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Masquerade, Self-Invention and the Nation: Uncovering the
Fiction of Katherine Cecil Thurston

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A thesis submitted for examination for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy

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This dissertation is dedicated to my parents: Patrick and Eva Bergin. Their continuous love and support got me there in the end.

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the life and works of Cork-born novelist, Katherine Cecil Thurston (1874-1911). Thurston occupies a liminal place in the Irish literary canon in spite of achieving significant transatlantic success during the early years of the twentieth century. An investigation into Thurston's relative neglect will shed light on a body of work that reflected a number of contemporary concerns in Victorian, Edwardian and pre World War I society. Recent research into Thurston's oeuvre has led to the discovery of a large collection of Thurston memorabilia in the National Library of Scotland. An inspection of Thurston's fiction alongside the associated archive material helps generate a much more complete impression of the author, from a personal standpoint through to how she was received at the time both by the contemporary media and public. Her noteworthy success in the American, British and European marketplaces, her status as highly sought-after spokeswoman in London's social circuit and her widely publicised separation from husband and fellow novelist, Ernest Temple Thurston, are all indicative of Thurston's celebrity. However, the author's relatively small body of work, together with her death at a young age has helped contribute to a century of obscurity. In this dissertation, I explore the thematic diversity of Thurston's oeuvre to demonstrate her active contribution to three of the most significant movements in literary history, those being; the New Woman movement of the late nineteenth century; the Irish nationalism debate of the early twentieth century, and the advent of modernism in literature in the early 1910s. The dissertation acts as a reclamation project that calls for Thurston's reconsideration as an Irish novelist of consequence.

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Introduction

I: Overview of Life, Works and Dissertation Intentions

Katherine Cecil Thurston was a preeminent and extremely popular novelist in the first decade of the twentieth century. Born in county Cork on 18 April 1874, Thurston published six novels and over eighteen short stories during the period 1901-1910. Thurston achieved early success and acclaim worldwide, mainly as a result of her accessible and highly fashionable brand of sensation fiction. The success of her novels and the popularity she enjoyed as a writer and public speaker might have suggested that Thurston's contribution to the Irish literary canon would be substantial. One hundred years since the author's death, however, Thurston's impact is minimal in both academic and public circles. Katherine Thurston was considered to be 'one of those who count in the literary world'.¹ Her subsequent neglect makes her an intriguing case study.

Thurston's literary career lasted less than a decade, yet within the span of eight years she wrote eight novels,² eighteen short stories and drafts of three plays. The sizable output in such a short space of time demonstrates a figure fully committed to her literary career, yet while her earlier novels of sensation and masquerade were wildly popular, her later fiction came to reflect the author's own growing dissatisfaction in both professional and personal spheres. The much-publicised separation from her novelist husband Ernest Temple Thurston in 1907 brought with it a retreat from public life. The author's decision to veer away from the type of literature that had facilitated her widespread popularity and commercial prosperity, had the adverse effect of reduced sales, but interestingly seems to have increased the author's reputation among later critics. Thurston, by deviating from the aesthetic or generic direction that had brought her fame, achieved a greater overall complexity in her writing. Yet this shift in literary preoccupations, coupled with the author's later

¹'Books and Bookmen', *Planet*, 15 October 1910, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

² Two remain unpublished.

resistance to the trappings of celebrity would actively contribute to her subsequent neglect. The purpose of this dissertation is to assess Thurston's relative obscurity from social and literary standpoints through an exploration of her fiction and associated archival material. This will facilitate a more complete exploration of the trajectory of the author's short career. The comparative examination of fiction and biography will result in an informed re-assessment of not only the author's literary reputation, but also bring to light a figure of considerable public import, whose relative disappearance from social and historical estimation proves curious.

In exploring Thurston the novelist, the dissertation will also address the larger theoretical debates around popular fiction and its overall place in the canon. A comprehensive analysis of Thurston's works alongside the social, cultural and historical contexts of production, in particular the more significant trends among her early twentieth-century contemporaries should reveal a greater scope for her literary accomplishments. As such, the dissertation functions as a reclamation project. It will address the perception of Thurston as a conventional novelist by undertaking a closer examination of her fiction and elucidate the value of the oeuvre.

2: Brief Account of Success and Principal Works

The following section provides a brief synopsis of the author's principal works, as well as an indication of each novel's success. This overview will help inform the literary analysis in subsequent chapters.

Thurston's debut novel: *The Circle* (1903) depicts a young woman sacrificing her home life in the pursuit of her career. The novel's plot centres on Anna Solny's guilt at abandoning her elderly father to become an actress in London's West End. Through her patron, Jeanne Maxtead, she makes the acquaintance of Maurice Strode, an American businessman who she eventually courts until he learns of the cruelty she had shown to her father. Recognising the need to make amends, Anna returns to her home to nurse her dying father, before ultimately receiving absolution for her past sins

by Strode. The novel was a commercial and critical success upon publication and in turn, indicated Thurston's potential as a novelist.

John Chilcote, M.P. (1904), the successor to *The Circle* and inarguably Thurston's most famous work, was a political thriller that mixed elements of masquerade and subterfuge against the backdrop of early twentieth-century British politics. The novel focuses on two principal characters who, in essence, swap identities. Chilcote, a drug-addled Minister in the British Government, enters into a self-imposed exile following his inability to cope with the excesses of life on the front benches, while the destitute John Loder (Chilcote's identical double) finds himself forced to assume a position in society that his predecessor had previously abused. The premise of the novel hangs on Loder's ability to convince Chilcote's wife and peers of his authenticity. An instant success upon its publication, both in Britain and the United States of America, the novel featured on the *New York Times* best seller list for two successive years, ranking as the third best-selling book for 1904 and the seventh best selling in 1905. The review of *John Chilcote, M.P.* in *The Daily Mail* came with the proclamation 'Dumas Outdone' emblazoned in the heading:

Mrs Thurston has given me what Dumas did not – a perpetually increasing wonder as to how the adventure is to end – (I was) hopelessly absorbed [...] The impossibilities of detail are forgotten in the subjugating domination of the incidents, with the result that the story is as thrilling as Hyde and Jekyll, while it is infinitely more human in its interest.³

Thurston's popularity was at its height in the years following the publication of *John Chilcote, M.P.* The widespread appeal of the novel aroused the interest of numerous playwrights and film producers, who, upon seeing the theatrical qualities of the work, sought the production rights. Thurston's husband Ernest Temple Thurston drafted the script of a 1905 adaption, with George Alexander in the title role. The author's collection in the Edinburgh archive is littered with letters to Thurston's estate,

³ Untitled review, *Daily Mail*, 13 September 1904, Box 9, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

requesting the staging rights to each of Thurston's successive novels. While none of the other works received theatrical or cinematic interpretations, further adaptations of *John Chilcote, M.P.* appeared following the author's death in 1911. The then blossoming cinema industry expressed interest in producing live-action versions of the novel – the first reworking entitled *The Compact* was released by American Pathé in 1912, with Joseph A Golden as the director and Crane Wilbur in the title role; the second was a 1920 Russian production dubbed *Lord Chilcott*, with another two films being made in 1922 and 1933 respectively,⁴ the latter being the most successful, produced by the Samuel Goldwyn Company and starring Ronald Colman. The commercial appeal of Thurston's oeuvre and the noticeable theatrical qualities that inspired interpretation indicate the author's pronounced popularity in the first decade of the twentieth century.

John Chilcote, M.P.'s successor, *The Gambler* was published in 1905, marking the first time that any author had two top ten books in the *New York Times* best seller list in a single year. The novel documents the life of Clodagh Asshlin who, upon inheriting a great wealth, abandons her role as family caretaker in the fictional Irish town of Orristown, and emigrates to Italy. Free of the conservatism of Irish society, Clodagh embarks upon a reckless and hedonistic lifestyle, which results in the loss of both her fortune and a prospective second husband; the story concludes with a suicide attempt. The novel constituted Thurston's first attempt to chronicle her fellow countrywomen in her fiction.

The Mystics (1907) was decidedly less successful than previous efforts. The plot focuses on John Henderson's attempts to reclaim his lost inheritance from the mystical cult who were ultimately responsible for the loss of his birthright. He infiltrates the sect and convinces its members that he is their rightful leader. His gamble is foiled by Enid, the novel's love interest. Upon its publication, the novel was judged by a number of publications to herald Thurston's decline. A fuller examination of *The Mystics* and its implications for Thurston's career appears in Chapter Two.

⁴ Both films were titled *The Masquerader*.

Given the widespread success of novels such as *John Chilcote, M.P.* and *The Gambler*, Thurston was rarely out of the public eye during the years 1904-1907. She was a persistent feature of gossip columns, newspapers and magazines. Her celebrity status reached a particular intensity during her salacious divorce proceedings from Ernest. The unhappiness that the author was experiencing on the personal level was seemingly paralleled in her professional life, most notably in *The Mystics*' successor: *The Fly on the Wheel* (1908),⁵ with its core themes of marriage, adultery and separation. The novel traced Isabel Costello's attempts to reacclimatise to life in provincial Ireland following a number of years abroad. Her romantic liaisons with two members of a prominent local family make her a pariah. Her rejection both by her romantic interests and by the community as a whole results in her suicide. Generally speaking, the narrative offered scathing criticism of parochial Ireland, a view at odds with the idealised version of her home country that Thurston presented in speeches at various writers' conventions. In a speech at a Ladies Luncheon, for instance, Thurston is reported to have stated:

The sum of life is not the holding of fair things, but the giving of them. It seemed to me that there was something appropriate in those few words, not only to this evening's feast, but to the whole atmosphere of Ireland – the whole attitude of the Irish mind. Generosity – the joy of giving-as part of Ireland, and when I left my country and made my home in England I brought with me first among the impressions destined to become sacred memories, that atmosphere of generosity – of warm, spontaneous giving – in which I had grown up.⁶

This admiration for her home country is at odds with the condemnation of the Irish middle class in *The Fly on the Wheel*. The dichotomies present are of particular interest in exploring Thurston's relationship to Ireland and will be addressed more fully in Chapter Four.

⁵ This aspect of *The Fly on the Wheel* will be explored in greater depth in Chapters One, Three and Four.

⁶ Taken from *London Opinion*, 5 October, No Year Given, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

Thurston's final published novel, *Max* (1910) explored the practice of transvestism as a method of overcoming gender inequality. A Russian Princess escapes to Paris and adopts the role of a man in order to live the life that sexual and societal determinacy had denied her. 'Max' makes the decision to devote his life to his professional career, but experiences complications as a result of his growing attraction to his newfound companion, the Irishman, Ned Blake. The transgressive properties of the text are key to the understanding of Thurston's contemporary critical appeal and will be addressed in Chapters Three and Five.

Thurston's novels: *John Chilcote, M.P.* and *The Gambler* sold extensively worldwide. *The Gambler* benefitted from *John Chilcote, M.P.*'s vast transatlantic success. *The Mystics* and *The Fly on the Wheel* failed to reach the commercial heights of earlier works, but both *The Fly on the Wheel* and its successor *Max* are the artistic high point of Thurston's career. As the decade progressed, sales figures of popular fiction dropped significantly, but even with the decline in the market, *Max* performed quite well, being the fourth best-selling book in the United States of America for 1910.⁷

⁷ An analysis of Thurston's sales figures has been attached to the end of the dissertation as an appendix.

3: Reception

The widespread circulation of Thurston's novels meant that reviews of the author's fiction were plentiful. The sensational nature of works such as *John Chilcote, M.P.* attracted the attention of the general public, but certain reviewers bemoaned (what they viewed as) the lack of aesthetic merit. Conversely, her later works sold poorly but were positively received by critics who had been unimpressed by the author's earlier efforts. These reviewers favoured the increased levels of social commentary present in the author's later narratives. The following section will explore the polarity present in Thurston's critical reception.

Thurston's gift of storytelling meant that her novels were well received by the Edwardian public. When *John Chilcote, M.P.* was published in serial form, Harper & Brothers' offices were reportedly inundated with letters to the editor, pleading for advance information on the story's conclusion. An inordinate amount of hype grew around the book, with one avid reader, who suffered from a heart condition, entreating *Blackwoods* for an advance copy of the final instalment, for fear that he might die before it was published.⁸ However, the sensation fiction of the mid-nineteenth century (aspects of which permeate Thurston's work) had been discredited by many critics by the beginning of the twentieth century on the basis of aesthetic weakness and transient appeal. The sensation element of fiction seemed to be something of a bygone product by the time she began to write. The feminist dimensions and more pressing social and cultural concerns raised in the author's work were obscured by the elaborate motifs of masquerade, melodrama and scandal. Thurston's fiction was regarded by some reviewers as hackneyed popular fiction. Despite the widespread popularity of *John Chilcote, M.P.*, a number of critics blasted Thurston's work as trite and unoriginal. In his review for *Revue Des Deux Mondes*, Théodore Étienne De Wyzewa notes: 'The author of *John Chilcote, M.P.* writes flatly and pretentiously; her descriptions are absolutely hackneyed. Her characters are vague and lifeless, merely borrowed from

⁸ The letter has been attached to the final page of the Introduction.

the stock figures of fiction and interesting only by the part they play in the story.’⁹ Elsewhere Olivia Howard Dunbar’s review of *The Gambler* bemoaned Thurston’s hesitancy and lack of courage:

Mrs. Thurston shows plainly that she belongs to the lesser ranks of novelists by the fact that she has not the courage to work out the theme of her newest story to a consistent end. It is easy to trace the waning of her own enthusiasm from the opening chapters of the story, with their really interesting and vital picture of Denis Asshlin, the Gambler, to the later and far feebler portions where Clodagh, the gambler’s daughter is shielded from her own Nemesis. There is much appeal to an author’s imagination in such a character as Asshlin, hackneyed as it is. Granting this, the question of the daughter’s inheritance of her father’s vice becomes, from the author’s point of view, irresistible. So far we can follow Mrs. Thurston with something like zest, destitute that her book is of essential vitality, barren as it is of observation of life. But from this point, the book is a compromise. The novelist prefers not to handle her problem boldly, as such; nor has she sufficiently vitalized her characters to make it seem worthwhile to follow their adventures for their own sakes. [...] As to the strength or weakness of the girl’s character, Mrs. Thurston herself seems in some doubt. We are left at the end with a sense of the flabby ineffectualness of the whole performance, with a vague desire for some spiritual solution of the questions vainly raised. The particular spell of *The Masquerader* is quite missing from this volume, whose subdued and dreary melodrama is a depressing substitute for a genuinely human story.¹⁰

A reviewer of *The Mystics* (1907) also expressed disappointment with the novel’s failure to live up to the expectations established by Thurston’s previous efforts:

Frankly, we do not like *The Mystics*. It is all so crude, so cold, so unconvincing. In a word, it is cheap melodrama. Nor is it in any sense the sort of novel to which Mrs. Thurston has accustomed us. Following as it does such a masterpiece as *The Gambler*, it furnishes a decided set-back to the author’s reputation. To us, whose duty it has been to follow Mrs. Thurston’s rise to fame as a novelist, the feeling is one of greatest disappointment as we turn the last page of the book. For we know the author to be capable of work of a far higher plane, and regret

⁹ Théodore Étienne De Wyzewa, *Revue Des Deux Mondes*, 1904, Box 9, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

¹⁰ Olivia Howard Dunbar, ‘A Group of Novels’, *Critic*, 1905, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

that she should be led into those paths of scamped and hasty writing into which many of our successful novelists find themselves drawn by either their own or their publisher's desire – for rapid wealth rather than enduring reputation.¹¹

A number of reviewers of Thurston commented on the author's inclination to raise questions of real contemporary import, but then to stop short in addressing them, in favour of convention. A reviewer for the *Daily News* of 12 March 1908 states:

Those admirers of Mrs. Thurston who have been waiting for her to write a really serious novel will scarcely find that their expectations have as yet been realized. She appears as if she is determined to discuss a problem of real importance, and then stops short with the curtain only half drawn back. She gives the promise of originality, only to leave us in the well-worn road of the conventional unconventionalities.¹²

While generally negative in its appraisal, the *Daily Mail's* review would at least recognise something of Thurston's potential and her capacity to contribute more effectively to the medium of popular literature, perhaps by defying conventional motifs and cheap melodrama and proposing a more socially engaged form of fiction. While Thurston's detractors were numerous, her admirers were still more plentiful. Thurston's later fiction, in particular *The Fly and the Wheel* (1908) and *Max* (1910) provoked strongly favourable reactions in critics. Whereas a number of the reviews for the earlier novels lauded Thurston as the newest literary sensation, announcing each successive work to be a candidate for novel of the year before embarking upon generally stock summaries of plot and character, reviews for *The Fly on the Wheel* and *Max* were significantly more preoccupied with critical analysis and the interrogation of the author's voice and overall intention. As will be seen throughout the dissertation, the reviews in American publications were often more insightful than those in the British press, as they made a greater effort to contextualise the author's oeuvre within the framework of popular fiction and twentieth century society and

¹¹ Untitled Review, *Crown*, 3 May 1907, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

¹² Untitled Review, *Daily News*, 12 March 1908, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

culture. The reviewer for the *Chicago Post* addresses Thurston's take on Irish life in the *The Fly on the Wheel*, in particular the author's fair and unbiased representation of her fellow countrymen:

Mrs. Thurston has realized the tragic possibility in provincial life. [...] Technically the novel has a simple severe method. Setting, character and dialogue are all so closely fused they are thought of as one compact whole, never distinct from the impassioned theme. There is no effort at background, yet there is a delicious sense of the loveliness inseparable from Ireland. [...] It is a sincere novel this, not a vain piece of writing in it.

[...] As an Irish novel, it needs special mention for its large, simple presentment of a serious group of people who speak an intelligible English and deport themselves in a thoroughly human way. In the presentation of the Irish literary movement a novel like this is important. It avoids the one extreme of overidealising the Celt, over his dreamy, poetical nature; still more, it avoids the other extreme, particularly of writers who go to Ireland in a holiday mood and see the Irish as a people composed of jocular and everything else convivial. Mrs. Thurston has now nearly half a dozen novels to her credit, but in none has she shown such artistic vigour as in this.¹³

The review for Boston's *The Living Age* adds: 'It is a pitiful tale, but it is artistically wonderful, and although it may not take as high rank as its predecessors in popular estimation, it is really far superior to them'.¹⁴ The reviewer for the *Glasgow Daily Herald* seemingly concurred with this assessment:

This is a novel of passion, if ever there was one: and in laying the scene in an industrially backward corner of Ireland Mrs. Thurston has shown the fine discrimination of a true artist in fiction. We talk vaguely about the stir and stress of great urban centres like London; yet experience proves – and good novelists know – that the emotions are plants that require room to develop, and that thrive better in clumps than in forests: city life tends to convert the gold pieces of passion into the small change of sensations, and London society is like an opera house on a gala night, where everybody looks at everybody else, and the only people who do anything are those whose business it is to be looked at.

¹³ Untitled Review, *Chicago Illinois Post*, 3 November 1908, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

¹⁴ Untitled Review, *The Living Age*, Boston Massachusetts, November 1908, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

In the Waterford of Mrs. Thurston's novel, everybody is on the stage and is both actor and spectator; and the play is in more or less deadly earnest. [...] The story would go finely on the stage - though we should be sorry to lose the splendidly visualised descriptions of one of the least spoilt and most interesting towns in Ireland. Possibly, had this novel been published first, it might not have brought the author the reputation won by *John Chilcote, M.P.*; yet to our mind, it is an infinitely better book.

Reviews for *Max* were similarly complimentary, as the reviewer for the *San Francisco Argonaut* lauds its achievement when addressing the question of gender: 'It is a study of sex, most welcome in the days of feminine "emancipation" a study of such penetrating force as to be a real message to the age without losing any quality of art'.¹⁵ The reviewer from *Continent* in Chicago adds:

It is a daring story, for it deals with a woman masking as a man, and the complicating situations, which necessarily arise are well developed and carefully carried out. The author has attacked the world old problem of the innate differences in man and woman and the irresistible call of the one to the other.¹⁶

The polarising nature of the reviews for Thurston's oeuvre means that the works warrant reappraisal. As will be explored in the following chapters, Thurston wrote during a period of significant historical and cultural change. The women's rights issue persisted; Ireland's suitability for home rule was hotly contested in the British parliament, while a fundamental shift towards modernism in writing was emerging in the years preceding the First World War. This dissertation will primarily investigate Thurston's contribution to twentieth-century literature by carefully addressing her body of work under a number of different headings, namely: the author's commentary on contemporary concerns, the relation of autobiographical elements to the oeuvre, the extent to which Thurston's works relate to the New Woman movement of the late

¹⁵ Untitled Review, *Argonaut*, San Francisco, 15 October 1910, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

¹⁶ Untitled Review, *Continent*, Chicago, 15 December 1910, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

Victorian era, to questions of Irishness and Irish nationalism, and to the subsequent shift towards twentieth-century modernism in literature.

The author's preoccupation with sensation and incidents of high drama, most notably in her earlier works, meant that Thurston was sometimes perceived chiefly as a purveyor of melodrama - which would result in an immediately popular yet fundamentally transient appeal. The *Globe Advertiser's* review of *The Gambler* states:

The title, which sounds 'interesting' and 'By the author of The Masquerader' on the title page will doubtless bring new laurels to Mrs. Thurston. The only fear is that the laurels won by stories of *The Gambler* sort are of the kind that soon wither - read today by many, remembered tomorrow by few.¹⁷

Thurston's association with ephemeral literature was again commented upon in a 1905 review for the *Academy*, which states:

Perhaps the most interesting feature of the season is that there has been no boom. Last year's readers seemed, in theatrical parlance to 'keep their money' for Mr. Hichens and Mrs. Thurston. This year they have distributed their favours more evenly. [...] If popularity were an index of merit, this might be a bad sign. As a rule, however, it is nothing of the kind; *and the novel of a season is seldom the novel that endures*. In the absence of any work of absolutely commanding genius, the interest in literature is more natural and healthy than we find different people reading different books, in obedience to their different tastes, instead of slavishly following a fashion.¹⁸

Recent literary criticism has been more hospitable to the 'popular' fiction genre and its value. In the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Women's Writings and Traditions*, Gerardine Meaney makes the argument that just because a certain form of fiction is popular, does not mean it cannot offer something in the way of insight or social commentary:

Popular forms offered women (the) freedom to explore material which was unusual, sensational or more extreme in its nature than in that

¹⁷ Untitled Review, *Globe Advertiser*, 9 October 1905, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

¹⁸ Untitled Review, *Academy*, 8 December 1905, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

which could be encompassed with the conventions of realist narrative or within the political or religious forms which made women's writing in other genres respectable [...] The kind of freedom which income from a literary career offered to women was exceptional. From the later nineteenth century on, the woman artist, freed by her artistic abilities or her success from the traditional constraints on femininity is a persistent feature of literature by women and in this case the Irish material is typical. The emergence of the woman artist as subject of fiction intensified the self reflexivity which is a characteristic of women's writing, given its [...] needing to justify the conjunction of terms, women and writer. This self-reflexive turn produced in women's writing in the decades following independence, a willingness to experiment with form and to embark on those varieties of modernist endeavour, which are characterized by a demythologising aesthetic.¹⁹

As will be explored in Chapters Three through Five, Thurston's willingness to explore the more subversive elements of her narratives, be they the treatment of marriage as an economic contract, self-aggrandisement overriding moral responsibility, suicide over the subjugation of personality and gender performance in an effort to address sexual marginalisation – all demonstrate Thurston's claim to Meaney's demythologising aesthetic. The immediacy of Thurston's popularity, which faded over time, her relatively small body of work and the more disparate themes and motifs inherent in her fiction mark her as something of a cultural anomaly. Her widespread appeal could have acted as springboard by which to voice the contemporary concerns in her fiction – instead, the aforementioned elements combined to contribute to her relative anonymity for the remainder of the twentieth century. While many critics were content to associate Thurston with a cursory appeal, there remained a number who felt that her fiction, even though it may not have the same levels of attraction or longevity as some of the more classic examples of literature, still had an important function in society. In 1905, a journalist for the *Academy* notes:

It should be remembered, however, that literary work is not necessarily without value because its value is transitory. We need the classics to form our taste; but we also need to be acquainted with the literature of our own day, even if it lacks the qualities, which will in the end give it classical rank. Every age presents its own problems, and requires its

¹⁹ Gerardine Meaney, *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Women's Writings and Traditions*, vol. 6, (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002), p. 769-770.

own criticism of life. We often, therefore, feel that we are brought more closely into touch with life when reading a second-rate work by a contemporary, than our reading a masterpiece that has descended to us from our forefathers. That is a sound reason for not being ashamed to read ephemeral literature. It would be a mistake, of course, to try to read all of it or to read nothing else; but the reading of a good deal of it is a proper part of education.²⁰

Thurston's style and popular associations may have resulted in her fiction being dubbed ephemeral, or in this instance second-rate, but her ability to seize upon contemporary issues and assess them under the guise of Edwardian sensationalism adds to the overall value of her oeuvre from a critical perspective – mainly because the elaborate nature of her narratives would have meant that, in many cases, the books suffered disparagement by critics upon their publication. Her fiction may have been clouded by sensation and melodrama, but this did not negate Thurston's right, or indeed proclivity, to explore increasingly salient concerns of contemporary society and culture in her fiction.

²⁰ Untitled Review, *Academy*, 8 December 1905, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

4: Methodology: Use of the Archival Material

Since my aim with the dissertation is not just to critically assess the oeuvre, but also investigate Thurston as a prominent public figure, an early phase of my research involved an attempt to trace Thurston's descendants in both Mallow, Co. Cork and Ardmore, Co. Waterford. There is an absence of biographical information on the author. In 2000, the journalist Declan McCormack conducted an interview with Aileen O'Meara, whose mother was a first-cousin of Katherine Thurston. Having spoken with McCormack, I entered into a correspondence with her sons, Stephen and Gerard O'Meara and both spoke at length about the Madden family. Both Aileen and Stephen passed away during this time, but the youngest sibling Gerard provided valuable biographical insight, which will be alluded to towards the close of the first chapter. McCormack's article²¹ states that Aileen O'Meara was in possession of a chest containing Thurston-related items, from society magazines, to autographed editions of her books and also a number of typescripts²² The bulk of the material was of little use when it came to obtaining further biographical information. Following my interaction with the O'Meara family further attention was given to tracing possible descendants of Thurston and led to a correspondence with Dr. Jack Madden of Mallow, Co. Cork. Thurston's summer residence of Ardmore was a place of interest. I attempted to garner more information on the author from the people and publications that were published in the area (most notably *The Ardmore Journal*), but the seclusion that Thurston sought when in Waterford meant that her interactions with the townspeople and local press were limited.

The most significant breakthrough in terms of my own research came with my discovery of a comprehensive archive of Thurston memorabilia in the National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh. Kenneth Dunn, the Senior Curator of the Special Collections section reported that a descendent of Thurston's fiancé, Dr. Alfred Thomas Bulkeley Gavin, had entrusted a significant amount of material to the library

²¹ Declan McCormack, 'The Butterfly on the Wheel', *Sunday Independent*, 24 September 2000.

²² McCormack, p. 3, Aileen's son, Gerard O'Meara, bequeathed the serialised typescript of *The Gambler* to me.

when clearing-out his home in Scotland. McCormack's article reports that 'There are no records whatsoever of Dr Bulkeley Gavin, the man who got virtually everything'.²³ The majority of Gavin's belongings, personal correspondence with Thurston and items he received as co-executor of her estate were left with his own family in Ayrshire. According to Dunn, the Thurston archive remained in an unsorted state for many years, with little attempt made to catalogue it. The archive is noteworthy for the wide array of materials included: photographs, shopping lists, financial ledgers, professional correspondence with publishers, love letters between Gavin and Thurston, and typescripts of theatre adaptations of *Max* and *John Chilcote, M.P.* One of the more fascinating finds includes a number of unpublished works, more specifically drafts of two unpublished novels, *Sandro* and *The Healer of Men*, and three unpublished plays: *Harlequin*, *The Day After* and *Fidelity*. A number of published and unpublished short stories also feature: 'Human Nature', 'The Times Change', 'The Hazard', 'Votive Offering' and 'Temptation'. These works are crucial to an understanding of Thurston as a writer, as they provide further evidence of the generic diversity of the oeuvre. As will be addressed in Chapter Two, the eclectic nature of these writings is indicative of Thurston's inclination towards experimentation with form and technique. Though many of these works remain unpublished, they help refute the perception of Thurston as a mere genre writer. A number of these works will be explored in some detail in subsequent chapters.

While the archive is significant in the volume of material it holds, there remains a substantial lack of information on Thurston's life prior to her move to London in 1901. The majority of personal correspondence is restricted to the years 1909-1911 and her relationship with Gavin²⁴, while the bulk of professional messages that feature are from her publishers in London, Edinburgh and New York. It is assumed that the author did not retain copies of her letters to others. Thurston also offers no explanation as to why she chose not to publish several of the works in the archive. In an interview with a journalist from the *Indianapolis News*, Thurston states

²³ McCormack, p. 3.

²⁴ Gavin kept the letters that he received from Thurston, thus explaining their presence in the archive.

her interest in theatre and her desire to see her novels staged,²⁵ yet her three plays remain unfinished and unpublished. Research in the archive proved to be both a rewarding and frustrating experience. The rich variety of materials and unpublished works have been hugely beneficial to my research, but the considerable dearth of biographical information, in spite of the large volume of archival material, is unfortunate.

Limitations notwithstanding, the information obtained has had a pivotal impact on my study of Thurston. The reviews of the author's works have provided a much-needed critical scope by which the body of work may be scrutinised. The personal correspondence with Bulkeley Gavin has granted an intimate knowledge of the author's private life, while professional correspondence with various publishing houses indicate Thurston's prominence in the Edwardian literary marketplace. Thurston only published a handful of novels during her lifetime and was noticeably reluctant to more formally contribute to issues such as Irish nationalism and the Women's Movement in the public sphere, yet the archive has effectively doubled the author's literary output and provides access to approximately two-three hundred items of personal and professional correspondence – all of which contribute to a more complete understanding of the author's oeuvre, as well as her personal and professional aspirations. A complete list of items in the archive has been compiled and features at the end of the dissertation as an appendix.

²⁵ Untitled Article, *Indianapolis News*, 17 March 1906, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

5: Critical Context

Much of the challenge of studying the works of Katherine Thurston comes as a result of the relative absence of literary criticism since her premature death. As mentioned, positive reviews of her novels during her lifetime tended not to engage in critical evaluation – instead favouring brief plot summaries and epigrammatic taglines that would invariably claim the work to be ‘a must read’ or ‘the novel of the season’. Thurston’s fiction was judged mainly by its immediate appeal, as the reviews were published in quick succession alongside the latest release. The critical value of the work went unheeded in many reviews. Following the author’s death in 1911, Thurston’s popularity faded and she all but disappeared from public and academic consideration. She was, however, acknowledged in numerous dictionaries of Irish writers. Examples of these include: Henry Boylan’s *A Dictionary of Irish Biography* (1988), Ann Owen Weekes’ *Unveiling Treasures: The Attic Guide to the Published Works of Irish Women Writers, Drama, Fiction, Poetry* (1993), Brian Cleeve’s *Dictionary of Irish Writers* (1985), John Crone’s *Concise Dictionary of Irish Biography* (1928), *The Dictionary of National Biography 1901-1911*²⁶ and the *Dictionary of Irish Biography* (2009). There is little information in these dictionaries, beyond a list of publications, the rudimentary details of Thurston’s life, oftentimes with an emphasis on the salacious nature of the author’s divorce from her first husband, Ernest, and an acknowledgement of the author’s transatlantic success. Though she has received mention in these dictionaries, the commentaries, offering little in the way of reappraisal, and appear to confirm her minor position in the Irish canon. Stephen Brown deviates from the orthodox approach to Thurston biography in *Ireland in Fiction* when commenting on Thurston’s death, remarking that ‘the manner of the author’s own death gives this a poignant interest’²⁷, referring to Isabel Costello’s suicide in *The Fly on the Wheel*. The suggestion that Thurston ended her own life is unfounded. The official verdict was death via asphyxiation following an

²⁶ Thurston’s entry appears in the supplement section. The fundamental details of Thurston’s career, divorce, death and fiction are recounted. The entry is also notable for providing a succinct and quotable plaudit: ‘In all her work a genuine gift for story-telling is combined with a fluent style and signs of intellectual insight’. (p. 525)

²⁷ Stephen Brown, *Ireland in Fiction*, (Dublin: Maunsel, 1919), p. 293.

epileptic fit, but Brown's acknowledgement of the suspicious circumstances surrounding Thurston's death, mere years after the event itself, would be fitting for one of Thurston's own Edwardian melodramas. The suggestion that Thurston's death might have been a suicide or the result of murder was reiterated in Tina O'Toole's *Dictionary of Munster Woman Writers, 1800-2000*. O'Toole's entry is also notable as it is the first to raise the issue of plagiarism in Thurston's oeuvre – an aspect that will be addressed in Chapter Two. Moreover, entries such as these demonstrate the need of fresh research into biography and literature, in an effort to more fully understand their relationship to one another.

While her most famous work, *John Chilcote, M.P.* (1904) spawned cinematic and theatrical adaptations, Thurston's writing remained out of the public eye for the remainder of the twentieth-century save a re-printing of *The Fly on the Wheel* (1908) by Virago Press in 1987. The edition contained an afterword by Janet Madden-Simpson, which constituted the first attempt at Thurston-related literary criticism in the latter half of the twentieth century. Madden-Simpson's work is significant. She succeeds in pinpointing and exploring a number of Thurston's primary considerations and motifs – particularly as they relate to the treatment of identity in her fiction. Her labelling of Thurston's *Max* as 'a clearly-articulated female fantasy of turn-of-the-century strivings towards gender-based equality, but also a passionate *cri de coeur* of personal frustration, even of anguish'²⁸ not only identifies an awareness of the gender discrepancies that Thurston sought to interrogate with her final book, but also hint at the pangs of self-reflexivity and introspection that would come to characterise Thurston's later fiction.

The first year of the twenty-first century saw a rejuvenation of interest in Thurston. The Irish elements of *The Fly on the Wheel* warranted its inclusion in Colm Toibín's *Penguin Book of Irish Fiction* (2000) where an excerpt from the novel is featured, while Declan McCormack's article 'The Butterfly on the Wheel' brought Thurston to the attention of the general public, when it appeared in 24 September

²⁸ Ibid. p. 330-331.

edition of the popular newspaper *The Irish Independent*. McCormack's piece is more grounded in the contextual associations of Thurston's writing career. He foregoes any attempt at literary analysis in favour of discussing the more sensational aspects of the author's personal life, particularly Thurston's troubled relationship with her ex-husband, Ernest, and also the apparent anti-Irish sentiments in his fiction. The strength of the article comes in its investigation of Thurston's biography, as told to the journalist by members of Katherine Thurston's extended family.²⁹ While the article certainly serves to spark interest in Thurston as a neglected but undeniably intriguing literary figure, the lack of commentary on the oeuvre itself would do little to prove that Thurston's written works were worthy of critical reappraisal.

