

**OFF THE BEATEN PATH:
ELLA D'ARCY'S *YELLOW BOOK* STORIES**

CLAUDIA IOANA DOROHOLSCHI

West University of Timișoara

Abstract: *The small body of work produced by Ella D'Arcy in the 1890s is noteworthy for its experimentation with narrative instability, its unsympathetic treatment of character and its oppressive, claustrophobic fictional world. The paper looks at how D'Arcy's fiction makes use of shifts in focalisation, melodramatic plot twists and closure to build up a sense of irresoluteness and moral de-centering.*

Keywords: *1890s, Ella D'Arcy, narrative, short story*

1. Introduction

Despite her prominence in the literary milieu of the 1890s, Ella D'Arcy is little known today beyond her small body of work, her letters and several contemporary accounts. Nowadays, her name is most likely encountered in passing in an enumeration of prominent 1890s figures; a small number of her short stories have featured in anthologies, and there has been a brief revival of critical interest in the mid-1990s, owing to a temporary increase in curiosity for all things fin-de-siècle. Critics such as Benjamin F. Fisher (1990:xiv, 1995:223) deplore the fact that her works are not more widely available in print, or indeed that she didn't write more. Recently, the fact that the *Yellow Book* has been made available in its entirety on the *Internet Archive* has provided new opportunities to

investigate the lesser known, but not necessarily less interesting writers of the decade.

During the 1890s, D'Arcy published intensely in a number of magazines. Her output consists mainly of short stories, which were then collected in two volumes, *Monochromes* (1895) and *Modern Instances* (1898), and includes only one novel, *The Bishop's Dilemma*, published in 1898.

In the mid-1890s, D'Arcy, hailed by her discoverer Henry Harland as 'remarkable' (Windholz 1996:116), became associated with the emblematic periodical *The Yellow Book*, to whose first issue she contributed the story *Irremediable*. She then contributed to almost all the 13 issues of the magazine, until its demise, which more or less also marks the end of her literary career. She quickly became sub-editor, which, as Anne M. Windholz shows, proved to be an ambiguous position for a female in the 1890s: she was unofficially appointed, and she was paid right out of Harland's pocket; she was in charge of answering letters and keeping in touch with the writers, but was not given the authority to make the selection of texts (Windholz 1996:116). In 1895, after Aubrey Beardsley was sacked in the wake of the Wilde trials, D'Arcy seems to have aspired to the post of art editor (she had initially trained to be a painter, an aspiration which she gave up due to poor eyesight), but failed to get the post. Her frustrations with her status at the *Yellow Book* and her attempts to take more control of the editing work culminated in her changing the contents of Volume 9 without the main editors' approval and reducing the volume by roughly 100 pages by excluding a significant number of writers, an act of over-confident rebellion which resulted in her being sacked without any prospects of finding another satisfying literary job elsewhere (Windholz 1996:116-127).

Although she still contributed stories until the last issue of the magazine, her career practically ended soon afterwards, failing to live up to its promising start.

2. The Short Story in the 1890s: A Playground for Innovation

The fin de siècle marked both an increase in the production of short stories in general, owing to the appearance of cheaper media and new opportunities for publication, and an increase in the production of female short stories. Women found the medium easy to approach, flexible, and convenient (since it required no great investment of time and could, on the other hand, prove financially rewarding; Forward 2003:xiii), so that in the 1890s, and in *The Yellow Book* in particular, the short story became associated with the ideals of the *New Woman* and with the first sustained assertion of these in fiction. Quite a number of significant 1890s women writers (George Egerton and Charlotte Mew, among others) were accommodated there alongside the (now still) more famous male counterparts such as Henry James, H.G. Wells or W. B. Yeats.

In the same time, the genre itself was undergoing significant transformations, moving away from the Victorian conception of the short story as a shorter novel, and from the plot conventions and the constraints of the ‘marriage plot.’ The very term ‘short story’ was new at the time: the American critic Brander Matthews is credited with having coined it in 1884 in the *Saturday Review* (Forward 2003: xii; in contrast, earlier writers such as Edgar Allan Poe referred to the short narrative as ‘tale’). Poe’s influential theory of the short genre, formulated as early as 1842 in his review of Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales*, gained ground in the 1880s and ‘90s. His idea of the “unity of effect or impression” and of design that the short story

should pursue (Poe 1842:571), as well as his definition of “the short story narrative” as a narrative “requiring from a half-hour to one or two hours in its perusal” (Poe 1842:572) were to become important in the formation of the modernist theory and practice of short fiction. Still, in the 1890s a clear theory of the genre was yet to be articulated, so that writers had at their disposal a fresh, dynamic medium. The medium had the additional advantage that it “could focus on specific episodes, encounters and impressions, analysing psychological responses to those moments”, and also, importantly, it was one in which “it was acceptable for the ending to remain open” (Forward 2003:xii). The short story thus allowed greater flexibility and more opportunity for experimentation, and lent itself to the exploration of new areas of interest and a changing social content.

