

## GEORGE EGERTON'S "VIRGIN SOIL": TWO CENTURIES IN ONE SHORT STORY

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**Summary:** George Egerton, a pseudonym for Mary Chavelita Dunne, wrote the short story "Virgin Soil" in 1894 and, although within the text no information is given regarding the time when the story is supposed to have taken place, the very date of publication, put together with its attachment to the New Woman movement at the *fin de siècle*, marks it as a bridge between two centuries. In Egerton's "Virgin Soil" both the structure, in two parts, and the two female characters, mother and daughter, represent conflicting models of womanhood at the *fin de siècle*. In those final decades of the nineteenth century, literature did not limit itself to portraying society as it was, but became actively involved in issues concerning women. Novels and short stories written by women of that time took a stance in the battle between forces demanding change and forces resisting innovation. This essay will look into how "Virgin Soil" illustrates both parties in the shape of the characters of mother and daughter themselves and in the literary choices she makes in the double structure of the text.

**Key words:** English Literature; *Fin de siècle*; Egerton.

**Resumo:** George Egerton, um pseudônimo de Mary Chavelita Dunne, escreveu o conto *Virgin Soil* em 1894 e, embora no texto não haja informação sobre quando a história supostamente ocorreu, a data de publicação, juntamente com sua associação ao movimento New Woman no *fin de siècle*, faz dela uma ponte entre dois séculos. Em *Virgin Soil* tanto a estrutura, em duas partes, e as duas personagens femininas, mãe e filha, representam modelos conflitantes de feminilidade no *fin de siècle*. Naquelas décadas finais do século XIX, a literatura não se limitou a retratar a sociedade como ela era, mas se envolveu ativamente em questões concernentes às mulheres. Romances e contos escritos por mulheres de então assumiram uma posição na batalha entre as forças que exigiam mudança e forças que resistiam à inovação. Este artigo examinará como *Virgin Soil* ilustra ambos os lados do embate na forma das personagens da mãe e da filha e nas escolhas literárias que a autora fez na estrutura dupla do texto.

**Palavras-chave:** Literatura Inglesa; *Fin de siècle*; Egerton.

In Egerton's "Virgin Soil" both the structure, in two parts, and the two female characters, mother and daughter, represent conflicting models of womanhood at the *fin de siècle*. In those final decades of the nineteenth century, literature did not limit itself to portraying society as it was, but became actively involved in issues concerning women. Novels and short stories written by women of that time took a stance in the battle between forces demanding change and forces resisting innovation. This essay will look into how "Virgin Soil" illustrates both parties in the shape of the characters of mother and daughter themselves and in the literary choices she makes in the double structure of the text.

George Egerton, a pseudonym for Mary Chavelita Dunne, wrote "Virgin Soil" in 1894 and, although within the text no information is given regarding the time when the story is supposed to have taken place, the very date of publication, put together with its attachment to the New Woman movement at the *fin de siècle*, marks it as a bridge between two centuries, a period when "Woman's role variously as a wife, a mother and a sexual subject were all under scrutiny" Marshall (2007, p.156). Burris-Janssen was aware that Egerton "took issue with the term 'New Woman' and "tried to distance herself from New Woman novelists", but asserts

that, nonetheless, “her desire to explore the ‘terra incognita’ of womanhood certainly resonated with the goals of her New Woman contemporaries”.

Comparing a group of women born in the 1880’s and 1890’s to the mid-Victorian generation, Gorham says that the latter were “essentially Victorian”, though they lived past such events as the First World War, because their childhood and youth had been lived “at the pinnacle of Victorian prosperity and the dominance of Victorian ideology, and they had lived a considerable portion of their adult lives before they were affected by the changing circumstances of the new century”. Those women born in the 1880’s and 1890’s, on the other hand, who had been “affected by the considerable changes in social, intellectual and sexual mores that had begun to be evident even in the last decades of the century”, and moreover, had lived “their early adulthood in the years when the foundations of the Victorian liberal consensus were crumbling” had mixed values and allegiances, as one would expect (1982, p.187).

