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Subversive and Clandestine Sexuality in  
Four Novellas from The Savoy***

**Matthew Brinton Tildesley\***

\* Durham University

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*Matthew Brinton Tildesley*  
*Durham University*

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“We are not Realists, or Romanticists, or Decadents”,<sup>[1]</sup> wrote Arthur Symons in his editorial note to the first issue of *The Savoy*, January 1896, understandably wishing to distance the magazine from the furore surrounding all things decadent in the wake of Oscar Wilde’s imprisonment. However, following this denial of the label, he proclaims “For us, all art is good which is good art.” This statement has more than a hint of Wilde’s epigrammatic style, not to mention the quintessential Decadent creed “art for art’s sake”. In *The Savoy*, Symons, along with chief illustrator Aubrey Beardsley, publisher Leonard Smithers and the contributors to the magazine, were attempting to navigate the extremely difficult route that lay between the desire to explore areas in art, literature and philosophy typified by the Decadent movement, and the weight of public opinion that condemned such behaviour.

Wilde’s flagrant display of his sexuality was part of his stance taken up in opposition to Victorian mores. As the law became more restrictive over matters of sexuality, sexuality itself became an ever more potent weapon to be used against the lawmakers. Throughout the eight issues of *The Savoy* we find the subject of sexuality being explored in fiction, critical works and illustrations. In order to demonstrate how *The Savoy* managed to navigate this most precarious route that lay between the threat of prosecution and the desire to explore areas of sexuality that would be deemed subversive or clandestine, I will be examining four novellas from the magazine: the tales of Ellen (I, 103-8), Nancy (I, 31-41 and II, 99-108), Lucy (II, 147-60 and VIII, 51-61) and Beardsley’s *Under the Hill* (I, 151-70 and II, 187-97).

### **The Tales of Three Women**

Within “respectable” middle-class Victorian society, women were ideally defined according to their relationships with men: they would be classed as either daughter, maid, wife or mother. This powerless feminine ideal was championed, somewhat paradoxically, by the Monarch herself; writing to Theodore Martin, Victoria decreed that ‘The Queen is most anxious to enlist everyone who can speak or write or join in checking this mad, wicked folly of “Woman’s Rights” with all its attendant horrors, on which her poor feeble sex is bent, forgetting any sense of womanly feeling and propriety’.<sup>[2]</sup> *The Saturday Review* (September 1871) states that “the power of reasoning is so small in woman that they need adventitious help [...] they do not calculate consequences, and they are reckless when they once give way”.<sup>[3]</sup> The same publication stated in December 1865:

No woman can or ought to know very much of the mass of meanness and wickedness and misery that is loose in the wide world. She could not learn it without losing the bloom and freshness which it is her mission in life to preserve.<sup>[4]</sup>

It was the preservation of this freshness that resulted in the “chaste courtship and passionless marriage of Victorian legend”<sup>[5]</sup>. Examining prostitution across the Empire, Lawrence James remarked “it was impossible for [British prostitutes] to find any pleasure in sex ... a verdict that was extended to all women in general during the second half of the century” and that for a British woman to “enjoy sex for solely physical reasons was against nature”;<sup>[6]</sup> a woman’s place was in the home and “it was as a mother, not as a bed mate, that the mid-Victorian wife fulfilled what society took to be her highest duty”.<sup>[7]</sup>

Throughout *The Savoy* there are many depictions of women that oppose this view of femininity, such as “Ellen” by Rudolph Dircks. Ellen is a café waitress and has been for two years, her age indicated in “that silent, miraculous change, so imperceptible, so profound, which works in a woman between the ages of eighteen and twenty”. However, there is more to be gleaned from this early

portrait: for a girl of that age to be working in a café, she must be without a financial ward, i.e. she has no dominant male in control of her affairs. In matters of looks and behaviour, she is profoundly different from her work colleagues who display “that fictitious spirit of gaiety” and “that alert responsiveness” to flirtatious behaviour from the customers. The fact that she “rather despised these coquetries of her companions” suggests social detachment and a level of education above that of the other waitresses. (I, 103.)

Ellen is an orphan, and is portrayed as being of a social class not normally associated with waitressing - it was only the untimely death of her parents that led to her to such a station. The figure of the female orphan is one which features heavily in Victorian pornographic and erotic literature, and will be discussed later, but here the key element of Ellen’s position as an orphan is the fact that she is an *independent* woman.

This is stressed throughout the story and specifically contrasted with the position of married women. Whilst her desire for independence is still an undefined yearning, “she had an intuitive suspicion that she possessed qualities that would be fatal to her retaining the affections of a husband, that there would be little joy for her in the companionship which would place her in the position of a wife” (I, 104). Clearly marriage marks a change in status that would restrict her freedom - the inherently subservient “position of a wife”.

