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*Ewig Weibliche: Reversed Gender Essentialism and Feminine Virtues in “A Cross Line”*

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**Abstract**

New Woman was an effort to highlight the uniqueness of female identity and to prevent women from being stereotyped. This research illustrates that instead of pursuing equality for men and women, people began advocating female supremacy as a result of this movement, once again misbalancing the men-women status quo in society. Authors began to create overtly powerful women characters, who looked down on men and objectified them. This in turn resulted in reversal of the age-old gender essentialism prevalent in the Victorian era. Using the short story “A Cross Line” from George Egerton’s collection *Keynotes* as a case study, this paper will examine how male characters identified by a female writer aid in portraying feminine characteristics more vividly and pointing towards a female’s not-so-conventionally-feminine nature.

**Keywords:** New Woman, Reversed gender essentialism, George Egerton

**Introduction**

New Woman had attempted to build a place for women in the Victorian era, focusing specifically on their aspirations, which had not been discussed until the mid-nineteenth century. It not only brought attention to the women’s perspective of the narrative, but also blurred the lines drawn by concepts such as gender essentialism, which being the guiding principle had divided Victorian men and women into two distinct groups and assigned them defined responsibilities based on their gender. However, as critic Desiree Manicom points out that the gender concepts can only be deemed to be valid if they have the ability to describe social reality (vi), Mary Chavelita Dunne Bright (writing as George Egerton), a Victorian wife and author, wrote about women like herself, seeking to depict their true nature. With the orthodox Victorian society serving as the backdrop, her startling work of art—*Keynotes*, has attempted to break the conventional barrier of gender. Egerton’s notions were ambiguous in the context of feminism, because she opposed gender equality and considered women to be superior to men, and had separated herself from the suffragist movement publicly. In her letter to Ernst Foerster, she wrote: “I am embarrassed at the outset by the term ‘New

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Woman'. ... – I have never met one – never written about one. My women were all the eternally feminine". In a private letter to her father, however, she expressed her support for women's suffrage: "The women won't be beaten in the long run. – In every class they have a greater average of intelligence than the men ... It isn't a question of Rights. It is a question of Economic change. ... means: if I pay the tax – I must get the vote!". This contradiction in her viewpoints might be useful in analysing her characters.

Thus, studying Egerton's works in the New Woman context would be a bit tricky. Her stories declared to have portrayed the genuine, internalised self of women – the *terra incognita* – revealing the natural feminine identity that, according to Egerton, males cannot write about, because it is still undiscovered by them. Yet she strives to do it with an ambiguous tone, leaving readers to wonder if her views are conservative or regenerative. In Lyn Pykett's views "Egerton's writings directly challenged the repressive hypothesis of dominant discourse on female sexuality, focusing instead on the deforming and explosive consequences ... which contradicts women's nature" (167). Hence, she supports her ideological argument and believes her to have achieved what she had claimed, through her works. However, in "A Cross Line", her protagonist has rather sacrificed her freedom, the adventurous self, and surrendered to the responsibilities

of motherhood, suggesting the traditional way of construction of women. She admires Egerton's portrayal of women as a mystery to men, as well as her use of polarity in depicting a working woman and a fallen woman using the polar opposite asexual and omni-sexual persona (167). Similarly, according to Gail Cunningham, it was crucial for New Woman writers to break the social taboo surrounding sex and sexuality, so she admires Egerton's forthrightness in using sexuality as a theme: "Female sexuality was made fashionable by George Egerton" (17), which is noteworthy given that the majority of her writings are full of sexual imagery. The New Woman critics had not fully examined the musical metaphors in Egerton's writings, which was done by Maura Goodrich Dunst in 2013. She writes "Egerton's first collection, given the musical moniker *Keynotes*, uses music primarily as an accompaniment to women's sexual and personal awakenings" (210). The notes of music triggering intense emotions in a woman has been highly praised by the critic, as if it was another character in her stories, who is omnipresent, reading the minds of other characters and expressing a wide range of emotions.