In the last decades of the nineteenth century the literature produced by and for women in England, concerned as it was with women’s issues, came to have such a strong connection with realism that critics of women’s movements saw

“feminism and realism as related maladies” (MARSHALL, 2007, p.181-2). Marshall sees it as “no coincidence, then, that the backlash in the *fin de siècle* against realism was largely a backlash against women’s fiction” (p.182).

Those critics of realist novels of the late nineteenth century claimed to be defending the ‘young reader’ who, in their view, was susceptible “to be damaged – emotionally, intellectually and of course morally – by exposure to [realist novels]” (MARSHALL, 2007, p.175). The ‘young reader’, Marshall clarifies, is in lieu of ‘young *female* reader’, a figure that was constantly enmeshed in debates held over literature at the *fin de siècle*. Marshall counters this idea with a powerful argument by Henry James when he protested against the practice of addressing single young women, or counting them as a major portion of the novelist’s public in contemporary English literature: “Half of life is a sealed book to young unmarried ladies, and how can a novel be worth anything that deals only with half of life?” (p.175-6)

The expression ‘New Woman’ initially referred to a movement fighting for female emancipation, but came to be used in association with “a body of fiction whose sensational form drew new attention to women’s issues” (JAMES, 2006, p.204), in other words, the sensation novel.

Some scholars make an effort to distinguish between those two terms, while acknowledging that they have much in common – the centrality given to female characters and to women’s experiences and rights. In Peterson’s regard, it is the experimentalism that Egerton and many others used in short stories “in form, plotting, and characterization – that ultimately distinguishes the New Woman fiction from sensation fiction”. By the end of the nineteenth century, ‘the enigma of woman’, object of New Woman novels and short stories, “some of which anticipate the modern psychological novel and modernist experimentation with form”, had replaced the sensation novel’s ‘woman with a secret’ (PETERSON, 2015, p.141-2).

From the beginning, in the description of the two women, Egerton hints at the diametrical dissimilarity the reader will see between them by the end of the short story. The girl, Florence, or Flo, distinguishes herself from her mother in appearance by a firmer mouth and a nose that is “full of character” (RICHARDSON, 2002, p.104), prefiguring the strength she will exhibit in the second part of the narrative. When she chooses to exclude the father from the narrative Egerton is simplifying the equation. She eliminates distractions and isolates the problem, concentrating her

efforts on the two female characters, mother and daughter – one an old-fashioned and the other a brand-new view of womanhood, respectively. This is, after all, fiction “written by a woman, about women, from the standpoint of a woman”, in the words of W. T. Stead, quoted by Peterson in search of a characterization of the genre (PETERSON, 2015, p.134).

The mother is a stereotypical Victorian woman. She shows no sign of maturity, of the self-assuredness one would expect from a woman old enough to have a teenage daughter. In many respects, she herself is a ‘girl’ still – a woman-child. While talking to her daughter after the wedding she is “scarcely less disturbed” (RICHARDSON, 2002, p.103) than the newly wed herself is at the prospect of having to leave her parent’s house with the man she has just married; she makes “a strenuous effort to say something to her daughter”, to tell her about sex, “something that is opposed to the whole instincts of her life”; she is as embarrassed as any young girl would be when she tries to tell the girl what she should expect in her wedding night; she cries; she blushes; she speaks hesitantly and she is, in the end, utterly unable to be of any assistance to the terrified seventeen-year-old bride. All she manages to do is pass on to her child the same litany she must have heard from her own mother and she does so

in a halted speech that reveals her immense mortification: “You are married now, darling, and you must obey... your husband in all things – there are – there are things you should know – but – marriage is a serious thing, a sacred thing... you must believe that what your husband tells you is right – let him guide you – tell you...”.

In the light of the understanding we get after reading the second part of the narrative – the distance and coldness in the relationship between mother and daughter – the distress of the mother in this first conversation seems to be less a result of her love and concern for her child than an abhorrence of the task she is encumbered with, the task of educating her daughter about sex; we get the impression that her daughter’s terror reminded her of how distasteful the topic is to her and, therefore, when she calls the girl ‘darling’ it seems more like she is commiserating with a fellow sufferer, because she herself has gone through a similar ordeal as an ignorant young girl.