In the same year Ann Heilmann in *New Woman Fiction: Women Writing First Wave Feminism* supplied a valuable critique of Thurston's final novel *Max* in her exploration of the book's associations with the New Woman movement in literature. Heilmann comments on *Max*'s use of female-to-male cross-dressing as an attempt to address the shocking lack of alternatives for women artists who attempted to succeed in the professional sphere. While Heilmann makes a number of valid points concerning gender-based inequalities, the discussion is rooted mainly in the pre-1900 era. Heilmann highlights the fatalistic elements of Thurston's pen and does so by borrowing Ann Ardis's notion of the 'boomerang plot' in which women attempt to transcend the limitations in their private and professional lives but are ultimately returned to domesticity. She carefully deconstructs the Thurston protagonist's return to convention through her description of the clashing of external and internal desires, the recognition of (the character's) inner dissociation into two discordant selves and the final choice of one of the two available positions.³⁰ She asserts that 'cross-dressing narratives which focus on the attainment of individual fulfilment often end with the protagonist's voluntary return to feminine preoccupations and the collapse of her professional career',³¹ While the 'boomerang plot' was not exclusive to Thurston, the

²⁹ The value of this information will be discussed in Chapter One.

³⁰ See Ann Heilmann, *New Woman Fiction – Women Writing First Wave Feminism*, (New York: Palgrave 2000), p. 174.

³¹ *Ibid.* p. 120.

commentary that Heilmann provides speaks less of the potentially transgressive properties of the author's fiction and more of the difficulties that New Woman authors faced on the broader level when subscribing to convention and orthodox morality in their texts. As such, Heilmann's contribution works primarily on a contextual level – particularly when it came to exploring Thurston's link to the New Woman movement. Elsewhere Heilmann, quoting Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, suggests the link between autobiography and fiction in New Woman fiction - denoting the predicaments that the protagonists underwent oftentimes represented broader authorial concerns:

On the metafictional level, the heroine who has found her 'true self' reflects the novel's author, who is (re)constructing her autobiographical quest for artistic identity in her fictional character. 'The one plot that seems to be concealed in most of the nineteenth-century literature by women', note Gilbert and Gubar, is the 'story of the woman writer's quest for her own story ... of the woman writer's quest for self definition... the story of her attempt to make herself whole by healing her own infections and diseases.'³²

As will be explored in Chapter Five, Thurston's fiction sidestepped the more extravagant motifs of sensation and melodrama in later years, in favour of a more realist approach. Her dissatisfaction with the media attention during her divorce trial forced a retreat from public life and resulted in increased levels of introspection and self-reflexivity – which would have consequences for her fiction. Heilmann's suggestion here contends that the difficulties that the New Woman novelists felt prefigured this more self-reflective approach in later fiction as authors, such as Thurston, would endow their creations with the freedom of reinvention – a privilege that was not readily available to themselves. As previously mentioned, Heilmann's commentary is notable mainly for its figuring the author within the context of the New Woman movement. Her decision to focus solely on *Max* means that her contribution works best as a starting point from which to explore the New Woman associations of Thurston's oeuvre.

³² Heilmann, p. 174-175.

Caroline Copeland has written substantially on Thurston's literary accomplishments both in Britain and America,³³ demonstrating the widespread appeal of the author and thus raising more questions about her exclusion from the canon. Her article 'An Oasis in the Desert: The Transatlantic Publishing success of Katherine Cecil Thurston' contextualises the publication of Thurston's first two novels: *The Circle* and *John Chilcote, M.P.*, commenting on both the critical reception and the impact of the works in terms of overall sales figures. Copeland makes a number of astute observations concerning the treatment of Thurston, the relative newcomer to the world of popular fiction, by her chosen publishers: Blackwood & Sons in Edinburgh and Harper Publications in New York. As evidenced by Copeland, the tactics employed by Harper Publications (in particular) to secure Thurston's continued working relationship with the company would demonstrate the importance attached to the growing popularity of fiction in the early years of the twentieth century. Copeland goes on to argue that Thurston was guaranteed higher royalties from the American publication house, than those promised by *Blackwoods*. As will be explored in Chapter Four, Thurston's dealings with her UK Publishers would become decidedly more tense, given what Blackwood & Sons viewed as the author's growing allegiance to Harper Publications in America. Thurston favoured the publishing house that would give her the best return. In discussing the then contemporary market for popular fiction Copeland adds: 'Thurston's work may not now be regarded as canonical, or even of any literary merit, but it does provide a counterbalance to a publishing and literary history determined by the prevailing patriarchal culture of the period'.³⁴ Copeland also notes that, in contrast to Thurston's case, the publishers responsible for the publication of works by a number of her contemporaries, such as Emily Lawless and Katherine Tynan, failed to realise the full earning potential of popular fiction: 'They had not grasped the new economic power that was moving authors to more professionalised and financially astute negotiations over literary worth'.³⁵ Copeland's

³³ Caroline Copeland, 'An Oasis in the Desert: The Transatlantic Publishing success of Katherine Cecil Thurston', *Journal of Edinburgh Bibliographical Society*, Number 2, 2007, pp 23-41.

³⁴ Copeland, p. 37.

³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 35.

article is perhaps limited in its presentation of Thurston as a cog in the larger machinations of the publishing industry, but it also adds an extra dimension to our understanding of the author. Copeland, in her article, acknowledges the significant historical and political changes brought about by the ending of the first World War that perhaps helped to expedite Thurston's exclusion from the canon: 'The world that Thurston inhabited and wrote about appeared to the next generation disproportionately distant from the realities of the period immediately after 1918'.³⁶ Her article acts as a starting point both to address the larger theoretical concerns about the relevance of popular fiction in twentieth-century literary history, but also as a bridging point in the discussion of the modernist associations of Thurston's writing.

Gerardine Meaney's article 'Decadence, Degeneration and Revolting Aesthetics: The Fiction of Emily Lawless and Katherine Cecil Thurston' (2000)³⁷ argues for the transgressive potential of Thurston's fiction as she links both Lawless and Thurston to notions of degeneracy, decadence and New Woman feminism in literature. Meaney's article elaborates on Heilmann's discussion of the issues surrounding the context of the novel's production. As such, it succeeds in effectively contextualising the writings of Thurston within the boundaries of late Victorian/early Edwardian literary practice – essentially demonstrating that the reappraisal of a neglected or obscure novelist could contribute to the forging of a more diverse literary tradition. Meaney subsequently included a valuable section on Thurston in 2002's *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*³⁸ with the work itself representing a concerted effort on the part of its contributors to increase awareness of the multi-layered nature of the Irish literary tradition by its inclusion of extracts and commentaries on hitherto marginalised literary figures. Meaney includes an extract from *Max* in the anthology as well as a discussion of some of the elements already explored in her 'Decadence and Degeneration' article, namely Thurston's preoccupation with self-reinvention, the

³⁶ Copeland, p. 37.

³⁷ Gerardine Meaney, 'Decadence, Degeneration, and Revolting Aesthetics, The Fiction of Emily Lawless and Katherine Cecil Thurston' in *Colby Quarterly Review*, vol. 36, June 2000, pp. 157-175

³⁸ Geraldine Meaney, *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Women's Writings and Traditions*, Vol. 6, (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002), pp. 976-1040.

dilemmas inherent in professional and aesthetic aspirations and the overriding limitations imposed by biological sexuality – contextualising the author’s writing within the framework of the Victorian Sensationalism and the New Woman discourse. Meaney comments on the ties between sensation literature and the contemporary debates on gender inequality:

Women like Katherine Cecil Thurston, who were infamous in themselves and sensational in their fiction, offered interrogations of gender and society, which outside the alibis of religion or nation were acceptable as an aspect of popular literature’s sensationalism. These novels were expected to be shocking and as such they represent the new questioning of sexual roles at the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century, which is explicit in the work of Thurston and her compatriots Grand and Egerton.³⁹

Here Meaney contends that the shocking or sensational aspects that were present in the writings of Thurston, Grand and Egerton did not preclude the possibility of pressing social commentary in the works, rather they represented another form of contemporary criticism. Meaney, by re-addressing these more obscure writers is calling for a reappraisal of the canon on a much broader level. Rather than offering an unequivocal and exhaustive investigation of these neglected literary figures, her contribution on Thurston acts more as a rallying cry.

More recently, Tina O’Toole has contributed to the discussion of the feminist dimensions of Thurston, as explored by Heilmann and Meaney, in her analysis of both the New Woman sensibilities in the oeuvre and the author’s treatment of gender as a performance. O’Toole’s article: ‘Nomadic subjects in Katherine Cecil Thurston’s *Max*’.⁴⁰ (2008) O’Toole situates her work on Thurston within the New Woman discourse, commenting on the relative neglect of Irish writers or an Irish dimension from the body of criticism. She also enquires into the notion that transvestism served

³⁹ Ibid. p. 769.

⁴⁰ Tina O’Toole, ‘Nomadic subjects in Katherine Cecil Thurston’s *Max*’, in Coughlan and O’Toole, *Irish Literature: Feminist Perspectives*, (eds.) Patricia Coughlan and Tina O’Toole, (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2008) pp. 80–95.

an important role in deconstructing the social and cultural limitations imposed by sexual determinism:

The deployment of instances of female-to-male transvestism served two important functions within New Woman discourses. It illustrated that women were just as able intellectually, emotionally and physically to operate within the public sphere and to take on the responsibilities and roles open only to men at the Fin de Siécle. Furthermore, in exploring the ways in which gender roles are constructed, and the ways in which characters in fiction – and moreover, people in society – *perform* their gender (to use Judith Butler’s formula), it pointed to the flaws within an essentialist, gender-divided and radically unequal system of social organisation.⁴¹

O’Toole extends the examination of transvestism to include the possibility of homoeroticism in Thurston’s text, a discussion that is elaborated upon in Chapter Five of the dissertation, as I attempt to evaluate Thurston’s oeuvre for its potentially modernist properties. Adding to the debate is O’Toole’s assertion that the character of Max *undergoes* the gender reinvention, as opposed to being an active participant in it:

Thurston’s main interest in this text is not so much in female masculinity, or the ways in which a woman may construct an identity within the guise of a boy, but rather, the ways in which womanhood is socially constructed and delimited. Unable to leave behind his hair, which was ruthlessly shorn from his head on leaving Russia, Max has kept his tresses with him in a parcel. This potent aspect of his femininity is treated with an almost surreal allure in his text [...] In this episode we see the power of Max’s hair as a symbol, unquestionably raised to the level of a fetish object, as though the hair itself were the embodiment of his femininity, which he has kept in the closet over a period of several months Thurston is careful to construct Max as the passive recipient of these ministrations, and also to gesture toward the conflicting sensations he suffers during this reconstruction.⁴²

O’Toole’s suggestion here indicates the friction between internal and external desires. Max’s ultimate intention was to deny sex in favour of his aesthetic ambitions. Thurston’s situating of the character in Bohemian Paris – traditionally seen as a more

⁴¹ Ibid. p. 82.

⁴² O’Toole, p. 89.

liberal location in which a transformation such as the one Max undergoes would be more readily accepted, and the continued insistence of external forces⁴³ that demand Max's return to the identity he sought to abandon, demonstrates not only the demands of social conformity but the stresses caused by the conflict of inner and outer realities – itself a motif of the modernist movement in literature. As such, O'Toole's contribution here is especially valuable in assessing Thurston as an early exemplar of modernist discourse.

John Wilson Foster wrote extensively on both Katherine and Ernest Temple Thurston in his critical work *Irish Novels 1890-1940: New Bearings in Culture and Fiction*,⁴⁴ (2008) - examining the pair's relationship to Ireland, but more specifically the treatment of marriage in each other's fictional efforts – an intriguing area of discussion, given the impact that Katherine's success in fiction was to have on the couple's own situation. Foster speaks at length on the achievements of Thurston's oeuvre, noting the provocative mixture of themes and social commentary with the more popular motifs of sensation and masquerade. His work is noteworthy as a result of the broad scope with which he not only examines Thurston's fiction from an Irish perspective, but in the interjection of pertinent snippets of biographical information, helping to further contextualise Thurston as a writer. Foster also suggests that Thurston's more critical approach to Ireland in the presentation of marriage and community in the *Fly and the Wheel* (and perhaps the bleak prospects for social prosperity as presented in *The Gambler*) did little to endear her to her fellow countrymen. Thurston's less than complimentary commentary on the national character may have meant that her premature death, when considered alongside the momentous historical and cultural changes brought about by the end of the first World War, as well as the prominent shift in Irish National politics following the 1916 Rising, accounted towards a fading of interest in her popular romantic fiction.⁴⁵

⁴³ Through the interjection of the effeminate neighbour, Jacqueline and the love interest, Blake.

⁴⁴ John Wilson Foster, *Irish Novels 1890-1940: New Bearings in Culture and Fiction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁴⁵ This aspect will be explored more fully in Chapter Four.

Moreover, the failure of Thurston, Tynan and Somerville to carry through may be a literary hesitation due to the conventions of the romance genre (which allows tragedy but not a final realism), not to mention the expectations of their customary readers; or it may be a social hesitation due to the authors' grasp of Irish reality with its hostility to adultery or even second marriages contracted out of true love. Yet failure is what it seems like from our perspective, despite the considerable alternative achievements of these novels.⁴⁶

Foster's work is valuable, particularly in regard to his treatment of Thurston as an Irish novelist. His exploration of biographical elements, thematic concerns of the works and the broader implications of such analysis in light of Thurston's peripheral status to the canon facilitates a more rounded approach to the neglected author.

Even with the resurgent level of interest in Thurston in the twenty-first century, there is still a relative dearth of critical attention. While the work of Meaney, O'Toole, Heilmann, Copeland and Foster has been beneficial, there remains further room for study. Meaney, O'Toole and Heilmann address the broader feminist/modernist concerns of *Max*, leaving the remainder of Thurston's oeuvre untouched. The articles by Meaney and O'Toole in particular, act primarily as a call for recovery into hitherto neglected literary figures. As such, they recognise and encourage the importance of fresh research, so as to enrich the heterogeneous nature of the Irish literary tradition. Heilmann's interest in Thurston extends to the discussion of the New Woman aspects in her writing. Copeland's article serves mainly to gage the author's commercial reception, while Foster's attention is fixed primarily on Thurston's relationship to Ireland. As such, the works are highly informative, but limited in their overall scope. This dissertation employs the archival material to attempt a more rounded exploration of Thurston: the woman, the celebrity and the novelist, while engaging more fully with the author's personal and professional connections to Ireland, modernity and feminism.

⁴⁶ Foster, p. 267.

6: Chapter Overview

The focus of the first chapter is primarily biographical. Given the dearth of information on Thurston on the whole, a comprehensive account of the details surrounding her life will be of special use when approaching her fiction from an autobiographical perspective and also in determining the factors that have accounted for her relative obscurity. A chronological discussion of the publication and reception of Thurston's works will also be included, with the corresponding thematic preoccupations of the works and their correlations with the author's own life being given special attention. As will be explored in this section, Thurston's oeuvre, while still displaying an enthusiasm for romantic convention and masquerade, veered away from the sensation and melodrama of earlier efforts towards a more grounded, realist approach in the years leading up until her death. The media blitz surrounding the author's separation from her first husband, Ernest, and flood of public interest in the couple's disharmony is also explored here, again making the most significant case for autobiography in Thurston's work, most notably in *The Fly on the Wheel*. The importance of the archival research is paramount here, as both the reviews of these works and the accompanying personal and professional correspondence indicate Thurston distancing herself somewhat from the then contemporary perception of her as a populist writer. The existence of a large body of personal correspondence between the author and her fiancé Bulkeley Gavin illuminates Thurston's growing dissatisfaction with her career's trajectory and the circumstances that forced her isolation from her romantic interest. The suspicious circumstances surrounding the author's death will also be given due attention – with particular reference to the correspondence between the couple immediately preceding the fatality. The extent to which Gavin sought to impress himself on Thurston's life, to the detriment of the author's Irish family is also of special interest here. Finally the manner of the death itself, seemingly lifted from the sensation genre to which the author was aligned, is explored. This issue is of particular interest when considering the accusations made by the author's Irish family, whom Gavin was reportedly attempting to disinherit.

While the biographical aspects of Thurston's life are dealt with primarily in chapter one, the extent to which they influenced the production of her work will be addressed in the second chapter, which explores Thurston's thematic preoccupations.

The aim of Chapter Two is to trace the development of Thurston's core themes and motifs; analyse her method of writing; explore the generic diversity and offer a cursory glance at the styles and movements to which she has posthumously been affiliated. As evidence from the archive would suggest, Thurston's aptitude for drama was obvious from an early age. The chapter will address not only the author's theatre-based influences, but assess her decision to forego dramatic writings in favour of fiction – a curious decision given her long-standing desire to have had each of her novels staged. The author's experimentation within the gothic genre will be addressed in this chapter, more specifically with *The Mystics*. Thurston's fascination with masquerade, identity reformation and self-fashioning is key to an understanding of Thurston's work, and as such, will form a substantial part of this chapter. The discussion of real-life examples of masquerade and identity theft will illuminate the author's propensity towards self-reinvention in her fiction. Elsewhere the author's ambivalence towards her home country will be given brief consideration, in anticipation of Chapter Four's more rounded examination of Irishness and Irish nationalism. Thurston's ties to the sensation novel of the late nineteenth century will also be addressed, with specific attention being given to its relative omission from the canon on the grounds of its seemingly sparse critical worth. Thurston's association with the sensation novelists would seem somewhat justified here. The reliance on the more elaborate literary motifs and thematic preoccupations in her writings resulted in a widespread appeal, but one that was deemed to be of insufficient literary value – a complaint levelled against many of the novelists who preceded her. However, Thurston's associations with the New Woman movement of the late nineteenth century are of undoubted interest, given the author's commitment to exploring the discrepancies that existed between the sexes in her fiction. This discussion will form the basis of Chapter Three.

The third chapter will deal primarily the feminist dimensions of Thurston's work, in light of her association with the New Woman writers of the previous century. Again, Thurston's involvement here is contentious. As the chapter will demonstrate, Thurston's reluctance to comment on the feminist associations of her heroines' actions entailed a conservatism of sorts, which distanced her from the more outspoken proponents of the New Woman movement. Even without the author's endorsement, the conspicuous feminist dimensions of the oeuvre indicate Thurston's recognition that the issues concerning woman's role in society were exceedingly pertinent. The chapter will begin with a discussion of the elements that led to the formation of New Woman movement, before exploring its impact on Victorian sensibilities. The contributions of a number of the more celebrated writers of the movement (Sarah Grand, George Egerton and Mona Caird) will be looked at to gain a greater understanding of the movement's ethos, but also to ascertain Thurston's relationship to the prevalent issues. An analysis of three of Thurston's principal works: her debut, *The Circle* (1903), *The Fly on the Wheel* (1908) and *Max* (1910) will form the basis of the remainder of the New Woman discussion. *The Circle's* debutante Anna Solny will be analysed alongside her patron Jeanne Maxtead as an interrogation of feminist archetypes – the youthful exuberance that yearns for recognition versus the embittered arch-feminist seeking her due, regardless of the cost. Focus will then shift to an examination of marriage in the New Woman fiction, and its presentation in Thurston's most daring work, *The Fly on the Wheel*. The novel is especially notable for its provocative depiction of Irish marriage. The possibility of autobiography will also feature predominantly in the discussion, particularly with the acknowledgement that, in light of the subjugation that the New Woman felt, it was practically impossible not to draw from inner contestations when crafting one's own work. Self-reflexivity is a topic that will continue in the discussion of Thurston's final novel *Max*, as the novel's heroine seeks to pursue her chosen career by denying the socio-cultural demands of her sex. The difficulties that the New Woman novelists of the previous century felt in attempting to reconcile their lives as women with their professional aspirations becomes the very source material of Thurston's novel, again giving further credibility to the presence of the author's feminist preoccupations.

The fourth chapter seeks to demonstrate Thurston's often-conflicting views of Irish national identity. The priorities of her earlier fiction did not easily allow her to address questions of self-government and Home Rule – the author instead favouring tested motifs of sensation and masquerade and thematic concerns of feminist empowerment. Even the works that contained Irish characters ignored the more pressing national concerns in favour of foreign relocation – a seemingly deliberate attempt on Thurston's part to abstain from political considerations. This chapter will more carefully address Thurston's relationship to the country of her birth in its treatment on the micro-level of social politics and parochial conventions. The chapter will feature an examination of Thurston's *John Chilcote, M.P.* and its (either overt or subtle) associations with prominent Irish figures, namely Charles Stewart Parnell and Katherine (Kitty) O'Shea. An analysis of some examples of Thurston's short fiction will also be undertaken. Readings of 'The Times Change' and 'The Hazard' will be conducted in light of Thurston's veiled attack on the middle classes in *The Fly on the Wheel*, but also with knowledge of Thurston's own dissatisfaction with her life in Ireland and what she saw as her privacy coming under fire when residing with her relatives in Ardmore, Co. Waterford. The remainder of the chapter will be occupied with figuring the family in Thurston's Irish fiction – most notably the dangers associated with hereditary influence in her follow up to *John Chilcote, M.P.*, *The Gambler*. The treatment of 'types' in Thurston's Irish-based works, more specifically the characters in *The Fly on the Wheel* will also be a salient feature in the exploration of community, be they the headstrong and exotic Isabel Costello, the foreigner who objectifies traditional mores and practices, the sympathetic Father James - the spiritual caretaker of the nation, whose faith is of paramount importance in returning the protagonists to domesticity or Stephen Carey – 'the dutiful son of the patriarchal order'⁴⁷, whose propensity towards transgressive behaviour speaks volumes about the provincial mentality he sought to escape. The sense of fatalism associated with her Irish characters, particularly in this, her penultimate novel, served to demonstrate the author's growing shift from the sensational to a more realist approach.

⁴⁷ Janet Madden-Simpson, Afterword to *The Fly on the Wheel*, (Dublin: Virago, 1987), p. 333.

The central argument of the final chapter will contend that Thurston's novels, while not necessarily exemplifying the characteristics of high modernism in literature, still contained a significant number of subversive elements to claim that she was, at least in part, contributing to the formation of an early modernist discourse. The levels of experimentation with these elements indicate that even though her in-built conservatism demanded a return to domesticity by the resolution of each respective plot, the contestation between inner and outer realities, the deviations from representations of traditional morality, the resolute insistence on the force of individuality, the preoccupation with self-reflexivity and the persistent questioning of gender roles throughout her oeuvre, all indicated a migration of sorts from the pool of hack writers, noted solely for their combination of fleeting popularity and marked unoriginality. Thurston's peculiar take on morality is of special interest here. As two unpublished novels from the archive demonstrate – the author's difficulties when attempting to reconcile religious belief and humanist philosophy display levels of introspection not commonly associated with Thurston. An examination of both *Sandro* and (more specifically) *The Healer of Men* illustrate Thurston struggling with questions of conventional morality. Elsewhere, the thematic concerns of individualism and representations of gender will form the basis of a comprehensive analysis of Thurston's final novel *Max*. Particular attention will be given to the tentative homoeroticism inherent in the novel and both the author and press's attempts to sidestep the issue. Thurston's exploration of both transvestism and aestheticism as potential alternatives to the limitations imposed upon by sexual determinacy will also be addressed.

THE MASQUERADER

by

KATHERINE CECIL
THURSTON



ILLUSTRATED BY
CLARENCE F. UNDERWOOD

Two men, not related, but looking absolutely alike—one married, the other a bachelor—secretly change places. The novel develops along lines new to fiction, and is a forceful, compelling story; not a story of style and words, but a story of doing, a history of life in action. The moral problem involved is a strange one.

A CURIOUS LETTER

August 3, 1904.

To the Editor of *Harper's Bazar*:

"You may, and I hope you have, some little remembrance of my name. But this will be the very oddest letter you have ever received. I am reading that most clever and wonderfully well-written novel 'The Masquerader.' I have very serious heart trouble, and may live *years*—and *may* die any minute. I should deeply regret going without knowing the general end of that story. May I know it? Will be as close as the grave itself if I may. I really feel that I may not live to know the unraveling of that net. If I may not know it for reasons good and sufficient to yourself and by no means necessary to explain, may I please have the numbers as they come to you, and in advance of the general delivery? I congratulate you on the story—it is to my mind the very best and most intensely interesting story I have read for many and many a year; indeed, I cannot think of *any* book I *ever* read which held my attention so utterly. I have my own theory of the end. I think Loder is in some way the real Chilcote. . . . I just felt that (I have had so many troubles) it would be just my *luck* to die, and not to know the end."

The Editor of HARPER'S BAZAR was so much interested in the letter that the advance proofs of *The Masquerader* were sent to the lady.

The book is now for sale at all booksellers

HARPER & BROTHERS, PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK

⁴⁸ Fig. 1. This letter was featured in a number of publications circa 1905. Recognising the sales potential of *The Masquerader/John Chilcote, M.P.* following its success as a serial, Harper & Brothers were keen to publicise the novel as much as possible.

Chapter 1 – Scandalous Life, Sensational Art – The Life of Katherine Cecil Thurston

(1.1) The Divorce

Reporting from the courthouse, a journalist for the *New York Times* quoted Ernest Temple Thurston's desire to abandon his marriage to wife, Katherine Cecil Thurston and 'for the purpose of (his) literary work go down into the very depths of society'¹, a sentiment that was paralleled quite closely in his wife's *The Fly on the Wheel*, when the lawyer Stephen Carey agrees to thwart social convention and abandon his marriage for the woman he loved.

Do you care for me? Tell me! Do you?
[...] Yes, I care. I've always cared.
[...] Is that the truth? The honest truth?
Her glance answered his, burningly, seriously.
'Yes, the honest truth'.
His hands dropped with a gesture of finality.
'Then by God, I'd go down to hell for you'.²

On 7 April 1910 Katherine Cecil Thurston was granted a decree nisi on the grounds of the misconduct and adultery of her husband, Ernest Temple Thurston. Reports from the courthouse in 1910 suggest that the decision to separate remained solely with the husband, who sought to disavow his relationship as he found it 'impossible to live the ordinary and conventional life of a married man'.³ Ernest's jealousy of his wife's success was a significant contributor to the marriage's downfall. Declan McCormack adds that Ernest reportedly requested that his publishers produce micro-editions of his books, so he could boast about having outsold his wife.⁴ The presiding judge at the couple's divorce proceedings ruled that a wife was 'entitled to the permanent

¹ Untitled Article, *The New York Times*, 8 April 1910, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

² Katherine Cecil Thurston, *The Fly on the Wheel*, (London: Virago, 1987), p. 262.

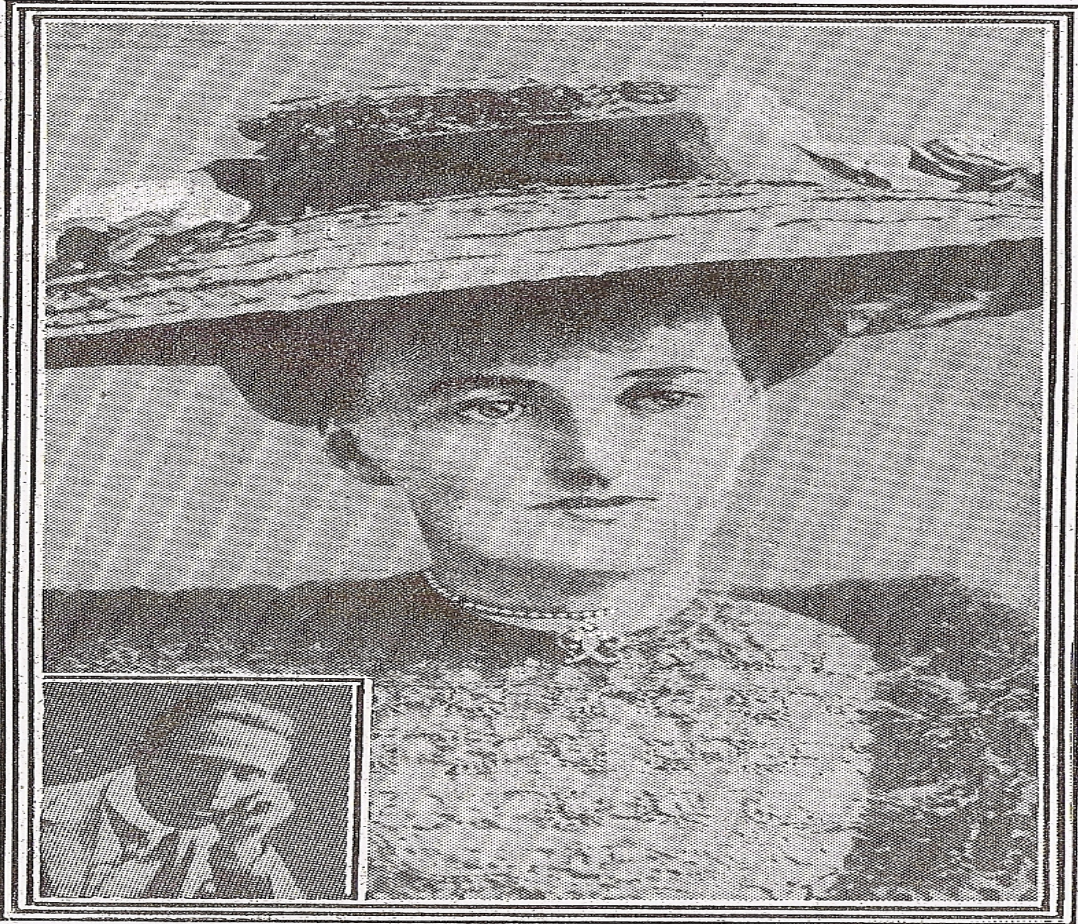
³ Untitled Article, *Westminster Gazette*, 10 April 1910, Box 10, Archive, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁴ McCormack, p. 2.

protection of her husband, which in this case had been denied to her by his wilfully separating himself from her without her consent. He was satisfied that the respondent had been guilty of desertion' and granted the divorce.⁵

Marriage and 'Literary Temperament.'

WELL-KNOWN AUTHOR OBTAINS DIVORCE.



Mrs. Katherine Cecil Thurston, author of "John Chilcote, M.P.," and her husband, Mr. E. Temple Thurston, also a novelist, from whom she obtained a divorce yesterday. Mrs. Thurston said her husband once told her he could not live conventionally as a married man, and was sorry he had not had the courage to tell her of his temperament before.—(Bassano and Thomson.)

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⁵ Untitled Article, *Westminster Gazette*, 10 April 1910, Box 10, Archive, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁶ Fig. 2 taken from the *Daily Mirror*, 1910, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

Ernest never openly admitted his jealousy of his wife's success, instead blaming her overly dominating nature for the marriage's failure.⁷ At the hearing Katherine Thurston expressed an annoyance at being identified as such, and asked what her husband meant by it. The judge presiding over the hearing suggested that she had the stronger character in the couple, to which Thurston replied, 'I suppose so, but that's not for me to say'.⁸ While the couple separated in 1907, Ernest proved to be indecisive when it came to the physical separation from the wife. Following the break, Ernest moved into a flat in Soho. The move proved to be temporary however, as he returned to their marital home on numerous occasions, declaring himself to be 'perfectly miserable' for having strayed from his wife. He left Thurston for good on December 30, 1907.⁹

Ernest's indecision as regards his feelings for his wife affected Katherine deeply. Despite his admission of infidelity on at least three occasions, she chose to forgive him, exclaiming that their marriage was one of 'affection – on her side anyway'.¹⁰ Thurston's faith was of paramount importance to her – it played an important factor in her decision to not only forgive her husband, but to welcome him back, should he have so wished. On one occasion Thurston's solicitor writes:

Dear Sir, We have been consulted by your wife on the subject of your withdrawal from the common home. We are to tell you that No. 20 Victoria Road, Kensington is still open to you, and to ask you to return there or to provide a common home for yourself or your wife.¹¹

Ernest's lawyer would respond with:

Mr. Thurston desires us to inform you that he does not think that it would tend to the happiness of his wife or himself were he to comply with Mrs.

⁷ Untitled Article, *The New York Times*, 8 April 1910, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁸ Untitled Article, *Westminster Gazette*, 10 April 1910, Box 10, Archive, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

Thurston's wishes and he therefore does not propose to alter his present mode of living.¹²

Katherine is shown to have made repeated attempts to reconcile with Ernest, with reports dating back until at least December 1909¹³, when Katherine's romance with the Scottish-born physicist, Dr. Alfred Charles Bulkeley Gavin had been established for the better part of year. While this may suggest a degree of infidelity on Katherine's part, it is probable that this was her final attempt to rectify the situation with Ernest, as his refusal to return resulted in her filing for divorce soon afterwards. A letter to Gavin, dated 19 April 1909, points to Thurston's exasperation at the state at which she found herself:

I am ashamed to tell you that my tears were not all shed while I was with you yesterday – that I had another trying evening with the boy, and ended by crying myself to sleep at 2am. I cannot tell you how badly I feel today and how utterly my nerves are shattered – I turn to you entirely to help me and make me strong – strong in will power, I mean, for I feel that if I am to go on with life as it is, I must make one definite effort, and stop these scenes absolutely.¹⁴

Being Roman Catholic, she was reluctant to separate herself from Ernest. For Thurston, his steadfast refusal to return would have perhaps sanctioned her relationship with Gavin.

From the separation in 1907 through to the widely publicised divorce in 1910, Katherine remained silent on the nature of her relationship with her former husband. Any revelations that appeared as a result of the court case served only to highlight Ernest's impropriety in the matter. There are quite a few letters of condolence from Thurston's peers who extend sympathies but profess to not knowing the extent of Ernest's misconduct. Aileen O'Meara, the daughter of Katherine's first cousin, Aileen, who had a knowledge of the Ernest's personality, given her mother's closeness

¹² Untitled Article, *Westminster Gazette*, 10 April 1910, Box 10, Archive, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

¹³ Ibid. At Katherine's request, the Thurstons met at the Berkeley Hotel.

¹⁴ Letter from Katherine to Gavin, 19 April 1909, Victoria Road, Box 12, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

to Katherine, reported that ‘Mum didn’t like him’.¹⁵ No particular reason is given for the disfavour.¹⁶ Thurston’s friend Alain Perrian writes to the author stating: ‘I am so glad you have done it! I didn’t know it was coming so soon – but in my opinion the sooner the better – [...] well rid of the little viper – all the same I am so sorry for all you have suffered’.¹⁷ Thurston’s plight did not go unnoticed by her literary peers, as the following letter from Bram Stoker’s wife, Florence Balcombe demonstrates: ‘We both sympathise for you, it is so sad, if a girl only knew on her wedding day what was in store for her in the future. What a tragedy it would be! I was so sorry not to see you today, and hope it is only a pleasure postponed. Our warmest remembrances. Yours very sincerely – L. Bram Stoker.’ [Florence Balcombe]¹⁸

Following the divorce Ernest expressed further regret at the manner in which he treated his wife. At a meeting with Katherine in the Berkeley Hotel, he said that he was not fit to be anyone’s husband and apologised for ‘not having the courage to tell her of his temperament’¹⁹ He remained in England following the separation and married twice afterwards, the first to Catherine Cann in 1911, whom he divorced in 1924, then his secretary, Emily Cowelin in 1925; the couple had two daughters. He died of pneumonia and influenza in London in 1933. Katherine Thurston’s later correspondence suggested that Ernest attempted to rectify his fractured relationship with his first wife; however, Thurston grew more apathetic towards her former husband in advancing years. In a letter to Gavin, dated 5 May 1911 she states: ‘I got two letters from Ernest since I have been here, and his new book which is very poor and slight in the extreme – I suppose I shall have to thank him for it, as the two letters still remain unanswered’.²⁰ In the four years of correspondence between Thurston and

¹⁵ McCormack, p. 3.