Any social movement cannot be only about women, yet all the late nineteenth and early twentieth century criticisms have been focused solely on them, leaving men out of the conversation. It is worth noting that males dominated the literary market

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before the first wave of feminism had influenced literature, but as soon as New Woman came into being, men were almost wiped out of the creative content. They were designed to support the heroines, and were authored (mostly), objectified, and looked down upon by women. Accepted conceptions of masculinity were questioned, and they exhibited socially constructed feminine qualities such as passive roles and submissiveness to their female counterparts. As this topic has not yet been fully explored, my research aims to approach George Egerton's "A Cross Line" from an objective point of view, studying the male characters in relation to the female protagonist in order to illustrate the reversed gender essentialism as a product of the New Woman movement. It also aims to assess the nameless protagonist of "A Cross Line" as a 'New' Woman, although Egerton did not believe she had written about one. The first part of this paper uses the history of New Woman to discuss George Egerton's aestheticism in her collection of short stories, *Keynotes*. It attempts to find answers to the following questions: What was the outcome of women attempting to break free from gender essentialism? Was it possible at all? Has the New Woman created something "new"? Is the perspective in New Woman literature not comparable to a 'female gaze', since the New Woman movement was theoretically a response to the male gaze? What impact

does this new way of perception have on men (in the New Woman fiction)? The second part of this paper will employ a close reading of "A Cross Line". Using it as a case study, it will examine how the male characters identified by a female writer aid in portraying feminine characteristics more vividly and pointing towards a female's not-so-conventionally-feminine nature. It will trace the aesthetic principles that are dealt with in the first section of the paper into "A Cross Line", and interpret its ending.

**I. What did the New Woman Movement entail?**

Throughout history, and most notably during the Victorian era, women had been burdened with domestic duties such as caring for their husbands and families. They were not permitted to gain knowledge of the outside world, since that was considered as men's domain. The New Woman movement was an attempt to free women from these societal restrictions, having both physical and psychological impacts. Women started to educate themselves, and form their own opinions, beginning in the late nineteenth century. Their lives had become more than just about marriage and family. Critics had included and talked about this social change in their works, and tried to document their takes on the Nineteenth century *fin-de-siècle*. The notion of New Women, according to Ruth Bordin, was not static. She says that the emphasis in

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the 1890s was on economic independence, but by the first decade of the twentieth century, it had broadened to include all innovators, such as scientists, reformers, and sportswomen. It was popular in the 1920s to emphasise people's right to personal and sexual freedom, as well as their right to control their own lives and wear rational clothes (Bordin 3). Maxfield Parrish designed a cover of Harper's Weekly, showing a woman riding a bicycle in bloomers and not long skirts. This suggests that the movement also aided women's mobility by allowing them to undertake masculine tasks like riding a bicycle and exploring the city, making them more engaged to the outside world. A stereograph depicting a man (presumably the husband) washing laundry, while a woman reads newspaper in bicycling bloomers with her bicycle nearby, hinted at the probable 'reversed' gender roles.<sup>1</sup>

Higher education institutes for women in the America and Britain allowed upper- and middle-class women to obtain education, preparing them for professions other than the pre-assigned (caretaking) jobs such as governesses. Women's educational, occupational, and physical freedoms needed to get protected by the law, because their real-life struggles had only been addressed partly before. In a marriage, husbands had the right to divorce their wives for infidelity, and because of the exclusive male judiciary, wives did not get custody of children, but after Infant's Custody Act (1839) was passed, this problem was solved. Married Women's Property Act passed in 1870 allowed women the right to their own property (earned or inherited), which used to be previously surrendered to the husbands after their marriage. The New Woman advocated for free union, so that the woman's property does not get transferred to the man. Women, married or single, now owned their property, making the marital status less important. In America, the Contagious Diseases Act (1885) abolished prohibitions on abortion and birth control, giving women the legal control over their bodies. The conventional icons of femininity, quite predictably, were threatened by these rising representations of women's liberation. This massive change in roles of men and women had made the society uneasy. As the New Woman undermined the traditional beliefs, people got divided based on their opinions for or

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<sup>1</sup>Many of these illustrations depicted women in unconventional ways, and these images were gradually incorporated into mainstream media. Few of them are listed below:

- i. "Sport model roadster". 1907, *Digital Public Library of America*, <http://dp.la/item/3f10d60366f9fc2cde64d0ab10bb033f>.

It is a photograph of a woman driving a sportscar.

- ii. Gibson, Charles Dana, "Fourth of July". 1894, *Digital Public Library of America*, <http://dp.la/item/42a2437f78b1ca43999f84c0fd1e1dac>.

A woman representing Independence.