After befriending an anonymous male customer, her feelings crystallise and she articulates her desire: “I don’t want to be married the same as most girls do; I don’t like men, as a rule – at least, not in that way ... besides, I think I should always be happier remaining as I am at present, working for myself, independent.” (I, 107.) This may include a hint towards tribadism, but the powerful anti-establishment message here is that an intelligent young woman is rejecting the institution of marriage as it represents an unequal partnership necessitating the surrender of her independence. Following this admission she speaks of her desire for a child, leaving an unspoken invitation for the man to be

the father. The fact that he remains anonymous emphasises Ellen's determination to be independent – even in the act of procreation, the male as an individual is insignificant and certainly not superior. The contrast between Ellen and the accepted male-defined stereotypes of daughter, maid, wife or mother could not be sharper; neither the Queen nor *The Saturday Review* would have been amused.

The image of a young waitress with an illegitimate child would not have been uncommon. However, throughout the tale Dircks stresses the fact that Ellen is not simply a thoughtless working-class girl. Earlier in the story, former waitresses who married customers were deemed to be “fortunate” compared to those whose sudden disappearance was “simultaneous with a break in the regular attendance of certain customers” (I, 104). Ellen appears not to approve of the illicit sexual liaison. Her distancing herself from the behaviour of others strongly suggests a difference in class, and implies a morality shaped by the concepts of reputation and scandal – a quintessentially middle-class phenomenon. However, she is not bound by conventions that she perceives as being detrimental to her own happiness and freedom. Hers is an informed choice to become a mother, without being lessened by the institution of marriage. She will remain an independent woman, and not become merely another “ruined maid”. Thus Ellen wilfully subverts the sexual stereotypes of her gender and class.

Another suggestion of the social status of Ellen may be found in the portrait following the story: *Chloe*, by Will Rothenstein (c. 1896).



Although the portrait has different name and author, the order of the literary and artistic contents of *The Savoy* suggests an attempt on the behalf of the editors to match illustrations and literary works. Rothenstein's image of serious-faced, well-dressed young woman could be seen as a further editorial suggestion as to the character of Ellen.

The concept of suggestion is very important in terms of understanding the stance of *The Savoy* regarding sexuality, as overt references would result in prosecution. Just as Ellen's possible sexual orientation is merely a suggestion, as are the sexual antics of her colleagues, the tale's ending is open enough for the reader to make up his/her own mind as to the outcome.

In Ellen, therefore, we see *The Savoy* very carefully depicting a character at odds with the accepted view of sexuality, but done in such a way as to avoid public outcry. She appears insignificant enough to be able to challenge the status quo without being deemed too much of a threat, and it would be possible to surmise

that her actions were seen as wrong by the would-be father of her child, and that the heinous crime of single-motherhood never took place. The reader is presented with the *impression* of a story into which s/he inserts his or her own details according to the reader's own moral viewpoint. This concept of suggestion was central to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Wilde famously stated that "What Dorian Gray's sins are no one knows. He who finds them has brought them".<sup>[8]</sup> Dircks and the editors of *The Savoy* are using the same technique as Wilde for the same purpose, i.e. challenging the sexual norms set out by the middle-class moral-lawmakers.

The two-part tale of Nancy Nanson's fall from grace again leaves the sins unstated, but also borrows from Wilde's story in both its characters and plot. The narrative takes the form of a series of letters between Nancy, a child prodigy of the theatre, and Clement Ashton, a portrait-painter. In this relationship there is an echo of the early relationship between Dorian Gray and Basil Hallward. Nancy's is a haunting beauty with which the artist becomes obsessed: "the face was young – but I have known youth. Pretty it was – but a fashionable portrait-painter lives with prettiness. It was so monstrously refined" (I, 32). This notion of a monstrous beauty in the face of a girl of fifteen is laden with suggestions of latent power and the capacity for tragedy that is embodied in the young Dorian Gray. Recalling Wilde's novel in its conceit of appearance reflecting moral behaviour, Ashton tells Nancy: "This thing may not last with you. Whether it lasts depends, in a great measure, upon the life you lead, in the strange world opening to you."<sup>[9]</sup> (I, 36.) Like Dorian, Nancy stands on the verge of adulthood resplendent in a near-divine beauty, but with the suggestion of a fatal flaw that will ensure her fall from grace.

Nancy may be seen as a fusion between two of Wilde's creations, namely Dorian, as already shown, and Sybil Vane. The tale of Nancy could be read as a meta-narrative from within the text of Wilde's novel. Her experiences may be viewed as the story of Sybil's meetings with Dorian, told from her perspective, in veiled letters to a friend. As Sybil is a theatrical child prodigy, so is Nancy. Both fall

foul of a male admirer who is responsible for their “ruin”. Sybil loses her life, but it is not altogether clear what happens to Nancy at the hands of her “Prince Charming”.