¹⁶ McCormack, p. 2.

¹⁷ Letter from Alain Perrian, (12 Cadogan Court, SW), 7 April, (No Year Given), Box 1, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

¹⁸ Letter from Florence Balcombe (4 Durham Place, Chelsea), 7 April, (No Year Given), Box 1, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Letter from Thurston to Gavin, 5 May 1911, St. Ann’s, Cork, Box 12, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

Gavin, Ernest is mentioned in passing by Katherine, but Gavin fails to mention his predecessor at all.

(1.2) *Marriage to Ernest*

Despite his substantial volume of work, little biographical information exists on Katherine's husband, Ernest Temple Thurston. He published forty works (novels, plays and poetry collections) between 1905 and 1932, from which several stage and cinematic adaptations were made. Although Ernest's output vastly exceeds that of his first wife, he failed to make much of an impression on the twentieth-century literary marketplace. He achieved a measure of success on Broadway with a number of adaptations of his works, most notably *The Wandering Jew* (1921), while his novel *The City of Beautiful Nonsense* (1909) inspired two film adaptations in 1919 and 1935.²¹ He is still perhaps most widely-known as husband to Katherine. Ernest's first novel did not appear until 1905, so it is possible to surmise that up to that time he remained largely preoccupied with managing his wife's business affairs. Indeed, a large collection of correspondence in the Edinburgh archive demonstrates an active involvement in Thurston's literary dealings. There are numerous examples of letters between Ernest and both William Blackwood (Blackwoods) and James McArthur (Hutchinson) where Ernest displays a shrewd knowledge of licencing agreements and rights to serial publications, seemingly well aware of his wife's earning potential. In terms of public appearances and social engagements, both Thurstons were reportedly quite active, despite Katherine's shyness. A journalist for the *Tribune* speaks of the couple being guests of honour at the annual ladies' night dinner held at the Criterion restaurant and presided over by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle:

In proposing the health of Mr. and Mrs. Temple Thurston, the chairman said that theoretically they were that night entertaining only one person; but that one person was one of the foremost lady novelists of the day and the man-writer, if he lived, would leave a mark of strength and

²¹ Of the same name.

power upon British fiction. *John Chilcote, M.P.* gripped its readers from the first day it appeared.²²

In interviews both preceding and following the divorce, Thurston remained quite secretive when it came to her husband, even with his admitted acts of adultery in the latter stages of the relationship. Constance Smedley commented on Thurston's reticence:

I sat next to her at dinner and scarcely dared open my mouth. Her mask-like beauty froze me," said a well-known diner-out. 'There is something almost uncanny about her reserve'. Naturally Mrs. Thurston became from that moment a supremely interesting figure. When I met her at a gay tea-party Mrs. Thurston's smiling impressed me also with a strange sense of awe. She seemed so far away that she almost faded from my memory; and now I cannot remember any distinct impression. We did not really meet then. The Mrs. Thurston who fulfils social duties is a remote beauty who seems to detach herself with a curious high-bred (cautiousness), from the adulation which surrounds personages in public.²³

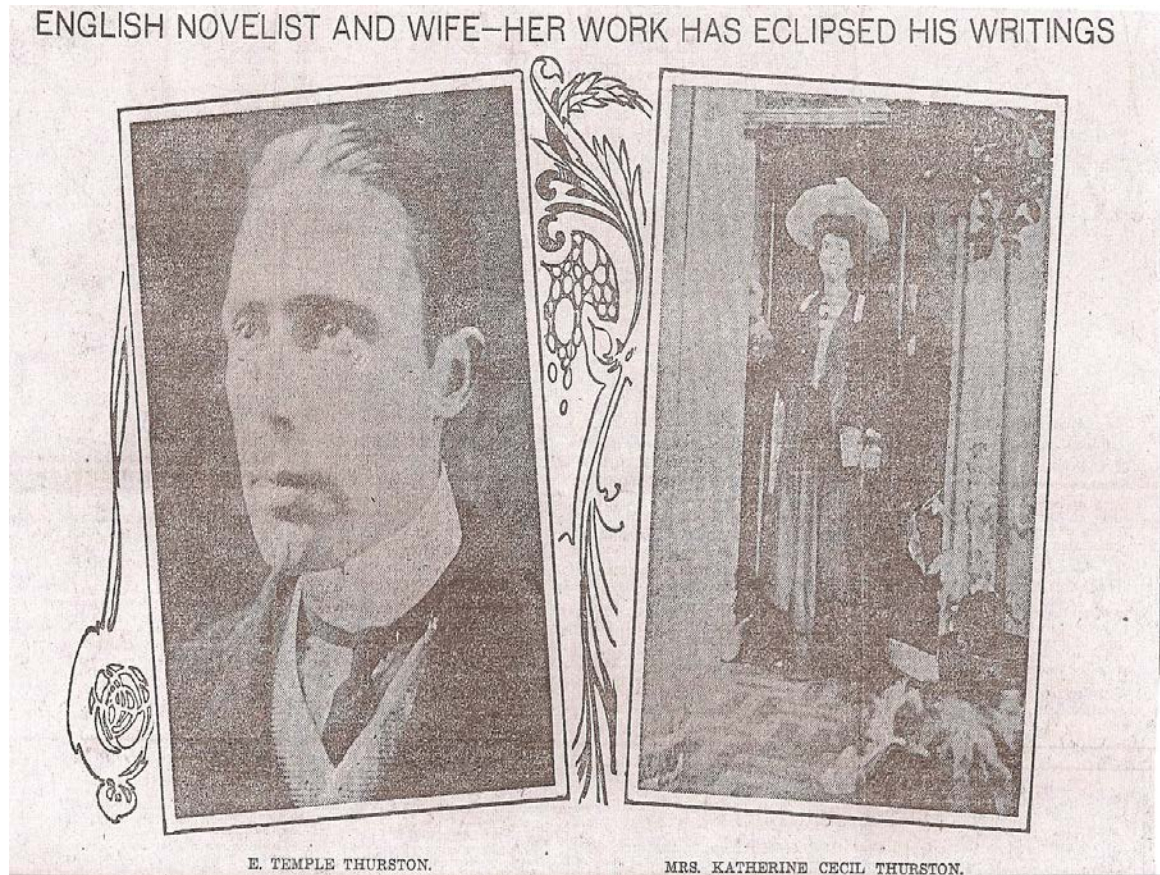
This type of restraint, which Thurston often demonstrated in the public sphere, meant that news of the couple's separation in 1907 came as a surprise to many. Given that the bulk of the materials that constitute the Thurston archive in Edinburgh were relocated to the estate of Thurston's potential second husband, Alfred Thomas Bulkeley Gavin in Scotland, it comes as no surprise that there exists little information on, or personal items belonging to Ernest. Katherine Thurston's romance with Gavin began towards the close of 1908. It is likely that, in her haste to start afresh with Gavin, the author chose to discard any memorabilia of the six-year marriage, save the professional correspondence that pertained to the publishing of her work, which was handled primarily by Ernest up until the separation in 1907. During the same year, certain publications sought to instigate a rivalry between the couple, despite the

²² Untitled Article, *The Tribune*, 12 June 1906, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

²³ Constance Smedley, 'Some Story-Book People', *T.P.'s Weekly*, 11 February 1910, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378. Further excerpts from this interview appear in Chapter Two.

Thurstons' quite dissimilar literary interests. The journalist for the *Louisville Courier* writes:

It must be stimulating for a married pair to be professional rivals. History shows that as a rule, one overshadows the other and so discourages effort; or generally it is the wife who so overrates her husband that she undervalues her own genius and so never develops the best that is in her. There is also another deterrent in the fact that the loving wife listens as a wife to her husband's criticism instead of as a writer, often to the world's loss. But here one sees husband and wife of equal talent engaged in generous rivalry, each putting out at the same time a strong novel backed by a reputation to be sustained.²⁴



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²⁴ Untitled Article, *Louisville Courier*, 13 April 1907, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

²⁵ Fig. 3 taken from the *Daily Mirror*, 17 March 1906, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

Katherine sought to champion her heroines as they attempted to release themselves from social and cultural restrictions, whereas Ernest's earliest literary preoccupations were limited to noting his disdain at the Catholic Church's grip on twentieth-century thought and expression.²⁶ Nevertheless, Ernest's acts of adultery and the subsequent separation were deemed (at least in part) to be the result of his jealousy of his wife's success.²⁷ Ernest's actions had a devastating effect on the naturally reclusive Katherine and left an indelible mark on her subsequent fiction, most notably *The Fly on the Wheel*. Described as an 'incise, bitterly humorous analysis of the Irish Catholic middle class at the beginning of the century'²⁸ the novel, as previously mentioned, also exhibits the most significant suggestion of autobiography in Thurston's fiction.²⁹ The parallels between love interests Stephen Carey/Isabel Costello and Ernest Temple/Katherine Cecil Thurston seem particularly suggestive. Isabel Costello is the only Thurston protagonist to end her own life as a result of being shunned by an erstwhile lover – a drastic and particularly poignant outcome, considering the circumstances of the author's own private life. Thurston's strict desire for privacy and the lack of information on the couple's lives outside of their attendance of various social functions meant that the subject matter of her work is of interest in considering her opinions on marriage and familial duty.

(1.3) Early Life and Sudden Success

The sole child of Paul Joseph Madden and Eliza Mary Madden (née Dwyer), Kathleen Annie Josephine Madden was born in the living quarters of the Madden Premises at 13-15 Bridge Street, Cork on 18 April 1874. Katherine's year of birth was widely publicized throughout her career to be 1875, when records indicate that she was born the previous year in 1874. Her father, a reputable wine merchant, grocer and one-time Mayor of Cork city was also an associate of Charles Stewart Parnell – with

²⁶ Untitled Article, *Westminster Gazette*, 10 April 1910, Box 9, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378. The anti-Catholic sentiment in Thurston's fiction will be addressed in Chapter Four.

²⁷ This will be addressed in the following section.

²⁸ Weekes, p. 341.

²⁹ Thurston's criticism of middle-class Ireland will be addressed in Chapters Two and Four.

both men sharing a strong affinity in matters concerning Ireland's quest for Home Rule. Madden, it was reported, 'sacrificed much for the Land League' and played a key role in the stabilisation of the Munster and Leinster banks.³⁰ Paul, Eliza and daughter Kathleen later moved to Wood's Gift on Blackrock Road, where they lived until shortly after 1901. The Thurstons enjoyed a relatively comfortable life in Cork. As Declan McCormack writes: 'Their home, Wood's Gift, was a fine Georgian building with an attached kitchen garden and adjoining croquet and lawn tennis grounds. A commodious and suitable abode for a member of Cork's rising middle class'.³¹ Katherine's father Paul Madden died in 1901 and her mother Eliza moved to Clogheen, Co. Tipperary where she died in November 1904. Allusions to either parent appeared infrequently in her writing. Correspondence with her extended family in Mallow, Co. Cork indicate that they played a substantial part in Thurston's upbringing, from her early years up until her death in 1911.³²

In her obituary for Thurston, Nano Harris Walker indicates a generally secluded upbringing:

Katherine was an only child, too precious and too loved to be sent to school – she was educated at home by governesses. Far as I could learn from friends who knew her as a girl, she never showed any distinct literary tastes. She never even ventured on that step – dear to all embryo poets and litterateurs - insertion in the columns of the local papers. She was just a light-hearted, extremely pretty girl, unconscious herself, as was everybody else, that beneath her broad white forehead and soft, silken, brown, ringletted hair lay the makings of a famous future novelist.³³

³⁰ Unknown Title, *Freeman's Journal*, 22 October 1900, Box 10, National Library of Ireland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

³¹ Declan McCormack, 'The Butterfly on the Wheel', *Sunday Independent*, 24 September, 2000, p. 1.

³² Thurston's relationship to her extended Irish family will be addressed in due course.

³³ Nano Harris Walker, 'A Woman's Impression of Katherine Cecil Thurston', *T.P's Weekly*, 22 September, 1911, Box 13, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

Gerardine Meaney writes that Katherine was believed to have been in possession of a ‘vivacious and humorous personality’³⁴ and was a noted participant at bazaars, dinner parties and tennis functions. Thurston’s early life was spent enjoying the spoils of her father’s success. It is likely that she met Ernest Temple Thurston, at one of these gatherings.

Ernest was born the youngest of five children in Halesworth, Suffolk in 1879. His father was a member of the Church of England, while his mother, Georgina was reportedly Catholic.³⁵ His family moved to Cork sometime in the 1880s where his father found work as head brewer of the Beamish and Crawford brewery. McCormack adds: ‘Ernest worked as a pupil brewer during the mid-1890s but had already decided to follow the impecunious vocation of writing. He was an all-round athlete who played tennis in the opening rounds of Wimbledon, cricket at Lord’s, and later still excelled at golf’.³⁶ The couple met and fell in love at some point during the 1890s. As mentioned, Katherine’s father Paul died on 7 January 1901 and Kathleen, now calling herself Katherine Cecil Madden moved to London five weeks later (16 February 1901) to marry Ernest. She began writing in earnest following the wedding, and had stories published in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, *The Tatler* and *The Sketch*. Her inexperience as a writer proved to be of little importance, as according to John S. Crone, she never had a contribution rejected by these publications.³⁷ By 1902, the Thurstons had bought a house in Victoria Road, London and a villa, called Maycroft, in the west Waterford fishing village of Ardmore. She spent several months of the year there to unwind and compose her fiction.

1903 saw the publication of Katherine’s first novel, *The Circle*, which had previously been serialised in *Blackwood’s Magazine*. The story documented the journey of a young Jewish girl who fled her father’s curio shop in the East-end of early

³⁴ Gerardine Meaney, ‘Decadence, Degeneration, and Revolting Aesthetics, The Fiction of Emily Lawless and Katherine Cecil Thurston’ in *Colby Quarterly Review*, vol. 36, June 2000, pp. 169.

³⁵ McCormack, p. 1.

³⁶ Ibid. p. 1.

³⁷ John S Crone, *Concise Dictionary of Irish Biography*, (Dublin: The Talbot Press, 1928), p. 248.

Edwardian London to become an acclaimed theatre actress, under the tutelage of the New Woman archetype, Jeanne Maxted. The novel, in a sense, foreshadowed Thurston's own career as it documented the protagonist's journey from a relatively secluded upbringing to success on an international platform. Heralded too as a triumph for its portrayal of New Woman sensibilities,³⁸ the novel caught the attention of a number of critics who deemed the then unknown Thurston as an author of interest: 'The Circle is of happy augury for her future. [...] the manner in which it (the plot) is treated; its sincerity and its passion mark it out clearly among contemporary fiction'.³⁹ The book was well received and was described as 'far above the average in conception, imagination and style'⁴⁰, yet while *The Circle* earned Thurston a modicum of commercial and critical acclaim, it was her second work, *John Chilcote, M.P.*, that was to cement her newfound reputation as a novelist. The novel was a political thriller, described as being 'fast-paced and packed with sensational incidents and characters'.⁴¹ It was a tale of masquerade based in Great Britain's Houses of Parliament, the story, with its heightened levels of melodrama and intrigue, attained an immediate popularity with the Edwardian public. Prior to the novel's publication, its serialised form in *Harper's Bazaar* accumulated a tremendous amount of interest. The novel achieved a large measure of popularity abroad with 200,000 copies being sold in America alone, where Thurston's American publisher renamed the work *The Masquerader*.⁴² The success of this, her second novel, would set a precedent for Thurston's fiction in America and her subsequent novels were to be found occupying spots on the *New York Times* best seller list for years to come.⁴³ Back in Britain, Thurston was to become a celebrated public speaker and both she and her husband Ernest were reported to have entertained many guests at their London home in the

³⁸ This will be more fully addressed in Chapter Three.

³⁹ Untitled Article, *Daily Graphic*, 19 March 1904, Box 9, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁴⁰ Untitled Article, *St. Andrew*, 5 February 1904, Box 9, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁴¹ Ann Owens Weekes, *Unveiling Treasures: The Attic Guide to the Published Works of Irish Women Literary Writers, Drama, Fiction, Poetry*, (Dublin: Attic Press, 1993), p. 340.

⁴² Presumably renamed so to avoid confusion over the initials M.P. in the original title.

⁴³ The *New York Times* reports that *The Masquerader* (1904), *The Gambler* (1905) and *Max* (1910) among the top-selling books in America for each of their respective years.

Royal Burrough.⁴⁴ The success of her fiction granted both she and Ernest an entrée into London's high society. She became an active society figure, involving herself in several highly-regarded clubs, including the ladies Athenaeum, Sesame and The Writers. Correspondence and memorabilia in the archive indicate Thurston's association with famed public figures such as Bram Stoker and his wife, Florence, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Edith Anna Eneone Somerville, and Alice Stopford Green amongst others. This celebrity status brought with it a sense of responsibility, however, with one columnist commenting that the author's death in 1911 was a significant blow to her fellow women writers and journalists:

Few things, I think, could speak more eloquently of the prominent and exceptional position held by Mrs. Katherine Thurston in the literary world of London than the effect caused by the news of her tragically sudden death. Especially to women writers and journalists it came with the shock of realization that an intimate companion and friend had gone. While in London, Mrs. Thurston continually identified herself with all the societies and clubs devoted to the social wants of professional women. She presided at meetings, took part in debates, acted on committees and in a thousand ways, showed her sympathy with the life and efforts of her sisters of the pen.⁴⁵

Following Ernest and Katherine's separation in 1907, Katherine spent much of her time in the seaside villa of Maycroft in Ardmore, County Waterford. As mentioned, it was there that she composed most of her fiction, as she enjoyed the relative peace and quiet that was seemingly unobtainable in her married home in London.

⁴⁴ Untitled Article, *To-day*, 5 October 1904, Box 9, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁴⁵ Nano Harris Walker, 'A Woman's Impression of Katherine Cecil Thurston', *T.P.'s Weekly*, 22 September, 1911, Box 13, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.



(1.4) Gavin and Thurston's The Irish Family

'I wouldn't admit the defeat. Women are such keen anglers they can never acknowledge that any fish, however big, has evaded the hook'.⁴⁷ Lady Astrupp's maxim here could be quite appropriately be extended to Thurston's own resolve in both the personal and professional spheres. By 1908, the author's popularity in literary circles had diminished somewhat. Reviews of *The Mystics* were less than favourable, with one reviewer from the *Lutheran Observer* stating: 'There are some of the characteristics here that have given the author's previous stories their popularity, but the book is not convincing. It lacks body, is artificial in its development and altogether below the grade of her work hitherto'.⁴⁸ Elsewhere, *The Fly on the Wheel*, which achieved considerable critical success upon publication, failed to make much of an impact in terms of sales figures. Ernest's hesitancy to fully relinquish the marriage in

⁴⁶ Fig. 4 – Maycroft, Ardmore, Co. Waterford. Photograph located in Box 1 of the Archive.

⁴⁷ Katherine Cecil Thurston, *John Chilcote, M.P.*, (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1904), p. 164.

⁴⁸ Untitled Article, *Lutheran Observer*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 12 July 1907, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

the years following the couple's separation was a cause of much consternation for Katherine; however, her burgeoning romance with Doctor Alfred Thomas Bulkeley Gavin served as an antidote to her ex-husband's continued presence.

Thurston first met Alfred on the balcony of the Ritz hotel on 21 September 1908. In a letter of the same date in 1909 Thurston wrote: 'This day, one year ago, darling, I crossed to London, there to find heaven'.⁴⁹ Little is known about Gavin, save that he was born in Ayrshire, Scotland in 1873, making him two years older than Thurston. Correspondence with the author makes mention of a brother, Frank, living in Johannesburg and an unnamed father, who died in 1911. He studied medicine and had a small practice in London's West End. Although biographical information on Gavin is scant, I contend that his relationship to Thurston was beneficial, both in terms of her separation from Ernest, but also her career trajectory.

Thurston's later fiction cast aside much of the sensation and decadence that marked her earlier efforts, in favour of more incisive commentaries on class, gender and society. *The Fly on the Wheel's* attack on the narrow-minded purpose of middle-class Ireland was treated with much critical adulation upon publication. Its preoccupation with self-fashioning in the face of conformity; the social and economic connotations of marriage over romance; and idealism versus conventional belief, meant that it shared many of the attributes that made George Eliot's *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life* a success in the previous century. In many ways Thurston's treatment of Waterford as a microcosm of Irish society demonstrated a depth of observation that was perhaps not as evident in previous efforts. Thurston's newfound artistic drive was significantly enhanced by the presence of Gavin following the publication of the novel and the separation from Ernest. A series of letters between the pair, spanning three-four years constitute the most substantial and intimate biographical information relating to the last years of Thurston's life. The highly personalised nature of the correspondence allowed the couple, then known for their

⁴⁹ Letter from Thurston to Gavin, 21 September 1909, Box 12, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

staunch desire for privacy, to express themselves independently of the furore and artifice that surrounded Thurston's position in high society.

From the outset, Gavin's wish to remain entirely anonymous in the relationship is apparent. Although the couple dated for a number of years prior to the author's death, his refusal to be acknowledged as anything but a companion to Thurston meant that, aside from the letters shared between the two, virtually no information existed on the couple until the announcement of their impending marriage in the Summer of 1911. Unbeknownst to the world at large, Gavin would act as Thurston's muse as she composed her most critically lauded novel, *Max*. Correspondence from Thurston while she was researching the work in Paris saw her refer to Gavin by 'little Max' – demonstrating his presence in her thoughts during the book's origins. Following the novel's publication, in a letter believed to have been written in August 1910, Thurston states:

Beloved, I have only time in this briefest of letters, for we are at the moment starting for the south, not brief though, it must be I want it to convey how infinitely happy your love of *Max* has made me – Darling, I could feel in every word you wrote so close a sympathy and understanding of my mind – If ever book belonged to human being – this book is yours – undedicated though it will be it, every word, every thought in it is of you inspired by you and yours absolutely – I am filled with joy that something of the exaltation that came into my life with that finest hour on the balcony at the Ritz has shown in the pages that, as I say, were written with one thought filling my whole being – the thought of you.⁵⁰

Gavin's wish not to receive the book's dedication is curious. In a letter to Thurston, the doctor himself acknowledged the importance of the novel as it related to the author's career when he stated that '*Max* forecast her future as a novelist',⁵¹ yet he sought to disassociate himself from the work in spite of his partner's wishes. Perhaps he foresaw the widespread circulation of the novel, with his name potentially placed

⁵⁰ Letter from Thurston to Gavin, August 1910, Box 12, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁵¹ Letter from Gavin to Thurston, 24 September 1910, Box 11, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

on the inner sleeve as a public acknowledgement of the couple's romance – something he suspected would have had an adverse effect on his status as physician. A letter dated 3 October 1910 saw Gavin (potentially) equating the dearth of patients in his surgery with the public's knowledge of his relationship to Thurston:

The lack of work with me is appalling – Today I have not one single patient – no more than yesterday – never in all my experience have I been like this – I wonder if my public knows anything [...] no more than the public knows my other life which would be much more detrimental to my material interests.⁵²

Gavin's reticence to publicly acknowledge the couple's relationship continued almost up until the month that they were to be married. In a letter dated 7 August 1911, Gavin tells Thurston that he wanted a private wedding, with no gifts and a small number of guests. In the same letter he states that he hated public weddings and thought that an announcement of the couple's marriage on the day of the ceremony would be sufficient.⁵³ In an undated letter from August 1911, Katherine attempts to console Gavin following the leaked announcement of their engagement in an American publication:

A letter has just come from Mr Wills with a caution from the *New York World* stating everything in full American fashion. The thing appeared on Friday, July 28th and these are heads of the article – Mention of my books – the fact that I divorced Ernest – (nothing of his marriage) – That I am a catholic and that my marriage is to be annulled at Rome and that we marry in the Autumn – that you are a Scotch physician with a West End practice and that your name is Dr. Alfred Buckley Gavin – that we have been engaged for three months, but only announced the engagement that day. That I am very good-looking and considered by some people to be like the Granena of Russia! (Even in all one's distress and anger one has to smile!) Thank heaven there is no mention of my father. Dear, I cannot possibly tell you what I feel – the sense of impotence – the lack of someone to advise me – and through it all I feel we must pull ourselves together and look at it sanely.

⁵² Letter from Gavin to Thurston, 3 October 1910. Box 11, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁵³ Paraphrased letter from Gavin to Thurston, 7 August 1911, Box 11, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

Although Thurston's distress here is tinged with humour, the unauthorised acknowledgement of the couple's engagement served only to anger Gavin. In response, Thurston takes full responsibility for her fiancé's unease:

My dear husband, I think you are the most loyal person in the world, and I only ask you if the occasion should arise, to let me prove my love as well as steadfastly as you have done. I love you and I respect you with all my heart – but, oh, I wish I was not the instrument of all this humiliation to you who are as sensitive as I am myself.⁵⁴

Although prone to angry outbursts, Gavin's letters to Thurston often demonstrate a profound affection. Indeed, his earliest letters to the author are tinged with the burgeoning affection of young adulthood. In an early letter he writes: 'My sweet Cecil, Darling it is wonderful to think (that) you will be back so soon. My life with you has been such that it seems unreal [...] I think of you all day and every day [...] forgive all my shortcomings [...] for I am yours to do with what you will – from your very own, CBG'.⁵⁵ While a great many of his early letters demonstrate his fondness for the author, it is possible that he was unaccustomed to being the recipient of romantic feelings – particularly those expressed by one of the foremost literary craftswomen of the day. A number of the letters appear to be quite hurriedly composed, some as he waited for the arrival of a patient, or others, as he was en-route to an engagement. The inattention demonstrated was either indicative of a hectic professional life, or perhaps suggested an unwillingness to engage with the author on the level that she desired. The infrequent number of letters to Thurston also demonstrates this sense of hesitancy, with the doctor himself exclaiming: 'Forgive me, I am so forgetful of you'.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Letter from Thurston to Gavin, Marked 'Wednesday', August 1911, Box 12, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁵⁵ Letter from Gavin to Thurston, Unspecified date in 1908, Box 11, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁵⁶ Letter from Gavin to Thurston, 29 May 1909, Box 11, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.



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Unsurprisingly, Thurston expressed concern at the inconsistencies in the thoughts and feelings expressed in the letters of her young companion. In a letter dated 5 May 1909, she concludes that she is asking too much from the doctor:

You tell me, dear love that I have a gift of expression – tonight I feel strangely lacking in its possession, for there is a sadness in my soul not to be clothed in any words I can find – a sense that I have given you of my best most truly and most fervently, and that I have left you unconvinced – I will say no more than this, for the saying hurts too deeply – perhaps silence will convey to you something of my pain – I

⁵⁷ Fig. 5. Photograph of Gavin from Box 11. Thurston bemoaned Gavin's unwillingness to be photographed, often calling him 'notoriously difficult'.

have been thinking – seriously, as I always think concerning you – and I have decided that I put too great a tax upon your time and upon your nerves in allowing you to see me every day at the expense of your work – Tomorrow therefore, I will spend the day with Nance, leaving you quite free, and on Friday I will go to Bourne –End, to stay there for some days – if it makes things easier for you – Do not say – do not think – that I have one motive in this but the motive that has ruled my whole existence since I knew you – the desire to make your life happier and less complicated - Do not think it, Alfred, because the pain in my heart tonight is too acute to bear even the idea that I may be misunderstood by you, whom I love with infinitely the most complete and perfect love I have given or shall give to any man in this unhappy world – I may be annoying your infinitely by this scheme of mine, but it hurts me so much and leaves me so lonely that there must be some use and good behind it – or so I think.⁵⁸

Gavin's reluctance to fully commit to Thurston is indicative of a troubled personage on the whole – in one letter he exclaims 'I am a strange being, even to myself'⁵⁹, elsewhere he would display a noted ambivalence in matters of his own mental health. At times Gavin denies Thurston's suggestion that he may be suffering from depression, he vacillates between states of contentment and despair, seemingly re-affirming the author's suspicions, as in one letter he thanks her for 'overriding the pessimism in my life' [...] 'what a change!' [...] 'all that makes my life – my miserable life – a dream' In the same letter he apologises for his egoism, noting that the author left him in a state of happiness'.⁶⁰ The entirety of the correspondence between the two suggests an almost mutually beneficial arrangement. Thurston is shown on many occasions to try and coax Gavin from his depressed state and assure him of his self-worth, while he, in return, provides her with the attention that she desperately craved, given her ongoing torment with Ernest and fading popularity as author.

⁵⁸ Letter from Thurston to Gavin, 5 May 1909, Box 12, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁵⁹ Letter from Gavin to Thurston, 3 October 1910, Box 11, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁶⁰ Letter from Gavin to Thurston, 6 October 1908, Box 11, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

Fluctuations in temperament aside, the one consistent feature of Gavin's correspondence involved his seeming demand to seek the best possible value for money both in his own affairs and more significantly, in Thurston's. By 1910, Gavin had essentially adopted the dual role of potential husband and financial adviser. Correspondence showed him dictating matters in taxation, the sales of serial rights, payment of checks and even the choice of budget-priced accommodation, to the author. It is with his intervention in Thurston's pecuniary affairs that Gavin would come into conflict with the Pollock family in Cork, Thurston's known relatives and overseers of the author's finances since the separation from Ernest.

Spending the majority of her adult life in London, Thurston fraternised with the Pollocks and Maddens only when spending three-four months of the year in Ireland, usually as she was composing her works. Little is known about the relatives, save the information from the various items of correspondence between Thurston and Gavin. Nance and Will Pollock were to feature prominently in the author's letters to Gavin, with her cousin, Nance being the closest thing that Thurston had to a best friend. She often accompanied Thurston on her trips around Ireland and visited her often in London. Her partner, Will, assisted the author when it came to practical matters e.g. caretaking of the family's various properties throughout the year. A number of other relatives are mentioned in the letters to Gavin, primarily her cousin Austin Barry, who was the author's principal financial advisor. As Thurston's relationship to Gavin grew, Austin came to communicate directly with the doctor in discussing the author's financial matters. Aileen Madden was perhaps one of Thurston's most favoured relatives, with whom she spent a considerable amount of time when visiting Cork – she also remained the sole family member with whom Thurston would place an implicit trust, even through 1911 when the author became increasingly estranged from her Irish family. Gavin seemed to recognise and respect this trust, as Aileen appears to be the only relative with whom he continued an informal correspondence following Thurston's death in September 1911. Various other relatives are mentioned; Isabel, a cousin with whom the author had a number of heated exchanges; Laddy (no other name is given), who intervened in matters

concerning the delivery of correspondence and The Aunt (most likely a Pollock) whom Thurston considered a burden.



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Gavin's relationship to Thurston's family at one time seemed convivial. In a letter to Gavin, Thurston jokes at Will and Nance's visit to London, saying that the couple were keen to show their big baby to the good doctor.⁶² As the bond between Gavin and Thurston grew however, so did the doctor's frustration with the Pollocks and Barrys' presence in the author's life. As mentioned, Gavin became obsessed with getting the best possible value for money. His belief in Austin's incompetence as it related to the managing of Thurston's financial affairs sparked a rift between the two. It culminated in Gavin's wish that the author disinherit all of those closest to her in Ireland:

⁶¹ Fig. 6. Undated photograph of Thurston (holding a parasol in the back) with unspecified relatives. Taken from Box 1, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁶² Letter from Thurston to Gavin, 31 August 1909, Box 12, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

If I am dragged into it by the family, please say it has not only my most unqualified approval, but that I insist upon you washing your hands of such an ungrateful and unchivalrous crowd. Austin must for all time be self-supporting [...] And Nance's attitude.. [...] I beg of you to grant me this one big favour: Give Nance no money until I see you and if you (decide) to give her money, do it in 'Kind only'. 'Before you commit yourself to any plans, write and consult me' [...] should such a calamity happen, you will have me in the picture and meantime you would simply (relocate) to the nearest hotel.' 'Everything you have done, I approve of [...] embrace this opportunity of clearing out the Court in Ireland.⁶³

Thurston complied with Gavin's wishes. Later correspondence from the doctor displayed a significant change in disposition. All traces of affection were discarded when the discussion of financial matters constituted the reason for writing. At times he became frustrated with Thurston herself. In a letter of 11 September 1910, he bemoans her decision to send him socks via post as their discovery might have revealed an aspect of the closeness that the couple shared, thus publicly announcing their relationship: 'God knows what will be the end of it [...] the knowledge that they know our affair and possess some socks as a souvenir. I am awfully sorry for this letter, dearest! But it cannot be helped now – For God's sake – never must anyone post anything to me, not save Austin'.⁶⁴ It could be surmised that Thurston's decision to disinherit her family came, at least in part, as a result of her fiancé's wishes. Her plans to dispossess her Irish relatives constituted a significant amount of correspondence from 1910 up until the author's death in 1911. She echoed Gavin's dissatisfaction with Austin's ineptitude, at one time stating: 'I have been so disgusted with him since we left you that really I long to be rid of him altogether'.⁶⁵ Elsewhere she questioned Will and Nance's motives when it came to the sale of her property, while Isabel called the author a 'brute'⁶⁶ for the manner in which Thurston sought to sell the family studio in Maycroft. When news that Isabel was in some way connected

⁶³ Letter from Gavin to Thurston, 14 August 1911, Box 11, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁶⁴ Letter from Gavin to Thurston, 11 September 1910, Box 11, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁶⁵ Letter from Thurston to Gavin, 11 September 1910, Box 12, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁶⁶ Letter from Thurston to Gavin, 20 May 1910, Box 12, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

to the leaking of news of the couple's engagement to the American press, Thurston seized upon the relative's apparent betrayal and sought to use it to cut her ties with the family and 'put them all on the street'.⁶⁷ At this time, Thurston was writing the short story 'The Hazard', a tale in which the Irish national character is lambasted for its brutality and greed. Gavin had the story's hero modelled after him, as he saved the heroine from her cruel fate – possibly echoing the doctor's participation in ridding the author of her ungrateful family members.⁶⁸

Thurston's decision to shun the Irish members of her family in the months leading up to her death could have been interpreted to be at her fiancé's behest. Letters between Thurston and Gavin in the summer of 1911 suggest that members of Gavin's family were disinclined to grant the union their blessing as a result of Thurston's Catholic background. Gavin's own father did not learn of his son's plan to marry the author until May 1911. In the weeks leading up to the couple's wedding, the doctor seemed less preoccupied with securing the favour of his family and more with the disinheritance of Thurston's kin. His last known letter to the author speaks of the Pollocks/Barrys shallowness and how much they fill him with 'disgust and loathing'.⁶⁹

The perception of Thurston as a 'celebrity, constantly on the verge and often in the realm of notoriety'⁷⁰ was something of a misconception. Her reclusive nature and dogged determination to appease the men in her life defied the image of extravagant society belle. Thurston enjoyed the spoils of her career, but only to the extent that they could facilitate the relatively secluded life that she sought with her successive partners. The gulf that existed between the public and private perception was commented on in one of the author's few known interviews:

⁶⁷ Letter from Thurston to Gavin, Undated, sent from Moore's Hotel, Cork, Box 12, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁶⁸ The story will be analysed more carefully as a critique of the Irish temperament in Chapter Four.

