ inside, and has a delicious scent about it” (96). The hand fetishism is perhaps most conspicuous in “Under Northern Sky” where a young wife’s hands become an object of her husband’s sadistic obsession: “[he] closes his thumb and finger round her wrist, and laughs a rasping laugh. ‘Did any mortal man ever see such a hand? You witch!’ and he tightens his grip and she winces at his roughness. ‘There’ (with a softening of voice), ‘did I hurt you? you poor little thing, you queer little womany!’” (144).

After being explicitly eroticized on several occasions, a mere allusion to female hands (often “little brown hands”) carries an erotic association, thus serving as an example of Egerton’s use of condensation and descriptive shortcuts. While the emphasis on smallness of the hands would perhaps reinforce what for Freud came to be the conventional interpretation of erotic fetishism as a substitute for women’s “genital lack,” Egerton seems to stress the quality of men’s lack of control over women’s sexual attraction. Rather than self-restraint (as with Grand), Egerton emphasizes sexual excess—repeatedly employing the hand fetish motif in her renderings of
men driven out of control. Hands become a metonym for the unrestrainable excess of women’s sexuality and of spontaneous, almost accidental, endowment of women with sexual allure. While many of her female characters find this kind of sexual “power” over men uncomfortable, others unconsciously or deliberately manipulate it to their or other women’s advantage.

While the color of the hands is sometimes white, frequently hands are represented as brown or, even more deliberately, as “decidedly brown.” When Egerton describes the hands of her attractive protagonist in “A Cross Line” as being “of a perfect shape but decidedly brown” (6), while the woman herself is assessed as “a lady decidedly,” she deliberately distances her character from the feminine ideal of whiteness so popular with other Victorian writers (including Grand). The brownness of this protagonist’s hands, as well as her free roaming in the woods, signifies simultaneously the protagonist’s disregard for the conventional norm of feminine beauty and her carelessness about her distinction from women of lower classes and marginalized races; such strategies release her women characters’ sexual appeal from reductive ideals of whiteness, purity, and self-denial and instead place emphasis on instinctual self-reliance and transgressive capabilities. Not surprisingly, the *Punch* parody reinterpreted the character’s brown hands as “unwashed,” employing the strategy popular with Victorian critics of representing women’s transgressions from femininity and from the ideal of purity and racial and social differentiation as aesthetically unattractive.

Egerton’s texts thus subvert a host of ideological and moral conventions of English domestic fiction, distorting its developmental temporal chronology and fragmenting and rejecting its model of bourgeois women’s subjectivity as constructed through self-denial and racial purity. Given the roles that middle-class women were expected to play in the construction and maintenance of both bourgeois identity and the British Empire, we might say that Egerton’s challenge to the feminine ideal has implications not only for the conventions of women’s literature but for the colonial narrative as well. In her reading of Foucault, Stoler has persuasively pointed out the tangled interrelations between the practices that went into the cultivation of bourgeois bodies and sexuality and those that worked to cultivate the racialized sense of Europeanness and assisted in the process of colonization. As she argues, racial membership in “Europeanness” (whiteness) was not secured by birth but was rather sustained through practices that (while not precisely co-determinant) significantly overlapped with those that went into the making of middle-class identity and morality. Colonial
racial discourse, according to Stoler, was instrumental in the making of the middle class, while the privileged white racial membership (in the colonies as well as in the metropolis) was sustained by “a middle-class morality, nationalist sentiments, bourgeois sensibilities, normalized sexuality, and a carefully circumscribed ‘milieu’ in school and home.” Whereas Grand’s *The Heavenly Twins* teaches New Women how to uphold all of these qualities essential for the maintenance of white hegemony, especially restraint and sexual self-denial, Egerton’s characters in *Keynotes* and *Discords* do not seem to subscribe to any of these values and are in fact quite unpatriotic. By sympathetically representing desirability in women whose behavior is directed by their confidence in themselves and by their obligations to their nearest community rather than by duty to the empire and bourgeois social institutions, Egerton prospectively deprives the empire of its women, and its women had counted among its principal supporters.

**EGERTON’S PRODUCTION OF COLONIAL MIMICRY AND HYBRIDITY IN “UNDER NORTHERN SKY”**

Although set in Norway rather than in a British colony, “Under Northern Sky” (*Keynotes*) can be interpreted as an allegory of the decline of an English patriarchal household (referred to as “the big white house,” “the grand place”; 124, 131) of its despotic master (“the master of them all,” 132) and of his abusive colonizing desire to appropriate, own, and rule. Rather than writing a tale of focused and organized anticolonial resistance, Egerton here depicts a gradual takeover of an English colonial space (controlled by rules of disavowal and appropriation of difference) by the desire for hybridity. In contrast to Egerton’s “The Regeneration of Two” (a story that might be read as subscribing to the imperial paradigm of the white middle-class settler’s regeneration by a “primitive” cultural setting), “Under Northern Sky” represents the pathology and decline of an English master as irreversible and the fictional local community and setting as refusing to live up to their narrative roles of regenerating the weary English. The story is a study of subversive colonial and feminine mimicry on the part of the servants and a young mistress in their behavior toward the English master.