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against this movement. Greg Buzwell writes in his article that this movement did not get any gender-specific support, as many men saw the notion of women actually making their way into different spheres of the world as reasonable, whereas many women, most notably author Mary Augusta Ward, who wrote under the married name Mrs Humphry Ward, were vehemently opposed to it because of the threat it posed to the man-woman status quo in the society (Buzwell).

Unlike New Woman in real life, the wide-ranging political, economic and social issues were absent in New Woman fiction, and they seemed to concentrate on only the dark side of marriage and free union. The probable reason for this was the target readers who constituted the selling market of these books. The conventional reading public might have been more interested in marriage issues of a female protagonist and not about her higher education. This was a limitation of reading the New Woman fiction. While works like Coventry Patmore's "Angel in the House" presented the Victorian ideal of womanhood as docile, submissive, and self-sacrificing, literature of the *fin-de-siècle* reacted in a variety of ways against such conventional ideas. The focus on the significance of seeking out new sensations eventually led to sex and sexuality having a larger role in the quest for new experiences. Cunningham

notes "It was suddenly discovered that women, who had so long been assiduously protected from reading about sex ... or from hearing about it in a polite conversation, had a great deal to say on the subject themselves" (2). Until this time, explicit issues concerning sexual urges, especially those of women, were essentially prohibited, but New Woman Literature covered all of those so-called forbidden areas. Pre-marital sex, illegitimate pregnancy, and intellectual separation from family were all subjects in early New Woman novels such as Olive Schriener's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) and Thomas Hardy's *The Woodlanders* (1887). New Woman fiction was already in much discussion when George Egerton published her volume *Keynotes* in 1893, therefore, it is reasonable to believe that it had influenced Egerton's work.

In the mid-nineteenth century, as works of literature became more widely distributed and read by a larger audience, most of these works urged for a social reform. Following this movement, which was a product of the first wave of feminism and the struggle for women's suffrage, it became a popular topic for most authors to write from the perspective of women. This was justified as they unveiled themselves and worked against the Victorian pretentiousness and the traditional male dominance. But to a certain extent, instead of organising for

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equal rights of men and women in society, they romanticised this concept, focusing on female supremacy and creating something akin to a 'female gaze'. Both male and female authors wrote boldly about women who were either sexually extroverted or who saw the world from different yet self-centred point of view. One feature that is remarkably present in these works was that men were relegated to the background. One might argue that this movement was exclusively about women, but the first wave of feminism (of which New Woman is a product) had aimed to establish an equal status of women in society as that of men, and not to undermine their existence. With a few notable exceptions, the literary world began to develop female characters who tended to view males as objects who functioned to complement their (these female characters') way of living. This is what was visibly "new" in the New Woman movement. Publishers such as John Lane, who published *Keynotes*, took advantage of the chance to create apparent female dominance in a perverted mindset. Being a shrewd businessman, he was well aware of the tastes of his target readers. Because the story "A Cross Line" was scandalous and featured extramarital affair and erotic imageries, Egerton intended to put it towards the end of the book, but Lane put it at the top of the table of contents. This ensured the collection's immediate success.

The title plays a vital role in the reading of any piece of literature. Much like *Discords* (1894) and *Symphonies* (1897), the title of the first collection of her stories, *Keynotes*, is excessively rhetorical. For her, the various chapters of a woman's life must have been intermingled into a musical composition, and she has attempted to reveal the key-notes of that piece of music in her *Keynotes*. Apart from that, the big ornate key that was printed on the back of the cover and spine of the book (which many critics say unlocks the enigmatic wonder of feminine nature) also featured the letters of her pen name (G and E), implying that her works were not entirely objective. The confidence in her characters, their absence of guilt, and rejection of social control over their sexuality, reflected her interest in Nietzsche's philosophy (Jusová 32). As a result, her study of Nietzsche affected her writing, but she had selectively internalised the Nietzschean concepts. According to Daniel Brown, Nietzsche's portrayal of man as "the *sick animal*" was more of a gender prejudiced comment than a general one for George Egerton (144). As already been discussed, the *fin-de-siècle* authors used to mould the popular concepts to suit their own accord and incorporate them into their writings, and being one of them, George Egerton was no exception.