⁶⁹ Letter from Gavin to Thurston, 4 September 1911, Box 11, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁷⁰ Gerardine Meaney, 'Decadence, Degeneration, and Revolting Aesthetics, The Fiction of Emily Lawless and Katherine Cecil Thurston' in *Colby Quarterly Review*, vol. 36, June 2000, pp. 169.

I knew this Mrs. Thurston was an essentially sincere woman [...] She had walked across the park in the rain, and the glow of exercise still enveloped her. We had not talked five minutes before I discovered she was the very best sort of an enthusiast, whose reason has to be convinced as well as her heart. [...] She was so different from her “society” prototype that I could even dare to ask the reason. She laughed and admitted it with the perfect simplicity and frankness, which now seemed a part of her. “I am desperately shy,” she said. “Strangers seem to expect me to be somebody ‘great,’ and that’s paralysing.”⁷¹

Thurston sought freedom for her art and the freedom to re-invent the self; her celebrity status granted her a new lease of life, when letters to her fiancé suggest that she sought the life that many of her contemporaries and fictional heroines had so strongly resisted. A number of the circulating reports that surrounded her own death suggested that she subscribed to her characters’ ultimate fate as well.

(1.5) Death and Legacy

Thurston’s body was found on 5 September 1911 in Moore’s Hotel, Cork, with the official verdict being death via asphyxiation following an epileptic fit. In the four years of correspondence to Gavin and even in Thurston’s own letters to her publishers, Blackwood and Hutchinson, there are numerous reports of the author being prone to malady. Influenza, headaches, ulcers, back pain and nausea were among the most common causes of complaint. Curiously, the sudden and unexpected nature of the author’s death led a number of publications to question the official verdict. Thurston’s persistent ill health and reliance on medicine⁷² led many to believe that she had died from an overdose. Another theory was that Thurston took her own life, echoing the fate of Isabel Costello in *The Fly on the Wheel*. Gerardine Meaney adds:

The fatally headstrong protagonist was so far identified with Thurston in her lifetime that her death in a Cork hotel at the age of thirty-six was widely speculated to have been a suicide despite the coroner’s verdict

⁷¹ Interview with Constance Smedley ‘Some story-book people’, *T.P.’s Weekly*, 11 February 1910, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁷² Thurston’s dependency on medication often featured in her fiction, from John Chilcote’s addiction to morphine in *John Chilcote, M.P.*, to Isabel Costello’s self-inflicted poisoning at the end of *The Fly on the Wheel*.

of natural causes. The speculation left the realm of gossip and became literary biography when it was repeated by the prurient Stephen Brown in his *Ireland in Fiction* in 1916.⁷³

From speaking to the journalist Declan McCormack, I learned of other possible causes of Thurston's death; the most shocking suggestion was that Gavin murdered Thurston. As noted in the previous section, towards the end of her life, the author became estranged from her family in both Cork and Waterford – to the point that she often escaped to Cork city, more specifically Moore's Hotel in an attempt to achieve at least temporary independence. Gerard O'Meara reported that the O'Meara/Madden family did not like Gavin and his family firmly believed that he had played a hand in the author's death. McCormack's interview with Aileen O'Meara seemed to support the claim, as she comments on Gavin's unsparing treatment of the Madden family following the author's death. Speaking of Thurston, she states:

'She left virtually everything to her fiancé, including her half of the Madden's business [...] the doctor insisted on the Madden's paying up his shares [...] it put severe financial strains on the shop, from which it struggled for a long time to recover [...] they believed that he had been instrumental in her death'.⁷⁴

In an interview I conducted with McCormack, the journalist elaborated on the manner of death stating that Katherine's body was found stretching for medicine that could have perhaps saved her life. He also stated, in a piece of information that did not feature in the final published article, that O'Meara mentioned that Gavin had hired a maid to look after Thurston during her stay, and that she was under orders to withhold the medicine from the author in order to facilitate her death. The conjectural nature of this accusation, whilst making it worthy of one of Thurston's own melodramas, is impossible to authenticate. Secondly, the fact that O'Meara was speaking from a highly subjective viewpoint must be taken into account. It had already been established that Gavin had sought to disinherit the Pollocks, so it was perhaps natural that she held a degree of resentment towards the man who not only stole the affections

⁷³ Meaney, p.169.

⁷⁴ McCormack, p. 3.

of one of their own, but brought generations of her family to near financial ruin. There is no mention of an attending servant in any of the letters sent to Gavin during her final stay in Ireland. A letter to Gavin's father from family friend, Jane McKinnon, seemingly disproves O'Meara's theory, stating that the author died alone. She writes:

I thank you most earnestly for your kind letter. I am thankful to know you work with your dear son Alfred. My heart is simply [...] for him in this terrible sorrow – so sudden and so utterly fragile. May God help him [...] sympathy can do but little valuable though it be. My sister who is here at present feels it equally with me. I do not wonder that his whole being is [...] I pray to God to console my dear friend in some way as other one is tempted to ask why that very precious person was allowed (by herself I mean) to sleep unattended, not with someone in the adjoining room. I want to mention that the first moment I got news of her death was an obituary within *The Times*: otherwise was in reference to her approaching happy marriage. Kindly excuse a badly written letter. Believe me to yours most sincerely.⁷⁵

Conversely, the suggestion that Gavin played a hand in the author's death is not beyond the realms of possibility. Thurston insisted that any correspondence between the couple must be private, oftentimes insisting that Gavin discard a specific letter. The last known message to him⁷⁶ explicitly states 'Burn this letter' at its conclusion. Gavin's ultimate decision to defy his fiancée's wishes is a mystery. It could be viewed as his wish to keep his wife's last known letter as a token of remembrance, or as proof of outstanding practical dealings that had to be attended to following his wife's sudden death. As had been witnessed in his correspondence with the author, the manner in which he dealt with his fiancée changed dramatically over the course of their four-year relationship. In the final few months leading up to the author's death, all semblance of affection disappeared from the various letters, with Gavin's concern seemingly fixated on safeguarding his privacy as regards the upcoming wedding and procuring a good price for Thurston's assets, both in London and Ireland. It was during this time that Thurston had decided to bequeath the majority of her estate to Gavin, in

⁷⁵ Letter from Jane McKinnon to Gavin, Ronachlan, Clachan, Argyllshire, Undated, Box 12, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁷⁶ Letter from Thurston to Gavin, 4 September 1911, sent from Moore's Hotel, Cork, Box 12, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

the event of her own death. Whatever the doctor's intention, his self-assertiveness went unheeded by Thurston, who sought only to appease her fiancé. An interesting aside involves the discovery of a number of handwritten notes underneath the author's pillow, which were rumoured to be the sequel to her most famous example of literary sensationalism: *John Chilcote, M.P.*⁷⁷. Claudius Clear shared a memorable depiction of Thurston in her obituary in the *Irish Book Lover*:

I met Mrs Thurston only on a few occasions, but was each time impressed by her kind, eager, friendly manner, and her loyalty to Ireland and her friends. The best description I have seen of her is quoted by the "Daily Telegraph", from an American writer who said, "The principal thing that struck me was her glowing colour and air of country vigour. She might have just come in from a tramp over the moors. Her dark eyes shone with a sparkle that high winds breed, and her step was sprightly and alert. She came across the room as if she were tramping over the heather."⁷⁸

⁷⁷ 'Pathetic Sequel to Novelist's Death', *The Daily Mirror*, No, 2460, 13 September 1911, Box 13, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁷⁸ Claudius Clear, *Irish Book Lover*, volume IV, p. 84.

(1.6) Conclusion

It is arguably the case that, despite the level of personal grievances that resulted from both the annulment of her marriage to Ernest and the highly temperamental disposition of her fiancé, the author's final years with Gavin were highly beneficial to Thurston's literary endeavours. Defying her embittered statement that she would 'never write again' following her divorce from Ernest,⁷⁹ her final novel *Max* received widespread critical acclaim as it was generally considered to be 'a richer more original novel'.⁸⁰ Critics lauded the author's handling of sensitive subject matter in an environment altogether alien to what she must have been accustomed: 'The artistic, Bohemian side of Paris is drawn with a knowledge which is informed with sympathy and insight, indeed some will look upon this as the best part of the book [...] Mrs. Thurston has made a delicate psychological problem the real subject of the story and has managed it with skill, grace and thoroughness'.⁸¹ In many ways *Max* is Thurston's most important novel: reminiscent of New Woman sensibilities, it reflected not only the author's affinities for masquerade and self-invention, but demonstrated her strong capabilities for the subversive whilst working within the confines of the romance genre. The tortured nature of the lead character's struggle as she reinvented herself is made even more tragic with the knowledge that, had she lived, Thurston's fiction could have expounded upon the more experimental elements that had begun to feature in her novels, thus creating the possibility for more lasting recognition within the canon. At the time of her death, Thurston was heralded as having excelled in her career and literary aspirations, in spite of the media's gruelling interest in her private life. What has been largely excluded from literary biography was the knowledge that Thurston was quite optimistic at the time of her death, both in terms of her career prospects and her married life with Gavin. The salacious divorce from her first husband and the sensational nature of her death failed to tarnish the reputation that she achieved as one of Ireland's first notable female novelists.

⁷⁹ *Globe*, New York, as quoted in *Westminster Gazette*, 10 April 1910, Box 9, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁸⁰ Weekes, p. 340.

⁸¹ Untitled Article, *Bookman*, November 1910, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

Chapter 2 – Thurston: The Writer

(2.1) Introduction

Thurston experimented quite extensively while working within the popular modes of Edwardian fiction. Her fascination with masquerade and identity doubles found expression in her work and constituted some of her greatest successes in *John Chilcote, M.P.* and *Max*. Her flirtation with the Gothic genre in *The Mystics*; her ambivalent take on the Irish character in *The Fly on the Wheel*; the deconstruction of New Woman archetypes in *The Circle* and drafts of unpublished plays, all indicate a generic and thematic diversity that went unheeded during the author's lifetime. This section of the dissertation will both signpost and inform the analysis in Chapters Three, Four and Five by exploring the multiplicity of agents that constructed the oeuvre. Thurston's thematic concerns, style and methodology will be addressed alongside the eclectic array of influences that inspired her successes, failures and unpublished material.

(2.2) The Dramatic Qualities of Thurston's Oeuvre

The first indication of Thurston's potential came in the form of an utterance from an unspecified relative who deemed Thurston 'an interesting and precocious child from whom they expected things'.¹ Indeed, her writing career, although prompted by Ernest during their courtship in the 1890s, first flourished during the author's youth. Her early enthusiasm for literature is noted in an interview with a journalist for the *Indianapolis News*:

It is possible that Mrs. Thurston may be added to the list of distinguished authors who find the fascination of playwriting not to be resisted. In answer to my question whether she had ever thought of doing dramatic work, she replied quickly: "Yes, indeed! Long

¹ Untitled Article, *Bookman*, Box 3, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

before the idea ever appealed to me of writing books. When I was a small girl of 10 years I used to compose little plays of my own and act them out with my cousins. I have never had the courage to attempt any serious work of this kind, since it seems to me to be something that requires much thought and not a little study and experience. [...] However, I may yet try something of that kind.”²

Relying quite extensively on theatricality, elaborate set-pieces and dramatic confrontations in her novels, the Edinburgh archive is littered with references to the theatrical associations of the author’s work.³ Indeed, one of the early reviews of *The Circle* found fault with the manner in which the author conceived the plotting of the novel, likening it to an unfolding performance on a stage:

The author often seems to lose her grip on essential emotion by reason of her desire to reproduce its physical effects. In scene after scene facial expression, gesture, the play of light and shadow are obtruded to the weakening, almost ruining of the heart of the situation. It is as though we were reading a drama encumbered by the minutest stage directions. Every motion of the actors is recorded, almost to the numbers of their steps across a room. It is clear that such a method must break continuity, must take the edge of dialogue, and reduce the fire of passion to a remote and rather unkindling glow.⁴

For a debut, *The Circle* accumulated a greater deal of attention than was perhaps usual for the majority of first novels, with many reviews expressing surprise at Thurston’s deftness of touch as regards characterisation and powers of description. Those who found fault with the text tended to criticise the level of melodrama, or (as evidenced above) the overly staged antics of the principal characters. The journalist for *The Irish Times* commented on there being ‘much brilliancy of dialogue, and many passages of descriptive writing, which would do credit to several novelists whose fame is made,’ while at the same time noting the ‘certain unevenness in the narrative, and (the)

² Untitled Article, *Indianapolis News*, 17 March 1906, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

³ The existence of theatre scripts for both *Max* and *John Chilcote, M.P.* clearly demonstrate the author’s affinity for theatre.

⁴ Untitled Article, *The Academy*, 13 January 1904, Box 9, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

attempt to play on the emotional side in too high a key'.⁵ Similarly, a reporter for *The Globe* reported that 'the book is [...] written with admirable conciseness and vividness, [...] full of power though not yet disciplined and one can feel that a new voice is making itself heard above the din created by the multitudinous fictionists of today.'⁶

One of the more intriguing reviews of the novel likened Thurston's debut to the work of Norwegian dramatist, Henrik Ibsen. Elements of *When We Dead Awaken*, the story of Arnold and Maia Rubek whose marriage is tested when they both find themselves attracted to more appealing traits in other people, are perhaps reflected in Thurston's *The Circle* with its complex exploration of the conflict between human egoism and human love:

Love is always at war with the ego, for it seeks to establish a new ego composed of the two egos of the lover and the loved. In order to merge the two egos in the new ego, they must be subordinated to each other in a complex interplay of mutual self-abnegation. Anna Solny, like Ibsen's Rubek, sacrifices the needs of her human love to the needs of her human egoism.⁷

The same struggle between love and ambition is regularly featured in Thurston's fiction, perhaps suggesting the influence that an author such as Ibsen had on Thurston's writing.⁸ The reviewer of the *Baltimore Sun* remarks on a number of Ibsen-esque traits that were to feature in Thurston's *The Fly on the Wheel*, noting the simplicity, the commonplace environment and limited number of characters that mark the Ibsen drama, and also the fact that there is 'no character in the book whose personality and conduct does not contribute either to hasten or avert the impending

⁵ Untitled Article, *The Irish Times*, 13 February 1903, Box 9, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁶ Untitled Article, *The Globe*, 11 February 1903, Box 9, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁷ Untitled Article, *Slan*, 14 February 1903, Box 9, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁸ *When We Dead Awaken* was first published in 1899, four years before *The Circle*'s publication.

tragedy'.⁹ Indeed, similar to slightly more pronounced parallels could be drawn between Ibsen's style and the three unpublished plays that Thurston wrote: *Fidelity*, *The Crucible* (later renamed *The Day After*) and *Harlequin*.¹⁰ All three of these works borrowed heavily from the Naturalist movement with its explorations of self-discovery and an indictment of preconceived notions of marriage, as evidenced most prolifically in Ibsen's 1879 play, *A Doll's House*.

The plot of Thurston's *Fidelity* centres on Olga Nicholovsk's decision whether to remain faithful to her husband, Nicholas, or entertain the advances of the suitor, Vladimir Devornov. The play's climax is reached when Nicholas is discovered to be complicit in public insurrection, and attempts to blame Olga for the disturbance. Vladimir shoots Nicholas and then embraces Olga. Thurston's treatment of marriage, in which Olga grows suspicious of her husband's questionable behaviour, in a sense, reflects Nora's dissatisfaction with her treatment at the hands of her husband Torvald in *A Doll's House*.

The letter that Krogstad uses to blackmail Torvald, which ultimately forces Nora to the brink of suicide, is perhaps mirrored in the use of a letter and accompanying rose in *Fidelity*.¹¹ The importance attributed to the simple objects is paramount, as through their presence in the narrative, Olga's suspicions about her husband are proved correct, and she is forced to seek her happiness elsewhere, again echoing Nora's decision to leave Torvald by the close of Ibsen's play. The treatment of matrimony in her dramatic work again features in *The Day After* as Olga Desbarres expresses frustration in her marriage to Andre, forcing her into the arms of his brother Philippe.¹² Her conflicting feelings for both men force her to question her heart's

⁹ Untitled Article, *Baltimore MD Sun*, 25 October 1908, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

¹⁰ The plays are undated and exist in various states of completion in the archive.

¹¹ The rose became a symbol of infidelity in the play. Anyone in possession of it was deemed untrustworthy.

¹² The play exists as a combination of handwritten scraps and typed notes - it is difficult to pinpoint references/page numbers.

desire. Her subsequent decision to return to her spouse's side is undertaken through an Ibsen-inspired act of self-actualisation:

The first duty of every human creature is to himself. The theologians are not far wrong when they make such use of their conscience. It is from man's inner self, that secret place which no intruder ever enters that all things emanate – knowledge, punishment, reward. [...] Think less of others and more of yourself! That sounds a moral paradox, but it is not one. You are flying to oblivion [...] because you dare not confront yourself!¹³

The themes of adultery, separation and divorce were to become staples of Thurston's fiction throughout her career. The reasoning behind Thurston's decision not to publish any of her plays is unknown. Her preference for fiction writing is obvious, with *Harlequin* being initially conceived as a play, only to be shaped into a novel of the same name following the completion of the first act. The relatively unpolished state in which the play/novel exists suggests that Thurston was unsure as to how to proceed with her story.

Harlequin exists as a number of handwritten notes in the Edinburgh archive. It is described as being a play in three acts, but there is only evidence of work on the first two. There is also no discernible plot. The opening act introduces the reader to a more jovial and light-hearted version of Paris's Montmartre district in which three characters: Harlequin, Pantaloon and Columbine take part in a farcical episode involving dance, costumes and buffoonery.¹⁴ The second act presumably takes place elsewhere and introduces Harlequin's patron, an unnamed Madame who bears a similarity to *The Circle's* patron, Mrs. Maxtead, Thurston's archetypal feminist.¹⁵ The action of the second act is haphazard at best. Harlequin tells Madame of his love of Parisien life, while she expresses her boredom of living in the city. Shortly thereafter

¹³ Partially typed transcript of *The Day After*, Box 3, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378, p. 20.

¹⁴ Thurston's fascination with French culture was to become evident with the play *Harlequin*. Bohemian Paris was again used as the setting for her most critically lauded work, *Max*. The Edinburgh archive is littered with snippets from French magazines, menus from French restaurants and programs from French theatre.

¹⁵ See Chapter Three for a discussion of New Woman stereotypes.

she attempts to seduce him. The two then engage in a discussion of the differences that exist between the sexes. Handwritten notes suggest that Thurston toyed with a number of titles for the work, one of which being *The Soul of Harlequin*; however, there is little to suggest that Thurston was (originally) aiming for a psychological analysis of her protagonist, certainly on consideration of the whimsical nature of the first act. A disparity exists when the play is transferred into the novel format, as the unnamed Madame attempts to identify Harlequin's stance on female temperament:

Mme: And where is the great difference that you imply between a man and a woman??

Harlequin: (a little hotly) When a man goes down into the other world he looks for the difference - the difference is immense/universal. [...] The other world understand him is accustomed to him – understands him – accepts him. When a woman does it –

Mme: (with sudden cold intensity) 'When a woman does it mon cher, results depend entirely upon one circumstances. How much of this man is in the composition of her pain. A woman may be an adventurer despite her path – an adventurer in the true sense – in the cry for sensation for experience for colours and for life.

Harlequin: You are an extraordinary woman.

Mme: Not at all. Only a creature who knows herself and shares the knowledge with you. Half the women in the world are adventurous at heart: only they bind themselves – the other people, to the past – Woman have the vices of the slave and the methods of the slave when the vices are eradicated.¹⁶

The draft of the novel ends soon after this, with no visible evidence of further work on the piece. The clash of preconceived notions of gender roles, as evidenced above, would find greater expression in Thurston's final novel *Max*, as the author more deliberately assesses the Ibsen-inspired contestation between love and egoism in its exploration of aesthetic and sexual liberation.¹⁷

¹⁶ Manuscript of *Harlequin*, Box 3, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

¹⁷ This will be given further attention in Chapter Five.

(2.3) *The Edwardian Gothic in Thurston's Fiction*

Thurston's tendency to shy away from issues such as suffrage and the nationalist movement did not result in her fiction being free of ideological conviction. Meaney argues that nineteenth-century women's decision not to engage in a distinctly political discourse did not mean that the fiction lacked purpose:

It is often, however, inobstensibly non-political forms that one finds the most challenging and exciting writing by women, Whilst Ireland did not produce standard realist fiction in the nineteenth century to a partially successful degree, it was a happier breeding ground for gothic forms and supernatural tales.¹⁸

Thurston's flirtation with the gothic genre in *The Mystics* is of particular interest. The novel begins with a probe of perhaps the most salient feature of the genre: mortality.

Of all the sensations to which the human mind is a prey, there is none so powerful in its finality, so chilling in its sense of an impending event, as the knowledge that Death - grim, implacable Death - has cast his shadow on a life that custom and circumstance have rendered familiar. Whatever the personal feeling may be, - whether dismay, despair, or relief, - no man or woman can watch that advancing shadow without a quailing at the heart, an individual shrinking from the terrible, natural mystery that we must all face in turn - each for himself and each alone.¹⁹

Published in 1907, the novel's chilling introduction served to demonstrate Thurston's relative comfort in exploring unfamiliar subject matter. Indeed, the premise of her most lauded work, *John Chilcote, M.P.*²⁰ owes its existence to a chance encounter, in the eerily-depicted environs of Westminster

¹⁸ Gerardine Meaney, *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Women's Writings and Traditions*, vol. 6, (Cork: NYU Press, 2002), p. 769.

¹⁹ Katherine Cecil Thurston, *The Mystics*, (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1907), p. 5.

²⁰ The *Saturday Evening Herald* review of *John Chilcote, M.P.* suggests that a mystical or supernatural encounter could, in part, be responsible for Thurston's writing career. The use of the palm-reading features quite significantly in the novel, again demonstrating Thurston's tendency to use real-life situations in her fiction: 'Strangely enough, Mrs. Thurston had not written at all until after her marriage to Ernest C. Thurston, a London journalist and playwright. Five years ago, the idea of writing had not even occurred to her. It is interesting to learn from the author's best friend that her success as a novelist was once foretold by a palmist - a prediction scouted at the time by Mrs. Thurston'. Taken from

Maintaining his haste, he went deliberately forward, oblivious to the fact that at each step the curtain of darkness about him became closer, damper, more tangible; that each second the passers-by jostled each other with greater frequency, while the scraps of conversation that reached him became more dubious and indistinct. Then abruptly, with a sudden realisation of what had happened, he stood quite still. Without anticipation or preparation he had walked full into the thickness of the fog – a thickness so dense that, as by an enchanter’s wand, the shadowy figures of a moment before melted, and the street lamps were sucked up into the night.²¹

Elements of the Gothic genre also permeated a number of Thurston’s short stories, most notably the unpublished ‘The Hand’¹, in which a pair of scientists come into possession of a severed human hand, which they believed to possess supernatural qualities. The work itself remained unfinished, suggesting Thurston’s reluctance to expound more fully on subject matter either due to the poor reaction to *The Mystics*, or the story’s noted similarities to WW Jacobs’ famed horror story ‘The Monkey’s Paw’ which was published in 1902. Handwritten notes indicate Thurston’s intention to turn the short story ‘The Hand’ into a novel, again demonstrating the author’s preference for novel writing.

While Thurston demonstrated undoubted skill in her descriptive prowess when dealing with the Gothic, *The Mystics* was the only fully-fledged attempt to fashion a novel from the genre. The overwhelmingly negative reviews that accompanied the publication of the book, more than likely, resulted in her reluctance to continue in a similar vein. Although the novel was published in 1907, reports suggest that it was in fact composed and copyrighted in 1904.²² A journalist for the *New York Sun* claimed that the novel should never have been published and that the delayed publication of such a sub-standard novel was merely the publishers’ attempts to quickly cash-in and

Saturday Evening Herald, Chicago 14 January 1905, Box 9, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

²¹ Katherine Cecil Thurston, *John Chilcote, M.P.*, (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1904), p. 4.

²² Untitled Article, *New York Sun*, 13 April 1907, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

‘take advantage of Mrs Thurston’s vogue’.²³ It proved to be a decidedly costly mistake in terms of Thurston’s reputation with a number of reviewers making the claim that the novel marked the nadir of Thurston’s career to date. The reviewer for *Hearth and Home* comments on the supposed dip in literary merit:

Katherine Cecil Thurston’s literary progress is like that of an uncoiling spring. With each book she “lets herself go” a little further but (I speak as a fool in dynamics) her force is less. *The Circle* was a strong piece of work, minute, almost, restrained, *John Chilcote, M.P.* was more reckless, but dramatic, *The Gambler* was almost sloppy in its abandonment; *The Mystics* is weak and melodramatic.²⁴

Elsewhere, the journalist for *Black and White* magazine began his/her review of the novel with the title ‘The Decline of Mrs. Thurston’.²⁵ The disfavour with which the novel was greeted was unfortunate for the author, mainly because it ceased all experimentation within the genre. The most favourable reviews applauded the author’s decision to tackle a wholly original premise²⁶, even though the manner in which that narrative was worked-out was to receive widespread condemnation. Thurston subscribed to Woolgar and Roberts Clippings bureau, who sent the author small envelopes containing various titbits of information that appeared in both the national and international press, pertaining to both her and her fiction. Correspondence with Gavin showed Thurston’s high levels of expectation when awaiting these clippings; the fact that the majority of the reviews of *The Mystics* remain in their sealed, unopened state leads to the suggestion that she grew weary of reading about the book’s less than desirable reception.²⁷

Backlash notwithstanding, *The Mystics* was important in terms of identifying an aspect of Thurston’s technique, namely the author’s tendency to seize upon popular

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Untitled Article, *Hearth and Home*, 1 May 1907, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

²⁵ Unknown Author, ‘The Decline of Mrs Thurston’, *Black and White*, 3 May 1907, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

²⁶ The story revolves around John Henderson’s attempts to reclaim his lost inheritance from a mystical cult by infiltrating it and becoming its prophet.

contemporary topics and elaborate upon them in her fiction. Specifically, *The Mystics* addressed the growing trends of religious fanaticism that permeated the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The journalist for *The Strand* comments on its presence in Thurston's novel:

There is one great point in the workmanship of fiction that Mrs. Thurston grasps with remarkable tenacity: the necessity of marching with the times. Her stories deal with things that are in the air. Nothing is more significant about the days we live in than the growth among educated people of what the irreverent call "freak religions" All over Europe and the United States they are beginning to flourish, and some of them are not a whit less preposterous than *The Mystics*, the society of earnest and respectable lunatics at large with whom Mrs. Thurston deals with in her new novel. This association, its ways and ceremonies and hidden things, is described with vividness, and it makes a lurid and novel setting for the simple little melodrama that the author has to unfold.²⁸

The activities of Scottish Evangelist, John Alexander Dowie²⁹, who founded the Christian Catholic Church feature prominently in the reviews. Dowie adopted the mantle of Elijah the Restorer, theocratic leader of his people in his self-made City of Zion; his ascension mirrors the Scotsman John Henderson's rise to power in Thurston's text. It is a distinct possibility that Dowie's death in 1907 prompted the publication of Thurston's book in the same year.³⁰ The prominence of cultural icons such as Dowie during the Edwardian period and the similarities between Dowie and Henderson's activities heightens the likelihood of contemporary influence in Thurston. The veiled associations with Charles Stewart Parnell, and Thurston's own fascination with cases of real-life doppelgängers when composing *John Chilcote, M.P.* also demonstrate this trend. Perhaps due to the success of the novel, the use of

²⁸ Untitled Article, *Strand*, 27 April 1907, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

²⁹ Dowie (1847-1907) was a notable faith healer, restorationist and Pentecostalist who amassed a large following in Australia, New Zealand and the United States of America. His willingness to practice medicine without a licence led to numerous encounters with the law, while his authoritarian leadership provoked dissension amongst his followers. He founded the city of Zion near Chicago in 1900 and led his people until 1905 when he suffered a stroke. He died two years later.

³⁰ James Jershom Jezreel, who founded the New and Latter House of Israel religious sect (also known as the Jezreelites) in the 19th century, was also a noted precedent.

masquerade and dual identities were to become a prominent feature throughout the author's oeuvre.

(2.4) The Use of Masquerade in Thurston's Fiction

The resolution of *The Mystics* comes about with John Henderson's realisation that Enid, the woman he loved, would eventually see through the pretence and artificiality that surrounded the Scitsym,³¹ deeming the cult as nothing more than a passing fad: 'The Mystics were in reality nothing but the products of a neurotic age – mere hysteric dabblers in the truths of the universe. She was too delicately feminine, he told himself with growing conviction, too intelligent and self-controlled to be more than temporarily attracted to any such exotic creed' (*The Mystics* 97-98). In crafting her previous success, *John Chilcote, M.P.*, the author would be credited with pioneering another type of fad, as she sparked a renewed interest in the premise of identity doubles in fiction. The reviewer for the *New Jersey Gall* reports:

Mrs. Katherine Cecil Thurston gave English fiction a delightful though unmoral novel when she wrote *The Masquerader*, but she started an epidemic whose dire effects of her storytelling offset the pleasure her book afforded. Since the time it appeared the dual likeness pestilence has swept through the author populace, and its wane is hardly in sight. One after another they have come from 'double trouble; down to 'less than kin', which is appearing serially in Putnam's and the Reader magazine. Nor will it cease, one fears until some other writer catches public fancy with a new idea and imitation is renewed in other quarters. The Dromio school of letters, however, is safe for a while, for one new idea to a decade is about as much as can be counted on.³²

Reviews of Thurston's *John Chilcote, M.P.* are rife with references to Robert Louis Stevenson's own take on character doubles in his gothic novella, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, where the story's protagonist deals with the consequences of maintaining a split personality. Indeed Thurston's own novel makes

³¹ The mystical text from which Thurston's *Mystics* drew their inspiration.

³² Untitled Article, *New Jersey Gall*, 11 October 1908. Box 9, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

reference to Stevenson's work as Loder attempts to defend the incongruities of the façade: 'You haven't quite grasped me yet. I'm a man of moods you know. Up to the present you've seen my slack side – my jagged side – but I have quite another when I care to show it. I'm a sort of Jekyll and Hyde affair' (*John Chilcote, M.P.* 87). Although Thurston was credited by some reviewers with the rejuvenation of interest in literary doubles, it is probable that she was conscious of the long-standing popularity of the device, with Shakespeare's use of the twin Dromios in *A Comedy of Errors* and Anthony Hope's identical protagonists in *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1894) being certain precedents. Yet while the appeal of fictional doppelgängers ensured commercial prosperity, the widespread success of *John Chilcote, M.P.* forced not only the accepted comparisons to other works of fiction, but led to accusations of plagiarism on Thurston's part.

An article titled: Did Mrs. Thurston get the idea of *The Masquerader* from Mr. Zangwill'³³ detailed the contestation over the novel's originality, as the exploits of John Chilcote and John Loder were deemed to bear pronounced similarities to the characters in Israel Zangwill's *The Premier and The Painter* (1896), in which two men of differing social standings swap identities. Thurston's reply to the piece, which was included in the same article, insisted upon her innocence in the allegation, as she expressed her resentment at the idea, considering plagiarism to be 'the most cardinal sin in writing'.³⁴ She later admitted that as she read the article, her anger gave way to amazement, as the similarities seemed between both works seemed uncanny. Ultimately, she emphatically rejected the claim, offering only her own word that she did not steal ideas, claiming that she had never read the book. She also made the point that after achieving success with *The Circle* that it would be foolish to ruin her literary career by following it up with a stolen story from an author whose literary profile had been so esteemed over the course of the previous seventeen years.³⁵ Accusations of

³³ Untitled Article, *Critic*, New York, June 1905, Box 9, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

³⁴ Untitled Article, *Critic*, New York, June 1905, Box 9, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

theft notwithstanding, the charges levelled against Thurston would draw attention to the author's susceptibility to outside influence when crafting her works of fiction.

A collection of articles from the Edinburgh archive seemingly endorse Thurston's claim to innocence as it pertained to the theft of ideas from Zangwill. Claiming no knowledge of the former's novel, her inspiration for *John Chilcote, M.P.*, came in the form of many real-life cases of identity theft and masquerade. Press cuttings detailing the lives of men who have passed themselves off as another man, or had been mistaken for someone else, feature throughout the archive.³⁶ Examples include the story of James Hellyer, an Englishman whose demise was repealed mere days after the discovery of his body in a ditch. A clipping states that the man's family, at the time of the funeral, discovered that the real James Hellyer had actually been sentenced to jail for drunk and disorderly behaviour. A visit from Hellyer's brother to his jailed sibling resulted in confirmation that his brother was alive and well. The identity of the man in the coffin remained unknown. Another story involved an unspecified woman who met a man on the bus, whom she recognised as her husband. Curious as to why he would not alight the vehicle with her, she eventually convinced him to walk her home, when the pairing were greeted by the woman's actual husband and seven-year old daughter. The inspiration behind *John Chilcote, M.P.* remains unspecified³⁷, but Thurston's disposition to research her novels and seize upon contemporary issues³⁸ became a consistent feature throughout her career. A notable example of female-male impersonation, and probable inspiration for *Max*, involves the story of Amy Bock, a male impersonator from New Zealand whose criminal behaviour whilst masquerading as 'Percy Redwood' from 1908-1909 made her a feminist icon.³⁹ As was the case with the male doppelgangers that inspired the writing

³⁶ Both articles are untitled. They are located in an unspecified folder in Box 4, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

³⁷ The claim that the novel was, at least in part, influenced by Thurston's father and his relationship to Charles Stewart Parnell will be addressed in Chapter Four.

³⁸ Thurston comments on her research process in letters dated January 1909 in Box 12 and the interview published in the *Indianapolis News*, Indiana, 17 March 1906, Box, 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

³⁹ Amy Maud Bock (1859-1943). Bock was imprisoned multiple times for fraudulent behavior, which included theft and racketeering. Her most venturesome ruse involved her assuming the guise of Percy Leonard Carol Redwood, a prosperous sheep farmer from Canterbury, New Zealand. Redwood entered

of *John Chilcote, M.P.*, Thurston's fascination with Bock's activities was a probable inspiration for the exploits of the escaped Russian Princess of her final novel, who sought liberation from the self in order to evade the preconceived expectations of her sex. The literary technique of women adopting the mantle of man in order to transcend these perceived limitations had been used before⁴⁰, but Thurston's enthusiasm for pioneering women such as Isabel Costello, Amy Bock/Percy Redwood and Max/Maxine signalled a new direction for the author's fiction, as she distanced herself from the sensation and melodrama that marked *John Chilcote, M.P.* and *The Mystics* and instead looked to explore the gender-based concerns of her sex.⁴¹ Curiously, this inclination towards the feminist plight in her fiction did not fully extend to her public persona. Despite being a prominent figure on London's social circuit, Thurston was decidedly hesitant to publicly campaign for women's rights.