The mistress appears to be a model of a patient wife, attending obediently to the raging man, who—“being a creature of higher understanding” (as the narrator sarcastically comments, 124)—alternates between obsessive pangs of affection and physical abuse of his wife. However, the wife’s
apparent submissiveness barely covers up her desire (restrained but pre-
sent) to be free of him. Her resigned patience seems sustained only by the
certainty of the coming end. As the master succumbs to the effects of alco-
holism, he is haunted by memories of the women he has seduced and ill-
treated, and it takes him more and more effort to maintain the remnants
of his sanity and to separate his ego from the menacing otherness encir-
cling him ever more closely. With the end approaching, the surroundings
encroach on the once-guarded house (with neighbors and strangers now
freely trespassing) and on the Englishman himself, whose body becomes a
target for myriads of crazed flies that nothing can keep away. In the end,
his body is a source of poisonous odor, which drives people away and
which, as a sign of ultimate decay, still lingers after his death. The English
master is going down, the house is going down with him, and so does the
Union Jack, the standard of the British Empire, which slides to half-mast
upon the master’s death and is buried with his dead body.

While Evadne, the prototype of the colonial wife in Grand’s narrative,
is, in her conscientious maintenance of the cult of domesticity and her
careful separation from subaltern surroundings, more a pillar of the Eng-
lish colonizing mission than her husband, the mistress in Egerton’s story is
characterized by her identification with otherness and her neglect of the
roles traditionally expected of English middle-class wives. She is evidently
not invested in the maintenance of the “white house” and the cult of
domesticity and has no interest in replacing the “master of them all.”
Instead of taking the reins of control over the household into her hands,
she observes its dilapidation from a position of emotional distance. If the
master’s character is defined by his frantic efforts to maintain a separation
of his ego from “contamination” by otherness, by his appropriations of dif-
ference, and by his determined but hopeless defense against the invasion of
his memory and of the house, the sense of identity of the mistress is quite
different. Instead of shunning plurality and diversity, she embraces it.
Whereas her husband’s subjectivity is characterized by exclusion and dis-
tance, her identity is defined by and constructed through inclusion and
proximity.

As is typical of Egerton’s texts, the alienation of the mistress from the
stereotypical white bourgeois identity is expressed through her identifica-
tion with gypsy culture, which to Egerton represented a model of success-
ful resistance to the European civilizing mission of conventional morality.
Her relationship with gypsies is described as being the opposite of her hus-
band’s colonizing position. Seen at first through the master’s eyes, the gyp-
sies in the story are initially stereotypically exoticized and eroticized:
Merrily twang the guitars, and the tambourines rattle as they are swung aloft by slender curving wrists. The wild cries of a Zingari dance ring out. Black eyes gleam, and brown skins shine under the orange and scarlet kerchiefs. The grace of panthers and the charm of wild untamed natural things is revealed in every movement. Colour, vivacity, dirt, and rhythm. . . . The whole tribe are gathered round him, begging and screaming with one voice, and he throws silver lavishly to them and thrusts his hand with a coarse jest into the open bodice of the girl nearest him. (146–47)

Although both the master and the mistress stand in the position of watching subjects as the gypsies are objectified through the narrative gaze in this scene, Egerton makes an essential distinction between the man’s appropriating gaze and the identifying look of his wife. While his gaze is driven by the desire to possess, the mistress desires to join rather than appropriate the dance, which to her represents freedom from conventionality.

Furthermore, the direction of her gaze is not fixed, and the position of the viewing subject alternates between her and the girl who has been assailed by the master. In line with Egerton’s notion of “essential womanhood,” there is an understanding and kinship between the two women that surpasses their cultural and social differences: “The [gypsy] girl looks curiously, pityingly, respectfully at the other girl [the mistress], she is little more than a girl as she stands dumbly by during all this scene. Eye seeks eye—sympathy meets sympathy—what affinity is between these two creatures?” (147–48). A likeness between the English mistress and the gypsy women was already suggested earlier in the story by her husband who, in reference to her resistance to his understanding of marriage, calls her “queer little gypsy” (145). She remains emotionally independent, as if (as he puts it) “I hadn’t bought you, as if I didn’t own you, as if you were not my chattel, my thing to do what I please with” (145). Thus in this story, the presumed link between women, frequently suggested by Egerton, is determined by their relationship to men in power who desire to dominate them and by the experience of their resistance to this desire. Although her marriage puts her in a position of advantage over the maids and gypsy women, her relationship with them differs from her husband’s. The experience of his abuse and her resistance to it seem to connect her with women of subaltern class and race—particularly since she has no interest in realizing the potential of her advantaged position as a white middle-class English man’s wife.

As her brief monologue on the subject suggests, rather than a fixed category (a matter of essence), race to the mistress is fluid and constructed, a
matter of appearances and performance: “How strangely my eyes gleam, and what a gipsy [sic] I look! No one would know, no one would dream of it. I would soon get brown!” (151). What perhaps remains unacknowledged in Egerton’s text, even while it commendably reaches beyond hierarchized separations of women in Grand’s narrative, is that the mistress’s position of advantage as a white wife of a man of means provides her with the potential to choose among various lifestyles and even racial identifications. While Egerton’s writing here points toward the politics of women’s alliance, her inclination to essentialize womanhood marginalizes the consequential differences in the experiences of women of different races and classes.