Nancy’s “deterioration” is most deftly achieved through suggestion. The second instalment of letters includes a short introduction where the “editor” remarks:

I seem to discern some change of tone – a rather quick transition or development [...] which, if it is really there, is unlikely to have escaped the eye of her correspondent, and may perhaps even have prepared him in a certain measure for a *denouement* which, nevertheless, when it arrived, disturbed him seriously. That, at least, is my own reading of Miss Nanson’s notes. But I am possibly wrong. (II, 99)

Wedmore is distancing himself from any specific intent. The linguistic register of the introduction absolves the author of any conclusive message. Words such as “seems”, “perhaps”, “if”, “possibly” all put the weight of interpretation onto the reader in the most playfully suggestive manner. Not only does Wedmore use Wilde’s technique of reader participation in matters of morality, but he also makes it clear to the readers that this is expected of them. Indeed, there is even a second such instruction to the reader when Ashton tells Nancy that “letters, even when detailed, generally omit much, hide some part of a thought – put the thing in a way that pleases the writer, or is intended to please the receiver” (I, 31):

Wedmore’s message could not be clearer.

As with Milton’s Eve, Nancy’s fall from grace is the movement from innocence to knowledge – the very thing that *The Saturday Review* sought to avoid. This is hinted at in the later letters in phrases such as “The Theatre Royal, Hoxton, is more for the masses than the classes” (II, 100). Such a distinction between people would have been unthinkable to the young, innocent Nancy in the first instalment, who forgave even those who sought to blacken her name in the press. Nancy has become discerning, and discernment comes only from knowledge. As Eve found to her cost, knowledge, sexuality and damnation are inextricably bound

together in Christian ideology, and a similar fate now awaits Nancy in the eyes of the attentive and duly instructed reader of Wedmore's carefully crafted tale.

That Nancy's mistake is in some way a sexual misdemeanour is without doubt. Ashton's vague comments as to the price of physical chastity in his last letter and Nancy's admission that she "compromised herself" certainly give that impression. Nevertheless, Nancy's statement that "I was on deep waters. But I did *not* go under" leaves the details of her sin up to the reader's own sense of moral propriety (II, 108).

However, it is not Nancy's sexuality that is of primary importance here, but rather that of Clement Ashton; in him we find a microcosm of repressed Victorian passions.

Clement Ashton never mentions the existence of a wife. If he is married, one may ask why his wife is never mentioned. If Ashton is keeping his wife secret from Nancy, we may assume that Nancy is in turn secret from his wife, resulting in the notion of a dual existence in the mode of Henry Spencer Ashbee or Oscar Wilde.<sup>[10]</sup> However, it seems likely that Ashton is not married, but although nothing specific is said about his history, there is an "impressionistic" portrait of his character within these letters.

Ashton moves in exclusive circles: Sir James Purchas is a close friend (I, 32) and enjoys staying at 'the old "Gloucester"' (I, 34), formerly owned by George III; he has enough disposable income to offer financial support to Nancy and her mother. Clearly Ashton is a man of wealth and high social standing. Given the inherent difficulties in making a living from the arts, one may presume that Ashton's wealth has been inherited. In short, Clement Ashton is a member of the Victorian upper middle classes. As such, his schooling and higher education would have been conducted in all-male institutions and this pattern of social behaviour largely carried on into his adult life.

This preponderance of all-male institutions, coupled with the complete shunning of the adult female form as an object of sexual desire in late Victorian middle-

class Britain led to both sexual confusion and deviance. In some cases this deviance was thoroughly conscious and deliberate, but in others such deviation seems to be less intentional, and possibly less conscious.

Ashton is emblematic of an alarming trend in late Victorian Britain for men who have had their natural sexual desire repressed to such an extent that they no longer find the adult female form attractive. Once a female reaches puberty she becomes the very thing that respectable men are not to look at or desire, and so the image of a child becomes a “safe” alternative. Children are not sexually attractive, therefore children cannot tempt the watcher to sinful acts, as women can.

In Ashton’s letters one discerns such a repression and projection of sexual desire. Ashton tells her “I like you, and like to think and reflect on you”, and he goes on to state that he has no love of Music Hall, but comes only to watch her perform. The attraction is “your charming personality [...] not your performance”. (I, 33) Such statements could be quite innocent; on page 35 however, there is the first hint of another attraction. Ashton, in comparing Nancy to another dancer, tells her “Sylvia Gray’s dance is perfect, from the waist upwards [...] Where Sylvia Gray ends [...] you, my dear, begin.” There follows a vivid description of Nancy’s dancing which leaves her “flushed and panting”. A second dance is described, before which Ashton had given Nancy two carnations:

They were not worn in your first turn. They were not worn in your second. In your third turn, I espied them at your neck’s side, in the fury of your dance. Already there are people, I suppose, who will have thought those striped carnations happy – tossed, tossed to pieces, in the warmth of your throat. (I, 39)

The image of a sexually charged, sacrificial dance is unmistakable and reminiscent of Wilde’s *Salome*. Ashton’s intense interest in Nancy wearing the flowers that secretly link her to him, and his imagining “people” who would be happy to experience the thrill of being so close to her during her frenzied dance,

strongly suggest sexual desire. Wedmore's instruction that the reader should be conscious of any possible "hidden thoughts" strengthens such supposition.