In spite of her age, the girl shows a disposition to objectively deal with the matter and solve the mystery she has sensed in the weeks prior to her wedding – in the way her mother and others looked at her and “in the very atmosphere”. Her impatience with her mother in that moment is a preview

of how far apart in the spectrum of womanhood the two of them will be. She asks: “What is it that I do not know, mother? What is it?” (RICHARDSON 2002, p.104), but it is already too late for an answer, the groom is at the door.

The young fatherless bride is helpless in the relationship she has just entered. Her mother does not command sufficient strength to offer her daughter any protection against the man who now holds over her child all the authority conferred on a Victorian husband, the man who gives “a sharp rap to the door” and who calls to his bride with a recently acquired “imperative note” (p.104) to his voice – he is, of course, very aware of the power of his position, of all the rights society and the law assure him a husband has over his wife. It would have taken a stronger, more mature and assertive parent to instigate some form of restraint in that man’s treatment of his new wife. Flo’s growth and fortitude, exhibited later on, are a wondrous feat made even more extraordinaire by the fact that they were not built on her mother’s experience, knowledge and strength: Flo was forced to learn about men, women and marriage all by herself in order to eventually break free from the prison her marriage represented. To be fair, a strong parent in our times might take up that protective role with some degree of success, but Victorian



husbands were all-powerful and the parents of most brides would have been, first, reluctant to intervene and, second, unable to.

In our first view of the groom, Philip, we learn that his hair is grey, establishing a significant age difference to the seventeen-year old bride. His likeability is not encouraged by further description: he is “loose-lipped”, “inclined to stoutness” and only “affable enough” when he smiles. The fact that he “looks very big” and has “strong white teeth” adds a certain amount of menace to his appearance. His impatience could at first be attributed to the understandable passion of a newly married man, but before the closing of the first section of the narrative the reader will have had chilling glimpses of the kind of husband Flo’s is going to be. The predatory nature of the groom is subtly brought to relief by the use of two almost identical words: ‘fawn’ – meaning ‘a young animal’ or ‘young deer’ – used in reference to young Flo, who has “fawn-like eyes as her mother’s” and a “fawn-like shyness”; and ‘faun’ – meaning ‘a kind of satyr’, ‘a deity with lustful character’ – used in reference to the groom, about whose ears it is said that they are “peculiar, pointed at the top like a faun’s” (p.103).

The paragraph that follows depicts the essence of the female vulnerability in Victorian society. The heroine is

pursued by a predatory male, but here no one shows up to save her at the last minute. When the couple reach the train station Flo “jumps out first; she is flushed, and her eyes stare helplessly as the eyes of a startled child, and she trembles with quick running shudders from head to foot. She clasps and unclasps her slender grey-glove hands so tightly that the stitching on the back of one bursts” (p.104). When it is time to board the train “he offers her his arm with such a curious amused proprietary air that the girl shivers as she lays her hand in it”. The reader is left to conjecture what happened in the past half hour and what follows when “a large well-kept hand, with a signet ring on the little finger, pulls down the blind on the window of an engaged carriage”. As Burris-Janssen points out, “The importance of sex is made more dramatic by its absent presence in the text”.

And here is where the dated style and plot come to an abrupt end, brought about by a very a modern character, the New Woman Florence. The conventions and tropes used in the first section of the narrative – the virginal young woman, the dangerous and sexually aggressive male, the strictures of female modesty, the feeble and submissive mother-figure and the cruel husband – give way to verisimilitude in the depiction of a strained mother-daughter relationship, an

angry woman who has just abandoned her husband and who is very vocal about her dissatisfaction with women's lot in her society. Those conventions that persistently portrayed the woman as a victim make a stark contrast with the second segment of the story, closer in style to realist fiction, which tends to depict stronger female characters. It is my suggestion that such a juxtaposition was made expressly to add force to the impression of conflicting worlds imparted by the abyss that separates mother and daughter. The five-year gap that elapses between the first and second parts could be taken as a reference to the fact that the passage of time brings about change. The first segment would, in that line of thought, represent past generations of women and the second would depict the New Woman, a figure "repeatedly associated with modernity in the late nineteenth century" (MARSHALL, 2007, p.165).