The cook Marie Larsen, who comes to relieve the mistress from her vigil by her husband’s bed and who tames the master with her nonsensical tale about a local bazaar for “the black heathens in Africa” (135), is perhaps the most subversive character in the story. There is an ambiguity about her person that seems maddening to the dying man. Passing as a Christian woman, telling the Englishman a seemingly harmless account of charity deeds of the local Christian community, she resembles a sorceress who uses her knitting needles and endless tales as refined instruments of torment to avenge those whom he has harmed. While appearing a respectable and polite older woman, she has many aspects that suggest an affinity between herself and the women from the master’s past who haunt his imagination and that turn her presence into a torture for him. Rumors tell of Marie’s affair with a married magistrate when she was young, about her child “accidently smothered,” and about her time in Germany spent at a “disreputable trade.”

The narrative strategy employed by Egerton to describe Marie Larsen’s character masterfully reflects and constructs the sense of ambiguity and uncertainty that seems to be her defining characteristic and that proves so unsettling for the Englishman. As the description unfolds, it constantly undermines any sense of essence to her character: Marie keeps eluding all narrative (and the master’s) efforts at her classification (and appropriation). If she “is” anything, it is something other than what her appearance and polite manners would suggest:

Her eyes are a fishy green grey, the left eyelid droops; when she thinks you are not looking, a sly elusive gleam brightens them, her pursed lips loosen, and if you happen to see it, you might think that there may be something after all in the stories the gossips whisper of Marie Larsen. Her dress is exquisitely neat, her apron snowy. ... And what if there be an old-time tale
of a brat accidentally smothered? And what if the Amtmanden [superior magistrate], he who had the sickly wife, did send Marie to Germany to learn cooking? Well, he had money to spare and was always freehanded. And if her nose was red and her breath smelt of cloves, who could say they ever saw her buy a bottle of akavit, and that was more than could be said of all the other temperance leaguers. She had a nice cottage, with marigolds and curly-mint and none-so-pretty nodding down the garden paths, and if you went inside it was very respectable; and you could not fail to notice the large brass-bound Bible on a crochet-square on top of a mahogany chest of drawers, with a spring of palm marking the gospel of the previous Sunday. And no one answered the responses more loudly, or confessed more openly at revival times, or quoted scripture more aptly to the confusion of a neighbor than Jomfru Marie Larsen. (132–34)

This description of Marie creates the impression that respectability and religious devotion, paraded by her so vehemently, are subverted as they are asserted. She seems to be overdoing her little duties: her dress is not only neat, but exquisitely neat; her apron is not just white, but snowy; her Christian devotion is the loudest; confessions the most frank; and her ability to quote the Bible so apt that it drives a neighbor into confusion. Is Marie perhaps parading and exaggerating her religiosity to gain authority in the community while laughing behind her “neighbors” backs? There is something deceitful about her, an impression of slyness; enough of it slips through to be noted, yet it remains ungraspable. Rather than being respectable, Marie seems to imitate respectability, and her mimicry constantly produces slippages, so that her behavior is both within the frames of propriety and always somehow outside it—producing an unsettling and subversive ambivalence, which she uses in her “battle” with the Englishman. Asking nobody’s permission, Marie asserts her authority, carrying the exhausted mistress to bed, assuming her place next to the master, and engaging in a battle with him, in which her strategy of tale telling triumphs over his curses and roars.

Significantly, the tale that Marie successfully deploys to subdue the English master connects Christianity and colonialism, the two major Western narratives of appropriation; Marie weaves these into a repetitive, fragmentary, circular recital in her native Norwegian, disrupted by meaningless (to the master) lists of people who attended the charity bazaar and descriptions of refreshments served. The grand narrative of British colonialism, constructed around the patriarchal English subject, is turned by Marie into a fragmented and repetitious account, which resembles the
original colonial narrative but also subverts it and the Englishman as its subject:

“Yesterday we had a bazaar, a bazaar in the school-house, a bazaar for the poor black heathens in Africa. For the poor black heathens lost in the darkness of unbelief, and ignorant of the savings of the Lamb—oh, it was a blessed work!”

A savage roar from him, but she goes on unheeding with her narrative...

“And then we sold all sorts of things, and drew numbers, and had a lucky bag; . . . and missionary Hansen told us about the poor blacks, and all his blessed work, and how the Lord guided his footsteps through the sandy wastes, and how he baptized a chief and all his wives in the waters of faith. And Nils Pettersen says, they took out more raw alcohol and spent gunpowder and spoilt cotton goods than the fear of God; and that the Bird o’ Faith cleared 100 per cent on her freight. But Nils Pettersen was always a liar; and oh, it was a blessed thing to do all that for the heathen blacks! And then the kapelan spoke again, a touching discourse!” And she refills her glass, dodging his stick and watching him out of the tail of her eye as she turns the heel of her stocking, and repeats the whole of the sermon.

His vocabulary is exhausted, and he is inventing the weirdest oaths, hurling them forth, a deep accompaniment to her shrilled sermon, with its sanctimonious sing-song tune and unctuous phrasing; for she is, perhaps unwittingly, mimicking the kapelan to the life. (135–38)

On the one hand, Marie is a subaltern woman who bears a strong resemblance to the native other in the British colonies, as is underscored by her grammatically flawed English: “No can have Fruen, she sick, no can have her, be good, Marie tell you a tale” (135). On the other hand, her skillful appropriation of the dominant narrative (and her Europeanness) places her on the same side of the colonial duality of self and other as the English master.

