

# George Egerton: 'A Faded Decadent or... A Proto-Modernist'?

(March-Russell, P., 2011, p.ix)

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century Mary Chavelita Dunne, working under the pseudonym 'George Egerton', contributed towards John Lane's Yellow Book, which was associated with the decadent literary period. Literary criticism has concentrated on Egerton's early short stories pre-dating the Wilde Case in 1895, which divided the literary period and is used to express the abrupt end to the 'decadent episode' (Baldwick, 2008, p.79). By tracing Egerton's literary works through this divide there is evidence of a proto-modernist narrative anticipating the works of Modernist writers such as Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf, D.H Lawrence and James Joyce. Egerton's experimentation with feminine prose portraying the *terra incognita* within 'psychological moments' reveal her realist aesthetic. Egerton pushed the boundaries of the generic manipulating the 'modern' short story form and bildungsroman to present a realistic portrayal of interiority and stream of consciousness.

This research project shall focus on Egerton's **feminine prose** and representation of **feminine identity** as a proto-modernist aesthetic within her short story collections: *Keynotes* (1893), *Discords* (1895), *Symphonies* (1897) and her semi-autobiographical novel *The Wheel of God* (1898).

## 2. METHODOLOGY & CONTEXT

A **historicit approach** allows examination of Egerton's work within the historical context of the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

Egerton is commonly defined as one of the most influential writers of New Woman fiction, associating her with 'first-wave' feminism and the Suffragette movement. This is despite Egerton rejecting any involvement with these movements, later announcing: **'I am embarrassed at the outset by the term "New Woman"... I have never met one – never written about one. My women were all the eternally feminine'** (cited in March-Russell, 2011, p. ix).

Scholars have focused on the biological essentialism in Egerton's work suggesting female identity is constituted by sexuality which is innate, centralising the female identity in naturalism. However, Egerton distances herself from this discourse revealing that nature is constructed by culture and therefore, her female protagonists are not outside the social paradigm they seek to challenge.

## 3. DISCUSSION

### Gender and Sexuality

There is a desire for sexual freedom, self-expression and to have a voice within society which can be claimed through the act of writing. The female artist is a prominent figure in Egerton's writing representing female aspiration outside marriage and motherhood.

Egerton is affirmative in her portrayal of female sexuality and is not constrained to the heterosexual, exploring allegorically same-sex procreation. Thus, highlighting the disgust and resentment many of her female protagonists feel towards men and their involvement in procreation.

### Egerton's *terra incognita*

Egerton's narratives express the true, internalised self -the *terra incognita*- presenting a internalise natural female identity which Egerton believes cannot be written by men.

The *terra incognita* can be identified as a woman's repressed identity. Despite New Woman writers challenging societal values and the expected "normative" behaviour of women they were always 'contained by contemporary discourses' which acted to suppress New Woman ideals (Pykett, 1999, p.145).

### Egerton's feminine prose & proto-modernist aesthetic

Egerton experimented with the short story form, creating a "new" form of expression for the "new" gender relationships and female identities in her literature.

It is the way in which Egerton wrote which made her 'notable, original and controversial' (Miles, 1996, p.248). Egerton experimented with portraying interior thoughts, using brief moments of stream of consciousness in her writing to capture the essence of the mind, which is closely associated to modernism.

She also developed narrative ellipses contributing to disturbances of time and place both during and between passages, creating non-linear plots which reflect a realistic portrayal of the consciousness and disengages Egerton from the generic.

'I realised that in literature, everything had been better done by man than woman could hope to emulate. There was only one small plot left for her to tell: the *terra incognita* of herself. As she knew herself to be, not as man liked to imagine her...Unless one is androgynous, one is bound to look at life through the eyes of one's sex, to toe the limitations imposed on one by its individual physiological functions. I came too soon. If I did not know the technical jargon current today of Freud and psycho-analysts, I did know something of complexes and inhibitions, repressions and subconscious impulses that determine actions and reactions.'

*George Egerton, 1932, p.58*

## 4. CONCLUSION

- ❖ Egerton's controversial portrayal of female identity, which challenged the repressive discourses on female sexuality of the period, encapsulates the contradictory notions of what makes one's identity, combining the desire for self-expression, sexual freedom and eroticised motherhood.
- ❖ Her literary works are not confined to the decadent literary period. Instead her exploration of feminine prose and attempt to create a literary style which captures the female consciousness illustrates Egerton's proto-modernist aesthetic and commitment to a realistic portrayal of the *terra incognita*.
- ❖ The subjectivity of Egerton's narrative anticipated the feminine prose of Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf, and their exploration of the female identity and representation of character in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

## 5. REFERENCES

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