(2.5) Women and Ireland in Thurston's Fiction

It was often the case that female writers at the close of the nineteenth century could not attribute realistically to their characters the same freedom that they enjoyed as writers. By the time Thurston had completed *Max*, she had become a celebrity both at home and abroad. Her novels had frequently found themselves on the *New York Times* bestseller list. The opening of Thurston's first novel *The Circle* describes a young peasant girl expressing the desire to be a man, so that she could become a sailor and see the sea. Thurston's final novel, *Max* sees this dream realised: a princess escapes to Paris, to enjoy a life that was, by accident of birth, denied her. The subject matter and scope of Thurston's career in fiction might suggest that female emancipation or empowerment was the primary concern, yet the author's hesitation

into a romantic affair with wealthy heiress, Agnes Ottway and married the girl on 21 April 1909, but was apprehended soon after by the police, who had been tracking Bock's criminal activities for some time. Her male impersonation and repeated criminal offences made her infamous in both New Zealand and neighbouring Australia. She has since become the subject of a number of Feminist and Queer theory studies.

⁴⁰ Examples include: Rosalind in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* and Viola in *Twelfth Night*.

⁴¹ The feminist dimension of Thurston's oeuvre will be addressed in Chapters Three and Five.

to engage with these issues on the public stage served only to endorse her somewhat ambivalent relationship with feminism.

Four of Thurston's principal works: *The Circle*, *Max*, *The Gambler* and *The Fly on the Wheel* call into question woman's role in society, with each protagonist fighting against her own particular circumstance. The level of veneration ascribed to these creations, both at the time and in more recent critical estimations of the author's oeuvre⁴² suggest ties to the New Woman novelists of the Victorian era,⁴³ yet Thurston possessed little of their perceived audacity. Despite being a stable presence at social functions throughout her career, Thurston revealed in an interview with Constance Smedley that she found them unappealing.⁴⁴ The journalist speaks of Thurston's ease in disassociating herself from undesirable social situations in an article for *TP's Weekly*:

It is this atmosphere of detachment from the trivialities of social intercourse, which gives Katherine Cecil Thurston her distinction. So purposeful is her individuality that she can remain silent in a room full of people without being embarrassed by her quietness, and this signifies a quite amazing consciousness of self. Mrs. Thurston simply obliterates her individuality if the company is unsympathetic, and remains a beautiful presence, charming, smiling, a dignified, but as far away from her communion with those around her as is a picture on the wall.⁴⁵

Her decision to relocate to the relatively secluded family home in Ardmore, Co. Waterford for lengthy sections of each calendar year is perhaps another indication of the author's lack of interest in social engagements. Personal correspondence with Gavin indicates that seclusion was preferable to any sort of company.⁴⁶ The final few months of the author's life were interspersed with trips to Moore's Hotel in Cork,

⁴² See the Introduction for some of the most recent criticism on Thurston.

⁴³ A full exploration of which will feature in Chapter Three.

⁴⁴ Interview with Constance Smedley 'Some story-book people', *T.P's Weekly*, 11 February 1910, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Undated Letters in the Summer of 1911, Box 12, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

where she felt it necessary to distance herself from responsibility. As established in Chapter One, the dysfunctional nature of Thurston's relationship to her Irish family motivated this retreat, and was closely mirrored in the author's fiction.

Throughout the course of her career, Ireland, as a setting, appeared infrequently, but allusions to the Irish character or temperament featured in a steady number of Thurston's narratives. In one of her few documented interviews, the author displayed a considerable affection towards her home country, but also acknowledged her distance from the nationalist movement:

She spoke of Ireland, and the fire in her eyes deepened as she touched the homespun stuff she wore-Irish through and through. Everything that had to do with young Ireland was of supreme interest, its literature and art and music. "I don't know how it is I am not more in the movement," she said thoughtfully. "I don't belong to societies somehow. Yet I care; and I try to help whenever I see a way".⁴⁷

As will be explored in Chapter Four, Thurston's hesitation to comment on the political turmoil of early twentieth-century Ireland suggests that her interests lay elsewhere – most notably with character formation and self-reinvention. However much sympathy the author felt for her nation, and indeed her father's cause, her reluctance to address the more pressing concerns of her country meant that her contribution to Irish literature has escaped the scrutiny of the majority of literary historians. *The Gambler* and *The Fly on the Wheel* are the author's only Irish-based novels, with both disavowing the more pressing political concerns, and instead addressing social politics at the local level, as the female protagonists in both stories are brought to the brink of suicide as a result of their inability to subscribe to the demands of small-town Irish life. In *The Fly on the Wheel*, Isabel Costello sought to re-establish her life in Waterford after many years abroad. Thurston uses the community in the novel not only as a foil to Isabel's process of self-actualisation, but to mimic Irish society as a whole - doing so allowed her to expose the middle class's vices and general lack of

⁴⁷ Interview with Constance Smedley 'Some story-book people', *T.P.'s Weekly*, 11 February 1910, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

tolerance for anything (or anyone) who would defy the local mores. In *The Gambler*, Clodagh Asshlin's obligations to her family's estate in Wexford see her sacrificing her life's ambition to the needs of her kin, while in 'The Times Change', Tom Blake's life is governed by the manipulations of his father, his wife and his faith – all of which point to a sense of fatalism in Thurston's Irish-based fiction. Veiled critiques such as the one featured in *The Fly on the Wheel* and 'The Times Change' perhaps demonstrate Thurston questioning her own relationship to nationhood through her work. In an interview for *T.P.'s Weekly*, Thurston acknowledges the intrinsic link between life and fiction:

Mrs. Thurston believes that in modern literature sincerity is the chief essential. "Here and there" she said recently "you meet with the man or woman who says to you 'oh, this or that was not my real work. I did not put myself into it.' There is not a statement more false than this. There is no position less tenable for the artist. Every deed that a man does and every word that a man writes contains inevitably something of himself; and if we are to be truly sincere, we do not shelter behind excuses."⁴⁸

Thurston's father, Paul Madden, made a lasting impression on his daughter's work, with *John Chilcote, M.P.* acting as an elegy of sorts to her late parent. As will be explored in Chapter Four, a number of reviews commented on the possibility of a connection between the novel's protagonists and Madden's close associate, Charles Stewart Parnell. While Paul Madden inspired Thurston's most celebrated work, references to her late mother appear infrequently both in her fiction and known correspondence. Interestingly, Thurston's fiction is almost entirely devoid of maternal figures. Anna Solny in *The Circle*, Isabel Costello in *The Fly on the Wheel*, and Clodagh Asshlin in *The Gambler* are presented as resisting their respective situations. It is arguably the case that for each protagonist, the lack of a mother figure actively contributes to each woman's troubled circumstance. The levels of duty and responsibility visited upon them as a result of the missing parent may be responsible

⁴⁸ Interview with Constance Smedley 'Some story-book people', *T.P.'s Weekly*, 11 February 1910, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

for inhibiting their own personal growth, by not only forcing them to adopt a given role within the family, but by denying them the opportunity to choose their own life's path. *The Gambler's* Clodagh Asshlin is obliged to raise her younger sister, care for her father and take charge of the family's estate in Orristown, Co. Waterford, before being forced into an arranged marriage in an effort to safeguard not only the family's estate, but also the future prospects of her sister, Nance. The death of her parents in the early 1900s and her emigration to England in her mid-twenties might go some way to explain Thurston's sense of dislocation from Ireland.

Questions of Irish nationalism and women's rights have permeated Thurston criticism since the author's death, but went largely unanswered during the author's lifetime. The earlier novels of masquerade and deception remain as Thurston's most visible contribution to twentieth-century literature. As such, parallels may be drawn between Thurston's fiction and the sensation novel of the late 1860s/1870s.

(2.6) Thurston and the Novel of Sensation

The sensation novel was a popular form of fiction that first appeared in the 1860s. The genre was perceived by some as 'preaching to the nerves instead of the judgment',⁴⁹ in that its appeal was instantaneous yet ephemeral.⁵⁰ Themes such as murder, divorce, adultery, bigamy and deception were enough to satiate the appetites of the Victorian readers to allow for the genre's continued popularity until the late 1870s. Critics derided the genre for its salacious appeal and for what they deemed to be its lack of literary merit. This seemingly transient appeal of the fiction did not prevent its continued presence in the works of famed novelists such as Thomas Hardy in the late nineteenth century, whose 'first effort, *Desperate Remedies* is very much in the sensation vein'.⁵¹ Patrick Brantlinger credits the 'powerful influence of Dickens, stage melodrama, 'sensational' journalism, and bigamy trials and divorce

⁴⁹ Philip V. Allingham, 'The Victorian Sensation Novel, 1860-1880 – Preaching to the Nerves instead of the Judgement', 26 August 2011, <http://www.victorianweb.org/genre/sensation.html>.

⁵⁰ Chief proponents of the sensation novel included Wilkie Collins, Charles Reade and M.E. Braddon.

⁵¹ Allingham, p. 1.

law reform'⁵² as inspiration for these works. With noted similarities in subject matter, one publication cites Katherine Thurston as being responsible for the sensation novel's resurgence in the 20th century:

The sensational novelists are a lazy imitative lot, generally speaking. They lack initiative. This spring most of them are selling the same line of goods – the “strong resemblance” pattern. It is not new. Shakespeare showed it in his *Twelfth Night* and since his day it has been used sporadically. But it never became an epidemic until the present year of our Lord. Now the fiction mills are working double shifts to weave enough of it for popular demand. Mrs. Thurston started the craze with her *The Masquerader*, which turned on the twin-like resemblance between two men of antipodal character. She made a fortune with her novel and now the other novelists of this genre are yelping at her heels. Sometimes they do it well: often they do it badly. But bad or good, they never seem to have the courage to strike out for themselves⁵³

Although largely negative in its association, the article at least recognised Thurston's novel as being of a higher quality than its successors. It also points to the author's own consciousness of tradition when it came to her fictional efforts. It is probable that the author became familiar with the sensation novelists during her childhood. The genre's preoccupation with themes such as adultery, betrayal, masquerade and deception signify an obvious association with Thurston's novels and short stories. Correspondence between Thurston and Gavin in 1910 showed that the allure of courthouse drama often constituted a trip to Dublin, where Thurston would eagerly attend a number of murder and robbery trials - events such as these were potential source material for her fiction.⁵⁴ As established in the Introduction; however, the presence of sensational aspects in Thurston's fiction did not preclude the existence of literary merit. Critics such as Gail Marshall and Winifred Hughes demonstrate the

⁵² Patrick Brantlinger, 'What is Sensational about the Sensation Novel?' in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, vol 37, No. 1, (June, 1982), p. 2.

⁵³ Untitled Article, *Leader*, Cleveland Ohio, 14 April 1907, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁵⁴ Letters dated 6 May, and 5 August demonstrate Thurston's eagerness to attend the Dublin Court, to watch them 'deal out justice' (Letter to Gavin) The archive also contains some handwritten notes on a novel called *The Melting Pot*, which was in the early stages of development. The plot focuses on a young doctor who becomes embroiled in a murder trial in County Cork. 6 May 1910, Boxes 12 and 13, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

value of the sensation novel, as they argue for the genre's tendency to merge sensation and romance with realism:

What distinguishes the true sensation genre as it appeared in its prime during the 1860s is the violent yoking of romance and realism, traditionally the two contradictory modes of literary perception" (16). If we take the early novels of Collins as our *locus classicus*, we can see that the new subgenre indeed fused opposites, both possible and improbable, solidly English and yet exotic, sordid and yet respectable, refined yet violent, scientific and yet superstitious, documentary and yet far-fetched, realistic and yet romantic, rational and at the same time absurdist, but above all romantic and suspenseful, "a kind of civilized melodrama, modernized and domesticated — not only an everyday gothic, minus the supernatural and aristocratic trappings, but also a middle-class Newgate, featuring spectacular crime unconnected with the usual criminal classes.⁵⁵

In many ways, the course of Thurston's oeuvre reflects a transition from traditional modes of sensation, to a provocative and more socially engaged form of fiction. As mentioned, earlier melodramatic works such as *John Chilcote, M.P.* and *The Mystics* were replaced by more subtle critiques of society and culture, as found in *The Fly on the Wheel* and *Max*. Thurston then, could be seen to have sidestepped the pitfalls of literary sensation by exploring the orthodoxies of her era. Critics such as Patrick Brantlinger comments on the sensation novel's ability to be socially subversive yet maintain its commercial appeal:

Most sensation novels confine their voyeuristic, primal scene revelations to family circles, but the family itself was the mainstay of Victorian bourgeois values. Sensation novels were therefore subversive without ordinarily addressing political issues. They stripped the veils from Victorian respectability and prudery, exposing bigamists and adulterers, vampires and murderesses. They did so not by pushing the conventions of realistic fiction to the limits, but by subverting those conventions themselves, importing romantic elements back into contemporary settings, reinvesting the ordinary with mystery.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Winifred Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860s*, as quoted in Allingham, p. 3.

⁵⁶ Brantlinger, p. 26.

This stripping of respectability and prudery is evidenced most noticeably in *The Fly on the Wheel*, as Isabel Costello attempts to re-acclimatise to life in parochial Waterford. Eschewing the sensation of previous novels, the novel acts more as a psychological exposé, tracing the difficulties that the character faces in adjusting to the community's skewed middle class customs and exposing its vices. Her constant rejection by both Stephen Carey and the local community serve only to heighten her resistance to conventionality:

There was no room in Isabel's mind for the thought of conventionality. Once and forever she had stepped beyond its pale. She was living now as her feelings prompted – undisciplined, primitive, careless of all comment. [...] Appalled by the blackness of life, she would have cowered upon the ground and wept, until her agony and her bitterness were melted by her tears. But in Isabel the old strenuous spirit was awake, drying up the source of tears, scorching her brain, conserving her impulses for some perfect act of self-expression. She was the primitive being – the being who does not probe and does not analyse – who knows what life offers, and acts instinctively upon the knowledge.⁵⁷

The potential danger that Isabel represented to middle-class Ireland is again reflective of the sensation novel of the previous century:

Often, the Sensation Novel features a beautiful, clever young woman who, like Magdalen Vanstone in Collins's *No Name* (1862), is adept at disguise and deception —such women are doubly dangerous and generate social instability because they possess and threaten to use secret knowledge. Other strategies employed by Sensation authors include the exposure of hypocrisy in polite society, intentional and unintentional bigamy, adultery, hidden illegitimacy, extreme emotionalism, melodramatic dialogue and plotting.⁵⁸

While Thurston's later fiction resisted the more obvious connotations of the sensation novel, it becomes clear that the subversive elements of her texts were, at least in part, featured in novels such as *The Fly on the Wheel*. The closing lines of the novel

⁵⁷ Katherine Cecil Thurston, *The Fly on the Wheel*, (London: Virago, 1987), 304-305.

⁵⁸ Allingham, p. 2.

demonstrated a perfect fusion of sensation and the provocative as Isabel Costello reconsiders her decision to poison the man that spurned her by drinking the noxious substance herself:

‘Wait!’ she said. ‘Wait’! For an instant her fingers lingered upon his; then she drew the tumbler away from him, lifted it slowly, and drank. The glass rattled against her teeth; the touch of the ice chilled her lips; but, looking down into the wine, her eyes caught the warmth, the redness, the glory of the sun’. (*The Fly on the Wheel* 327)

Isabel’s suicide could be deemed an act of defiance, as she denies the restrictions placed upon her by Waterford society. This decision indicates a shared empathy with the New Woman novelists of the late Victorian era, who sought to draw attention to the discrepancies that existed between the sexes.⁵⁹ Allingham contends that an analysis of the female temperament was already underway during the height of the sensation novel’s popularity:

To all of these features we should add the realistic and sympathetic investigation of individual psychology and an exploration of the female psyche in the manner of George Eliot and Charlotte Brontë. The prevalence of these "ingredients" in the popular fiction of the 1860s and 1870s suggests that the Sensation Novel drew its energy from a popular mid-Victorian reaction to middle-class stodginess and prudery.⁶⁰

The sensation novel played its part in exposing the vices of contemporary culture. Yet as Brantlinger argues: their unwillingness to more effectively contribute to the discussion of contemporary issues and ideologies forced them to occupy a liminal place in the canon.

But this subversive attitude is also felt to be regressive, inferior to traditional realism: the sensation novel never directly challenged the dominance of more serious, more realistic fiction, and sensational authors and narrators seem forever to be backing away from the

⁵⁹ A more rounded explanation of which will feature in Chapter Three.

⁶⁰ Allingham, p. 2.

deepest truths in their stories, abdicating or undermining their own authority.⁶¹

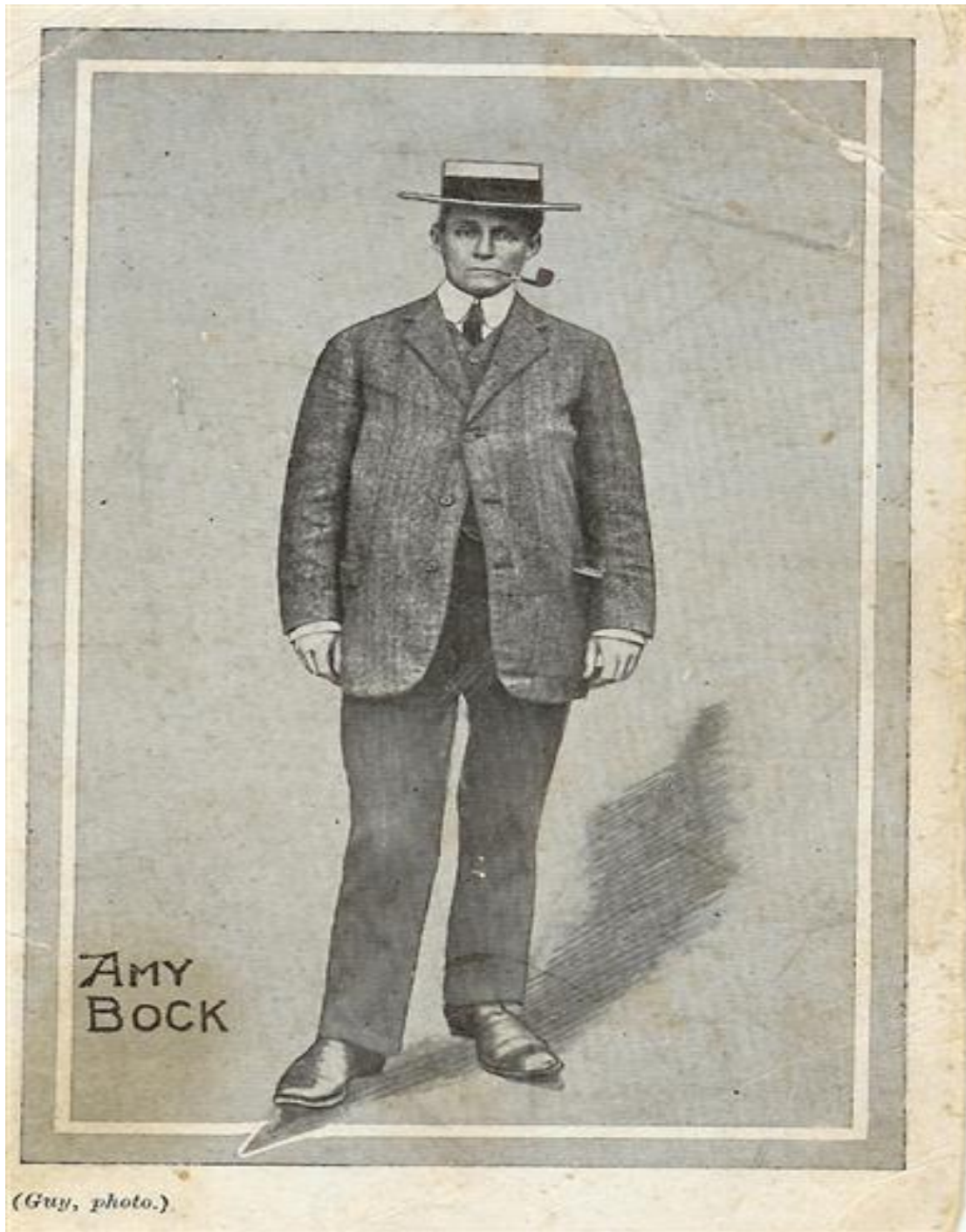
Similarities could then be drawn with Thurston and the manner in which her fiction has been received. Skirting the bounds of the sensation and romance genres, her works sidestepped discussions on prevalent issues such as Irish nationalism and women's suffrage, instead favouring character reform and self-invention. A more substantial commentary on Irish nationhood could have resulted in leaving a greater impression on Irish literary history, but the majority of Thurston-led explorations of the Irish character usually involved the protagonist relocating to a foreign and ostensibly more tolerant setting. On the whole, Thurston's fiction, much like the sensation novel of the previous century, oftentimes contained a complexity in subject matter that went unnoticed at the time.

(2.7) Conclusion

Thurston occupies a curious place in the Irish literary canon. The extravagance in her fiction aligned her quite closely with the sensation novelists of the mid-nineteenth century, while her fascination with identity doubles drew comparisons with literary luminaries such as Shakespeare and Stevenson. The less-widely acknowledged nationalist and feminist ideologies in her fiction could link her to both the New Woman of the 1890s and the Irish National Character of the opening decades of the twentieth century, yet *John Chilcote, M.P.'s* transatlantic success remains her biggest impression on the twentieth century literary marketplace. What became obvious was the author's restlessness when working within the confines of the popular romance genre. Her wide-ranging influences, the generic diversity of her published work, the noted experimentation with form and subject matter in her unpublished material, all indicate a complexity in the body of work that went unnoticed during her lifetime. In terms of critical estimation, the heterogeneity of the collection is an undoubtedly positive attribute; however, when considered alongside the relatively

⁶¹ Brantlinger, p. 27.

small number of published novels, the unclassifiable nature of the oeuvre helped account towards years of obscurity.



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⁶² Fig. 7 – Amy Bock as Percy Redwood. Bock was believed to be one of the main inspirations behind Thurston’s *Max*. *Otago Daily Times*, 2 April 2009, http://www.odt.co.nz/files/story/2009/04/amy_bock_in_the_persona_of_percy_redwood_photo_fro_1_740756673.JPG.

Chapter 3. Thurston and the New Woman Fiction

There is a New Woman, and what do you think?
She lives upon nothing but Foolscap and ink!
But though Foolscap and Ink are the whole of her diet,
This nagging New Woman can never be quiet!¹

(3.1) Introduction

While Thurston's fiction everywhere demonstrated a fascination with sensation, masquerade and identity manipulation, the inspiration behind a great number of her heroines could be attributed in no small part to the rise of the New Woman movement during the late nineteenth century. The resilience and unbridled idealism that typified Thurston's fictional women reflected the New Woman ethos, with its concerns centred on the moral reform or re-education of society, as the female characters were brought to the fore as 'centres of consciousness in the novels, rather than merely objects encountered by male subjectivity'.² In terms of critical analysis, Thurston's New Woman association has been largely posthumous, as her creations would not, at first glance, seem to follow in the footsteps of late Victorian feminism. While the writer lauded the virtues of her gender in many of her novels, she seemed content to consign her characters to the role of supportive and dutiful wife. At the close of *John Chilcote, M.P.*, Eve Chilcote remains by her 'makeshift' husband's side, as she utters professions of obedience towards the obligations of nationhood, 'You may put love aside, but duty is different. You have pledged yourself. [...] You are going to be a great man! [...] A great man is the property of his country. He has no right to individual action'.³ Similarly, at the close of *The Mystics*, Enid devotes herself to the novel's protagonist John and passionately implores him to take her with him to meet his mother when he travels back to England: 'Let me tell her the story! – Take me with you—and let me tell her! [...] We are both women and [...] we both love

¹ *Punch Magazine*, 26 May 1894, pp. 252.

² Penny Boumelha, *Thomas Hardy and Women: Sexual Ideology and Narrative Form*, (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982), p. 64.

³ Katherine Cecil Thurston, *John Chilcote, M.P.*, (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1904), p. 365.

you'.⁴ This level of adulation and frenzied commitment to her male companion may mark the character of Enid as something completely alien to the most rudimentary of concepts of female or indeed feminist empowerment, yet she, Eve and a number of Thurston's protagonists came to embody many of the characteristics that featured in the New Woman fiction. The following is a brief overview of the New Woman, from its origins and main proponents, through to its reception and overall impact on late Victorian society. Thurston's ties to movement and its subsequent implications for twentieth-century feminism will then be addressed alongside critical readings of *The Circle*, *The Fly on the Wheel* and *Max*.

(3.2) A Brief History of the New Woman Phenomenon

The expression 'The New Woman' was coined by Sarah Grand (Frances Elizabeth McFall, née Clark) in her 1894 essay 'The New Aspect of the Woman Question'.⁵ Grand herself subsequently became the chief proponent of the movement which encompassed what Iveta Jusová dubbed 'this new generation of [mostly middle-class] emancipated women [as they] focused their critical look on the double standard, fought for women's right to systematic higher education, worked to penetrate male middle-class professions, and became notorious for their unflinching outspokenness on various intellectual and sexual questions'.⁶ Jusová's definition notwithstanding, the character of the New Woman became difficult to properly define due to what Ann Heilmann dubbed 'the multiplicity of agents that constructed her'.⁷ Boumelha suggests that 'it was hard to reduce women to a simple ideology'⁸ and because of this, opinions on what the movement's advocates were trying to achieve, varied. When the New Woman creation surfaced in literary and social circles in the

⁴ Katherine Cecil Thurston, *The Mystics*, (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1907), p. 208.

⁵ Sarah Grand, 'The New Aspect of the Woman Question', *The North American Review*, vol. 158, No. 448, (March, 1894), pp. 270-276.

⁶ Iveta Jusová *The New Woman and the Empire*, (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 2005), p. 1.

⁷ Ann Heilmann, *New Woman Fiction – Women Writing First Wave Feminism*, (New York: Palgrave, 2000), p. 2.

⁸ Boumelha, p. 7.

latter stages of the nineteenth century, her appearance provoked decidedly mixed responses.



The Australian psychiatrist Ainslie Meares asks

What is the *New Woman*? She is the product of the social evolution, which is going on around us [...] What are the basic characteristics of the New Woman? [...] Above all she is striving for equality of opportunity with man to enjoy full life, and she seeks the right to make decisions for herself, the right to determine her destiny.¹⁰

Meares's explanation of the movement, while succinct, fails to grasp the complexities involved in the construction, maintenance and seeming dissolution of the New Woman phenomenon, but it points to the fundamental desire of a great number of women writers, who, like Thurston, sought independence not only for their creations

⁹ The subversion of (what were considered to be) traditional female practices was heavily contested at the time, both in the fiction produced and as a result of the contemporary media's representation. Fig. 8, 'The New Woman on Wash Day' – National Woman's History Museum, 10 August 2009, www.nwhm.org/progressiveera/statuswomenprogressive.html.

¹⁰ Ainslie Meares, *The New Woman*, (London: Collins, 1974), p. 9.

but for themselves, in both the literary marketplace and society as a whole. The movement itself was comprised of both male and female authors and was seen primarily as strongly feminist shift in literary ideologies and practices. As previously mentioned, definitions of the 'New Woman' character fluctuated greatly, with many women writers clamouring for aesthetic freedom, with some hoping to extend the plea for feminist empathy outside the realm of literature. Others were much more forthright with their criticism of the gender inequalities that existed in Victorian society. Members of the anti-feminist brigade sought to lambaste these women for the manner in which they addressed the supposed discrepancies - many bemoaned the New Woman's profound lack of grace or subtlety when making these demands for equality in their fiction. The heterogeneity of factors that constructed the New Woman meant that its overall impact on late Victorian culture was not to be underestimated.

The New Woman could be perceived primarily as literary construct, used by Grand and other like-minded individuals to deconstruct what they saw as outdated and ultimately harmful perceptions of gender roles in society but, as Heilmann points out, it was also an 'agent of social and political transformation'.¹¹ In her studies on the movement, Tina O'Toole comments on the shifting attitudes of women, both in terms of how they presented themselves in their own lives and the attributes given to female creations in their narratives. O'Toole speaks of George Egerton's characters being 'outspoken, educated, cigarette-smoking [and] bicycle-riding, [women, who had] their own latchkeys – a symbolic gesture of their independence'.¹² Elsewhere O'Toole notes the more pronounced changes in Victorian society, as women grew to acknowledge their own potential:

By the 1890s, women of the middle and upper classes were seen for the first time walking unaccompanied down city streets, emerging at last from the private sphere to take buses and trams, to go shopping and to stroll with friends. The suffrage movement took to the streets to

¹¹ Heilmann, p. 4.

¹² Tina O'Toole, 'Ireland: The Terra Incognita of the New Woman Project', *New Contexts: Re-Framing Nineteenth-Century Irish Women's Prose*. ed. Heidi Hansson, (Cork: Cork University Press, 2008), p. 128.

demand the vote, and women students in ever-greater numbers began to criss-cross the city to attend public lectures and college courses.¹³

These changes, whilst not appearing too demanding or outlandish from a contemporary perspective, sparked a considerable amount of controversy at the time.



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If the bicycle was to become the symbol of the late Victorian quest for gender equality, the formative years of the twentieth century would give rise to the motorcar as an image of modernity. In Thurston's fiction, the car was depicted mainly as an emblem

¹³ O'Toole, p. 129.

¹⁴ Fig. 9 - 'Outspoken, Educated, Cigarette-smoking [and] bicycle-riding'. Sarah Grand on a Bicycle – Photograph by R.W. Thomas, *The Cycling World Illustrated*, vol. 1 (19 April 1896). Image courtesy of the Horsham Museum.

of transgressive behaviour, with Isabel Costello and Stephen Carey's escape from Kilmeaden in *The Fly on the Wheel* being presented as both a romantic retreat and an act of defiance against the restrictive nature of middle class mores.

In another moment the lamps were lighted, the engines set in motion, and the car was a restive animal, trembling, quivering to be off [...] It was a mad drive – mad as the thoughts that were racing through their minds. Death would have come to either of them then without a tremor; for in every life there is at least one such hour as this – when physical danger and moral danger are alike meaningless, when the soul lift to the immensity of conscious power, defying fate.¹⁵

In a letter to Gavin, Thurston expressed her fascination with the spirit of adventure: 'I have worked continuously save for a motor drive that I took late last night in company with Isabel and the Aunt – I love the speed and mystery of night drives, and to experience the full sense of adventure, sat on the step of the car at the chauffeur's feet!'¹⁶

¹⁵ Katherine Cecil Thurston, *The Fly on the Wheel*, (London: Virago, 1987) p. 257-259. Night journeys presented as 'a thing of possibility' again feature in the opening Chapter of 1910's *Max*.

¹⁶ Letter from Thurston to Gavin, 10 May 1909, Box 12, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378. Car journeys feature throughout Thurston's correspondence, with the author herself taking many trips from Waterford to Cork when spending time in Ireland.



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¹⁷ Fig. 10 - Photograph of Thurston on a motorcar, taken while on holiday in Ardmore. Box 1, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

(3.3) Popular Writers associated with the New Woman

The divergent attitudes and fictional practices as they related to the formation of the New Woman discourse proved decidedly difficult to pinpoint. The movement itself had been (until the 1960s/1970s) largely associated with male writers and their perception of shifting notions of gender in Victorian society. Promotion of the New Woman was credited to writers such as Thomas Hardy, George Meredith and Grant Allen (amongst others), who were already recognisable in the public sphere and whose popularity made them the *de-facto* champions of the genre. With the New Woman's relative obscurity in the latter stages of the twentieth century, the involvement of the male writers in the New Woman's public construction, would seem to have overshadowed the score of female writers whose contributions laid the foundation of the movement and whose input would only achieve substantial academic recognition in subsequent decades.

Sarah Grand was seen to epitomise the New Woman phenomenon, with the author herself exclaiming 'Certain ideas are in the air [...] I happened to be the medium on whom the ideas in the air laid hold'.¹⁸ While responses to the New Woman greatly varied, Grand's main contribution was to help cultivate the underlying ideologies of the New Woman in the minds of a cautious public. Seen initially as a vulgar creation and a harbinger of social and cultural upheaval, Grand made a substantial effort to encourage empathy amongst the sceptics when it came to the discussion of the New Woman, by the promotion of female empowerment through the education of Victorian society as a whole:

We should diligently nurture the growing opinion, which ranks unchastity in *either sex* with the anti-social and contemptible vices, such as theft, or fraud or cowardice, or falsehood. Then having trained our children, especially in this opinion, we should, I venture to think, educate them together, and generally promote more camaraderie and freer intercourse between youths and maidens thus prepared to enjoy each other's society in honesty and honour.¹⁹

¹⁸ Sarah Grand, Preface to *The Heavenly Twins*, (London: Heinemann, 1923), pp. viii-ix

¹⁹ Sarah Grand, 'Marriage Questions in Fiction', *Fortnightly Review* 375, (1875), p. 387.

Grand grew to acknowledge that literary attacks on male hegemony in Victorian society would serve only to heighten the accusations of aggression and misconduct levelled against the New Woman. Whilst her anger at the double-standard (resulting from a moral code constructed by a male patriarchy) remained, her theories of effecting change through moderation facilitated a much greater acceptance of the movement amongst the conservative population. Ann Heilmann adds, ‘Authorial moderation, the adoption of a language of femininity, a discourse which accented the New Woman’s conciliatory spirit, and the frequent recourse to expediency arguments thus served the strategic purpose of disseminating and popularizing feminist concepts and ideas’.²⁰ Olive Schreiner, whose novel *The Story of an African Farm* was deemed by many to be a seminal work of the movement echoed Heilmann’s ‘moderation’ sentiment when, towards the close of the novel, the female protagonist Lyndall expresses her desire to live in a world that did not discriminate on the grounds of gender, ‘When I am with you, I never know that I am a woman and you are a man; I only know that we are both things that think’.²¹ Texts such as Schreiner’s demonstrated that the growing trend for feminist empathy in fiction did not necessitate a complete overhaul of social and cultural values in wider spheres, rather it pointed to the acceptance of an evolution of sorts, in which shifting preconceptions of gender identity could be incorporated in the development of nineteenth-century society. It would have been perceived as a more natural and less radical progression, as instead of engaging in feminist activism, daughters would be encouraged to pursue interests in fashion and modernity. At the same time both genders would be educated on processes of self-development, with special attention given to sexual health.

Thurston’s fiction seemed to rely on this supposition that moderation was key. Her fiction, while provocative, was decidedly non-partisan. As will be seen in this chapter, her heroines sought an escape from limitation and the repressive, but did so in a manner that conformed to the practices and conventions of its day. In a similar

²⁰ Heilmann, p. 33.