Petersonseemstooffersomesupportforthatinterpretation when she notes that "Egerton was a formal innovator who... experimented with new ways of rendering the inner lives of her characters through a series of psychological moments or dreamlike passages... Although many New Woman writers continued to work within and rework the conventions of the nineteenth-century realist novel, some of them, such as

Egerton, also sought new forms in which to tell a new story – the story of the modern woman” (2015, p.141). Egerton places those five years between the two parts of the story to accentuate Flo’s drastic metamorphosis by contrasting Flo as a girl and as a woman and also to dramatize the change by denying the reader access to the process of Flo’s transformation.

Instead of the expected closure to a Victorian narrative, the wedding ceremony is the starting point of Egerton’s short story, who is then able to examine the ‘ever after’ and allow the heroine to review her five-year marriage – which was no ‘fairy tale’. Ten out of the eleven pages of the story are dedicated to the mother-daughter encounter that takes place five years after the first segment.

When the narrative is resumed the girl has changed into a woman and an account is given of the transformation in both body and mind. Physically she goes from “scarcely fully developed in her fresh youth” at seventeen to a 22-year-old woman in whom you can find “no trace of girlhood”. Her posture speaks of her state of mind: the image of that young woman walking “with her head down and a droop in her shoulders” communicates her despondency. The transformation is made more poignant because of the

contrast it makes with the happy girl that used to “run to the open window on summer mornings... and welcome the day”, who would dance in the moonlight and “let her fancies fly out into the silver night, a young girl’s dreams of the beautiful, wonderful world that lay outside”; it is also touching because she is still so young and because the transformation is abrupt, introduced in the text by a mere, “five years later” (RICHARDSON, 2002, p.104-5). Flo herself is sensitive to the metamorphosis she has gone through and “a hard dry sob rises in her throat at the memory” of what she used to be (p.106).

As moving as the sorrowful state of Flo’s mind is, the picture we get when she looks at herself in a mirror at her mother’s house raises more serious concerns – she is not just unhappy, she is ill: “her skin is sallow with the dull sallowness of a fair skin in ill-health” and “her brown hair is so lacking in lustre that it affords no contrast” (p.106), she is “painfully thin, and drags her limbs as she walks” (p.110). Her mother remarks no less than five times in the second part of the narrative that Flo looks ill. Her body, her posture, her demeanour bear witness to what a marriage to a husband such as hers can do to a woman. Up to this point Flo had been, as Burris-Janssen puts it, “an emblem of Victorian womanhood”, who had

been “caught up in a set of outmoded marital conventions”. She was physically and mentally depleted by the five-year period she spent as a wife to a man she describes as “an animal with strong passions” (p.110).

The mother, on the other hand, doesn’t look “a day older than that day five years ago”, “her glossy hair is no greyer, her skin is clear”. In contrast to her daughter, she is the picture of how peaceful her life has been in the past years. At her daughter’s entrance, she is sitting in an easy chair with a cat on her lap, smiling in her sleep. A hymn book by the piano and some lace work nearby are indications of the carefree tasks that fill her life, “her quiet years, each day a replica of the one gone before” (p.5-6).

We learn that it is the first time the daughter returns to her mother’s house since her wedding day, having always made excuses not to visit. Flo’s first words to her after five years, as she shakes her wake “not too gently” are: “Mother, wake up, I want to speak with you (p.106).” The bitter new Flo is enraged at her mother’s easy life when hers “has been a hell” (p.112). Very realistically, she more than once takes pleasure in the distress she causes her mother when she tells her about her miserable marriage, observing her reactions “with a kind of dull satisfaction” (p.107) or “with malicious enjoyment” (p.108).