Following this, Ashton muses on Nancy's appearance: "Nancy, there is – for me – a certain pathos in this passage of yours from childhood into ripening girlhood; a book closed, as it were; a phase completed" (I, 40). The depiction of her being a "closed book" hints at a world of secrecy, heavily loaded with notions of knowledge and sexuality. However, it appears to be this transition into adulthood that causes Ashton severe problems. Rather than embracing the change in Nancy that will bring about her sexual maturity, Ashton is horrified by the idea. The suggestion that he is sexually attracted to Nancy is repeatedly offset by his increasing anxiety over her budding maturity. The final pages of the first letters make clear this tension between Ashton's sexual desire for Nancy and his need to keep her forever young and innocent. After musing on Nancy's passage "into ripening girlhood" Ashton asks, "Would she be like the rest [...] Besmirched, too?" As well as repeating his concerns for her moral development, this question raises another, namely who are the others? Is Nancy one of a long line of young girls with whom the chivalrous Mr Ashton has been involved? This is followed by an oddly placed statement of his Hardy-esque belief in a fundamental difference between "the accidentally impolitic" and "the essentially wrong" in matters of "Humanity's instincts" and a recollection of a dream repeating the notion that "she must not be like the rest". There follows a nightmarish depiction of the previous night's performance, the darkness of the audience "peopled with your enemies; with your false friends, who were coming – always coming – the unavoidable crowd of the egotistic destroyers of youth". He concludes, "I wished last night had not come – your sixteenth birthday – with the applause and gifts and menacing triumph". (I, 40.)

In order to avoid his own rising anxiety, Ashton wishes she could remain a child forever. This is depicted as a concern over what may become of her at the hands the unseen army of Mr Hydes lurking in the darkness of the audience, but may be

read as an semi-conscious fear in Ashton of his own repressed desires for Nancy which would become unavoidable when she reaches sexual maturity.

The second instalment adds weight to this assumption. Ashton is eager to undertake another portrait of the young girl, in addition to the several already mentioned. He specifically requires a “careful drawing – a drawing in line [...] I shall not be content until I have, somewhere else than in my memory, the eyebrow’s line, the delicate low forehead, the fine nose”. (II, 101.) In addition to Ashton’s urgent need to record her child-like features, this letter tells of his concern over how Nancy views him: “I am not a foolish person, making up to you. I am not a vulgar flatterer of the first prettiness in the street. You know how much I am an artist” (II, 102). It seems odd that, after so many previous sittings, the artist should be concerned over her perception of his motives for drawing her this time. This concern may reveal an anxiety within Ashton himself as to his motives for drawing the girl.

In his next letter, Ashton speaks openly of his concern, even fear, over her aging: “There is nothing like the theatre for aging you. You, Nancy, are now, not five months, but two years older than you were last autumn. At first I was afraid of it physically.” However, it is the inner change to Nancy that Ashton finds most alarming: “it was the deeper You that had altered [...] those changes are not for the better [...] Idealist though I am, I foresaw them – I foresaw them, with forebodings.” (II, 103.) Ashton’s language then becomes more fevered and obsessive. He repeats his concerns that Nancy will be “spoilt” or “ruined” and berates the monstrous crime of vanity. The cause becomes clear when he rebukes her for “a look at a private Box”, presumably containing her “Prince Charming”. Ashton is incensed by this: “who the dickens are the people who have had this influence on you?” and proposes taking her way from this wicked life that “I begin to hate for you”.

Nancy is obviously becoming sexually attractive and aware of her own sexuality. Ashton’s outcry could be viewed as a fit of jealousy, but his desires are not simply

that Nancy should be his and not another's. He finishes by calling her a "dear child" and "a good girl", forcing her away from not only her suitor, but also the image of a maturing young woman entirely. The closing lines make clear Ashton's conflicting emotions:

The stuff is in you out of which they make Sisters of Charity. The stuff is  
in you out of which – But No! Why?

I am your old and fatherly, your *grand*-fatherly friend, if you prefer  
it –

CLEMENT ASHTON. (II, 104)

After sexualising the girl with whom he is obsessed, Ashton hurriedly forces himself into the role of grandfather, distancing himself from any sexual intent. Indeed, catharsis is only reached after Nancy's fall, when Ashton becomes her surrogate father. Her regret over having "compromised" herself places her back into the role of "vulnerable young girl" needing his protection. In his final letter, Ashton clearly states that it is not any particular act that "ruins" Nancy, but it is rather the "deterioration, the slow change in you, that must be coming, or have come" (II, 105). On the evidence of the letters, this change appears to be nothing more than the inevitable physical maturity and the first faltering steps into the adult world. It is this maturity that Ashton finds so alarming as it would ruin forever the Edenic image of the child with whom he is besotted, echoing the sentiments of *The Saturday Review* above.