²¹ Olive Schreiner, *The Story of an African Farm*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 210.

vein, her correspondence with members of the media and public was laced with subtlety as it pertained to her beliefs and ideas on issues such as marriage and suffrage. There exists a number of letters from Anne O'Hagan-Shinne and Gertrude Brown of the New York State Woman's Suffrage association in which she asks the author for signed copies of her works and opinions on woman's right to vote. The number of letters from the same group, with the same request would suggest a degree of reticence on the author's part to propose a stance. Brown explicitly states Thurston's taciturnity on the matter in her second letter, stating that after successive attempts to contact the author, they still 'don't know her opinion on woman's suffrage'.²²

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, the public perception of the New Woman phenomenon was credited to the male writers of the period who elaborated on the growing demand for gender equality in their writings. A canon consisting predominantly of male estimations of the New Woman character would not come without its problems, however. From a twentieth-century perspective (when the movement was first given sufficient critical attention), the tendency was to sideline the female writers' contributions, as their strongly feminist texts were perceived to have been clouded by ideology and/or ulterior motives. The male writers like Hardy and Gissing, on the other hand, had already achieved fame in the public sphere, so their fiction offered more objective and less-biased accounts of gender identity in Victorian society. Many of the male writers associated with the New Woman made efforts in their fiction that satisfied the growing feminist concerns, not because it was a topic of much contemporary appeal, but because of their own cognisance of the inequalities that existed between the sexes. In her commentary on the work of Henrik Ibsen, Norma Clarke adds, 'Ibsen had no desire to be claimed by feminists [...] his importance lies in the furore his plays created, their powerful expression of a theme already being widely heard, that women were individuals with rights as well as

²² As addressed in Chapter Two, Thurston was notably ambivalent when it came to commenting on the women's issue. Letters dated 7 and 13 January, 1911, Box 1, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

duties'.²³ Similarly, Thomas Hardy was depicted as 'typify(ing) fin de siècle culture [in his fiction] by showing how adherence to Victorian codes of honesty leads only to moral confusion'.²⁴ Understanding the disparities that existed within Victorian perceptions of gender, Hardy felt compelled to draw attention to the issue in his own writing. Other male writers spoke out, with writers like GB Shaw bemoaning the need for both men and women to contribute commentaries on the issue, feeling that men were perhaps better qualified to address the concerns which arose in society since the question of the New Woman was first posed.

Deriding the 'novel readers and writers' of the day as 'half-educated women, rebelliously slavish, superstitious, sentimental, full of the intense egoism fostered by their struggle for personal liberty', he contrasted the feminist 'egotist's dream of independence' with his own (and other men's) writing to suggest that the male narrative project was as certain to serve, as women writers and readers were to obstruct 'the collective interests of society'.²⁵

Other male writers such as George Moore and James Ashcroft Noble drew the ire of the New Woman supporters, not for explicitly stating their disapproval of the movement, but for exclaiming to be advocates of the character and subsequently producing works with strongly misogynous undercurrents. Yet even with the accompanying (public or veiled) denunciation by writers, the New Woman character achieved a great deal of recognition in the latter stages of the nineteenth century. While proponents of the movement appreciated the support of authors such as Hardy and Ibsen, there proved to be a significant underlying difference between the male and female writers who subsequently sought to express their own dissatisfaction to a Victorian society that was now more responsive to their pleas.

Even though the male writers often echoed feminist concerns in their fiction, critics such as Ann Heilmann and Liz Stanley argued that they 'could not possibly

²³ Norma Clarke, 'Feminism and the Popular Novel of the 1890s: A Brief Consideration of a Forgotten Female Novelist', *Feminist Review*, No. 20. (Summer, 1985), p. 93.

²⁴ John Kucich, *The Power of Lies – Transgression in Victorian Fiction*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 201.

²⁵ As quoted in Heilmann, p. 49.

write *as* New Women, [as a result of] their narrative points of view [being] necessarily different'.²⁶ Liz Stanley noted that 'men, however sympathetic to feminism, cannot share women's ontology or bodily experience, and this has inevitable repercussions on their epistemology'.²⁷ Where the male writers could not hope to emulate an ontological understanding that would warrant their recognition as true writers of the New Woman fiction, authors like George Egerton fervently fought against her inclusion in the genre, yet seemed to readily contest (in both her life and fiction) the gynocentric experiences that eluded authors such as Hardy and Gissing.

Egerton's contribution to the New Woman was undoubtedly her frank and open attitudes towards female sexuality in her work, more specifically what O'Toole calls her ability to 'tell the truth about sexuality'.²⁸ Whilst many of the writers felt the need to mobilise chastity and (in some cases) demonise sexual counters between the sexes, Egerton incorporated a substantial number of erotic fantasies and notions of sexual liberation in her protagonists. Her decision not to adopt the New Woman credo meant that she was viewed as something of an outsider by many of her peers. As Heilmann suggests:

She saw women as 'embryo mothers', objected to their entry to the workforce, questioned their right to enjoy the same moral (sexual) freedom as men even as she was exploring women's erotic fantasies, dismissed the principle of equality on the grounds that woman was an 'even bigger beast' than man, and unequivocally distanced herself from the term New Woman, its feminist implications, and writers like Sarah Grand and Mona Caird.²⁹

Egerton's public disavowal of the genre earned her the respect of a number of contemporaries, but the works themselves provoked a decidedly mixed reaction. Whilst some tolerated her exploration of sexual fantasies (because they were

²⁶ Heilmann, P. 55

²⁷ Liz Stanley, *The Auto/biographical Eye: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/biography*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), p. 253.

²⁸ Tina O'Toole, 'Keynotes from Millstreet, Co. Cork: George Egerton's Transgressive Fictions', *Colby Quarterly*, vol. 36, No. 2 (2000), p. 149.

²⁹ Heilmann, p. 45.

contained within a hetero-normative discourse, that re-enforced the male/female divide), many members of the conservative press deemed her work salacious and the epitome of the current moral degradation in literature, as pioneered by advocates of the New Woman. The apparent contradictions in Egerton's literary practices would ultimately detract from the author's lasting appeal, much in the way that the subversive nature of Thurston's body of work proved difficult to classify, which resulted in it being deprived of critical or commercial success following the author's death in 1911. Both Egerton and Thurston wrote about wild and untamed female creations who fought for their right to self-expression, but who eventually succumbed to conventional domesticity.

(3.4) Popular Opinions of the New Woman

Those unwilling to entertain changes in gender role or distinction, as lobbied by supporters of the New Woman, adopted a number of different attitudes. The anti-feminist women utterly denounced the creation as a product of the fiction of sexual sensualism, with the New Woman's advocates seeking purely to shock and detract from the traditional attributes of the 'old woman' character - those being to encourage propriety, modesty and above all, the preservation of the old order. In their attempts to denounce this new creation, the New Woman was demonised as 'wild', 'odd' 'revolting' or 'superfluous'.³⁰ Noted English journalist Eliza Lynn Linton coined the phrase 'The Shrieking Sisterhood' to discredit the movement's legitimacy. One of the more prominent responses to the phenomenon (in terms of achieving a higher level of notoriety and circulation) came in the form of cartoon-like creations of masculinised or disfigured women in publications such as *Punch* magazine. Caricatures such as these were intended to lampoon the New Woman for her unorthodox style and behaviour.

³⁰ It should be noted that 'wild' and 'odd' were frequently used to describe the character of Isabel Costello in Thurston's *The Fly on the Wheel*.



31

‘The Masculinised New Woman’

Anti-feminist men seized upon this interpretation of the New Woman and utilised the cartoons’ deviation from preconceived notions of femininity and feminine behaviour to rally support amongst traditionalists for the movement’s public denunciation. Thurston’s fiction is littered with secondary female characters who, while not necessarily donning male dress, acted in a domineering and controlling fashion to the

³¹ Fig. 11. Taken from ‘The New Woman in a Variety of Situations, always on a Bicycle’, 1895, The Library of Congress, 10 August 2009, <http://www.nwhm.org/online-exhibits/progressiveera/statuswomenprogressive.html>

point that they exacted significant influence on the progression of the plotlines. Characters such as Lillian Astrupp in *John Chilcote, M.P.*, Fanny Callaghan in ‘The Times Change’, Phyllis Ord in ‘Temptation’, the unnamed Madame in *Harlequin* and Jeanne Maxtead in *The Circle* display considerable non-traditionally feminine attributes in both their inflammatory dialogue and insurrectionary actions. These characters succeed in prying control of the narrative from the protagonists (both male and female) and manoeuvre each respective plot to suit their own ends. Maxtead, in particular, is an interesting case study that will be addressed in due course.

Supporters of the New Woman faced huge difficulties in trying to subvert the predetermined standards of femininity, both in their writings and their own lives. In her studies on Victorian writers, Kate McCullough explained that ‘gender was a prime determinant of identity’³² for these women: to deny one’s gender was to rob the author or indeed literary creation of a sense of self. George Egerton was hesitant to be deemed a part of the New Woman movement, yet she would ultimately concur with McCullough’s assessment that the disavowal of gender would detract from the credibility of the author’s oeuvre. Denying one’s gender results in the disavowal of the self and as such, the legitimacy of the work is called into question. Egerton states in her seminal work, *Keynotes*:

I realize that in literature, everything had been better done by man than woman could hope to emulate. There was only one small plot left for her to tell: the *terra incognita* of herself, as she knew herself to be, not as man liked to imagine her – in a word, to give herself away, as man had given himself away in his writings... Unless one is androgynous, one is bound to look at life through the eyes of one’s sex, to toe the limitations imposed on one by its individual physiological functions.³³

As it stood, women’s exploration of sexuality in their writings allowed them to express their dissatisfaction with the rampant gender inequalities in Victorian society. Penny

³² Kate Mc Cullough, ‘Mapping the Terra Incognita of Woman’ in *The New Nineteenth century: Feminist Readings of Underread Victorian fiction*, (eds.) Barbara Leah Harman and Susan Meyer, (New York: Garland, 1996), p. 207.

³³ George Egerton, *Keynotes*, (London: Virago, 1983), p. 58.

Boumelha suggested that ‘the very fact that female sexuality was so much a matter for discussion, speculation and research and the accompanying questions of marriage would have been enough to make unselfconscious writing involving these subjects almost impossible’.³⁴ The responses from the supporters of the New Woman varied greatly, as many women writers saw themselves less as separatists and more as proponents of equality, requesting their rightful place in Victorian society. Heilmann points to their desire to reflect ‘true womanhood with her femininity, self-consciousness, a sense of dress, and the desire for physical exercise, health, body & mind’.³⁵ Whilst modest requests for equal treatment were met with sympathy in some quarters, it was the more elaborate stories of sex, prostitution, venereal disease, rape and adultery that captured the attention of the public at large. Jusová makes the comment that the conservative members of Victorian society blamed the New Woman for the ‘spread of socialism and nihilism, castigated her determination to redefine gender roles as undermining the long-term interests of the English nation, and sought to diminish the impact of the new fiction and drama by lambasting them as semi pornographic and indecent’.³⁶ As a result, the New Woman writers, when engaged in a discourse that stressed the need for equality and self-expression, had to defend themselves from accusations of impropriety from the traditional mainstream. New Woman writers who chose to explore the less socially acceptable topics (such as rape and prostitution) succeeded in obfuscating the aspirations of the movement in the eyes of contemporary society. Many of the writers felt that they had to address taboo subject matter in an effort to expose the sexual and moral double standards that existed between men and women. The spread of venereal disease became a topic of much contention and notions of gender boundaries were blurred with writers addressing themes of self-reinvention and transvestism.³⁷ Writers such as Egerton were deemed the forerunners of ‘erotomania’ (madness which manifested itself as sexual

³⁴ Boumelha, p. 25.

³⁵ Heilmann, p. 20.

³⁶ Jusová, p. 4.

³⁷ Grand’s *The Heavenly Twins*, which told the story of a young girl adopting the mantle of a boy and exposing the moral double-standard that existed between the sexes, has long since been heralded as one of the most significant texts to come out of the movement.

perversion)³⁸ and were subsequently dismissed by many. Given the subversive nature of the subject matter, the writers of the New Woman fiction were linked by the conservative press to the other significant literary movement of the late nineteenth century, that being the Decadent fiction.

(3.5) Thurston, The New Woman and The Decadents

England, or more specifically London became the site of contestation for many of the conflicting perceptions of the New Woman. Many of the writers were drawn to the city where their collective social and literary aspirations found expression. At the time of the movement's inception, the British empire was undergoing significant spatial and economic growth. Expansion of colonies in Africa, India and Hong Kong, meant that Queen Victoria's attention was firmly fixed on territorial expansion. In England itself, scandal was rampant with the Jack the Ripper murders in 1888, W.T. Stead's 1885 report on child prostitution and the Oscar Wilde trials of 1895. In much the same way that Grand was linked to the New Woman phenomenon, Wilde was to become a key representative of an era dominated by cultural, social and literary sensation. At a time when Britain was attempting to consolidate its reputation and strengthen its stronghold on the global economy, Wilde and the decadent writers were being accused of impropriety in their lifestyles and compositions. Together with the New Woman, both movements were accused of contributing to the moral degradation of Victorian civilisation, with some critics heralding them as the harbingers of the 'Apocalypse'.³⁹ In the discussion of the apparent similarities between the two genres, Dowling claims that

To most late Victorians the decadent was new and the New Woman decadent. The origins, tendencies, even the appearance of the New Woman and the decadent – as portrayed in the popular press and periodicals – confirmed their near, their unhealthily near relationship. Both inspired reactions ranging from hilarity to disgust and outrage,

³⁸ Heilmann, p. 51.

³⁹ Linda Dowling, 'The Decadent and the New Woman in the 1890s', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, vol. 33, no. 4 (March 1979), p. 437.

and both raised as well profound fears for the future of sex, class and race.⁴⁰

Yet while the two movements were linked by the subversive nature of their literature, there existed a deep-rooted divide between the literary intentions of each of the groups. In the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde was famously quoted as saying ‘all art is quite useless’.⁴¹ Thus echoing the Decadent position that literature should not concern itself with the promotion of an agenda, or seek to address social ills, rather it is to be valued on its own aesthetic merit. According to Ann Heilmann, ‘Feminists reacted strongly against what they regarded as the affectation, narcissistic self-absorption and misogyny of aesthetes’⁴² and as such, many New Woman supporters were quick to disavow the connection with the decadents, stressing the New Woman to be an agent of social and cultural reform. While the New Woman sought to encourage self-expression and liberation in literature, the writers found themselves in the difficult position of being stigmatised with a decadent creed that was completely at odds with that of their own. In many instances, the New Woman writers openly declared their disdain for the decadents’ superficial manifesto, denouncing its pretension and extolling the integrity of the New Woman by comparison, citing the movement’s educability. In *The Beth Book*, the artist-heroine of Grand’s novel was famously quoted as saying ‘Give us books of good intention – never mind the style’.⁴³ Elaine Showalter adds that ‘Women writers needed to rescue female sexuality from the decadents’ image of romantically doomed prostitutes or devouring Venus flytraps and represent female desire as a creative force in artistic imagination as well as in biological reproduction’.⁴⁴ The success of the writers’ efforts will be referred to in due course, but as Thurston’s fiction itself explored radically diverse and sometimes controversial subject matter, the intimation of her as a ‘daughter of decadence’ warrants consideration here.

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 436.

⁴¹ Oscar Wilde, preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, (Milan: Giunti, 2001), p. 16.

⁴² Heilmann, p. 48

⁴³ Sarah Grand, *The Beth Book*, (Bristol: Thoemmes, 1994), p. 460.

⁴⁴ Elaine Showalter (ed.) *Daughters of Decadence*, (London: Virago, 1993), p. xi.

Throughout a number of her works, both published and unpublished, there are indicators to suggest instability in moral or ethical purpose. One of the unpublished works with which Thurston reportedly struggled, was *The Healer of Men*⁴⁵ – a novel recounting the tale of William Ansell, a celebrated English surgeon who purposely takes the life of a patient in an effort to prove to himself the power of free will.⁴⁶ The work explores a number of Thurston’s usual fictional preoccupations, but is unsettling in the lead character’s seeming fascination with murder for curiosity’s sake. The novel’s moral instability will be addressed more fully in Chapter Five. Elsewhere, Clodagh Asshlin, the protagonist in *The Gambler*, having survived a loveless marriage, inherits a great deal of wealth and settles into a carefree, spendthrift existence in the novel’s title role. While her ties to the decadent movement cannot be wholly proved, the recurrent suggestion of moral and ethical instability in favour or personal fulfilment became a constant with many of her heroines – notions such as these being a trademark of the decadent writing. Also, Wilde’s aestheticism could be seen to have influenced writers such as Thurston, long after the movement’s decline, particularly in the depictions of bohemianism in fiction.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ The typescript and partial manuscript of *The Healer of Men* is available in Box 5, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁴⁶ Correspondence between William Blackwood and Katherine Thurston on 17 May 1906 provide evidence of the author’s difficulties with the novel, Box 1, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁴⁷ Thurston’s decadent, Parisienne settings for *Max* and *Harlequin* being notable examples.

(3.6) Thurston as New Woman: A Critical Reading of *The Circle*

Thurston's contribution to the New Woman phenomenon and her own feminist tendencies in her writing will be given greater consideration here, beginning with a close-reading of her debut novel, *The Circle*. Matrimony and its centrality in many of the fin de siècle narratives will be addressed in relation to the main action in *The Fly on the Wheel*, while the social and cultural impact on the formation of gender identity will be examined with an analysis of Thurston's final novel, *Max*.

Thurston's first novel *The Circle* (1903) could quite readily be interpreted as a glowing endorsement of New Woman values. Published at the beginning of the twentieth century, her first proper entry into the literary marketplace forced its lead protagonist, Anna Solny into adopting the role of burgeoning suffragette. In the opening chapters of the book, the character struggles with her decision to abandon her father and life in the lower classes of London's East End, in favour of embarking on a career in the theatre under the tutelage of a wealthy peer. Parallels can be drawn between Anna's choices as it pertained to her life's path and Thurston's decision to pursue a career as a novelist following her father's death in 1901. Thurston populated each of her novels with women characters who sought much greater levels of freedom and self-expression than they had previously known. The eponymous heroine of Thurston's final novel *Max* comments:

I have power - Power to think - power to achieve. And how do you think that power is to be developed? [...] not by the giving of my soul into bondage – not by the submerging of myself in another being [...] Can't you understand? I left Russia to make a new life; I made myself a man, not for a whim, but as a symbol. Sex is only an accident, but the world has made man the independent creature - and I desired independence.⁴⁸

This passage could also be read almost as a slogan for the New Woman manifesto, with its notions of female self-empowerment at odds with the limitations imposed by the male hegemony. Taken from the closing pages of the novel, the words are spoken

⁴⁸ Katherine Cecil Thurston, *Max*, (London: Hutchinson, 1910), p. 324.

by an escaped Russian princess (Maxine), who fled St. Petersburg for Paris in an effort to escape an arranged marriage and prove herself capable of becoming a painter. As addressed in the Introduction, *Max* was hailed by critics for its subversive celebration of the right to self-invention. Whatever Thurston's intention in creating the new life for her protagonist, through characters such as Maxine, she was guiding her readership towards, what Ann Heilmann called 'aesthetic judgement towards feminist considerations'.⁴⁹ The contradictions that the protagonist felt living her life as Maxine/Princess Davorska, or her carefully-constructed, masculine counterpart exemplified the contradictions that a women writers felt, as either fledgling upstarts in male-dominated literary circles or as established creators in their own rights. Thurston's female creations lent themselves to the New Woman ethos, in its direct appeal for empathy with women and gender solidarity. While *The Circle* and *Max* occupied opposing ends of Thurston's literary career, both could be seen to best epitomise Thurston's stance on gender equality, self-invention and feminism. Together with the *The Fly on the Wheel* (1908), *The Circle* and *Max* will be the three works by which Thurston's contribution to the New Woman will be assessed.

The Circle's plot hinges on Anna's guilt at abandoning her elderly father to become an actress in London's West End. Through her patron, Jeanne Maxtead, she makes the acquaintance of Maurice Strode, an American Businessman who she eventually courts until he learns of the cruelty she had shown to her father. Recognising the need to make amends, Anna returns to her home to nurse her dying father, before ultimately receiving absolution for her past sins by Strode. At the most basic level, the dissatisfaction that prompted Anna to take Maxtead's offer to leave her former life points to the New Woman's desire to transcend the limitations associated with gender and social classes. At the beginning of *The Circle*, Anna exclaims, 'I wish I were a man! [...] If I were a man, I'd get on board a ship and be a sailor. At the docks today the wind was roaring through the masts, and it sounded like a great loud song. It made me mad to see the sea. The world and the sea must be very

⁴⁹ Heilmann, p. 11.

much alike'.⁵⁰ Anna's plea here demonstrates something of the sober realism as it concerned the disparities that resulted from sexual determinism. Linton's notion of the 'shrieking sisterhood' echoed throughout the Victorian period, with the conservative moral majority bemoaning the presence of feminist activists whose constant demands for social reform and increased rights served only to disturb the status quo. Yet where detractors could only see the disruption of the socially accepted gender divide, the champions of the New Woman became convinced of their roles as advocates of burgeoning cultural realism. Penny Boumelha commented on this 'vocabulary of realism, [which was] seen as outrageous, [being] rapidly pressed into service to accuse these new writers of disproportion in their emphasis on the sexual'.⁵¹ The polarised view of the New Woman writers' intentions and practices, echoed the established conception that female literary creations either occupied the roles of whore or virgin, wife or mistress.⁵² While the New Woman authors were keen to stress notions of equality in their appeal for empathy and acceptance, the tendency remained to return to the discussion of the more undesirable aspects concerning women and sexuality. Yet as Ann Heilmann pointed out, women writers were keen to encourage ideas of 'sexual autonomy, as opposed to female sexuality'.⁵³ Nowhere does Thurston's plea for sexual autonomy or indeed emulation of the New Woman character appear so strongly than in Anna's introduction in *The Circle*.

Critical responses to *The Circle* proved to be mixed to positive, especially as they pertained to the author's presentation on the women's issue. Anna's effusive idealism was lauded in many reviews with *The Convent* praising Anna for being 'full of spirit and character'⁵⁴ and *The Morning Standard* commending the protagonist for possessing 'an individuality of striking force'.⁵⁵ However, *Harper's Weekly* lamented

⁵⁰ Katherine Cecil Thurston, *The Circle*, (Edinburgh: Blackwood and Sons, 1903) p. 3.

⁵¹ Boumelha, p. 67.

⁵² These binary oppositions in the perception of women date back to the bible where we see the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene as the two opposing female archetypes. The binary oppositions within the personality of Eve represent the earliest biblical notions of the duality of woman.

⁵³ Heilmann, p. 51.

⁵⁴ Untitled Article, *The Convent*, Hartford Connecticut, Box 9, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁵⁵ Untitled Article, *Morning Post*, 28 January 1903, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

Anna's inability to convince the reader that she is anything more than 'clever artifice'.⁵⁶ In a sense Thurston could be seen to pre-empt the mixed receptions of her creation when she describes one of Anna's initial meetings with her patron, Jeanne Maxtead:

For an instant their glances met, and they studied each other with that look so peculiar to the moment and to their sex. The first acquaintance of women resembles a shooting plant. The bare bough is rife with promise; from its brownness may spring flowers or thorns; according as the sun shines or the wind cuts; but for the moment – the all-pervading moment – it is a bare bough and nothing more. (*The Circle* 64)

Thurston here recognises the possibilities for her creation. Anna was to either remain alongside her father in the curio shop, unencumbered by the weight of feminist expectations, or follow through with her newfound ambition that placed her in Maxtead's presence. Thurston wished to imbue her protagonist with as many opportunities for self-development as possible. Anna's journey of self-discovery is set in place from the beginning of the novel – she is branded with a youthful enthusiasm, but is at the same time moulded by the experiences and expectations that burdened the lower classes of Edwardian society. Her initial transgression – the abandonment of her father in order to pursue an acting career, may have been presented to the reader as Maxtead imposing her will on a younger, more vulnerable creature, but it pointed to Anna's steadfast resolve to improve her own life and standing at the expense of all she once knew. In the opening chapters of the book, we see her courage in the fraught rescue of Johann as she helps him evade an angry mob, while shortly thereafter she demonstrates an acute self-awareness: when the Austrian asks 'What do they tell you of yourself?', Anna replies with: 'When nobody ever thinks of me, how can anybody talk of me?' (*The Circle* 23). The protagonist's own estimations of her place in lower class Edwardian society vindicate the idea that Anna's decision to follow Maxtead's lead, was borne of her desire to escape the limitations of a life that she never wanted.

⁵⁶ Untitled Article, *Harper's Weekly*, Undated, New York, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

Up to this point in the narrative, Anna's resolve was unshakeable; should she have truly wished to defy Maxtead's attempts at control, she would have done so. For Anna, and indeed many of the novel's critics, the matter of ambition versus duty or art versus the moral imperative became a pressing concern. This dilemma will be referred to and addressed alongside Thurston's *Max* at a later stage in the discussion.

The insistence with which the New Woman writers addressed the phenomenon meant that the majority of authors in England during the fin de siècle were forced to, if not choose a side in the debate, at least offer an opinion on her professed reformative capabilities. Yet while perhaps the most influential commentaries came from women, there remained a strong contingent of writers whose apparent inclusion of feminist ideals merely disguised their deep-rooted, anti-feminist ideologies. When reviewing *The Circle*, a journalist for *The Times* praised Thurston for her ability to 'pique our curiosity and the skill to hold our interest'⁵⁷, but at the same time criticised her for the lack of conviction with which she endowed her characters. In many ways, this lack of conviction could be applied to Thurston's own feminist stance, certainly as it pertains to this particular novel.

In her discussion of the New Woman's reception, Ann Heilmann advances Eliza Lynn Linton as a proponent of female anti-feminism. Her opinion of Linton's prose is of significance to the current discussion, if only because it puts forward the possibility of an anti-feminist stance in Thurston's writing. Heilmann suggests that writers such as Linton 'incorporated [in her writing] many of the aspects with which feminists endowed the New Woman: her desire for knowledge; the critical spirit with which she approached established traditions and male authority; her sense of a mission and reformist zeal',⁵⁸ but that even with these New Woman attributes, the writers' commitment to aiding the feminist cause by affecting change through their texts remained in serious doubt. Heilmann ultimately claims that 'In these novels anti-

⁵⁷ Untitled Article, *The Times*, 13 February 1903, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁵⁸ Heilmann, p. 24.

feminist women used two different plot structures to discredit the New Woman: they contrasted the ugly feminist with the “fair young English girl” and featured heroines temporarily infected by New Woman ideals but ultimately rescued by good old men’.⁵⁹ Parallels could therefore be drawn between Heilmann’s assertion here and the relationship between Anna, Maxtead and her love interest, Strode.

As previously discussed, Anna’s unbridled idealism and desire for change echoed the sentiments of the New Woman movement, but given the character’s ultimate dependency on Strode in order to achieve some sense of resolution, one could question Thurston’s own advocacy on behalf of her gender. Critics of *The Circle* noticed the apparent disparity between the youthful and exuberant Anna Solny who worked in the Curio shop and the renowned theatre actress who subsequently places her life in the hands of a male suitor: ‘You have given me new life, Maurice. I feel at last that I’ve a right to exist’. (*The Circle* 313) A reviewer for *Pilot* not only noted the obvious distinction between the old and new Anna, but also perceived a lack of aesthetic quality that accompanies the change:

Perhaps there is nothing in the remainder of the volume quite so fine as the picture in the first chapter, a girl of sixteen, athrill with the youth’s hunger for life, fretting against the silence and loneliness in which her days are passed. [...] but that is only to say that the high mark of a masterpiece is not sustained throughout. When we pass with Anna from Solny’s curiosity shop in Felt Street to Mrs. Maxtead’s drawing room in Palace Court, we descend from the plane of poetry—the poetry of the purely imaginative fiction, to the prose level of the more or less tricky conventional fiction of the day.⁶⁰

The suggestion that Anna’s strength of character had perhaps been eclipsed by her submissive relationship with Strode (thus falling back on established conventions), could either be perceived as an anti-feminist bias on Thurston’s part, or an acknowledgement of social limitations. Indeed, many of the New Woman writers

⁵⁹ Heilmann, p. 24.

⁶⁰ Untitled Article, *Pilot*, 14 February 1903, Box 9, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

denounced heterosexual union, pleading sexual autonomy over the need for heterosexual relationships, but as will shortly be discussed in relation to the *Fly on the Wheel*, these bonds often constituted the female protagonists' sole means of survival. If Thurston wished to use Anna Solny as an advocate for feminism, she was not beyond recognising the difficulties or restrictions that the character would undoubtedly face. As Penny Boumelha remarks, liberal feminist novels often took the form of realist novels, exploring the women's progress in society, as opposed to documenting the events of a simple love story. She adds 'the women of these novels *undergo* their experience, restlessly rubbing against its restrictions'.⁶¹ Although the resolution of Anna's plight is less than radical, the experiences or sacrifices that brought her back to the curio shop certainly marked her case as one deserving of feminist consideration. The second anti-feminist parallels that Heilmann makes in her discussion of Linton's work relates to the clash between 'the fair English maiden' and the ugly feminist. The obvious correlation between this and *The Circle* involves Anna and the character to whom she pledges her life – Jeanne Maxtead.

Maxtead proves to be a more fascinating example of Victorian/Edwardian feminism. From her first appearance, the character not only reflects the distasteful appearance that the anti-feminists came to associate with the New Woman, but also to recognise in her the potential to inspire others and perhaps affect change in society.

'From behind the curtain came the sound of a voice – the finest cultured woman's voice [Anna] had ever heard – and strong as a flame her power of appreciation sprang into life. She stood breathless, attentive to every word [...] [but] the beautiful voice didn't belong to a beautiful face'. (*The Circle* 47-48)

Throughout the novel Maxtead is unflinching in her role as Anna's patron. She remains entirely convinced of her own self-importance both in her own life and in her capacity to 'exploit others'. (*The Circle* 67) In many ways she epitomises the New Woman stereotype, as perceived by the conservative press, and as such, her appearance in the novel received just as much, if not more critical attention than the

⁶¹ Boumelha, p. 79.

protagonist, Anna Solny. In much the same way that New Woman detractors dismissed heroines who transgressed perceived notions of femininity, Maxtead's presence in Thurston's debut novel met with an inordinate amount of hostility from the critics. According to a reviewer in *Pilot*:

Mrs. Maxtead is artificial not only as a woman but as a literary type. And the quality of the book suffers in all the chapters where her personality dominates. To very simple readers her talk about herself and her talent for 'exploiting' clever people may possibly seem original. But to anybody who knows anything of the real talk of modern society and of the contents of modern novels, it will come as stale and commonplace and disappoints the expectation raised by the really unconventional situation of the opening pages.⁶²

The reviewer in the *Athenaeum* wrote as follows:

Mrs. Thurston has written a decidedly good story: her plot is original, her characters carefully studied and yet natural, her style unobtrusively good, and the interest well maintained to the end. With one character, a female exploiter of geniuses, we have little sympathy; she may be necessary to our author's plot, but frankly, we find her a bore. Her letter and conversation with a girl of sixteen of little education are, to our thinking, ridiculous; her rather commonplace cynicism and thin epigrams are the more tiresome from the charming frankness and directness of the hero and heroine, with which they are contrasted.⁶³

As noted elsewhere, focus on the New Woman had subsided by the time Thurston began to write. Therefore, many critics confined literary echoes of the genre, such as the character of Maxtead, to the past. Yet while Jeanne's resolve and determination mark her as a product of the movement, Thurston's intentions with the character remain unclear. There is ample evidence to suggest that she did indeed occupy the role (as Heilmann suggests) of ugly feminist – a stereotype whose sole purpose was to highlight Anna's positive attributes by association. There are numerous passages in

⁶² Untitled Article, *Pilot*, 14 February 1903, Box 9, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁶³ Untitled Article, *Athenaeum*, 28 February 1903, Box 9, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

the novel, which explicitly demonstrate Maxtead's influence on the young girl. In a letter to Anna, Jeanne states:

To be candid is the privilege of the strong [...] it is only weakness that hangs on the outskirts of a point. I will rob the point even of its frills; I will be blunt. [...] This may seem too big a sentence, too strong a sentiment; if it does, just pause. Lay down the paper before you read another line and think – think hard. Shut your eyes and repeat slowly to yourself, 'This is written by a woman – of a woman'. If that fails to convince you, I have no more to say. [...] Left to yourself, what future do you see? Let me answer for you. The saddest future on this profitable earth – the future of a thwarted career, of a discontented, wasted life. [...] My child, the remedy lies with me! (*The Circle* 96-99)

Yet while Maxtead's interference could be interpreted as the older professional woman seeking to hold the girl in place while capitalising on her success, the character's concerns in the novel often reflect New Woman notions of self-possession, education and empowerment. Maxtead's portrayal bears strong similarities to the characters advanced in the works of George Egerton - that is to say, the apparent anti-feminist aspects of Thurston's writing are countered by the presence of prominent feminist ideals.