The scene that ensues is where the differences between the two women are felt the most keenly. Facing her daughter's open aggressiveness, the mother is unable to respond in kind and, instead, adheres to etiquette. She rises and closes the door out of a "studied regard for the observance of small proprieties", presumably to keep the heated conversation private. She "feels she ought to kiss [her daughter], though she does not; the kiss is one other duty she feels she is expected to perform, out of the same sense of obligation that tells her to offer tea. She later asks about Philip, again because "it seems to her that she ought to". She is a woman whose conduct is dictated by a code of propriety apart from which she cannot exist. From that same code she derives all her very trite responses to Flo's report about her husband's philandering and her decision to leave him: "What would your poor father have said!", "Shall I – ask the vicar to – to remonstrate with him?", "I have always looked upon marriage as a sacred thing", "you should have tried to save Philip – from – from such a shocking sin", "you can't mean to desert your husband", "oh, think of the disgrace, the scandal, what people will say, the – the sin", "you can't refuse a husband, you might cause him to commit sin" (p.108-9). Could not all those *clichés* have been predicted to come out of a Victorian woman?

The daughter educates the mother when she says she can't understand what Florence is saying. Her reply is pragmatic: "sit down and I'll tell you" and from then onwards she proceeds in a passionate quasi-soliloquy only twice, and very briefly, interrupted. In Florence's harshness to her mother Egerton expresses her frustration at all the women who had persistently resisted change. Flo is so eloquent and knowledgeable in her diatribe against the injustice of women's situation in the nineteenth century that her discourse is reminiscent of a public speech. It is, in a sense, a public speech made to readers across the world.

Flo's is a mild-mannered mother, but she is not a particularly loving one. Egerton refers to her "dormant motherhood" (p.107) and to the "quiet selfishness" with which she has accepted Flo's excuses not to visit her in the same way she has received presents from her son-in-law. She feels she has fulfilled her duty as a mother, she "has found her a husband well-off in the world's goods, and there her responsibility ended" (p.106). Reading a larger sample of Egerton's works Marshall notes that her women protagonists do not usually exhibit profound biological attachment with their offspring and that when their lives are defined by motherhood, that definition is not cause for celebration. As



to the mother-daughter tie in the case in point, Marshall calls it “bitterly painful to both” (2007, p.161-2). Flo’s sentiments deserve even stronger words than that, as she does tell her mother emphatically “[I] hate you” (Richardson, 2002, p.112).

There follows after that a series of references to death – “I have cried myself barren of tears. Cry over the girl you killed”, “why didn’t you kill me as a baby?”, her suicidal impulse to “jump down under the engine as [the train] came in”, a reference to her years of marriage as “one long crucifixion”, and a confession of her strong temptation to kill her husband (p.113). These images of death lead to and culminate in what Burris-Janssen’s calls “a coded allusion to abortion”: to her mother’s suggestion that she have a child her reply is a simple “no, mother”, accompanied by a “a peculiar expression of satisfaction over something” (p.113). Burris-Janssen’s suggestion does fit in with the plot, as well as with the character’s stance in relation to her husband and her marriage, and with the feminist ideals the New Woman fiction associates with.

The mother remains a stereotypical Victorian woman until almost the very end, when she is illuminated by an epiphany (a literary device favoured by modernists): “The placid current of her life is disturbed, her heart is roused,

something of her child's soul agony has touched the sleeping depths of her nature. She feels as if scales have dropped from her eyes, as if the instincts and conventions of her life are toppling over, as if all the needs of protesting women of whom she has read with a vague displeasure have come home to her" (RICHARDSON, 2002, p.113).

The enlightenment of the mother in the end is the change that women writers at the *fin de siècle* hoped to operate in society as a whole. It is not a happy ending, though – a gloom *finale* being a more fitting conclusion to a realistic story. That is the reason Marshall gives for the open-endedness characteristic of realistic novels, in which, if "narrative closure is achieved, it tends to the bleak, even the tragic". She quotes Henry James's objection to "a distribution at the last of prizes, pensions, husbands, wives, babies, millions, appended paragraphs, and cheerful remarks" (2007, p.180) at the end of earlier Victorian novels. Flo knows all too well the grimness that lies ahead of her as a woman without her husband: "I have all the long future to face with all the world against me" (RICHARDSON, 2002, p.112).

With heart-wrenching works such as this it is not surprising that the literature produced in this period contributed to change the world.

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