Nancy's deterioration is not, therefore, a challenge to the norms of Victorian sexual politics as in the story of Ellen. In its depiction of the frustrated Ashton, the tale is a fleeting illumination of the world of repressed passions and perverted sexuality that lie beneath the veneer of respectability, as with *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

There are also facets of the story that link Wedmore's work to the clandestine publishing world. The very fact that these are *letters*, and not simply a recounted

tale, adds a secretive element to the narrative; the reader was not intended to be privy to this information. These letters represent a window into the secret life of Clement Ashton, and in the repressed world of late Victorian Britain the words “secrecy” and “sexuality” were almost synonymous. Wedmore’s instruction to read between the lines brings the reader closer to the text, to the point of virtual part-authorship, enhancing the feeling of a shared secret.

This “manuscript” format was one favoured by nineteenth century pornography, such as Edward Sellon’s *The New Epicurean*, which takes the form of letters penned to various lovers. Sellon’s tales frequently feature orphaned young girls as the object of sexual desire. As mentioned earlier, the female orphan is an inconvenient character for Victorian polite society as she is independent of the usual male-orientated positions for women. Within the world of pornographic literature, the orphan has the advantage of having no father figure to be negotiated along the path to sexual conquest. This pattern of the orphan as sexual prey is repeated throughout numerous works including *The New Epicurean*, *The Yellow Room*, *Flossie*, *a Venus of Fifteen*, and various tales from magazines such as *The Pearl*.<sup>[11]</sup> The fact that Ellen is an orphan and Nancy is fatherless would place the two stories into the realm of erotic literature for any informed reader. The theatrical performer and the orphan are two established conventions in the world of erotic writing. The format of “secret letters” is also a frequent style employed in erotic literature. These “reference points” enable Wedmore to give the impression of an erotic tale, leaving much unsaid, and therefore the actual content of Nancy’s story is by no means explicit enough to face prosecution. What *The Savoy* has achieved, therefore, is the framework of a “latent” erotic tale with suggestions for the cognizant reader to fill in the gaps.

Arthur Symons’ “Pages from the Life of Lucy Newcome” and “The Childhood of Lucy Newcome” share many similarities with the tales of Ellen and Nancy. Lucy is an orphaned, young, unmarried-mother who has been deserted by the child’s father, resulting in a life of desperate destitution; but unlike Ellen, Lucy is the quintessential “ruined maid”.

As with both of the above stories, Symons' tale is equivocal. We learn that her childhood was presided over by a listless, liberal-intellectual father and a sick mother. The father married beneath his social class, resulting in estrangement from his family and his liberal education of Lucy led to lax moral standards (or at least ignorance and naivety) resulting in Lucy becoming pregnant by her cousin. This happened after her parents' deaths, and the shame of unmarried motherhood forced her out of the respectable middle-class aunt's house, her home since being orphaned, and onto the streets. "Pages" starts at this point and charts Lucy's downward trajectory from penniless unmarried mother, through a period as a laundry-hand, to the ultimate humiliation of selling herself to a middle-aged bachelor.

Superficially, the tale has a strong moral message, decrying the fundamental flaws of liberal-intellectualism and extolling the virtues of middle-class conformity and sexual abstinence. Lucy's life in the working-class slum is shown in sharp contrast to her existence with her respectable aunt and cousin, as her dire financial need, resulting from her sexual crime, forces her into a life of virtual prostitution. However, if one scratches beneath the surface of Symons' narrative, an entirely different view of the Victorian middle classes emerges.

During her childhood Lucy believes that she is descended from fairies and is therefore innately superior to other children, as a means of retaining her sense of self worth amongst the children of wealthier parents. This free-spirited girl devised "a room all walls and no windows, within which she could be good or bad as she pleased" as a retort to the "pious servant's" attempts to admonish her by evoking the all-seeing, judgemental God (VIII, 54). This creative and carefree young girl becomes a cowering young woman, overburdened with shame, in the later instalment. At the beginning of "Pages", Lucy worries that "everyone must be looking at her", but her fear of recognition was much quelled by the fact that "she had altered so much since her confinement" (II, 147). When Lucy is taken in by the kindly Mrs Graham, her first concern is how this may affect Mrs Graham's standing: "You don't mind? You don't mind being seen?" The older woman's

reply, “No, *I* don’t mind!” (Symons’ italics) makes clear the difference in the women’s value systems; Mrs Graham’s is based on need and Lucy’s is based on reputation and scandal (II, 149-50). This middle-class value system forces Lucy to near starvation: she would sooner starve than beg alms from the despicably coarse laundry girls who call her “Miss Stuck-Up” and “Miss Fine-Airs” (II, 153).