Egerton's exploration of female sexuality was tolerated by a number of anti-feminists, because the female characters' activities were contained within the accepted heteronormative boundaries. At the same time, her narratives were dismissed in some quarters because of the belief that the liberties with which she endowed her characters had the potential to be socially disruptive. In Egerton's short story 'The Child', a young girl is singled out by her classmates for possessing an individuality and depth of potential that distanced her from her peers. The girl is accused of being 'too sharp-tongued, too keen-eyed, too intolerant of meanness, and untruth to be a favourite with her classmates – too independent a thinker, with too dangerous an influence over the weaker souls to find favour with the nuns'.⁶⁴ Elsewhere, the girl's patron states, 'For

⁶⁴ George Egerton, *Discords*, (London: Bodley Head, 1894), p. 12.

to the subdued soul of this still young woman who has disciplined thoughts and feelings and soul and body into a machine in a habit, this girl is a *bonnet-rouge*, an unregenerate spirit, the embodiment of all that is dangerous'. (*Discords* 13) Similarities appear when considering the critical attacks levelled at Thurston's Maxtead. Thurston's 'ugly feminist' may be endowed with anti-feminist traits, with her brutish behaviour and forceful disposition, but her strength of character and authoritative control over the people in her life, marked her as something inherently threatening to Edwardian society. In anti-feminist works, literary constructs such as Maxtead are invented to demonstrate the harmful effects of defying social conventions, with the understanding that their disruptive influences usually dissipate by the close of the works. *The Circle*, on the other hand, concludes with Maxtead's aspirations for Anna being fully realised. Throughout the course of the novel, she is revealed to have planned for every aspect of Anna's life, from the various stages of her theatrical career through to Strode's inclusion as suitor and potential husband. As a result, harsh criticism by the conservative press can be attributed to the feminist ideals not being sufficiently quashed. A journalist in the *Manchester Courier* commented that *The Circle* was essentially a study of 'the nemesis that is the feminine temperament - a study that had not been sufficiently kept in view by the novel's close'.⁶⁵

What is apparent in Maxtead's character is her unwavering sense of self-belief and her ability to exert influence. Thurston bestows the character with short, epigrammatic references to the New Woman throughout the novel: 'Every woman learns the word "sacrifice" at some period in her life; be thankful to learn it now', (100) 'Proposals like mine are not disposed of in six or seven words; *people like me* are not disposed of in six or seven words', (109) 'I am as capable of helping you as a man - more capable', (235) and finally 'Some day I shall write a treatise on 'Woman' [...] I think it ought to sell'. (245). Statements such as these demonstrate a fine degree

⁶⁵ Untitled Article, *Manchester Courier*, 28 January 1903, Box 9, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

of self-awareness in Maxtead. One of the more interesting reviews of the novel pointed to Thurston's own appeal with the character,

To the other characters in the book Mrs. Thurston has wisely given less attention, though she has evidently been sorely tempted to explain her study of Mrs. Maxtead, the lady who has a genius for exploiting the artistic faculties of others. It is a clever study, but just so exaggerated that while Anna appears beside her as a lovable woman, she remains to the end an amiable monster.⁶⁶

The reviewer's recognition of the author's obvious fascination with her creation, suggests that Thurston's intentions with Maxtead perhaps stretched beyond the role as Anna's patron. This suggested depth of character is commented on in a review of the novel in *The World*: 'The most skilful piece of work in the book however, is the character of Mrs. Maxtead, the "exploiter" of genius. Hard, calculating, powerful, but not wholly unwomanly, she compels from the reader little sympathy but unstinted admiration'.⁶⁷

In considering *The Circle*, when assessing Thurston's stance on feminism, few conclusive assertions can be made. The character of Anna Solny epitomises the aspirations of the movement, and demonstrate the restrictions, which the writers and literary creations faced when upholding its ideals. The resolution of her story follows the prescribed path of many New Woman protagonists as they succumb to social conventions to safeguard their own survival. Whether the acceptance of the union with Strode ultimately detracts from the novel's feminist purpose, or acts as a simple acknowledgement of Edwardian limitations, is open to interpretation. Maxtead's dual stance of the ugly New Woman stereotype and the suffragette of high-standing provoked mixed reactions amongst readers and critics alike, but the character's inclusion suggests that while Thurston was unwilling to openly declare her allegiance to the New Woman movement, she was certainly conscious of the literary types and

⁶⁶ Untitled Article, *Speaker*, 14 March 1903, Box 9, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁶⁷ Untitled Article, *The World*, 3 February 1903, Box 9, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

ideals that constituted its formation. The question of marriage and its implications for the New Woman forms an integral part of the discussion of feminism in Thurston's work and will therefore be addressed with reference to Strode and Solny's union, but also to one of Thurston's defining works, *The Fly on the Wheel*.

(3.7) Marriage, the New Woman and Thurston's Irish Heroines

Marriage had been a focus for much nineteenth-century fiction, as many of the more celebrated female novelists commented on its necessity in the culmination of a young woman's life. Yet while the works of Austen, the Brontë sisters, George Eliot and many of their contemporaries prefigured the feminist concerns of the New Woman movement, criticism had been levelled against the conformity with which the female protagonists divested themselves of their feminist aspirations in an effort to comply with social conventions. As Norma Clarke suggests, 'they could set out and rage against the emptiness of women's lives, the waste of talent and energy, [but they] all bought-into the system at the end by finding a man suitable for their heroines to marry and allowing marriage as the answer to all her discontents. What they failed to offer was feminist answers to feminist questions'.⁶⁸ New Woman responses to the marriage question were mixed. Writers such as Mona Caird and Mérie Muriel Dowie denied the necessity of marriage and pleaded sexual autonomy and were subsequently denounced as deviant. Conversely, writers such as Sarah Grand, whose objections to gender inequality were well documented, ultimately relied on marital union to shape her narratives. Clement Scott gave voice to the glaring double-standard that existed between sexes when he stated 'men are born animals and women 'angels' so that it is [...] only 'natural' for men to indulge their sexual appetites and, hence, perverse, - 'unnatural' for women to act in the same way'.⁶⁹ A woman's role, as it pertained to sexual or indeed marital union, was seen as being of secondary importance to the

⁶⁸ Clarke, p. 94.

⁶⁹ Clement Scott, 'An Equal Standard of Morality', *Humanitarian*, 5 (1894), pp. 353-355, (Cited in Boumelha, p.18).

wishes of the male – to the point that women viewed themselves as being mired in ‘monogamic prostitution’.⁷⁰ According to Ann Heilmann:

New Woman writers insisted that whenever women found themselves the victims of irresponsible parents, perverse social laws, reprobate male suitors and their complicit doctors, insensitive and even violent husbands, they had every right to refuse sexual relations and leave a marriage which amounted to nothing more than ‘legal prostitution, a nightly degradation’.⁷¹

Thurston seemingly illustrates Penny Boumelha’s suggestion that there were only two possible outcomes of a free union between man and woman – ‘martyrdom or marriage’.⁷² As we have already seen in the discussion of *The Circle*, Anna’s moral quandary over the abandonment of her father is resolved through the intervention of Maurice Strode. While a number of Thurston’s characters reflected New Woman sensibilities in either their speech or actions, Strode undoubtedly belonged to the classic model of Victorian behaviour, in that he saw it as it being his place to chastise Anna for her sins, before ultimately rescuing her from herself. His opinion of women could perhaps be summed up in the following reaction to the union between males and females – ‘A brilliant woman is rather wonderful [...] but I don’t think I’d care to marry one. Twould be like living in a conservatory – the temperature always abnormal and always artificial; one would grow afraid to open the door’. (*The Circle* 149) Strode’s opinion on the suitability of prospective partners, together with Maxtead’s efforts to unite him with Anna could be interpreted as Thurston’s recognition of the theory of ‘eugenics’ which was proposed in the late Victorian era. The practice essentially involved the possibility of controlled breeding in the selection of a morally sound partner for each citizen. The process proved problematic due to the obvious double standard, which prevailed in sexual principles and practices, and eugenics received a substantial amount of criticism at the time, especially in works of New Woman fiction. Its inclusion in *The Circle*, suggests that Thurston’s feminist

⁷⁰ W.T. Stead, ‘The Novel of the Modern Woman’, *Review of Reviews*, 10 (1894), p. 65, (Cited in Boumelha, p. 83).

⁷¹ Heilmann, p. 82.

⁷² Boumelha, p. 84.

allegiances were difficult to pinpoint. Maxtead's New Woman sensibilities should perhaps have dictated that Anna chose her own path when it came to her relationship with Strode. At the same time, the control that Maxtead exerts in providing (what she predicted as) a better outcome for her charge and the fact that the positive resolution for Anna's character was only possible with Strode's intervention, might suggest that Thurston was falling back on New Woman conventions when ultimately resolving her protagonist's story. A similar denouement is featured in another of Thurston's novels, *The Gambler*.

In the final pages of the novel, Clodagh Asshlin's lover, Walter Gore, decides to forgive his paramour's past indiscretions and re-instate their bond. This last-minute reunification echoes the claim that in the New Woman fiction, the female characters could only hope to prosper in society, should they accept their roles as wives, mothers and keepers of the home. Despite the New Woman's clamouring for independence, and her determined rebellion against the limitations she faced, it became clear that the submission to these assigned social roles often constituted the protagonist's sole means of survival. Clodagh Asshlin savoured the life of excess, as well as the liberties that stemmed from the death of her first husband, but the pursuit of her freedom following her restrictive marriage would inevitably lead her back to the homestead. She is saved by what she once resisted. Sally Ledger commented on the lack of commitment to feminism in many New Woman writings, especially as it pertained to the male/female union. She spoke of the 'pessimism' that resulted in an 'inability to think beyond heterosexual marriage'.⁷³ The alternative to marriage, as advocated by Thurston in *The Fly on the Wheel*, is reminiscent of Boumelha's suggestion of 'martyrdom', as Isabel Costello chooses death as a means of freedom, 'to counter the slow extinction of selfhood'.⁷⁴

⁷³ Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 23.

⁷⁴ Janet Madden Simpson, Afterword, *The Fly on the Wheel*, (London: Virago, 1987), p. 344.

As noted in the Introduction, *The Fly on the Wheel* is widely regarded as one of Thurston's most accomplished works. When considering the author's muted presence in the canon, one might consider her tendency to explore widely divergent subject matter, to the point that her oeuvre is difficult to classify. With *The Fly on the Wheel*, however, Thurston explores a number of issues with contemporary appeal, ranging from the Irish national character, organised religion, class, and in the character of Isabel Costello, a glowing endorsement of the New Woman.

The book begins with a study of the sons of Barny Carey, a respected businessman in County Waterford. Stephen, the first-born, was destined to be a lawyer, while the youngest son Frank was to study medicine in Paris. Stephen is presented as a highly influential member of the community, but is disturbed by the news that his youngest brother had become engaged to Isabel Costello, a free-spirited girl of no respectable social position, who had recently returned to the community. He intervenes and convinces Isabel to break-off the engagement with Frank. From that point, Isabel is slowly integrated into Waterford society and a mutual attraction is awoken between her and Stephen. Isabel attracts negative attention from Stephen's sister-in-law, Mary, who recognises the attraction between the two. The couple openly declare their affection for one another, before Stephen's wife and the local priest convince him to end the affair by reminding him of his duties to his family. Enraged by her dismissal, Isabel plots to kill Stephen by poisoning him, before reconsidering the decision at the last moment and drinking the toxic substance herself.

The Fly on the Wheel concludes (as is the case with most of Thurston's oeuvre) with the re-instatement of the pre-established social order, as Carey returns to his duty as husband and father. Yet the novel contains a significant number of deviations from Thurston's usual fictional practices, particularly as it pertained to the development of her characters. Firstly, it needs to be re-stated that the book is set in Ireland, more specifically in provincial middle-class Waterford – an area with which Thurston herself was familiar. Secondly, the book was published after the very public and salacious divorce of Thurston and her husband, Ernest. Isabel's struggle and inevitable

death could be perceived to have been an indirect response to Thurston's own failed marriage – which was credited to Ernest's apparent jealousy at his wife's commercial success.⁷⁵ As such, *The Fly on the Wheel* was received with suitably poignant interest. Numerous writers of New Woman fiction stressed the impossibility of divesting oneself from one's own writing. It was often the case that the personal difficulties and frustrations that were experienced in one's writing career, often translated to feminist concerns on the broader level. Given that this was Thurston's first novel based exclusively on Irish soil and the fact that it was conceived during what was arguably the author's most turbulent period (both in her own private and public life), the suggestion of autobiography is worthy of consideration.⁷⁶ Of interest here, however, is Thurston's characterisation, as well as her observations on marriage, as they pertain to the New Woman discussion.

While Anna Solny's youthful idealism and desire to escape her life in the curio shop would find feminist approval among certain critics, it was not until Isabel Costello returned to Waterford in *The Fly in the Wheel*, that Thurston's more pronounced New Woman sympathies were to become apparent. In his condemnation of the New Woman, the Reverend W.F. Barry stressed the inherent danger that accompanied this new creation, deeming the typical heroine of the 'New' fiction to be a throwback to 'Rousseau's savage'.⁷⁷ There are numerous references to untamed or immoral behaviour throughout Thurston's novel, with Isabel's 'wildness' attracting the attention of the more conservative members of Waterford society, most notably Stephen Carey's sister-in-law, Mary Norris. From her introduction, as Frank's fiancé, Isabel's presence at the local dance is treated with a mixture of fear and fascination: 'By ordinary judgement, she was merely a girl of twenty; but in that moment she might have been a flower swaying in the wind, a young animal stretching itself to the sun, a bird in its first flight, - anything fresh from Nature's hand, pulsing in the delight of

⁷⁵ The details surrounding the divorce were discussed in Chapter One.

⁷⁶ The question of autobiography, as it relates to Thurston's work in general and also as a device in the New Woman fiction, has been addressed in Chapter One. Thurston's consideration of the Irish national character is examined in greater detail in Chapter Four, as *The Fly on the Wheel* is assessed as a meditation on the Irish middle class.

⁷⁷ Cited in Dowling, p. 437.

living and knowing itself alive'. (*The Fly on the Wheel* 39) Her complexion, sense of dress and overall demeanour served to mark Isabel as something inherently foreign to her community. Characters like Mary, whose sole function was to uphold the mores of her class, objected to Isabel on a matter of principle, not for any action that she had knowingly taken, rather her suggested exoticism and capacity for deviance. As previously mentioned, the inclusion of an anti-feminist character was common practice for many New Woman novels, thus Mary Norris's character was undoubtedly introduced by Thurston to act as a foil to Isabel's notions of feminist self-empowerment.

One of the many reasons why the New Woman met with such resistance concerned the popular opinion that she was undermining traditional notions of womanhood in the public sphere. Women were historically recognised as the moral guardians of society – the New Woman's dissatisfaction with the restrictions associated with this stereotype, meant that women's perceived role in society and literature necessitated this role being re-imagined. Thurston follows literary convention here, by her inclusion of this traditional model in the character of Mary Norris – her place in Waterford society remains largely unquestioned, in spite of her tendency to alienate or censure people who disagree with her standards of acceptable social behaviour. In one instance, Stephen comments on Mary's disregard of Isabel's presence, 'Oh, you'll get used to that! It's a habit of Mary's to kiss people one day and cut them out the next'. (*The Fly on the Wheel* 49) Isabel, on the other hand, while taking an active part in middle-class Waterford life, would seem to actively reject 'proper' behavioural practices. As a result, her place in society is established. Mc Cullough comments 'If all female identity is defined by an inherent wildness (constituted in part by unmediated passion), then to embrace that identity fully is to accept a marginalized social position'.⁷⁸ With both templates of femininity established, Thurston uses Carey's marriage to Mary's sister, Daisy, as a means to criticise the restrictions associated with turn-of-the-century life in the middle classes. Carey's stance on marriage is perhaps succinctly summarised by the following:

⁷⁸ Mc Cullough, p. 210.

I mean that marriage must be more important to a man than to a woman – not in the sentimental sense, perhaps, but in the ordinary, practical, everyday sense. After all, if a woman likes to make a poor marriage, she does it with her eyes open and she finds compensations; it's the man who does it blindly and sinks under it. I know what I'm talking about. (*The Fly on the Wheel* 81)

The above quotation is taken from the conversation in which Stephen attempts to convince Isabel that she should not marry his brother, Frank. Isabel's pleas that love and marriage are not subject to considerations of social and economic worth are met with Carey's (apparent) empirical evidence to the contrary. From the outset, he is presented as the proverbial pillar of the local community, charged with the task of preserving normalcy and ensuring continued financial security for his wife and sons. Yet while his stance on marriage might signify thinly veiled misogynistic tendencies, the progression of Thurston's narrative endows him with many of the traits that he was quick to malign in Isabel's character. What Thurston succeeds in doing here, is taking the book's primary representative for proper social conduct and subverting his model behaviour, by instilling him with New Woman sensibilities.

Once Stephen's decision to willingly leave his family for Isabel had been made, Thurston is left with the task of exploring Carey's defiance as it related to the harm it would inflict on his family and the town as a whole. It is at this point that his character's dissatisfaction with his marriage to Daisy finds its voice – most notably in response to Father James' request that he should think of Daisy before proceeding with the abandonment of his old life:

“Stephen, Stephen, have you no thought that she's your wife – that she's - ” [...] “Father James,” he cried, “I've remembered her for five years! Now I'm remembering no-one but myself!” [...] “You think you've known me all these years since my father died; but you've never known me. Never! Never! What have I seemed to you? A plodding, industrious, sensible man – the sort of man to do well – to marry – to settle down! Oh, we both know the cant! But underneath all that [...] I have been something different all the time [...] “I've kept it under. I've worked and plodded and slaved till I thought I had

reconciled myself; but I find that I was wrong. I suddenly find that for me, - the respectable citizen, the cut-and-dried lawyer, - there's life to be lived; and, by God, do you think I'll refuse it?" (*The Fly on the Wheel* 280-281)

New Woman novelists, such as Olive Schreiner and Mona Caird proposed the rejection of matrimony in favour of complete autonomy. In view of Stephen's outburst, one could argue that Thurston too was attempting to encourage a reconsideration of traditional values pertaining to marriage. As it stood, Carey was the dutiful son of the patriarchal order, whose role was to secure employment, marry and provide for his family. Thurston's decision to subvert his intentions in favour of self-fulfilment not only points to the author's commitment to a process of self-actualisation,⁷⁹ but also to an acknowledgement of an underlying social pessimism as it related to the endorsement and maintenance of social conventions (such as marriage). On his first appearance in the novel, Stephen was lauded as the chief proponent of these values – the blurring of his character's purpose suggests that Thurston, while not prophesying the collapse of marriage, sought to draw attention to the manner in which it be treated in contemporary society. For many New Woman writers, marriage was responsible for the oppression of female desire; in *The Fly on the Wheel*, Thurston stretches this definition in her assumption that marriage had the potential to be destructive to the community on the whole.⁸⁰

The resolution of the plot sees Father James convince Stephen that the abandonment of his place in the community would be detrimental to his family, especially as it related to the upbringing of his sons. Throughout the novel, Stephen's wife, Daisy, is presented as the unassuming, dutiful wife, who only recognises the infidelity of her husband when her sister Mary broaches the topic – and even then, she refuses to believe it, attributing Mary's active imagination to the foreign novels that she reads.⁸¹ Again, Stephen's return to the domestic life he sought to abandon

⁷⁹ Stephen's conventional path could just as easily lead to a process of 'self-actualisation', but in choosing to escape with Isabel, he could be seen to choose a different version of it.

⁸⁰ The discussion of marriage in middle-class Ireland is given significant attention in Chapter Four.

⁸¹ As established in Chapter Two, the local men deemed these novels to be potentially harmful to women of the community, whom they considered impressionable.

demonstrates the re-instatement of the accepted social order. Where Thurston's narrative differs, however, is in the decision to defy the author's own fictional practices by facilitating the death of her heroine.

What qualifies Isabel for New Woman sympathies is her steadfast commitment to defying her society's wishes. Both Clodagh Asshlin in *The Gambler* or Anna Solny in *The Circle*, achieved redemption through their endorsement of heterosexual union. Isabel's refusal to agree to Stephen's decision to end their affair, forces her inherent 'wildness' to be amplified as her thoughts turn to murdering the man who spurned her. With her thoughts becoming undisciplined and her reactions based purely on instinct, it becomes obvious that Isabel's failure to comply with the standards of the community necessitated her death. Throughout the novel, Thurston persistently impresses upon the reader that should a person deny his or her given role in society, the alternatives are few and undesirable. This sense of despondency is echoed in the narrator's view of the sanctity of marriage, 'such women [meaning Isabel] either marry or they do not marry; and in that simple statement is comprised the tragedy of existence'. (*The Fly on the Wheel* 224) Given the sense of fatalism attached to life in the Waterford middle classes, it is possible to suppose that the quelling of Carey's spirit and his subsequent return to his wife denoted Thurston's return to traditional domesticity in an effort to ensure her protagonist's survival. On the other hand, the depiction of Isabel's final moments gives weight to the suggestion that Thurston's pleas for feminist empathy (as demonstrated in both Isabel's and Stephen's actions) as well as her call for the re-appraisal of the treatment of marriage on the broader level, signified a greater degree of optimism than previously thought. In the closing pages of the book, Isabel plots to kill Stephen:

"Wait!" she said. "Wait!" For an instant her fingers lingered upon his; then she drew the tumbler away from him, lifted it slowly, and drank. The glass rattled against her teeth; the touch of the ice chilled her lips; but looking down into the wine, her eyes caught the warmth, the redness, the glory of the sun. (*The Fly on the Wheel* 327)

The clarity and the richness of sensation with which Isabel's final moments are described, suggests that Isabel's fate could be perceived as a victory of sorts. The force of individuality, which she clung to for the duration of the novel, could not be extinguished, either by her rejection at the hands of Stephen, the community's dismissal of her actions or even her own final disposition towards murder. Her wildness marked her as something which could not be tolerated, but also someone who would not be contained. As Janet Madden-Simpson adds:

As Isabel's eyes catch its 'warmth' and 'glory' Thurston leaves the reader in no doubt that Isabel is experiencing a spiritual resurrection, that she is, at last, in touch with the exultation of victory against the forces which would oppress her. Her exercise of choice is her expression of her final freedom.⁸²

(3.8) Refiguring Femininity: the Reconstruction of Gender in Max

Novels such as *The Circle* and *The Fly on the Wheel* demonstrate Thurston's preoccupation with exploring woman's role in society. Anna Solny and Isabel Costello typify the Victorian heroine who was obligated to either succumb to domesticity or shun convention and be destroyed. Thurston's final novel, *Max*, continues in this vein and has been the subject of growing critical investigation in recent years, due to the manner in which the author deconstructs traditional gender roles. The protagonist's inner struggle between her professional aspirations and the demands of her sex form the focal point of the narrative as Thurston interrogates the discrepancies that existed between the two.

The plot involves the flight of the Russian Princess Davorska as she flees her native homeland to escape an arranged marriage. She travels to Paris to pursue her dream of becoming an artist. Of particular interest to *Max's* critics is the notion of gender re-invention. With Maxine's journey to become a Parisian artist, Thurston could be seen to have been adopting a feature of the New Woman fiction that challenged traditional notions of femininity, by defining the female character not

⁸² Janet Madden Simpson, p. 344.

through her private but through her professional life.⁸³ Casting her protagonist as a painter in masculine attire, Thurston sought to craft a novel that would explore the connection between sexual and aesthetic liberation. In the case of the young Max, the re-imagining of gender began with the loss of sexual identity in the pursuit of his art. He felt that he could only achieve the desired status by the shedding of his femininity. The process by which Maxine becomes Max and the manner in which Maxine divests and distances herself from her womanhood throughout the novel suggests the presence of the transgressive – an indicator of the modernist tendencies in fiction.⁸⁴ The reclamation of one's gender became a pivotal feature in many New Woman novels; as such, Thurston's treatment of the subject deserves consideration here.

In 1889 Olive Schreiner wrote: 'It is not against men we have to fight, but against ourselves within ourselves'.⁸⁵ Thurston incorporates this struggle into the character of Max, reflecting the New Woman's preoccupation with self-actualisation. The sympathetic character of the Irishman, Ned Blake, is introduced in the novel as a means to guide Max back to the identity that he was quick to abandon. Ned sought to help the young Max in his transition to life in Paris. He befriends the young boy and a growing affection between the two is kindled. Max, as a result, demonstrates difficulty with stabilising his new identity, because of his growing attraction to Ned. What follows is a narrative that traces the young protagonist as he struggles in his identification with both his present and past selves.

What distances *Max* from the rest of Thurston's fiction is the manner in which the protagonist's own sense of self is disputed. Anna Solny's youth or status did not disqualify her from the ardent pursuit of a new life. Similarly, Isabel Costello remained entirely convinced that she was deserving of her place in Waterford society up until her death. Conversely, Maxine struggles greatly when dealing with matters such as her ambition, strength of will and, most noticeably, sexuality. Nowhere in

⁸³ Heilmann, p. 76.

⁸⁴ This element of Thurston's work shall be explored in Chapter Five.

⁸⁵ Olive Schreiner, cited in Laura Chrisman 'Allegory, Feminist Thought and the Dreams of Olive Schreiner', *Prose Studies: History, Theory, Criticism*, vol.13, issue 1, 1990, p. 126.

Thurston's fiction are the fundamentals of personality so strongly contested as they are in Max's psyche. The self-reflexive nature of the text is apparent from the outset, when the 'artist' first arrives in Paris – free of obligations to gender or social determination, 'In that moment of confession the individuality of the boy was submerged in his ambition; he belonged to no country, to no sex. He was inspiration made manifest – the flame fanned into being by the winds of the universe, blown as those winds listed'. (*Max* 64) Unfortunately for Max, he is forced to defend this seeming endorsement of self-sufficiency some pages later, as Ned declares the impossibility of living a life unencumbered by the past, 'I disagree with you!' Max cried suddenly. "I disagree with you wholly! Individuality has nothing to do with environment – nothing to do with ancestry'. (*Max* 85) Throughout the novel Thurston uses Ned to question Max's pertinacious defence of his newfound life. Ned helps to facilitate the understanding that, not only do external forces help mould personal experience, but that natural instincts take precedence over pride of will. In a sense, Max's struggle here could be seen to reflect the dilemma of the artist in the *New Woman* novel.

Similar to Boumelha's 'martyrdom or marriage' quandary that underlay the issue of marriage in *New Woman* fiction, the artist, who sought either to disavow or diminish the importance of gender when embarking on her professional occupation, was forced to face either the collapse of her artistic career and the return to domesticity, or fully commit to her new role and die as a consequence. It became apparent that it was a choice of sacrifices – either denounce art and subscribe to a conventional lifestyle, or pursue a career until it consumes you. This facet of the *New Woman* fiction is present in Max's continuous struggle between her aesthetic aspirations and her growing desire for Ned. Throughout the novel, Thurston presages the inevitability of Max's choice, with both Ned and Max forewarning the reader of the demands of gender on numerous occasions. As the two characters witness a courting ritual in a local tavern, Blake makes the observation that 'Adam will be Adam, Eve will be Eve' (*Max* 186) suggesting that the instincts of sex will always assert themselves, while Max himself touches upon the impracticality of maintaining

his femininity and proceeding with his life as an artist, when he says, ‘You cannot submerge your personality, yet retain it’. (*Max* 129) Heilmann discusses the contest between the professional and private, and also its inevitable outcome when she says ‘Since ‘woman’ and ‘art’ cannot coexist, either she or her work must disappear. Thus, while [female artists] were successfully creating artistic space for themselves, feminist writers frequently saw the essence of woman artist’s position in the world as residing in her very absence from it’.⁸⁶ Max’s decision to retain his womanhood and commit to Blake, by the close of the book, is born from a series of changes in which the feminine Maxine is ‘re-constructed’ before the reader, pointing to the role that social and cultural forces play in the formation and maintenance of gender.

In her studies on Thurston’s *Max*, Tina O’Toole comments on the manner in which the protagonist’s ‘womanhood is socially constructed and delimited’⁸⁷ – the suggestion being that the character’s return to the female form was perhaps less natural and more fabricated, as a result of a conflict between internal and external pressures. The process begins with Max’s discomfort upon viewing a courting ritual in a local tavern; the closeness between the patrons unnerves Max to the point that he flees to the safety of his apartment. On his arrival, he searches underneath his bed and retrieves a package containing strands of his own hair. He proceeds to place the shorn locks on his head, before looking at himself in the mirror:

Max looked and, looking, lost himself. The boy with his bravery of ignorance, his frankly arrogant egoism was effaced as might be the writing from a slate, and in his place was a sexless creature, rarely beautiful, with parted, tremulous lips and wide eyes in which subtle, crowding thoughts struggled for expression. (*Max* 193-194)

This stunted desire for self-expression may have found its catalyst in Max’s own observations of Parisian life, but it signals the inherent difficulties that New Woman artists felt in the suppression of natural instincts, whilst pursuing their careers.

⁸⁶ Heilmann, p. 157.

⁸⁷ Tina O’Toole, ‘Nomadic Subjects in Katherine Cecil Thurston’s *Max*’, *Irish Literature: Feminist Perspectives*, (eds.) Patricia Coughlan and Tina O’Toole, (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2008), p. 89.

O'Toole speaks of cross-dressing being used as a tool by which the protagonist can regain a 'pre-lapsarian existence' in an effort to pursue their professional aspirations, unfettered by the constraints of preconceived notions of gender.⁸⁸ In this particular scene, Max's own faith in his chosen path is stripped away and he is left in a formless, confused state. The mirror serves to mark the character's own sense of detachment, as Heilmann notes:

By confronting the mirror image, an alter ego with a will of her own, the new woman heroine either challenges the role society expects her to play (her reflection in the mirror presents her with the domesticated woman she has no wish to be), or she attempts to come to terms with hitherto unacknowledged desires – in this case, the mirror reflects the person she wants, but does not dare to be.⁸⁹

While the scene in the tavern forced the outward manifestation of Max's own self-estrangement, it was seeing himself in the mirror, that not only clarified his own sense of self-alienation, but began the process by which the Maxine persona was to be re-established. To aid in the recovery, Thurston once again employs an archetype, in this case, the highly effeminate, Jacqueline, by which to guide Max back to her lost womanhood. She is introduced as Max's neighbour in his apartment complex, with her duties seemingly amounting to little more than the domestic needs of her partner, the famous musician, Monsieur Cartel. Her overall importance in Thurston's story, however, becomes decidedly more pronounced as the narrative progresses. With Jacqueline, Thurston creates a character who, would seemingly revel in the virtues of womanhood. Despite her low social standing, Jacqueline embodies all of the passion of Parisian life, with few of the restrictions that would traditionally accompany her status in society. A creature of instinct, she claimed to have known Max's secret since their initial encounter and while she swore to uphold the façade, she took every opportunity to assure Maxine of her rightful place in the world. Again, Thurston includes various character models to examine social and cultural limitations – the

⁸⁸ Tina O'Toole, 'The New Woman and the Boy in Fin de Siècle Irish Fiction' *New Voices in Irish Criticism* 5, (eds.) Ruth Connolly and Ann Coughlan, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005), p. 136.

⁸⁹ Heilmann, p. 168.

rebellious Princess who dabbles in gender identity before conforming to domesticity, the amiable Irishman, characterised by a grounded nature, who guides the protagonist back to acceptable conventions and finally, Jacqueline, the outspoken spokesperson for gender empowerment, who is tolerated because of her willingness to subscribe to contemporary practices. With her characters established, Thurston proceeds to document the reformation of Max's identity, but the manner in which this action takes place, acknowledges the difficulties that accompanied the construction and maintenance of gender. Max's frustration with the process of stabilising one's own identity finds expression in her announcement that the masculine and feminine elements cannot coexist in the one person.

“Jacqueline,” Max cried impetuously, [...] we have all of us the two natures – the brother and the sister! Not one of us is quite woman – not one of us is all man!” [...] “It is a war’, Max cried again, “a relentless, eternal war; for one nature must conquer, and one must fail. There cannot be two rulers in the same city’. (*Max* 198)

Despite Jacqueline's protestations and his own escalating desire to announce his affection for Ned, Max's determination to retain his masculinity results in his decision to 'house' Maxine in a work of art. By painting what he deems to be his 'demonic' side, he would succeed in materialising his counterpart and hope that her hold upon him would consequently, disappear. It proves to be an interesting strategy; while the New Woman artist came to acknowledge that professional life must suffer when succumbing to the demands of sex (or vice versa), Thurston deviates from the practices of the New Woman fiction by making the pursuit of her career an *active participant* in the destruction of gender. Perhaps recognising the growing feelings of uncertainty, as regards the direction of his new life in Paris, Max's decision not only to aesthetically exorcise Maxine, but banish Ned during the painting process points to the degree in which Max's commitment to his professional ambition consumed him. With this said, the painting of Maxine constitutes the only time in which Thurston devotes sufficient attention to her protagonist's artistic preoccupation. From the outset, Max's interest in culture, art and architecture is acknowledged, but there remains the general sense that the pursuit of his career was of secondary importance

to the attainment of personal liberties. Throughout the novel, there exists a noticeable lack of urgency when it came to the commencement of Max's artistic career – the painting of Maxine being the only time in which the character gives serious consideration to his craft. The fact that the desire to paint comes solely from his internal struggle with self-realisation points to the suggestion that 'New Woman novels of the artist not so much focus on the processes that form an artist, as on the many obstacles that prevent her from becoming one'.⁹⁰ Max's inability to see beyond the demands that accompanied the sudden disavowal of his old life and the formation of the new, meant that the ultimate choice of the personal over the professional (i.e. choosing 'Maxine' over his career), appeared as something of a foregone conclusion.

Reviews of *Max* were generally positive, with many reviewers applauding the high level of artistry and attention to detail that Thurston devoted to Parisian life. The aspect, which drew the greatest level of discussion, however, involved the pairing of Max and Ned. *The Ohio Enquirer* deemed *Max* to be a story of 'two heroes and no heroine',⁹¹ acknowledging the transgressive element of the text; other reviews stressed the artificiality or awkwardness of the pairing, with *The North Mail* noting that the 'woman is true, the girl-boy is unnatural and self-conscious'.⁹² A common feature of many of the reviews, however, recalled *The Globe's* assertion that 'Sex in the end, must assert itself'.⁹³ While the conclusion of the novel may not have granted supporters of the New Woman the ending they desired (Maxine's return heralded the death of her artistic career), Thurston's attempts to subvert traditional notions of feminine identity should be recognised. The manner in which Thurston's commentaries on Max's cross-dressing, sexual transgression and aesthetic liberation helped to contribute to the formation of an early modernist discourse will be given further attention in Chapter Five.

⁹⁰ Heilmann, p. 162.

⁹¹ Untitled Article, *Ohio Enquirer*, 24 October 1910, Box 13, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁹² Untitled Article, *North Mail* (Newcastle), 1 October 1910, Box 13, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁹³ Untitled Article, *The Globe*, 28 September 1910, Box 13, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

(3.9) Conclusion

By her own admission, Katherine Thurston did not possess an agenda when composing her oeuvre – her brand of fiction debuted in the burgeoning years of the twentieth century, when the New Woman had been largely silenced. Yet despite the seeming apolitical motivation in her writing, the lasting repercussions of fin de siècle feminism could be seen in many of Thurston's fictional creations. In *The Circle*, Anna Solny's youthful idealism and dissatisfaction with her chosen life's path forced her into Jeanne Maxtead's patronage, with Maxtead herself exhibiting traits of both the anti-feminist and feminist archetypes. The centrality of matrimony, as it related to Victorian narratives, also found adequate expression in Thurston's prose, with the limitations imposed by social and sexual inequalities forcing the suicide of the free-spirited, Isabel Costello in *The Fly on the Wheel*, while in *Max*, the social restraints on gender identity force the abandonment of Maxine's professional aspirations, as she succumbs to a life of domesticity. All three novels suggest the New Woman influence on Thurston's writing. Although the conclusion of each novel may contain a degree of pessimism as they relate to the possibility of social and sexual liberation, the manner in which each character's struggle is elaborated upon, would suggest that Thurston was not only aware of the difficulties that faced the writers of the New Woman fiction, but also acknowledged that these difficulties were yet to find their ultimate resolution.

Chapter 4 – Thurston and National Identity

Prologue

In *John Bull's Other Island*, George Bernard Shaw remarks that 'a healthy nation is as unconscious of its nationality as a healthy man of his bones: but if you break a nation's nationality, it will think of nothing else but getting it set again'.¹ The Irish nation was never more 'broken' than it was in the years that marked the beginning of the twentieth century. The issue of Home Rule had gathered increased momentum in the British Houses of Parliament as Arthur Griffith's lack of faith in the Irish MPs led to the formation of the Sinn Fein party in 1905, while James Connolly sought to drastically restructure Irish labour laws with his Irish Socialist Republican Party. The rejuvenated spirit of reform was not limited to the sphere of political nationalism however, as writers such as Joyce, Synge, Yeats and others scrambled to wake the conscience of the Irish nation, in an attempt to shape it for the future. The Irish endeavour to sculpt the nation's separate identity often involved struggling against the English representations of Irishness, which were seen as predominantly derogatory.² The era was categorised as one in deep turmoil, so it understandably produced a rich variety of different perspectives on the national character from politicians, journalists, novelists, playwrights and poets. The masculinist nature of the era's political and cultural rejuvenation, meant that the Irish woman's contribution to her nation's cause was, on the surface, limited to perhaps Countess Markievicz' involvement in various Republican organisations, or Lady Gregory's contribution to the Irish Literary Revival.