Her ambiguous character might be read as representing in Egerton’s text the subversive hybridity described by Homi Bhabha as breaking down the symmetry and duality of self/other, inside/outside of colonial discourse (the basis of the production of discriminatory identities that secure the pure identity of colonial authority), and as “terrorizing authority with its ruse of recognition, its mimicry and mockery.” Marie’s mimicry of the kapelan’s discourse from her ambiguous position produces excesses (through exaggeration and irony) that seem to suggest both her and the
narrator’s doubts about the sincerity of missionary work in Africa and about the European Christian civilizing mission in general and that rupture the colonial discourse, perhaps announcing its failure. Through the character of Marie, Egerton turns the narratives of Christianity, philanthropy, and colonialism against the Englishman, without having expressly to denounce the dominant narrative.

There is another moment in the narrative that celebrates hybridity (the product of colonial expansion so carefully avoided in Grand’s narrative) as a strategy of subversion of the same colonial power that produced it. The white house—the Englishman’s place and symbol of his ego (walled around, controlled by his whims, and guarded by his dogs)—gives way in the end to a different narrative setting, an old overgrown garden by the fjord, a place of unrestrained hybridization, a symbolic graveyard of European colonization:

It is a garden of surprises. Fruit-trees from strange lands, dwarf shrubs of foreign birth, curious shells gathered on the beach of far-away islands flourish promiscuously with indigenous plants. A painted lady (the figure-head of some effete sailing craft), who has cloven the storms through many seas with her mighty breasts, and commanded the rising waves with her upraised hand, and faced the storm with a smile ghastly in its wooden fixity, has come here to rest. She leans next to an old sun-dial in the shade of an ancient lilac bush. The sense of beauty, and the bump of utility of successive owners is manifested at every turn. The even drills of potatoes are disturbed by the tombstone of a favorite dog. A plaster Mercury, and a shrub, cut in the form of a bulgy tea-pot, spoil the symmetry of a bed of carrots. . . . A tangled profusion of pinks, pansies, and gillyflowers, forget-me-nots, and fragrant lavender spikes have a long straight line of leeks running amidst their sweet irregularity. . . . (174–75)

The description of the garden might at first resemble the accounts of newly “discovered” virgin foreign lands that were popular with European travel writers—the harbingers of colonial expansion. The garden is here typically feminized, and its plenitude of flora has a virgin-like or primordial quality. However, unlike the typical nature scenes depicted in colonial travel narratives, this particular landscape is historicized; it is littered with artifacts of European history and civilization, mementos of its proprietors—gravestones, ruins, decayed statues, ancient scientific instruments, domesticated plants. The tropical plants foreign to the climate and the quaint wooden female figure, which evidently decorated a ship (symbol of
European voyages of exploration and conquest), suggest a prior story of colonization. This is not a virgin land that waits to be “discovered”; rather, the unkempt garden described by Egerton resembles remnants of a perhaps-once-magnificent colonial garden, in which the wild indigenous and the imported tropical flora had freed themselves from the constraints of the flower beds, compartments, and classifications assigned to them and had taken over. This is nature uncontained, where the artifacts and domestic flora of European civilization have been infiltrated and “polluted” by the tropics.

If the house is the master’s domain, the abandoned garden, where the mistress rests after her husband’s death, driven away by the odor of his decaying body, seems expressive of her sense of identity. Whereas the Englishman fears cultural contamination by the foreign environment and strives to seal his identity from uncontrolled external influences, she opens herself to the flowing, unconstrained currents of this wilderness. Her identity is portrayed as a web of vibrations that she shares with other women of diverse cultural and social locations. The overgrown garden setting accompanies the mistress’s (and the narrator’s) resigned attitude, her uninvested position in regard to the death of both the Englishman and colonial appropriating desire, both taken for granted by her as long expected. Egerton in this story announces the collapse of the empire (symbolized by the Union Jack) and the death of the inflexible Western subject (the English master) and explores new alternatives for women negotiated on the borders of culturally diverse spaces. She embraces as potentially empowering the “pollution” typically feared by contemporary English middle-class men and women (including Grand) and replaces the autonomous and coherent model of woman’s subjectivity with a mosaic of porous and fluid selves always changing in their interactions with one another.

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Representative of the Irish in “Oony” and The Wheel of God

Quite likely as a result of increasing censorship pressures on her from her publisher John Lane following the Oscar Wilde trials (1895), Egerton moved, in the second half of the 1890s, away from sexually suggestive writing. Partly due to the unfavorable deal Lane had given her on Keynotes and Discords, in 1896 Egerton found herself broke, ill, and unexpectedly pregnant by her husband who had left for South Africa and who was continuously appealing to her for money.46 Pressed by her bleak financial cir-
cumstances more than ever before, Egerton was obliged to write what Lane asked for—stories of chaste and spiritual, rather than sensuous, encounters between men and women. She was forced to substantially rewrite and change her stories in *Symphonies*, her last collection published by the Bodley Head, as Lane claimed that they were offensive to the middle-class audience and—unlike before the Wilde trials—he was not willing to publish the book notwithstanding. Likely as a result of these pressures and emotional upsets, Egerton's writing in the late 1890s suffered both formally and ideologically. Most of her work from this period gives the impression of being unfinished and contains unintegrated plots and undeveloped characters. Furthermore, these texts include some of Egerton's least sympathetic remarks concerning feminist reforms, and while they often focus on racial issues, the earlier concept of race as fluid and constructed gives way to a more essentialized understanding of racial identity.