At the turn of the century, the short story genre therefore “emerged as a dynamic site of modernist innovation” (Gillies and Mahood 2007:27). For Dominic Head, the short story is the prototypical modernist literary form, since it “has an enduring ability to capture the episodic nature of twentieth-century experiences” (Head 1992:1). In his discussion of the form’s aesthetic, he argues that there is always a paradoxical ‘disuniting’ effect in the story (Head 1992:2), which, due to the ellipsis and ambiguity inherent in the short form, functions as a counterpart to its ‘unity’ – that the story, and especially the modernist short story, has at its core tensions between unity on the one hand and openness / irresoluteness on the other. The same ambivalence marks its “moment of insight,” one of the central aspects of the aesthetic of the modernist short story. Confined by its brevity and by the requirements of the unity aesthetic to focusing on one significant moment or situation in one character’s life, on one revealing instant, the modernist short story typically challenges this very revelation (Head

1992:17-18). “In fact,” Head points out, “most of the accepted modernist ‘epiphanies’ are problematic” (Head 1992:20). While they provide a sense of narrative closure, they do not provide either moral conclusions or clear resolutions, and, with all their focus on unity, remain essentially open-ended.

3. Unsettled/Unsettling Narratives: Ella D’Arcy’s Fiction

D’Arcy’s *Yellow Book* stories are in the spirit of these late Victorian developments, as they take advantage of the inherent instability and flexibility of a new genre to experiment with narrative technique, and use it to probe new subject matter and explore new ideas. They are populated by uncongenial characters and rendered in the voice of an unsympathetic narrator; its focalizers are often either morally repelling or naïve. The settings are sometimes claustrophobic (notably featuring the closed provincial scene of the Channel Islands, where D’Arcy lived for a while) and her bitter, cynical world view allows for no happy endings. Her choice and treatment of her subject matter remind both of Maupassant and of Henry James, but there is a certain indecisiveness in both subject matter and form and, in Head’s terms, an abundance of ‘disuniting’ effects, which generate a degree of ambivalence that rides a rather thin line between early modernist experiment and artistic flaw. Her realistic narratives, which display a very convincing, subtle and often chilling analysis of psychological mechanisms, sometimes suddenly turn gothic; there are frequent dramatic shifts from one point of view to another, or changes of focalizers to the point in which we lose track of who the main character in the story is. In addition to that, characters, including focalizing characters, often misunderstand or willingly misrepresent situations, a strategy used for

the purpose of creating ambiguity, but also to achieve dramatic (or melodramatic) plot twists. Stories build up towards a final moment of crisis, which however usually leaves us with no resolutions or insight – but rather with a refreshed set of questions.

In what follows, I will attempt to illustrate this by taking a closer look at three of D’Arcy’s contributions to the *Yellow Book*. The first two, *Poor Cousin Louis* and *An Engagement*, appeared in Volume 2 (July 1894) and Volume 8 (January 1896) respectively, and both feature Owen, a young doctor who is trying to establish himself in the Channel Islands. The third, *Sir Julian Garve*, appeared in the last volume (13, April 1897) of the quarterly.

In *Poor Cousin Louis*, we are introduced to the landscape of the Islands by an easygoing, humouring omniscient narrator who leads us seamlessly into the characters’ world by a lengthy description of the Channel Islands setting and of the house belonging to the old Louis Renouf, but refrains from inspecting more closely their identities, backgrounds, or inner minds. The situation is gradually introduced through the eyes of Mrs Poidevin, whose old cousin Louis is spending his last days in the decaying house.

We are gradually made to suspect from the observations of Mrs Poidevin (who however fails to understand what the reader does) that her cousin is at the mercy of his housekeeper and her husband. He is also tormented psychologically by Margot, a girl who helps in the kitchen and takes an evil pleasure in making the old man uncomfortable. The housekeepers manage to persuade Mrs Poidevin that Louis Renouf is senile, and that his reports of things being stolen from his house are figments of his disintegrating mind. While Mrs Poidevin’s incomplete understanding of the

situation makes it unclear to the reader whether Cousin Louis is indeed senile or if he is physically helpless, but perfectly lucid, it is clear that he is certainly less senile than Mrs Poidevin believes him to be.