**II. Crossing the line of gender essentialism**



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In works such as George Gissing's *Odd Women*, Grant Allen's *The Woman Who Did*, and George Egerton's *Keynotes*, explicit references to the physical side of marriage were used to convey a moral point – that the institution had been perverted by society's demand that women traded on male sexual desire to gain social stability. The only primary purpose of a woman's life in Victorian culture was to care for her family, particularly her husband. It was a brave move on Egerton's part to publish a book that subjectively discusses women and their needs during such a conservative time, especially one authored by a woman herself. The majority of her hero(in)es publicly criticised marriage as an institution, boosting women's passion and thereby defying conventional Christian principles. Egerton's writing was unusual in both style and content, but she failed to do justice to her male characters. *Keynotes*, a collection of what may or may not be considered as short stories, also pushed beyond the genre's limits, and startled its readers. The narrative of "A Cross Line", the first short story of *Keynotes*, is more like a fragmented piece, where the author has supplied some hints and left it up to the readers to figure out what occurs next. The story begins with a series of musical allusions:

The rather *flat notes* of a man's voice float out into the clear air, *singing* the refrain of a popular *music-hall* ditty.

There is something incongruous between the *melody* and the sur-roundings. It seems profane, indelicate, to bring this slangy, vulgar *tune*, and with it the mental picture of footlight flare and fantastic *dance*, into the lovely freshness of this perfect spring day. (9; Italics mine)

It is an incomplete description that sets the storyline in motion, and the readers are allowed to conceive their own versions of visual imageries, offering innumerable interpretations of it, each one being unique. The musical references are scattered all over the story and they skilfully and effectively describe the development of plot. Egerton might have been very fascinated by the music of the Earth, says Dunst: her heroines hear, respond to, guided by the music of the surroundings, tying the music, Earth and the feminine body to an eternal whole (213).

The female protagonist is a nature lover who enjoys fishing, participates in deep conversations with a stranger, imagines herself beyond the constraints of her home, has erotic fantasies, and prioritises herself. Like her creator, her persona is enigmatic and, to some degree, incomprehensible to average readers. According to Pykett, "She is both self-sufficient and 'a creature of moments', unwomanly and hyper feminine" (169). Unlike Rhoda Nunn in *Odd Women*, she does not overtly criticise marriage as an institution, but she powerfully holds a

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mirror to the fakery of the Victorian era through the expression of her desires. Right from the beginning of the story, it is implied that the heroine is a woman whom society deems to have “fallen”, since she is first shown in the text as “a woman sitting on a *felled* tree” (9; Italics mine). The first time when the readers are allowed to peek into her mind it was a “busy brain, with all its capabilities choked by a thousand vagrant fancies...” (9). Every sentence in the narrative is packed with rhetorical references that build vibrant colours of that unnamed woman’s fantasies. The blend of contradictory reactions– “disgust and humorous appreciation” (9) on the woman’s face on hearing a man’s voice in a wild setting, presumably near a river (as deduced from the descriptions), suggests her mixed nature– the conflict between her wish to explore the unexplored and the age-old tradition, which is persistent throughout the narrative.

The names given to the characters in a literary work often disclose their natures. However, in Egerton’s case, the anonymity of any of her central characters might have been used to create the identities of these characters based on their attributes rather than their given names. Shanta Dutta notes, anonymity assists in the representation of the characters as being relevant to “Everywoman” or “Everyman”, regardless of their so-called social or educational status (24). This story is all about a

woman’s dominant nature and her perspective of the world. Dominance, that had been traditionally associated with men, was now being demonstrated by a woman. The first image that the story depicts of the protagonist–sitting alone and vulnerable among the “wilderness of trees” (10), hoping to meet a stranger whose voice could be heard from a distance, was unthinkable in Victorian culture, which believed that women were weak and needed to be safeguarded by their male family members. This “New” woman had shattered traditional notions of femininity and put the accepted notions of masculinity in jeopardy.

The singer has changed his lay to a whistle, and presently he comes down the path *a cool, neat, gray-clad figure*, with a fishing creel slung across *his back*, and a trout rod held on *his shoulder*. The air ceases abruptly, and *his cold, gray eyes* scan the seated figure with its *gypsy ease of attitude*, a scarlet shawl that has fallen from *her shoulders* forming an accentuate background to the *slim roundness of her waist*. (11; Italics mine)

The lady objectifies the fishing stranger right from the time when she sees him for the first time and does not mind objectifying even herself, for it solely mentions the areas of their bodies that are linked to sexual attributes. As this story is a fragmentary piece, though it is not clearly



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stated, the readers are given an impression that the protagonist is sexually drawn towards the stranger almost as soon as she sees him, and that she started fantasizing about him ever since. She effortlessly engages in a discussion about fishing, and astounds him with her knowledge— a reference to the ‘New’ social strata of educated ladies, who trained themselves to adapt in doing masculine jobs (fishing). The woman’s ‘hyper femininity’— the way she holds the stranger’s book and analyses it closely – compels the stranger to be charmed by her; it is almost as if she is doing it on purpose to seduce him.