It is at this point in her career that Egerton turns for the first time to Ireland as the main subject matter rather than just a backdrop for her stories. Some of the earlier short stories in *Keynotes* and *Discords* were situated in Ireland, including the famous “A Cross Line,” and this story’s narrator’s derogatory comment about the English timidity to shock the middle classes was likely perceived the more impertinent for the fact of it coming from Ireland. But only in one of these early texts, “A Psychological Moment at Three Periods,” did Egerton (briefly) deal with Irish issues. Her critical look focused here on the detrimental influence of Catholicism and on the priests’ hold on Irish women, and she exposed the economic and political reasons behind the interests of Irish clergy in maintaining their control over women in Ireland.

Egerton’s later works “Oony” (*Symphonies* 1897) and *The Wheel of God* (1898), where the Irish question is more deliberately foregrounded, could be interpreted as her contribution—however reluctant and critical—to the “Irish literary revival,” a movement whose aim was to bring back dignity to the image of Ireland, which had been tarnished in popular English press and literature. While politically the “Irish question” was in the late 1890s temporarily relatively assuaged—following Parnell’s death in 1891 and Gladstone’s resignation as the British prime minister in 1894—the Irish literary revival was in its full swing. Although, as her biographer has noted, Egerton’s dislike for W. B. Yeats kept her from more consistently socializing with the new Irish writers, she appears to have been far from oblivious of their work. While her treatment of the Irish subject matter suggests Egerton’s refusal to idealize the less palatable aspects of the Irish life, her texts share the same tension between the desire to identify with the Irish
and the reluctance to do so that informed the more romanticized writings of John Synge and W. B. Yeats.  

In his analysis of the depiction of the Irish in texts by Synge and Yeats, G. J. Watson attributes the conflict he discerns in their writing—the conflict between these authors’ more prominent wish to identify with the Irish peasant population and their occasional impulse to denigrate the “natives”—to the tenacity of their Anglo-Irish Protestant sense of caste superiority over the Catholic majority. While Egerton, unlike Yeats and Synge, was not a member of the privileged Anglo-Irish Protestant Ascendancy and, on her father’s side, she belonged to the dispossessed and impoverished ancient Irish population, her writing suggests that her feelings toward her father’s country were equally complicated and ambivalent. She shared with her Anglo-Irish Protestant colleagues a difficulty in appreciating the Catholic aspect of Irish nationalism, a consequent sense of distance from the Irish (despite her strong emotional attachment to the country), and an endeavor to vilify and subsequently dissociate (rather than downplay as Synge or Yeats did) Catholicism from her image of Ireland of the ancient times, the “authentic” Ireland.

Egerton’s attitude toward Ireland was further complicated by her tendency to blame the Irish climate and her father’s (presumably “typically Irish”) lack of responsibility for her (Welsh) mother’s death. Egerton’s mother was consumptive, and her condition was particularly destitute (she was pregnant with her sixth child) when her husband was sent to prison in 1874, following his involvement in Isaac Butt’s Home Rule campaign. The circumstances of her mother’s death soon afterwards likely further complicated Egerton’s personal feelings not only toward her father but possibly also toward Irish nationalism. Furthermore, Captain Dunn was an embodiment of many of the attributes that the English had for centuries chosen as the denigratory features of the Irish, a coincidence that did not exactly encourage Egerton’s recognition of the falsely essentializing nature of the Anglo-Saxonist stereotypes of the Irish. Her father represented the Irish to Egerton, and he was irresponsible, bohemian, temperamental, and impulsive: a “stereotypical” Irishman. While she loved him, Egerton also from her early childhood was harmed by some of these qualities of her father and could not help feeling ambivalently about them. When we further consider the likely impact (whether conscious or unconscious) on her of the English evolutionary discourse, particularly of the simianized caricatures of the Irish in popular English press whose omnipresence Egerton could not avoid after her move to London in 1893, it is perhaps no won-
der that her feelings for Ireland fluctuated from a sense of passionate emotional attachment to equally passionate rejection.

"Oony," the earliest story by Egerton that uses Ireland as the main subject matter, illustrates the author's ambivalence about the country and about her own national identity. The story's formal difficulties—Egerton's (as Stetz has appropriately described it) "lack of control over her material"—are no doubt at least partly a reflection of the conflicting tensions in the author's attitude toward her fatherland. Egerton deals with the conflict between her desire to identify with the Irish on the one hand and her rejection of Catholicism (the religion that has symbolized the Irish nation since the moment the first Anglo-Saxonist Protestants were planted in Ireland) on the other in a quite conventional (anti-Catholic and pro-Protestant) way. She associates the unfavorable attributes commonly ascribed in contemporary English press to the Irish as a race (fatalism, slovenliness, irresponsibility, brutality, superstition) with Catholicism, sides with the Protestant characters in the story, and represents the qualities of spiritualism and imagination—emphasized by the Irish Revival authors as indicators of spiritual and moral superiority of the Irish—in terms of pre-Christian Celtic folklore (represented in the story by a peculiar figure of Paddy, the "fairy child"). Unlike Synge or Yeats, Egerton does not idealize the Irish peasant life or try to avoid the question of the Irish peasants' devout Catholicism. As the story's reader quickly discerns, above anything else, "Oony" is an anti-Catholic diatribe.