Despite his cousin's mistrust, the terrified old man manages to convince her to take him away into town the following day. Unexpectedly, at this point in the story our focaliser so far – Mrs Poidevin – leaves the house – and we are introduced to the thought processes of another guest, Owen, the young doctor, who is as yet a stranger to the reader. He is called to pacify the old man, and, brighter than Mrs Poidevin, quickly figures out the situation. However, since he is still very much trying to establish a reputation for himself and is not yet doing very well in terms of patients, he has an interest in keeping the old man there, or at least in benefiting from the publicity that his death or an association with his name in the papers might bring him. The housekeepers have no interest in keeping the old man alive, and imply to Owen that their employer's death wouldn't be in the least inconvenient, since his departure might endanger their position. Thus, while the doctor gives precise instructions as to what must be done to ensure the old man's survival, we are made to understand that he is in fact giving instructions on what might kill the old man. The story ends with Owen leaving the house – just as it began with Mrs Poidevin approaching it – and this circularity is underlined by the return of the image of a window from the beginning of the story, this time framing a large shadow, as we are made to infer that the old man is being murdered (or at least that his death is being hastened).

On the one hand, the story is very cohesive structurally and stylistically, with the events gradually building up towards a climax and towards our full realisation of the situation; there are a number of unifying

motifs, the most prominent of which being that of the stately old house, decaying at the same time as its owner. On the other hand, we perceive his drama through two very inadequate reflectors, one (Mrs Poidevin) too obtuse to understand what is going on, the other (Dr Owen) too cynical to care. Both are lacking in empathy, which prevents the story from slipping into sentimentality and makes the old man's tragedy even more chilling, as we ourselves, as readers, are torn between sympathy for the old man and identification with the perspectives of two characters who dismiss him as senile, and in a way or another become accomplices to the murder. Thus, despite the presence of the smooth, reader-friendly omniscient voice, we are denied any conclusive judgments and we lack any consistent moral centre. The story also lacks a clear sense of a main character – the place is disputed between the old man whose tragedy unfolds throughout the narrative, and Owen, who appears only half-way into the story, but whose motivation we are made to understand more closely and who is the character we literally leave the story with.

Owen reappears as the protagonist of one of the later *Yellow Book* stories, *An Engagement* – or at least of its first half, for the most part of which he is again the focaliser – and is the same ruthless character in much the same predicament. We find him getting engaged to Agnes Allez, while he believes she might be coming into a fortune and might help his position, and then trying to get out of the engagement when he realises that he has been misled and that the marriage might not be as socially advantageous as he initially thought.

In the second half of the story, a shift in point of view occurs once again. The events are now narrated, again in the third person, from the perspective of Owen's fiancée, who is rather simple-minded (there are hints

of in-breeding) and, even after he breaks off the engagement, perseveres in finding him excuses until things become too obvious to deny. Eventually, she dies in despair of the shock (or rather of an ambiguous affliction that suggests a combination of sunstroke and broken heart).

However, the story does not end with her death, as we might expect; there is another last paragraph which gives us the perspective of a minor character – that of Mrs Le Messurier, Agnes's grandmother, as she remembers the dead from her past. This last perspective upon the events is unemotional and lacking in sympathy – she gazes into the past “through dim and tearless eyes” as she tends to her retarded grandson “with his mirthless laugh,” and then “the vision is scattered into thin wreaths of smoke” (D'Arcy 1896: 406).

Once again, we end up without a clear sense of who the protagonist is. Despite the fact that Owen is a recurring character (and focaliser), the drama is delusional Agnes's. Had the story ended with Agnes's death, it would probably have slipped into melodrama. D'Arcy does go for melodramatic effects, but, like in the previous story, the effect she is interested in goes beyond mere sentimentalism. We are not allowed to sympathise with the victim to the end – but are given a last view of detachment and oblivion which foregrounds not Agnes's tragic end, not Owen's cruelty towards her, but rather the absurdity, the gratuity of her death – and of her life, as a matter of fact. What the story leaves us with is, once again, a sense of miscommunication and meaninglessness: Owen may understand but doesn't care; Agnes doesn't understand, or sometimes misunderstands willingly; whereas the uninvolved witness – Mrs Le Messurier – remains the carrier of a vague and unemotional memory.

The same sense of absurdity, triggered by similar uses of technique, is present in D'Arcy's last *Yellow Book* story – *Sir Julian Garve* – which in a sense is probably also one of her most daring and possibly least successful. It focuses on the meeting between Underhill, an American, and Sir Julian Garve, a British baronet, over baccarat at a Casino. Underhill realises that Garve is cheating and winning his (Underhill's) money by unfair means.