The genesis of this change in Lucy’s values may be found in the few words spoken by the “grim”, “rigid” maiden aunt with the “severe sense of duty”. In “Childhood”, whilst widowed Mr Newcome is approaching death, Miss Marsden tells Lucy “I thought you were going to faint: I’ll have no fainting, if you please.” (VIII, 60.) This dominating concern for appearances and total repression of emotion is indicative of the archetypal middle-class, pinched Victorian spinster, recalling Lytton Strachey’s irreverent portrayal of Florence Nightingale in *Eminent Victorians*.<sup>[12]</sup> In his portrait of Nightingale, Strachey suggests that the near demonic fervour of this medical heroine was derived from her channelling energies from a repressed sexuality into unceasing work and strict discipline. There is certainly a distinct aura of this quasi-masochism about the aunt with which Lucy has spent many formative years in between the two passages recounted. The suggestion is that her aunt, every bit as much as her cousin, is responsible for ruining Lucy.

The fact that Lucy is a young girl and an orphan marks her out as possible sexual prey within the parameters of Victorian erotica. The predators in this story are manifold, and all from the ranks of the middle classes. The most obvious is the cousin who fathers her illegitimate child. In this relationship we find a pattern repeated throughout erotic writing, namely that of a young, orphaned female relative being introduced into a family and seen as legitimate sexual prey by the males of that family. If Miss Marsden is seen as the respectable “official” morality of the household, then the anonymous male cousin depicts the dark, “unofficial” side of the family’s moral identity.

Lucy's "saviour", Reginald Barfoot, is a character of similar social standing to Clement Ashton. His place of residence is "laid out in bachelor's flats, very expensive flats". (II, 156.) He is approximately fifty years old and has a substantial amount of disposable wealth. His close friends and neighbours include a doctor and several bachelors of a similar standing to himself. The fact that "his face was bronzed" suggests travel or possibly a colonial career, adding to the depiction of yet another upper-middle-class Victorian bachelor. Like Ashton, Barfoot refers to Lucy as "My child" and his initial concern appears to be for her wellbeing. However, the fundamental difference between Ashton and Barfoot becomes clear after he has fed Lucy in a café:

he began to talk to her, asking her questions, feeling his way. She blushed furiously: How he had misunderstood her! She was not angry, only frightened and disturbed; and of course such a thing could never be, never. He seemed quite grieved. (*Savoy*, II, 155.)

Barfoot typifies the moneyed, middle-class bachelor who prowls the streets looking for young, vulnerable women to feed his clandestine sexual appetite. The doctor's brief appearance at the end of "Pages" almost comically re-enforces this predatory male stereotype when the desperate Lucy appeals to him to save her doomed child. Her impassioned request is met with the lines: "The doctor looked at her critically; he liked pretty women, and this one was so young too" (II, 158). The resulting impression is that, as a vulnerable young woman amidst middle class society, Lucy is beset on all sides by predatory males who see her only as sexual prey; there is not one middle-class male who interacts with Lucy other than desiring her sexually. When contrasted with the honest, coarse life of the working classes, and the loving atmosphere of her early liberal home, the middle-classes are depicted as a seething mass of repression, hypocrisy and sexual deviance. The men are sexual predators and the women sexless harridans.

### **The Goddess Revealed**

The life of Lucy Newcome exposes the duality of middle-class sexuality, and the story displays distinct connections with the clandestine erotic book trade. The story of Nancy Nanson shares these features of Victorian erotica, both in content and in form, as well as depicting a perverted sexuality in the repressed Ashton. In the tales of Ellen and Nancy the subject of independent, sexually dominant women is inferred through the respective lives of a waitress and a dancer. The former challenges, and even reverses, the accepted patriarchal view of “the family” and the church-based definition of sexual union only within wedlock. Ellen’s will dominates the story and defines her relationship with the anonymous, almost insignificant male. In the latter story, Nancy’s sexual maturity causes Ashton tremendous anxiety; his fear is indicative of the threat posed to a male-centred society by uncontrollable female sexuality.

The character of Helen in Aubrey Beardsley’s *Under the Hill* is the towering archetype of powerful femininity in *The Savoy*. She is totally independent and not in any way male-dominated. Her position is that of a Classical Goddess, with both male and female worshippers: Abbe Franfeluche hears her “Vespers” being sung in chapter one (I, 159) and worries over his dress being acceptable to a Goddess; both the illustration and description of Helen at her toilet depict a sickly-rich scene of excesses and devotion of every kind, heaped upon the deity.

This fetishistic quality is reminiscent of the masochistic tendency in the Petrarchan sonnet tradition as the lover worships, and finds his *raison d’être* in serving, his lady. Helen is all-powerful and her beauty serves only to torture those who, though they may be favoured by her, will never possess her:

She was adorably tall and slender. Her neck and shoulders were wonderfully drawn, and the little malicious breasts were full of the irritation of loveliness that can never be entirely comprehended, or enjoyed to the utmost. (I, 163)

Although Helen's sexual excesses are only hinted at in the version of the tale published, Beardsley's illustrations add a further dimension to the text. If one examines the figure of Helen in the illustration of her toilet (I, 161) the angle of her legs whilst seated suggest more the hindquarters of a horse or goat than a human.