 Appropriately, Egerton begins the narrative by presenting a dilemma of identity: should Oony, an Irish girl whose Catholic father and Protestant mother had been murdered, be educated as a Catholic or as a Protestant? In nineteenth-century Ireland, the answer to this question, perhaps more than any other, would determine with what social classes the girl would associate and who she might become in her life. Oony is claimed by the Catholic Church, a decision presented in the narrative as having detrimental consequences for her, and the story's rather heavy-handed indictment of Catholicism begins. The family of O'Sullivans, with whom Oony is placed, is an uncritical embodiment of the Victorian stereotype of Irish Catholic peasants: they are represented as idle, slovenly, superstitious, and narrow-minded, and as abusive of Oony. The following description of the O'Sullivans' household does not really differ from the conventional Victorian pictures of the Irish lifestyle, which recurrently suggested—through a depiction of their presumed "domestic barbarism"—cultural inferiority of the Irish compared to the middle-class English:
A brand-new hay-shed with a corrugated-iron roof gave the place a prosperous look from the road below; but on close inspection the whole place looked dirty and ill-kept. The 'borheen' leading to the house was full of ruts and farm drainage, the yard a reeking bed of manure, refuse, and stinking pools of stagnant water in which a sow wallowed in company with the ducks and geese.58

This passage almost might have served as an accompanying text for one of the *Punch* caricatures of “Paddy,” which tended to portray—by uncritically exaggerating certain sides of the Irish lifestyle—the Irish peasant as racially and culturally “degenerate.”59 Similar to the English cartoonists who always found a way to express their value judgment over the Irish they portrayed, the narrator in Egerton’s text distances herself from the O’Sullivans and discursively expresses her censure of their lifestyle through adjectives of value judgment ("dirty," "ill-kept," "reeking," or "stinking"), which indicate that the O’Sullivans’ style of living is here measured against the conventional middle-class norm of Protestant (and thus Anglo-) domesticity. The unforgettable (to Oony) glimpse of (the Protestant, educated, Irish-American60) Miss Anne O’Leary’s bedroom—with its “snowy bed, with the dimity curtains with the stripes of roses, the big bath, and smell of violets” (137)—plays up the O’Sullivans’ domestic disarray even more. The independent Miss Anne, who rescues Oony from the O’Sullivans’ physical abuse and takes her into her house, seems to be, along with the local doctor, the author’s mouthpiece in this story. Both of these characters are educated Protestants and outsiders among the local Catholic peasantry. In their commentaries, the O’Sullivans’ domestic arrangements are connected directly to their Catholicism, while their character features are explained away by their belonging to the “savage race.”

As far as the physiognomy of the O’Sullivans is concerned, brown eyes, “loose lips,” darker hair, and short, thick-set figure seem to predominate in the family. Their features contrast with Egerton’s description of Oony and “Paddy, the fairy,” which highlights these characters’ blue “illuminated” eyes, blond (almost white) hair, and long white faces. Egerton here effectively divides the Irish into two distinct ethnic groups, thus deploying a discursive strategy popular among some Celticists, who—in their efforts to respond to the Victorian representations of the Irish as inferior—appropriated for their purposes the myth of the ancient Aryan founders of the European civilization, as it was articulated by Joseph Arthur de Gobineau’s *The Inequality of Human Races* (1853–55).
Searching for an answer to the popular question in the nineteenth century of why empires decline, Gobineau maintained that societies and nations weaken and ultimately perish when their originally presumably “pure” blood becomes diluted, “adulterated” by the blood of other races. According to Gobineau, the European civilization had sprung from conquests of weaker nations by ancient Aryan tribes and would presumably decline when the Aryan blood became too diluted and exhausted by intermarriages. He tended to regard the Anglo-Saxons in England as the most preserved Aryans, while Celts represented to him the “white-yellow combination,” and the Semitic people the “white-black combination.” But the ingenuity of Gobineau’s approach lies in his totalizing reach, in his implicit promise to other than the “pure” Anglo-Saxons (including the Celts) that they also have in their veins the “superior” blood of the ancient Aryan race, even if it has been “diluted” by their interracial breeding with non-Aryans. All these nations supposedly needed to do to return to their wondrous Aryan roots was to purify their population by rejecting the alien, non-Aryan elements from their midst.

The late-nineteenth-century European discourse of the nation was dominated by this doctrine of Aryanism and by efforts of scholars and writers of various nations to claim their particular people as being racially closest to the ancient Aryans (who were generally depicted by the end of the nineteenth century as tall, blond, “long-headed,” and white). Some Celticist writers, including Egerton in “Oony,” appear to have endorsed this discourse through their tendencies to distinguish between two Irish types: the presumably noble and superior, tall, blond, “long-headed” Northern Celts and the short, dark, “round-headed” Southern Irish population (a presumably older race that had been conquered by the “true” (Aryan) Celts). Oony’s description places her quite decisively on the side of the Nordic Celts: “Her flaxen hair had caught a deeper shade of gold; the big eyes [previously described as ‘light-blue’] looked more luminous than ever. The mystic eyes, with ‘the light at the back,’ of the visionary, the broad forehead and long-pointed face, the delicate skin, egg-white . . .” (139). On the other hand, Oony’s (Catholic) sweetheart, who ends up marrying a rich bride, leaving Oony heartbroken, is of “a short, thickly set figure” and “black, coarse hair” (146), completing the story’s gallery of evil and racially “inferior” Catholic characters.