The images that the story paints to its readers, are immensely erotic and a woman being the driving force, or the one ‘controlling’ the course of the fate of almost all other characters, is fantastic to imagine, but just for the sake of it. If we consider this narrative objectively, there is no justification for neglecting the character of the fishing stranger, using him for the protagonist’s selfish needs, and then abruptly dismissing him from her life. With the genders reversed, this is quite similar to women becoming the target of male gaze.

He met the frank, unembarrassed gaze of [her] eyes that would have looked [down] with just the same bright inquiry at the advent of *a hare or a toad*, or any other *object* that might cross her path... (12; Italics mine)

Another reference to the lady objectifying and looking down on the (male) fishing stranger, much as she would have looked down on some animal (a hare or a toad) passing by. The story then reveals that the protagonist is already married, for there is a thick wedding ring on her slim brown hand. The female author is clearly shaping the storyline to fit to the lady’s interests; firstly, she meets a fairly handsome “grey-eyed” stranger in the woods, they engage in a conversation, get attracted to each other, and then the woman turns out to be married. The story is heavily biased towards the woman, and therefore, it has pushed all other characters to the back, for the sole purpose of enhancing the woman’s role as the protagonist.

The second part of the narrative begins with the introduction of a man, who is later revealed to be the husband of the protagonist. He appears to be meek, caring and pretty concerned about his wife, but the woman does not show any sign of concern towards him; she is ever-busy daydreaming and being a wild woman. Her behaviour is no different towards him than that towards the fishing stranger. When her husband shows her the newly-hatched chickens, she is less interested in his hobbies and instead focuses on his physical features. This man is essentially another object to the ‘female gaze’ who is getting used by this woman. Moreover, she is uninterested in new-borns (here, chickens), which is significant

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because she is also not concerned about pregnancy and motherhood – a New Woman trait, while her husband loves “young things”. This story assigns feminine characteristics to men, subverting the concept of gender essentialism. She is convinced of her own superiority and refuses to accept that men might choose anything over her– she forces her husband to choose between herself and the mare he used to adore. It is important to remember how she gets insecure of and repeatedly compares herself with animals.

Her wild nature reveals itself once again in an intimate scene with her husband. She desperately attempts to monopolise him while he peacefully reads a book, and to direct him in a way so that she gets to actualise the fantasies that clogs her head and in turn, make her restless. She keeps getting back to his physical features that most appeal to her– “She looks at his hand, – a broad, strong hand with capable fingers;” (21)– as if it is only the physicality that matters to her. She then takes the initiative, escalating the situation:

There is a gleam of devilry in her eyes, ... she traces imaginary letters across his forehead, and ending with a flick over his ear, ... After a short silence she queries: “Are you fond of me?” She is rubbing her chin up and down his face.

It isn't the *love*, you know, it's the *being loved*; it isn't really the *man*, it's his *loving*! ...

... *You* are an awfully good old chap; it's just men like you send women like me to the devil!” (pp. 23-24)

These descriptions and the dialogue between the couple let the readers to draw a comparison between them with that of the erotic novels, but written in a more refined language with rich and sophisticated vocabulary. Through an extremely passionate conversation and tactile stimulation, the lady strives to communicate the sensuality which she embodies, into her husband, thus creating an environment of intimacy. She considers it a compliment and almost flaunts the idea when her husband calls her “a queer little devil” (23). Her wish to be a man, so that she can “go on a jolly old spree!” (23)– reminds the readers of Shakespearean Lady Macbeth who called upon the evil spirits to “unsex” her, so that she be able to commit a sin in order to satisfy her greed, as if men had the authority to commit sins (here, being a man would give the nameless woman, the freedom to accomplish something that traditional Victorian women would never have). In a sense, she wants have the same freedom as men, which was typical for ‘New’ women, but she does it by objectifying the opposite gender, by looking down on them. She is so obsessed with the physicality that she ignores the

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feelings of both her husband and the fishing stranger.