The shape of her foot closely mirrors that of the cloven hoof on her toilet stand. Her exposed breasts atop of the layered ruff resemble the torso of a satyr and the ornate screens behind her appear to show horns protruding from her head: Beardsley's Helen is a female Pan, thus representing the vibrancy and virility of nature in all its animalistic passions. Far from being the cowering, timid maid championed by *The Saturday Review*, Helen is an icon of powerful, independent female sexuality.

By contrast the leading male, Abbe Franfeluche, is pointedly feminized:

His hand, slim and gracious [...] played nervously about the gold hair that fell upon his shoulders like a finely curled peruke, and from point to point of a precise toilet the fingers wandered, quelling the little mutinies of cravat and ruffle. (I, 156)

In his appearance and demeanour the Abbe resembles Petrarch's Laura more than the poet-lover. Furthermore, whereas Helen is the focal point of a world of supplicant devotees – her will being projected on the masses – the corresponding account of Franfeluche depicts him as blithely passive and consumed with introspective trivialities:

he lay back on his bed, stared at the curious patterned canopy above him and nursed his waking thoughts.

He thought of the "Romaunt de la Rose," beautiful, but all too brief.

Of the Claude in Lady Delaware's collection.

Of a wonderful pair of blonde trousers he would get Madame Belleville to make for him.

Of a mysterious park full of faint echoes and romantic sounds. (II, 185.)

The list continues for three pages, including ludicrously lengthy footnotes which eventually dominate the text. The effect is an image of a man consumed by, even composed of, an infinity of intricately detailed and delicate trifles. The result is a

total reversal of the gender roles. The female, Helen, holds the ultimate position of authority and sexually dominates all those around her. The male Abbe is weak, incapable of decisive action and is reduced to ornamental status.

In some respects, therefore, *Franfeluche* recalls the anonymous would-be-father in the tale of Ellen. The male's identity is insignificant and exists only as a functional object required by the dominant and independent female. Although lacking the status of Helen, Ellen represents the same sexual challenges to the Victorian norms as Beardsley's fanciful deity; both are independent, wilful and powerfully aware of their own sexuality. The power of uncontrollable female sexuality is also found in the frenzied letters of Clement Ashton to his beloved Nancy. Although still standing on the threshold of sexual maturity, Nancy has the potential to become as worshipped and as powerful as Helen in the nightmare world of the repressed Ashton's imaginings.

Even though the characters in the tale of Lucy Newcome do not compare easily with those in *Under the Hill* the two stories are inextricably bound together in their depiction of the duality of Victorian middle-class society regarding sexuality. As Barfoot (and every other middle-class male in the story) leads the double life of being both a respectable Victorian gentleman and an exploitative sexual predator, *Under the Hill*, more than any other work in *The Savoy*, is representative of this duality in society. The story published in *The Savoy* is but a fragmentary, highly expurgated version of Beardsley's private text, described by James Havoc as an "extraordinary catalogue of sexual perversion".<sup>[13]</sup> Thus *Under the Hill* may be seen as a window into Beardsley's "Ashbee-esque" Secret Life. The private text is written for his own amusement and possibly that of a select group of friends, whilst the public text dispenses with the lurid details as any attempt to publish them openly would result in swift prosecution.

As with the above texts, Beardsley carefully avoids overt description of sexual acts, and uses inference and suggestion to lead the reader on to his or her own imaginings. His illustrations are used (to wonderful effect) to expand upon the

text in the reader's imagination, but Beardsley also uses the same techniques of suggestion and double meanings as Symons, Wedmore and Dircks.

The tale of the Peruvian virgin in chapter four (II, 187-8) is one such example. The Abbe's morning musings recall the story of the girl who devotes herself to the Catholic Church. Ostensibly this is a tale of wholesome Christian piety. However, the fact that the girl "vowed herself to perpetual virginity when she was four years old" (II, 187-8) makes her appear monstrously sexualized, as she is aware of her sexuality, and the inherent sinfulness therein, whilst barely out of her infancy.

The footnote to this tale, attributed to "Dubonnet", expands this notion by remarking that it is at this age "*when girls are for the most part well conformed in all the hateful practices of coquetry, and attended to with gusto, rather than with distaste, the hideous desires and terrible satisfactions of men!*" (II, 188.) In this statement there is more than a hint of Clement Ashton's feverish interest in young girls and fear of feminine sexuality. The effect is to damn the supposed author Dubonnet and, to an extent, the girl herself as obsessive sexual deviants. Hence this small sub-narrative displays the equivocal nature of a text, where the ostensible message is at odds with the covert implications.

The absurdly lengthy footnotes themselves may also be seen as a (possibly somewhat self-conscious) reference to the technique of using a scholastic format in order to legitimize an erotic text. Sir R.F. Burton's *Arabian Nights* and *Priapeia* (a collaboration with Leonard Smithers) are classic examples of such works, where the footnotes not only illuminate, but add to the erotic nature of the text. A further "legitimization" of the text may be seen in the lengthy dedication to a high-ranking member of the Catholic clergy (I, 153-5). Although one gains the impression that no tongue has ever been so eloquently placed in a cheek as here, the intended effect is to give the tale the appearance of a measured, scholarly work.