Although the story’s main message is that the Irish peasants’ superstitions, fatalism, bigotry, and lack of domestic order might be culturally produced (or at least encouraged by the clergy), and although the story is more than anything else another expression of the author’s distrust of the
Catholic Church, Egerton here, more than ever before, subscribes to ethnocentric narrative practices and represents the Irish peasants stereotypically. The only exception, Paddy, the “fairy child,” likely inspired by the Irish revivalists’ narrative strategies and interest in Celtic folklore, is, however, a rather sketchy and ambiguously described creature, whose loose incorporation in the narrative leaves the reader with an impression of an afterthought. As for Egerton’s sympathetic representation of Oony, it is not really unconventional and certainly not subversive. Being abused by the “evil” and “savage” O’Sullivans, the character of Oony could be interpreted as representing Erin (Hibernia), the feminine symbol of Ireland, who—often portrayed as being abused by Irish “monsters”—was frequently represented favorably in English press and literature. The description of Oony’s looks, her “delicate skin, egg-white with the curse of the Irish girl—chlorosis,” which “made her look like some quaint, medieval saint” (139), mythologizes her and further encourages her interpretation as a version of Érin. Victorian cartoonists and writers often used sympathetically drawn figures of the vulnerable and abused Hibernia to play up the presumed menace of the defiant and “inferior” Irish Paddy. Similarly, Egerton’s sympathetic representation of Oony accentuates the O’Sullivans’ “savagery.”

While Miss Anne, who seems to represent the “independent woman” in “Oony,” is at first portrayed sympathetically, the ultimate impression of her is unfavorable as she, preoccupied professionally, entirely misses signs of Oony’s loneliness. Compared to Egerton’s earlier women characters (perhaps with the exception of the equally distracted and unobservant writer in “Wedlock,” Discords), this emancipated woman is strangely unperceptive and seems censured by the narrative. A sense that the author wishes to distance herself from women’s emancipation is discernible also in The Wheel of God, a novel partly based on Egerton’s own experiences. The neighbors’ suspicion that Mary Desmond, the novel’s main character, is “one of the new women” is presented by the narrative as a sign of their lack of discernment. And while the novel closes with Mary’s pro-women daydream of a “valley filled with myriads of women,” each one looking eagerly up to Mary as she walks toward them (322), the adverse comments on feminism, pronounced by the woman writer “John Morton,” distinguish the type of women’s emancipation promoted by the novel from what is represented here as the predominant but misguided type of feminism. “John Morton,” whose words on women’s emancipation seem to represent the author’s point of view, upholds an unmistakably essentialist view of gender and censures feminist reformers’ encouragement of women to defy
their “nature”: “Let her [woman] develop herself to the uttermost as a woman, not as an atrophied animal with degenerate leanings towards hybridism. Your way leads to three sexes—man, halfman, and what is left over” (309). Egerton’s tendencies to essentialize the experience of womanhood, discernible already in her early work, are here fully fledged.

The treatment of racial issues in this novel about a woman who is Irish on her father’s side and English and Protestant on her mother’s side is for the most part similarly essentializing, and the Irish and English traits are here polarized in a stereotypical way. During her job interview with an “alert, clean-scrubbed-looking Englishwoman, with metallic voice, cultured accent, and attentive but abrupt manner,” Mary, as the narrator remarks, “felt the racial difference keenly, felt how irrational Irish people were, with their interest in everything and everyone’s troubles, their expansive confidences, their almost childish want of reticence. No, one had to knock and send in one’s card at the door of Englishmen’s hearts” (127). As in this comment, throughout the novel, Mary’s feelings about her Irish identity fluctuate between a deeply felt identification with the Irish and a sense of shame for, and desire to dissociate herself from, them.

Her alienation from the English, whose efficient utilitarianism, lack of spontaneity, and petty bourgeois aspirations prompt in her a combination of admiration and hostility, steadily increases. At the beginning of the novel, Dublin, where the Desmonds live, is described as a rather dingy place with “shabby neighborhoods, squalor, sordid poverty, slatternly, bedraggled women, neglected, filthy children” (11), and Mary’s most persistent desire, symbolic of her ambivalence about her Irish identity at this point, is to get out of Ireland and buy a house for her sickly mother (“mum-sie”) in the “warmest part of England” (18). Still, if Dublin is a shabby, provincial place, it is also the place where Mary knows everybody, something she begins to appreciate when she moves to New York and later London, both places that overwhelm her with feelings of loneliness. Despite its unpalatable sides, Mary at least felt a sense of belonging in Dublin that she misses in London, this “great, repellent prison of a city, where each man and woman looks with a certain distrust at every unknown person” (128). Her perception of London seems symbolic of Mary’s feelings toward the English. Living in London, Mary soon develops a deeply felt sense of racial distinction from the (as they are all perceived by her) coldly rational and utilitarian English, and this sense seems to her so overwhelming, elemental, and unsurpassable that she has misgivings about her planned marriage to an English man. Speaking of Mary’s love for her Irish father, the narrator comments:
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She felt it in a more limited degree for all Irish people, only they kept her back, on account of her breach with the old faith; yet, they touched her as no outsider. English were different. In some ways she felt nearer even to the colored people, with their clannishness, loyalty, and superstitions. The thought of the man she was about to marry, and a realization of the gulf between them, grew upon her. God, a racial difference even might mean a tragedy of non-understanding between a husband and wife. She felt she would never speak to him of the superstitions, the dreams that are the birthright of every Celt—he would never understand. (215)

The most striking aspect of this quotation is its essentializing description of the differences and the affinities among the Irish, the English, and the “colored people.” While her assessment of the presumably intrinsically Irish qualities alluded to in the passage is favorable, Egerton here repeats and affirms a plethora of conventional essentializing stereotypes about the Celts (as superstitious, clannish, imaginative), including the conventional lumping together of them with the black race.