This excerpt is significant not only thematically, but also because it discloses, for the first time in the story, the woman's intention to seek for the pleasure (both physical and emotional) from a third person that she does not receive from her husband. She expresses firmly that the "way" men love her is more important to her than the men themselves. This is a blatantly narcissistic remark that reveals her desperation to find someone (outside her family; an extramarital affair) who loves her the way she wants to be loved and understands her feelings, more than she does for others. The next scene contains the famous passage, which has sparked heated debates among nearly every critic who has attempted to examine *Keynotes*. Egerton's masterstroke, the two-page long erotic fantasy that is packed with unique New Woman imageries:

Then she fancies she is on the stage of an ancient theatre, out in the open air, with hundreds of faces upturned toward 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, ... She bounds forward and dances, bends her lissome waist, and curves her slender arms, and gives to the soul of each man

what he craves, be it good or evil. ... She can see herself with parted lips and panting, rounded breasts, ... sway voluptuously to the wild music that rises, now slow, now fast, now deliriously wild, seductive, intoxicating, with a human note of passion in its strain. She can feel the answering shiver of emotion that quivers up to her from the dense audience, ... and she stands with outstretched arms and passion-filled eyes, ... (pp. 27-28)

This quotation encapsulates every aspect that has been discussed so far in this paper—the musical allusions, the wild-running sensual dreams of a woman, and the men playing supporting roles only to enhance the female-supremacy. Being the greatest example of Egerton's openness in this story, it depicts the female protagonist's aggressively assertive sexuality involving the biblical allusion of the snake or Satan who seduced her to commit the sin of tasting the forbidden fruit. In this scene Egerton sets the Victorian heroine in an ancient cultural environment (an ancient theatre) where the free expression of her passions becomes conceivable, preaching the New Woman idea of a social reform. Here, the protagonist becomes an object presented in front of an exclusively male audience, and exploits her physical beauty to satiate the cravings (good or evil) of these men, while herself enjoying the exquisite self-delight of the luscious

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performance. When she ‘performs’ her fantasy in her imagination, the exhibitionism blurs the lines between a performer and voyeur (Dutta 28). It is important to note that she constantly imagines herself in a superior position, gazing *down* on every other man in the room, while the faces of the men are “upturned” towards her, when she dances for them. This passage not only creates an erotic atmosphere, but also causes the readers to experience synaesthesia, allowing them to visualise what she would have imagined. When she stares at the men (sitting in a comparatively darker area in the theatre) from across the stage (a brighter area), the faces of the men and their eyes might have appeared grey to her: grey eyes that are comparable to those of the fishing stranger. She dreams about being gazed at in public by more of these grey eyes, and imagines herself in a situation similar to that of a prostitute.

She is dependent on men, but only for the pleasure they bring her; otherwise, males have no place in her fantasy-filled life. Towards the end of the story, when it becomes apparent that Egerton’s bold ‘New’ woman is approaching motherhood, quite surprisingly she transforms into a traditional Victorian lady. Many critics claim that her wild side is subdued because of the motherly instincts that she experiences and the need for a social security that only a proper family may

provide for her child. Her decision was against her nature and as if she was trying to captivate her wild soul inside her eyes, which is why she withdraws from her gaze that once used to look down on men as if they were her slaves: she either blurs them with tears: “Her eyes are filled with tears that burn but don’t fall” (33), or she hides them with her hands: “I (the stranger) can’t see your face; take down your hands” (38); “He (the husband) finds her presently rocking slowly to and fro with closed eyes” (39); “tears come unbidden to her eyes, and trickle down her cheeks” (40).

**Conclusion**

The lady who claimed herself to be “merely a truthful” (36) woman, choosing herself over everything, was now experiencing a fear for the first time – the fear of having her child labelled as illegitimate. Although she had experienced freedom outside of Victorian confinement, she eventually returns to it by refusing to endanger her child’s future, which is why she discloses (though not clearly) this news first to her maid, Lizzie (and not to her husband), who possibly had an illegitimate child in the past, thus, demonstrating the typical Victorian domestic sorority. Egerton’s use of essentialism is seen favourably by Lyn Pykett (168). For her, the heroine’s return to domestic subjectivity was not to sustain societal conceptions of the feminine, but rather to question such notions through the application of essentialism. She ultimately

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confines herself in the “riddle of the *ewig weibliche*” (30)– the ‘eternal feminine’, which perhaps is “grey”, a blend of two absolutes – black and white; ‘devilish’ and ‘angelic’ and the world does not have the vision to realize it.

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