Thus, as with the novellas discussed earlier, Beardsley is using the techniques and “reference points” of the erotic book trade to direct the reader’s imagination towards the sexually subversive. We may be certain of his intent, as the clandestine version of the story, to which the *Savoy* version hints, is an openly and extravagantly erotic tale of powerful feminine sexuality. Therefore when viewed through the prism of *Under the Hill*, the latent erotic subtexts of other stories in *The Savoy* become manifest.

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Although he made no direct contribution, Oscar Wilde may be seen as a distinctive “shaping influence” on *The Savoy*. Notions of duality in the Victorian sexual psyche, as found in *Dorian Gray*, resonate throughout the magazine, and certainly the tale of Nancy echoes several specific elements of Wilde’s novel in its plot. Indeed *The Savoy*’s physical presence may be deemed an indirect influence of Wilde, as Smithers set up the magazine as a rival to *The Yellow Book*, in the wake of Beardsley’s sacking from that publication in 1895 on account of his perceived links with the scandalous Wilde.<sup>[14]</sup> However, it is in how the form produces the content that *The Savoy* displays its greatest debt to Wilde. Following his imprisonment, the laws governing what could be published regarding sexuality were applied with the most scrupulous severity. *The Savoy*’s editors and contributors therefore had to heavily “code” their work, in order to escape prosecution, but more than that, the change of climate in the publishing world after Wilde’s imprisonment resulted in the creation of a specific kind of Victorian literature. As respectable middle-class society sought to stifle any expression of sexual “deviancy”, artists such as *The Savoy*’s coterie used sexuality explicitly as a weapon against their oppressors. The sexually subversive is revelled in, and middle-class, pious morality is depicted as being depraved and hypocritical.

However, this covert style of literature led to the failure of the magazine as a whole; *The Savoy* clearly has pretensions to a wide readership, but the very nature of its content bars it from being widely read. Nods and winks may well slip past the censor, but they also limit the magazine’s appeal to the *cognoscenti*.

Decadence is necessarily exclusive, and so a Decadent magazine, espousing decadent, subversive sexuality, could never have mass appeal.

### Endnotes

- <sup>[1]</sup> B. C. Bloomfield, ed., *The Savoy: An Illustrated Quarterly of 1896 in Five Volumes*, 5 vols. (London: Cass, 1967) 5.
- <sup>[2]</sup> Ronald Pearsall, *The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality*, 2nd ed. (Harmondsworth: Pelican-Penguin, 1971) 139.
- <sup>[3]</sup> Pearsall 137.
- <sup>[4]</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>[5]</sup> Pearsall 209-10.
- <sup>[6]</sup> Lawrence James, *Raj: The Making and Unmaking of British India* (London: The Softback Preview, 1998) 210-11.
- <sup>[7]</sup> James 210.
- <sup>[8]</sup> H. Montgomery Hyde, *Famous Trials: Seventh Series: Oscar Wilde* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962) 136.
- <sup>[9]</sup> Here Ashton's advice echoes that of Lord Henry, who tells Dorian "You have a few years in which to live really, perfectly, and fully. When your youth goes, your beauty will go with it". Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Ed. Peter Ackroyd. Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986) 45.
- <sup>[10]</sup> Henry Spenser Ashbee, Victorian businessman and collector and cataloguer of pornography, is widely believed to be the anonymous "Walter", author of the monumental Victorian erotic journal *My Secret Life*. For further details see Ian Gibson, *The Erotomaniac: The Secret Life of Henry Spencer Ashbee* (London: Faber, 2001).

<sup>[11]</sup> Excerpts from *The Pearl* and *Flossie, a Venus of Fifteen* communicated privately by Professor John Manning, "The Other Victorians Course Reader and Miscellaneous Printed Matter," (Lampeter: University Of Wales, 2002).

<sup>[12]</sup> Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians: Cardinal Manning: Florence Nightingale: Dr. Arnold: General Gordon*, 2nd ed. (London: Phoenix-Chatto, 1929) 115-75.

<sup>[13]</sup> James Havoc, ed., *Oscar Wilde, Salome and Aubrey Beardsley, under the Hill* (London: Creation, 1999) Foreword 6.

<sup>[14]</sup> Stanley Weintraub, ed., *The Savoy: Nineties Experiment* (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1966) xiii-xv.

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### **First Response**

This is thoughtful and original work which deals with a still neglected area of fin-de-siecle studies. There is a fine sense of context here, and especially of the ambience which produced *The Savoy* and which influenced its readers' tastes and opinions. Tildesley has produced a very nicely nuanced argument which lead to interesting new insights into the world of Wilde's less obviously flamboyant contemporaries.