The point of view is technically speaking omniscient, but feels rather like a series of quickly alternating limited perspectives; focalisation shifts dramatically and abruptly from one character to another – generally between Garve and Underhill, but the perspective of a third character, Morris the diamond broker, is also occasionally introduced. The shifts are used not as much to give us an inside view of one of the characters, but to look at the other character from the outside – not to gain more insight and understanding, but rather to create blanks and ellipses.

Underhill is a rather typical 'innocent American' – in fact so innocent that he doesn't allow himself to believe his realisation that Garve is cheating, and only acknowledges it by Socratic talks with his unconscious self (his 'shadow' – an odd gothic echo in an otherwise realistic narrative). In the final confrontation between them, Garve acknowledges that he indeed cheats, and breaks down, seemingly humiliated by the revelation. The scene is rendered from Underhill's perspective – and we are made to expect that Garve will commit suicide. In a final plot twist, however, Garve appears to change his mind and decides to shoot Underhill instead, in order to prevent him from compromising his main means of survival. Surprisingly, the scene is rendered from the perspective of Underhill, who is so American that he refuses to believe that he is being shot; we join in his sensations, as we are

ourselves misled by his disbelief: “For the fraction of a second he thought Garve had really shot him... but that was absurd... a little blow like that!” (D’Arcy 1897:307), before the ceasing of ‘all sensation’ and the fall of his body to the ground makes us acknowledge his death. Once again, we are left with the sense of an unsettling and disjointed narrative, which, while it provides a sense of closure in the death of its protagonist, refuses to give value to his insight (an insight which in fact he consistently denies) and rejects any moral solutions. There is no reward for the good Underhill and punishment for Garve the wrongdoer – rather, like in many other of D’Arcy’s stories, the characters seem to be good only when they are too feeble-minded or naïve to be proficiently evil.

4. Conclusions

D’Arcy’s closures are almost always such hurried, jolting slaps in the face, preceded by a melodramatic (and admittedly rather artificial) plot twist. This is by no means a new development in Victorian literature – from Dickens’s early short stories to Hardy’s twists of fate or the grand finale of the fin de siècle gothic fiction, melodramatic closure is, if not the norm, then hardly an exception. However, unlike in the case of her predecessors, D’Arcy’s contrived, theatrical endings only superficially provide a sense of closure, and never a sense of a restoration of order. The fact that she associates these plot twists with an otherwise usually realistic narrative and with compelling psychological analysis, the lack of a moral centre in her stories, the fact that the focalisers usually arouse no sympathy and that there are few characters we are allowed to engage with only to find that they consistently misrepresent the facts, that there is no discernible authorial position implied in the narrative – all contribute to a sense of absurdity,

cynicism and overall irresoluteness, despite the resort to unifying plot structures and symbolism. The stories do not as yet build up towards a modernist sense of epiphany, but they end on a note which is every bit as ambivalent and problematic.

This refusal to establish overt ethical sympathies is also why it is hard to argue that D'Arcy's treatment of her feminine characters is proto-feminist. Despite the fact that she is a female writer whose real-life personality suggests a desire for emancipation and despite the fact that her writings frequently feature female characters who suffer at the hands of ruthless males, her women, while often presented as victims, are also morally questionable seducers, manipulators, tramps, or half-wits. In the same way in which she seems not to have settled on a narrative formula for her stories, D'Arcy doesn't seem to have found a coherent model of womanhood. It is clear that the Victorian ideal of the 'Angel in the House' no longer holds currency, but also that no new ideal has yet taken its place. Similarly, her narratives assert themselves as texts that disregard the norms of well-wrought Victorian fiction, but their narrative formula is not yet crystallized, and one may only wonder what D'Arcy's daring but occasionally baffling prose may have turned into if she had continued writing.

D'Arcy's stories may not always be equally successful, and much of her disruptive technique runs against what we would consider 'good writing' nowadays, especially within the confines of a short story. However, they consciously, systematically pursue an alienation effect and culminate in unsettling endings in which neither the characters, nor the readers are left with a sense of conclusive understanding – a sense that, like some of the evil or naïve character-focalisers whose perspective we are made to share,

we are ourselves prone to misunderstanding and misinterpretation. Despite D’Arcy’s small and uneven output, she more than merits attention as an original and often powerful short story writer, in whose work fin de siècle spleen meets pre-modernist experiment in representation.

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