The asserted differences between the Irish and the English in this novel, combined with the working-class point of view from which the earlier parts of the novel are narrated, occasionally interfere with Egerton’s tendency to essentialize womanhood and to emphasize sex and gender over class, race, and nationality as identity-constructive categories. Mary’s experiences are described as being determined not only by her womanhood, the central category in Egerton’s earlier stories, but also by her national and class identity. When working in London as a shop-girl, Mary acquires a strong dislike for prosperous Englishwomen, with “their peremptory voices, certainty of purpose, determination to get what they want, and their entire want of consideration for the shop-girls” (140). Here, class and national differences between women seem to create a gap unsurpassable by their shared experience of womanhood. Although it is reasserted in Mary’s final dream, on this and several other occasions, Egerton’s essentializing concept of womanhood gives way to an increased awareness of consequential material distinctions between women based on their social and cultural background.

The sway of the cultural/racial essentialism in the novel seems partly counteracted by Egerton’s discursive appropriation of Mary’s English mother as non-English, which contrasts with Beth’s English mother’s (in Grand’s novel) resolute insistence on distancing herself from her Irish surroundings. Egerton’s narrator fondly calls Mrs. Desmond the “little brown mother,” and she is described as being in the habit of humming Spanish...
dance tunes, thus being discursively dissociated from the English. This move seems to suggest that racial/national identity might not be innate, a matter of “essence,” after all, but rather is a matter of perception. Also, the description of Mrs. Desmond as non-white, non-bourgeois, and non-English enables Mary to identify with the Irish side of her family without disavowing her mother. Thus unlike Grand, Egerton’s discursive strategy allows her to be critical of the English without directing this criticism against the mother-figure in the novel. Mary’s emphasized physical characteristic—her “little brown hands”—can be interpreted as an amalgam of her mother’s “brownness” and her father’s sensual hands, of which the narrator remarks: “the major . . . had beautiful hands; [Mary] inherited them from him” (41). Typically, Egerton chooses as worth accentuating those features of Mary and her parents that insinuate their sensuality and their distance from conventional bourgeois values. Her father’s hands represent his sensual side, his artistic gift (he is a sketch artist), which he frequently employs to express his scorn for middle-class values, while her mother’s “brownness” betokens her non-English and non-bourgeois side.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps Egerton’s greatest achievement lies in her opposition to British imperial interests through her challenges to the bourgeois feminine ideal of women’s ascetic self-restraint and imperial duty. Her early alienation from English middle-class values and her apparent lack of interest in the maintenance of the British Empire freed Egerton, for some time anyway, from the constraining pressures of the ideological and narrative frameworks that influenced Grand’s writing, enabling her to develop a discourse that replaced the normative ideal of the white English upper-class autonomous woman with a feminine hybridity open to interaction with differences. In her best texts, Egerton’s writing becomes a celebration of the (feminized) power of hybridity to subvert the appropriating colonial desire and shows promise as a strategy of both anticolonialist and women’s struggle. Her most successful writing thus combines (deliberately or not) feminist and anticolonialist agendas.

Egerton’s disregard for English bourgeois culture and her interest in Nietzsche’s philosophy encouraged her growing distrust of the potential of the political reforms advocated by contemporary British feminist campaigners. Although for many she epitomized the New Woman movement, Egerton’s distrust of the interference of state institutions in women’s lives
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contributed to her growing skepticism regarding bourgeois women’s efforts to obtain increased influence within the existing system of Victorian institutions. According to Egerton, such attempts were flawed, further implicating women in the constraining Victorian cultural values and institutions which she believed they had the ability to flee.

Egerton’s type of feminism in many respects anticipates the trend in twentieth-century feminism that seeks to displace the dominant symbolic system of patriarchal philosophy and instead to focus on the “imaginary” as connected with women’s sexuality. Her failed attempt to locate women’s imaginary outside the existing patriarchal culture raises doubts about the plausibility of women’s imaginary providing an access to a place outside existing cultural laws, but particularly points to the problems in defining an alternative subversive system while employing the constraining Victorian language.

Egerton’s notion of “women’s nature” enabled her to envision a bond among women capable of overcoming their racial and social differences, which proved such unsurpassable barriers for women in Grand’s The Heavenly Twins. The essentializing assumptions about womanhood prevalent in Egerton’s earlier writing, while arguably not without benefits, also tend to entail the marginalization of material differences among women. Egerton’s later work (particularly her texts written from working-class and Irish women’s perspectives) occasionally manage to overcome her previous marginalization of the material consequences of social differences among women. On the other hand, Egerton’s representation of race was becoming increasingly essentialist and dependent on the iconography of the dominant English derision of the Irish. In this later work, Egerton repeatedly fluctuates between her dismissals of the Irish (as superstitious and irrational) and her affectionate expressions of racial and cultural identification with them. Essentializing the differences between the English and the Irish, even if the Irish traits are represented sympathetically, in the end reasserts rather than challenges the binary ethnocentric thinking deployed throughout the nineteenth century to rationalize and justify British colonialism.
Elizabeth Robins, c. 1904. The photograph of Elizabeth Robins is reproduced with the permission of the Royal United Kingdom Beneficent Association (UK Charity Ref 210729), the Backsettown Trustees.