¹ George Bernard Shaw, *John Bull's Other Island*, (London: Penguin, 1984), Preface, p. 31.

² See Michael de Nile, *The Eternal Paddy: Irish Identity and the British Press, 1798-1882*, (Wisconsin: Wisconsin University Press, 2004), Donald MacRaild, *Irish Migrants in Modern Britain, 1750-1922*, (London: Palgrave – Macmillan, 1999) and Roy Foster, *Paddy and Mister Punch: Connections in Irish and English History*, (London: Penguin, 1995).

(4.1) Introduction

The literary efforts of female writers at the beginning of the twentieth century were perhaps not heralded with the same level of adulation or objection that greeted the New Woman novelists of the previous century. In fact, the interest in the New Woman as a cultural movement had considerably subsided. In Ireland, the age-old vision of the sean-bhean who occupied herself with lamenting the state of the nation was the most common portrayal of femininity. The female contribution to the ongoing social and political strife appeared to be catering to the needs of the family whilst bearing silent witness to the efforts of men who feverishly worked to repair the fractured nation state. It was often the case that when women themselves spoke-up to air their own version of the Irish conscience they were ‘ridiculed, reviled or ignored’.³ Moreover, with extremely popular and influential writers such as Yeats being content to idealise woman or present her as a symbol of a wounded Ireland in need of protection⁴, the opportunities for a female writer to effectively contribute to her nation’s cause were apparently quite limited. Critics such as CL Innes stress the ‘need to look at the distinctiveness of what the women at the time had to say, when their voices were all too often obscured by writers such as Yeats and his construction of them too little questioned’.⁵ The essential point that critics such as Innes were trying to make was that a female voice was always present, but had never been fully acknowledged. Kathryn Kirkpatrick adds ‘Founded on a cultural nationalism of male artists and writers, the republic has been too slow to acknowledge a literary heritage at odds with traditional portrayals of Ireland & Irishness’.⁶ This chapter explores the underlying lack of consensus concerning the construction of national identity in the writings of the time. Katherine Thurston’s interpretation of the national character in her fiction offers a fascinating case study on the subject – especially in light of her

³ C.L. Innes, *Woman and Nation in Irish Literature and Society, 1880-1935*, (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), p. 179.

⁴ Herbert Howarth commented that ‘in Dublin as well as abroad, there was a temptation to delight in the figuring of Ireland as a sad, suicidal beauty’ in *The Irish Writers, 1880-1940: Literature under Parnell’s Star*, (London: Rockcliff publications, 1958), p. 28.

⁵ Innes, p. 179.

⁶ Kathryn Kirkpatrick (ed.), *Border Crossings: Irish Women Writers and National Identities*, (Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2000), p. 6.

personal experience of both countries. Her treatment of biography, marriage and hereditary influence will be addressed, with a view to demonstrate that her Irish-based fiction was more socially engaged than previous efforts.

(4.2) Thurston and Ireland

Loosely linked to the political turmoil of the early twentieth century by means of her staunchly nationalist father, Paul Madden, Thurston's preoccupations lay with the exotic and the taboo, centering less on reuniting a fractured nation and more with the reformation of the self. Yet while there is no doubt that much of the passion and exoticism that marked her own unique brand of fiction distinguished her from her fellow countrymen's cause, there remained an underlying current of both considerable affection and profound criticism. In much the same way that Augusta Gregory's plays 'examined the notion of national community by exploring it at the micro-level of local politics or of personal relationships',⁷ Thurston manages to successfully expose middle-class Irish society from within, exposing both its successes and vices. In the afterword to *The Fly on the Wheel*, Janet Madden-Simpson recognises Thurston's ability to dissect the intricacies of parochial Irish class structures, and also draw attention to Thurston's preoccupation with types – delineating the roles that each of the novel's characters represent; e.g. Isabel Costello may have been viewed as Thurston's object of transgression, but even this 'child of nature, rather than a child of God'⁸ is still very much 'a product of the mechanics of middle-class Waterford'.⁹ Madden-Simpson too points to the psychological and sociological questions raised in the narrative, in particular the overt threat to Irish morality and custom that a creation like Isabel would typify:

Isabel's determined refusal to 'squeeze down to fit' Waterford society marks her as a deviant, a temptress who not only flouts the conservative

⁷ Anne Fogarty, quoted in Kirkpatrick, p. 9.

⁸ Janet Madden-Simpson, Afterword to *The Fly on the Wheel*, (Virago: Dublin, 1987), p. 334.

⁹ Madden-Simpson, p. 333.

and pious Catholicism of Waterford, but who also threatens to undermine that most essential foundation of society, the family.¹⁰

The nature of Thurston's principal works suggest that there was perhaps a greater possibility for attaining freedom outside of Ireland.¹¹ Her only novels set in Ireland, *The Gambler* and *The Fly on the Wheel* are significantly more pessimistic about personal growth and prosperity in a country mired in the uproar surrounding Home Rule. Both novels focus on vivacious and free-spirited young women who attempt to defy the mores of their respective classes through their refusal to adhere to social conventions. Thurston succeeds in creating inspirational but ultimately doomed heroines, who simply cannot subscribe to the restrictions that their society has placed on them. From the outset both works seem to exude the necessity that to succeed, one must follow a prescribed path. As such, there remains a sense of predetermination in each novel, which actively resists the aspirations of the New Woman category. Identity reformation, or attempts to re-evaluate oneself against often hostile backdrops became one of Thurston's key motifs in her fiction, but what became increasingly apparent is that conforming to the demands and recompenses of living in Ireland at the dawn of the twentieth century often constituted the protagonists' sole means of survival, both socially and (in terms of literary relevance) aesthetically.

If we view the setting of the *Fly on the Wheel* as a microcosm of Irish society as a whole, the book itself could be seen to reflect a sense of Thurston's own dislocation or insecurity as it relates to national identity. Her decision to virtually sideline the nationalist agenda and bemoan Ireland's seeming intolerance for social, sexual and personal change meant that her Irish-based fiction was decidedly fatalistic. This unbiased relationship to her home country did not go unnoticed by the critics, as a reviewer for the *Chicago Post* acknowledged:

As an Irish novel, it needs special mention for its large, simple presentment of a serious group of people who speak an intelligible

¹⁰ Madden-Simpson, p. 335.

¹¹ Gerardine Meaney, 'Decadence, Degeneration, and Revolting Aesthetics, The Fiction of Emily Lawless and Katherine Cecil Thurston' in *Colby Quarterly Review*, vol. 36, June 2000, p. 169.

English and deport themselves in a thoroughly human way. In the presentation of the Irish literary movement a novel like this is important. It avoids the one extreme of overidealizing the Celt, over his dreamy, poetical nature; still more, it avoids the other extreme, particularly of writers who go to Ireland in a holiday mood and see the Irish as a people composed of jocularity and everything else convivial. Mrs. Thurston has now nearly half a dozen novels to her credit, but in none has she shown such artistic vigour as in this'.¹²

Thurston's short stories and unpublished works echoed similar (to slightly more pronounced) sentiments, oftentimes favouring the realist approach and further establishing her sense of dissatisfaction.

(4.3) The Irish Element in Thurston's Short Fiction

Undoubtedly, Thurston's most blatant criticism of her home country came in the form of the satirical short story 'The Hazard', the tale of Patrick and Roger Trale, two fiery-tempered Irish brothers who compete for the affections of Bridget, a local woman. The story begins with the two brothers fighting one-another in their shared lodgings, before spying the object of their affections on a street below. Following Bridget's departure, the two men draw pistols before deciding to throw dice to see which man will get to marry her. The understanding is then made that the losing party must not only renounce all affection for the prize but must then be immediately killed. The story itself featured in *Success* magazine, with Thurston's American publisher, Howard McJeep, suggesting that it was to become the worthy successor to *Max*. An obvious attempt to boost the publication's sales, 'The Hazard' features little of the innovation or depth of observation that characterises Thurston's final novel; instead it offers a simplistic tale of fraternal jealousy that results in a largely negative portrayal of the national character. To defend against possible allegations of nationalist betrayal,

¹² Untitled Article, *Post*, Chicago Illinois, 3 November 1908, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

Thurston opens the story with a disclaimer of sorts, in an attempt to distance her story and its protagonists from the (then) current Irish society:

It all happened 100 odd years ago, in the days before neurotics, when men drank deep and feelings ran high when a hat was cocked and a snuff-box shut with the same engaging flourish that was bestowed upon the drawing of a sword, and when ladies hid their thoughts behind their blushes, and yielded up their knees to a suitor much in the same manner as they parted with their purses to the highway robber.¹³

In much the same way that a number of Irish historians have been accused of adopting a revisionist approach in the study of their country's history,¹⁴ Thurston here adopts a similarly subjective point of view as she subverted traditional notions of the idyllic Irish character in favour of the archetypal, uncouth savage.

‘Welcome home, sweetheart! Pay toll at the gateway’! Once more his lips were near to hers in the kiss they craved, but with the strength of fear, the girl pushed him from her. ‘When the priest hath wed us’ she cried. ‘As yet, I am my own’! ‘Nay, you are mine’! (‘The Hazard’, Part III)

The simplistic nature of the plot and dialogue (as evidenced above) and the use of one-dimensional characters all point to Thurston's skewed image of an Ireland circa the 1800s Act of Union, in which the British Government quelled the threat of the violent Irish by abolishing their Parliament and taking full control of the smaller country. Thurston's re-imagining of her choleric countrymen, (people of whom she had no direct knowledge or experience), points to the author's closer affinity to the British temperament. The publication of ‘The Hazard’ came at a time when Thurston's dissatisfaction with her home country had become quite pronounced. Keen to escape the duty and obligations to her family members in Cork and Waterford, Thurston (towards the close of her life) stringently fought to disinherit those closest to her in

¹³ Taken from a printing of ‘The Hazard’ in Box 3, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

¹⁴ See Kevin Whelan, ‘The Revisionist Debate in Ireland’, *Boundary 2*, vol. 31, Number 1, (Spring, 2004), pp. 179-205 and Ciaran Brady (ed.), *Interpreting Irish History: The Debate on Historical Revisionism, 1938-94*, (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1995).

Ireland, as she believed their interest in her amounted to little more than what she could give them.¹⁵ In a letter to her fiancé, Gavin, dated Sunday 19 June 1911, she comments on her frustration with being in Ireland:

Sometimes this place is a positive hell – but I spend every minute I can alone – in the morning I sit in the garden, writing or reading, in the afternoon I walk in a couple of hours by myself, and at night I sit in my own room, reading or doing my own sewing! I hope that I am not very vindictive but, darling, I would give anything to sell this place to anyone but the Pollocks. It disgusts me to see them here.¹⁶

The dissatisfaction with her life in Ireland is reflected in the depiction of the brothers Patrick and Roger Trale, squabbling to benefit themselves as best as possible, despite the wishes of the woman at the centre of their disputation. The warring brothers are perhaps reminiscent too of much of the action in Emily Lawless's *Hurrish*, as Lawless puts forward a violent tale of local rivalries that end in brutal confrontations and bloody murder. *Hurrish* was savaged by both critics and readers alike; being condemned as 'grossly exaggerated, slanderous and lying from cover to cover'.¹⁷ 'The Hazard', with its satirical, damning indictment of the Irish lower classes escaped such scathing criticism, given that it was published as a short story¹⁸ and did not have nearly as wide a circulation as Thurston's novels. It ends with Roger, the more savage brother, dragging his prize to a member of the local clergy, demanding to be joined in matrimony, before being interrupted by Patrick who Bridget later decides to marry of her own free will. In essence, it is a simplistic and rather straightforward story, which is filled with stereotypical caricatures as opposed to fully-rounded creations. Roger Trale in particular is depicted as little more than an animal. Bridget at one stage declares that her heart belongs to Patrick and wonders why Roger would want her knowing this information, to which Roger replies: 'I leave such subtleties as hearts

¹⁵ This aspect of Thurston's family life was addressed in greater detail in Chapter One.

¹⁶ Letter from Thurston to Gavin, 19 June 1911, Box 12, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

¹⁷ As quoted in James M. Cahalan, *The Irish Novel*, (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan 1988), p. 81.

¹⁸ Correspondence with Howard McJeep of Harper's publications, New York suggests that the story was to be modified and published as a short novel. In the same letter, McJeep claims that Thurston was 'getting a reputation as one of the greatest living novelists'. Letter dated 3 February 2011, Box 1, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

and souls for my brother's keeping. For myself, the shell that you speak of mistress Biddy, has a monstrous fine colouring of fleshpink'.¹⁹ 'The Hazard' is one of Thurston's few works to be set in Ireland. Its satirical nature, as it caustically lampoons the Irish national character serves only to highlight Thurston's ambivalence with her fellow countrymen. Thurston sought to help the cause of Irish nationalism in whatever way she could;²⁰ the unpatriotic grievances that feature throughout her Irish-based fiction then, are decidedly curious. The only glimmer of national appreciation comes in the recurring figure of a sympathetic priest who regularly features in Thurston's works, and in 'The Hazard' denounces Roger's actions at the close of the story.

It becomes apparent from stories such as 'The Hazard' that the one unifying feature of a number of Thurston's works was the insistence in the guiding hand of faith. Thurston lived in London for the greater part of her life; however, while she favoured aspects of British identity commonly held as 'civilized', she seemingly remained unaffected by the scathing criticism of Catholicism, as featured in the works of many of her contemporaries, most noticeably her husband and fellow novelist, Ernest Temple Thurston. Katherine Thurston's commitment to her faith is registered in the Irish-based short story 'The Times Change'. The story follows the life of Tom Blake, who reluctantly decides to sell his home and business in an effort to appease his wife, Fanny. The townspeople (in particular the local priest, Father Pat) complain about Tom's eagerness to abandon the family business and start a life elsewhere. Yet before the couple and their small child can move away, Tom prays to God to give him guidance and pleads for help in becoming a better father. The story ends with the child's involvement in a terrible accident where he loses the ability to walk, presumably disallowing the family to leave their home. If the priest's involvement, the father's plea to a higher power and the child's sudden misfortune are to be seen as a type of intervention from a divine power, then the story could be seen to not only

¹⁹ Taken from a printing of 'The Hazard', Box 3, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

²⁰ Taken from the interview with Constance Smedley, 'Some story-book people', *T.P.'s Weekly*, 11 February 1910, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

solidify Thurston's own religious beliefs but display (what she viewed) as the inescapability of fate.

John Chilcote, M.P., displays the relative ease which Katherine Thurston depicts each facet of the upper-class English character, suggesting the author was quite at home in the country's mindset. A number of her short stories also utilised stock British characters in high-ranking roles. 'Temptation' introduces us to the character of Lawrence Westall, a solicitor by trade, who embarks on a number of shady investments in an effort to keep his love interest ensconced in the lifestyle to which she had been accustomed. Thurston's more celebrated characters such as Anna Solny in *The Circle* or Isabel Costello in *the Fly and the Wheel* embodied the right to freedom and independence, and while the author's female creations facilitated her place alongside Grand and Egerton as important contributors to the New Woman fiction, she displayed no hesitation in interrogating her fellow women for their indiscretions. As was the case with many of Thurston's female characters, Phyllis Ord in 'Temptation' is presented as 'shamelessly worldly'²¹, but intelligent enough to recognise the value of a husband with money. While it would perhaps be preferable to attribute some degree of enhanced veneration to these women for wishing to succeed, a lot of these creations remain as little more than faceless objects encountered by male subjectivity. Similarly, the character of Fanny Callaghan in 'The Times Change' is introduced in terms of her financial aspirations:

She was a woman of a type – a type that the small Irish township breeds very readily." She was a good woman, an ambitious woman, even a clever woman – who in her heart did fall justice to the sterling qualities of her husband, but who had made her choice with more appreciation of the financial position of the suitor and the nearness of her own 30th birthday, than with any intuitive recognition of the 'lover in the shy, silent man who had offered her his life.'²²

²¹ Taken from a manuscript of 'Temptation', Box 8, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

²² Taken from a transcript of 'The Times Change', Box 3, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

In her Irish-based fiction, Thurston repeatedly advocated the idea that the concept of marriage was little more than a social or economic arrangement between two people. Phyllis Ord, despite her supposedly 'worldly' qualities, rejects Westall's advances for the simple reason that she receives a better offer elsewhere. Her potential suitor, Lawrence, is described at the beginning of the story as 'reliable and nothing more', seemingly lacking the drive and resources that denotes a favourable husband. Of course, Lawrence is just as guilty of viewing their relationship in terms of economic prosperity, as he immediately sets out to procure more assets, so as to impress Phyllis; but when you consider his tag of 'reliable and nothing more' his decision to gamble an exorbitant amount of money for the sake of a merely potential wife, his breaking with type could perhaps be admired. The exploration of marriage as an economic arrangement will be given further consideration below.

Thurston's own marriage to the Englishman and fellow novelist, Ernest Temple Thurston, is of particular interest when examining the author's relationship to her own country. As addressed in Chapter One, certain publications sought to present the couple as being at odds when it came to their professional careers. The sensational nature of Katherine's fiction quickly garnered the attention of the general public both in her native Ireland and abroad, while Ernest found his work overshadowed by the popularity of that of his wife. Divesting herself of any allegiance to the burgeoning Irish nationalism of the early twentieth century, Katherine's interpretation of the national character was at times complimentary, oftentimes scathing. Ernest's Irish-based fiction adopted a similar approach, in that he readily criticised Ireland for its failings, but was just as quick to document its countrymen's more positive attributes. Paradoxically, on the whole, the Englishman presented a more favourable view of the Irish nation than that of his Cork-born wife. The following section will explore the apparent discrepancies that existed within the Thurstons' attitudes to Irish society and culture.

(4.4) Identity and Irish Nationalism in the Fiction of Ernest and Katherine Thurston

The opening preface of Ernest's 1915 novel *The Passionate Crime* speaks of Ireland with its 'quaint superstitions and its mystery, romance and tragedy'. The story contains many of the idyllic symbols of a romanticised country with multiple references to the supernatural and its effect on the Irish populace. Queen Maeve and her band of faeries reportedly dictate the fate of those who would cross their path; banshees herald the death of loved ones, and leprechauns are accused of escorting young children to their doom. From initial appearances, Ernest could be accused of constructing an outmoded, folkloric image of Ireland. He elaborates at length on the imagination of the Irish people, declaring them to be a nation of dreamers:

In Ireland they imagine of the things that will be and the things that are, not from what the past has taught them, but as if they turned their eyes to heaven and had seen strange visions or as if they heard strange sounds no other man had heard before. There is that look in their eyes as in the eyes of a man who has just wakened out of sleep, not knowing which is more real, the world he lives in or the dream he has just dreamt. So they come easily to their belief in the faerie people.²³

Declan McCormack comments that the novel, published just prior to the 1916 Rising, was 'not likely to endear him to a nationalist Ireland, particularly to those who had come under the sway of the Irish Ireland movement'.²⁴ Reductive perceptions of the Irish people and their ambitions, from the pen of an Englishman, served only to fuel the type of criticism that Emily Lawless faced, as she reportedly looked down on Irish people from 'the pinnacle of her three generation nobility'.²⁵ Ernest acknowledged the nation's (then) current struggle with the issue of Home Rule, but deemed it more an example of its narrow-minded purpose:

²³ Ernest Temple Thurston, *The Passionate Crime*, (New York: D.Appleton and Company, 1915), p. 15.

²⁴ McCormack, p 2.

²⁵ James M. Cahalan, 'Forging a Tradition: Emily Lawless and the Irish Literary Canon' in Kirkpatrick, p. 40.

To an Irishman, his land is his wife, his mother & his child. [...] Indeed the land is dearer to them (the Irish) by far. It is the land and seldom a woman they leave behind when they go into the far countries [...] a strange sexlessness inhabits the souls of the Irish people. Fierce as their passions are, they are more the passions of an excitable mind than of a susceptible body. So is the fame of Ireland world-wide for its virtue.²⁶

Observations like those found above were unlikely to endear Thurston to the Nationalist population. His first novel *The Apple of Eden* features a young curate in Rathmore who falls in love with a local married woman. As Declan McCormack observes: 'it was hot stuff for 1904. Female sexuality, "priestcraft" and the temptation of the flesh figured predominantly, a brave theme at a time when Plunkett suggests that some 3,000 Irish priests exercise and influence over their flocks, not merely in religious matters, but in almost every phase of their lives and conduct'.²⁷ The tendentious take on the priesthood, the spiritual caretakers of the Irish population, was one of the many controversial aspects of Ernest's fiction. Katherine Thurston's take on the national character could have been perceived to be much less abrasive than that of her husband; however, as with novels such as *The Fly on the Wheel*, or *The Gambler*, she provided a subtle critique of the English-speaking, petit bourgeois of Ireland and, it seems, gained a greater level of popularity or acceptance as a result.

Ernest and Katherine wrote about Ireland in the first decade of the twentieth century when, in the wake of events such as Charles Stewart Parnell's fall from grace, representations of Irishness were at a low. In works such as *Traffic: The Story of a Faithful Woman* and *The Gambler* the Thurstons acknowledged the bleakness of prospect as regards personal growth in an Irish setting, while in *The Fly on the Wheel* and *The Apple of Eden*, both novelists recognised Catholicism's profound influence on Irish thought and expression. What featured predominantly in Katherine's Irish-based works and Ernest's earlier efforts was the attempt to reconcile their own experiences of Ireland in their fiction. As Michael Kenneally remarks, 'It is as if

²⁶ Ernest Temple Thurston, *The Passionate Crime*, (New York: D.Appleton and Company, 1915), p. 25.

²⁷ Declan McCormack, 'The Butterfly on the Wheel', *Sunday Independent*, 24 September 2000, p. 2.

individuals still possess vestigial feelings of alienation, of being an outsider if not a trespasser and so strive to legitimise their claim to national identity by establishing the bond between self and setting'.²⁸ Katherine's decision to disavow commentary on the country's social and political turmoil, and instead transplant her Irish characters to more hospitable settings was a reflection of the sense of national dejection that she and many others felt at that time.

Ernest died in 1933, twenty-two years after Katherine's death. Thurston's perception of Ireland and its representation in his fiction improved dramatically over the course of this time, possibly as a result of his association with esteemed cultural figures such as Hazel Lavery. Ernest's novel *Jane Carroll* (1927) reads largely as a thinly-veiled attempt to fictionalise the supposed affair between Lavery and Irish revolutionary Michael Collins. A largely complementary panegyric of the couple, and an outsider to Irish nationhood himself, Ernest employs the novel as his personal claim to commentary on Ireland's troubles. Unlike her husband, Katherine needed to make no such claim. Born to one of Cork's most preeminent national politicians, she was at liberty to explore her nation's plight without fear of rebuttal. Interestingly enough, she abstained.

While Katherine Thurston often seemed to insist upon the necessity of faith through the mouthpiece of its representatives in her fiction, Ernest seemed content to downplay its importance in the lives of his characters, either by remarking upon its potentially destructive qualities (*The Apple of Eden*, *Enchantment*) or its inadequacy in aiding his protagonists' struggles (*Jane Carroll*, *The Evolution of Katherine*, *The Passionate Crime*). Even though his disdain for religious practices was evident throughout his fiction, he still recognised the power that ecclesiastical belief was to hold on humanity: 'People who still find consolation in their creed will only be the more firmly grafted to their beliefs by such blasphemy of mine. It will do them no

²⁸ As quoted by Susan Shaw Sailer in *Representing Ireland: Gender, Class, Nationality*, (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1997), p. 135.

harm. Oppression, persecution – you will find no more true food for belief than this. Look at Ireland, Catholic to a breath'. (*The Evolution of Katherine* 100)

The shift from negative to positive representations in Ernest's fiction grew over the twenty odd years to the point that Ernest's oeuvre reflects a much more favourable impression of Ireland and Irishness. Unfortunately, the luxury of time was not available to Katherine, given that she died in 1911. That being said, Thurston's inclusion of the highly sympathetic figure of Father James in her penultimate novel, *The Fly on the Wheel*²⁹, and the romantic figure of Ned Blake in her final novel, *Max*, is perhaps indicative of this shift towards positive representation of the Irish. The narrow, petty-mindedness of the middle classes in *The Fly on the Wheel*'s Waterford society is seemingly at odds with Father James's kindness and Ned's presentation in *Max*. Ned, in particular, is presented as a charming and affable Irishman who sought to help the young Maxine (masquerading as the young artist, Max) adjust to life in bohemian Paris. Being a largely solicitous portrayal of the national character, the close of the novel would see Max (now Maxine) reveal herself to her Ned, assuming his disgust or disappointment at her decision not to reveal her true self. Ned expresses disappointment in Maxine's lack of faith to endow him with the truth about her situation. In his own words: 'how low you have rated me to think I would oust you from yourself! Is it my place to make life harder for you? Just gave me credit for one saving grace'.³⁰ This sympathetic portrayal of the Irish was perhaps intentional on Thurston's part - the Irishman's inclusion was intended to be meaningful, and not just coincidental. With Ned in *Max* and Father James in *The Fly on the Wheel*, Katherine ably demonstrated the extent to which she believed the Irish people had progressed. Both men display a considerable level of empathy when dealing with the novels' troubled protagonists.

Whilst mainly preoccupying herself with themes of liberation (both aesthetic and sexual), it became apparent that however much Katherine Thurston stretched

²⁹ Father James's presence in *The Fly on the Wheel* will be addressed in due course.

³⁰ Katherine Cecil Thurston, *Max*, (London: Hutchinson, 1910), p. 327.

genre boundaries or explored taboo subject matter; she found it difficult *not* to draw upon Ireland or aspects of the Irish psyche in her collection of works. With that said, when one considers the thematic diversity of the oeuvre and also the fact that only two of her six novels are set directly in Ireland, Thurston's novels, when placed alongside Yeats or Joyce, could hardly be seen as significant contributions to the Irish literary canon. As Norman Vance suggests, 'There must be some underlying constant, some reliable vehicle of tradition in the work, for it to be a recognisable contribution'.³¹ Katherine, in a sense picked and chose aspects of the Irish tradition in her writing, never fully subscribing to any distinct or recurring ideology. Vance further suggests that notions of tradition are problematic for a number of reasons:

Consciousness of tradition cannot be comprehensive or constant as it is perhaps a little unnatural. It should be an imaginative response or something individual to particular circumstances or stresses. It is not possible for most people, most of the time to keep in focus more than a few of the treasures or glories of the cultural past. Even then there has to be a reason for thinking about such matters at all.³²

Katherine was susceptible to these 'imaginative responses' to Ireland and the difficulties that the country faced in the opening years of the twentieth century. Parallels between Chilcote's fall from power and Home Rule pioneer Charles Stewart Parnell's political downfall in the late nineteenth century, are evident in Thurston's most popular novel, *John Chilcote M.P.* However, Thurston denied reports that it was based on the life and supposed affair between Irish political leader Charles Stewart Parnell and his mistress Katharine (Kitty) O'Shea.³³ Yet much like her husband's semi-biographical account of Hazel Lavery's involvement with Michael Collins, there is much to suggest that Parnell's rise and fall from power played a significant part in the development of her plot. By a similar token, Declan McCormack suggests that the story of Anna Solny in Thurston's earlier novel *The Circle* may have been inspired by

³¹ Norman Vance, *Irish Literature: A Social History*, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1999), p. 6.

³² Vance, p. 3.

³³ 'There has been much speculation as to the model of the character of John Loder, with some suggesting Charles Stewart Parnell and others the late Lord Randolph Churchill. The accuracy of these claims will be addressed in due course.'

the life of Sophia Raffalovich, the exotic second wife of William O'Brien, M.P. for Cork.³⁴ Katherine's insistence on the efforts of women to help define the nation's identity was reflected in *John Chilcote, M.P.*, as Eve Chilcote is brought to the fore in the novel as the means by which both the British nation and the novel's narrative would succeed.

(4.5) Woman and Nation in John Chilcote, M.P.

John Chilcote, M.P. sold in excess of 200,000 copies in America alone and remains Thurston's most popular work. Published initially in episodic format in *Blackwoods* magazine, the novel was hailed as 'a masterpiece of sensational literature',³⁵ in which each new instalment brought with it a wealth of expectation for the next. The demand for the book exceeded both Thurston and her publishers' expectations. Yet despite its reputation as one of the finest examples of Edwardian melodrama in fiction, the novel demonstrated the author's awareness of the disparities that existed between class and gender. On a personal level, *John Chilcote, M.P.* could also be interpreted as a homage to her late father, documenting the impact that his political life (including his close friendship with Parnell) had played in her development as a young woman and maturing novelist.

The main action of the work is situated in the context of the Russian/British preoccupation with Persia at the beginning of the 20th century, but while the Persian question is given considerable attention throughout the course of the novel, the real revelation comes in Thurston's apparent comfort in depicting life in the front benches of the British Parliament. It was to become obvious throughout the course of her fiction that Thurston's real passion laid away from Ireland. James Murphy commented that the Irish upper middle class novelists of the time 'feared provincialism and aspired

³⁴ McCormack, p. 2.

³⁵ Untitled Article, *Augusta Herald*, 20 November 1904, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

to metropolitanism',³⁶ stating that the lower classes occupied themselves with promoting positive images of the Irish character, demonstrating themselves to be capable of self rule, while a large number of the middle class writers were keen to woo English sympathies by emulating styles of fiction that were free of nationalist ideologies. Thurston seemingly enjoyed the civilizing aspect of British identity and as we have seen, disavowed any national or class allegiances in favour of writing a brand of fiction that, whilst popular at the time, failed to make a significant enough mark on the Irish literary tradition to warrant lasting recognition. Despite the widespread success of *John Chilcote, M.P.*, only a handful of the critical reviews of the novel acknowledged the Irish aspects of Thurston's plot, instead focusing on the ethical dilemmas brought about by the lead characters' actions.³⁷

The principal Irish influence on *John Chilcote, M.P.* was undoubtedly Thurston's father, the one-time Lord Mayor of Cork, Paul Madden, to whom the novel is dedicated. In interviews that took place around the time of the book's publication, Thurston spoke about her father's political career. One of her earliest recollections was accompanying Madden to Hawarden and hearing Mr. Gladstone speak in favour of Irish Home Rule.³⁸ The *Freeman's Journal* commented on the impact that Madden made during his time as Mayor, stating that he 'sacrificed much time and money and seriously imperilled his liberty'³⁹ during his tenure in office, suggesting the intense level of commitment to the cause with which he and close friend, Charles Stewart Parnell, aligned themselves. The acclaim that *John Chilcote, M.P.* accumulated upon its publication and the strong political presence in the book compelled a number of reviewers to question the parallels between Parnell's career and that of his double in literature, Loder. A relative newcomer to the world of fiction, with her place in literature not fully established, critics sought to address the book's principal objective.

³⁶ James H. Murphy, *Catholic Fiction and Social Reality in Ireland, 1873-1922*, (London: Greenwood press, 1997), p. 17.

³⁷ The discussion of ethics and morality in Thurston's work will feature in Chapter Five.

³⁸ Untitled Article, *The Easy Chair*, 22 October 1904, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

³⁹ Untitled Article, *Freeman's Journal*, 20 October 1904, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

Thurston disavowed links to Parnell, Churchill and the other pertinent political figures of the day: 'But Mrs. Thurston disclaims any such affinity with real life personages in her portrayal of Loder, and claims that he is a creation of her own, having no double except the fictitious John Chilcote'.⁴⁰ Yet in an interview with Constance Smedley she admitted to conducting a significant level of research on politics in preparing the novel, so as to add to its overall credibility.⁴¹ She also 'confessed to a preference for her second book rather than her first, if only because of the extra work it had entailed, and the interest which her research brought to her'.⁴² In his work *The Irish Writers 1880-1940: Literature Under Parnell's Star*, Herbert Howarth suggests that in the years following Parnell's death, Irish writers were both inspired and compelled to assess their own relation to the country:

What Parnell's death immediately did for the writers and artists, besides raising their passions was to raise their sense of responsibility, indicate emphatically the necessity for Irish self-criticism: and because there were men and women looking for guidance in the perplexity that followed the 1891 schism, it multiplied their audience.⁴³

Thurston's decision to approach a subject to which she had no prior disposition could be perceived as an initial attempt to bring her closer to not only the political sphere to which Madden and Parnell devoted their lives, but to tentatively broach the topic of national politics from her own unique perspective. To the national press Thurston was a celebrity, associated more with social gatherings and tennis tournaments than the political front lines. Remaining largely on the periphery of her father's activities as he campaigned for Home Rule, the writing of *John Chilcote, M.P.* constituted Thurston's attempt to engage with Madden's life in a manner which she failed to do during his lifetime. Heralded for her ability to depict her fictional heroines with a rounded sense

⁴⁰ Untitled Article, 5 November 1904, Box 4, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁴¹ Revealed in an interview with Constance Smedley, 'Some story-book people', *T.P.'s Weekly*, 11 February 1910, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁴² Untitled Article, *Scotsman*, 29 December 1904, Box 9, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁴³ Herbert Howarth, *The Irish Writers 1880-1940: Literature Under Parnell's Star*, (London: Rockliff Publications, 1958), p. 6.

of self-awareness, Thurston herself was not exempt from the levels of self-analysis with which she bestowed upon her creations. She echoed Howarth's suggestion that 'self-criticism was necessary or the Irish would've died from complacency',⁴⁴ when in an interview with *The Scotsman*, she commented on the lack of drive in the lives of Irishwomen when it came to effectively contributing to society:

I doubt whether Irish society helps very much to cultivate any serious lifework for a girl. We have a genius for enjoying ourselves, and if circumstances do not compel us we do not think much of engaging in any regular and exacting task. So that, with the pleasures of life, which came to me after I came out, the memory of my childhood's writing days became fainter than ever'.⁴⁵

A literary career would have been the ideal means by which women could engage themselves more fully with the social and political upheaval that surrounded Home Rule. With *John Chilcote, M.P.*, it is likely that Thurston's decision to address the British political situation in the burgeoning years of the twentieth century, and in the wake of her father's death, was her attempt at showing what women were capable of from their limited position in (what was then) modern society. She would address this notable gender inequality with the character of Eve Chilcote.

Chilcote's disenfranchised wife, Eve, occupies the archetypal role of politician's wife and an initial inspection of the character reveals quite a dry and unassuming personality. Chilcote, the imposter Loder and even Eve herself are quite willing to limit the character's contribution to the role of supportive wife, as she, on occasion, intervenes with subtle, self-effacing remarks like 'How splendid it would be to be a man' or 'thoughts are the same as words to women, that's why we're so unreasonable'.⁴⁶ Similarly, Loder limits women to function merely as amusement, encumbrance or charming creatures whose 'best attribute was the imagination'. (*John*

⁴⁴ Howarth, p. 21.

⁴⁵ Untitled Article, *Scotsman*, 29 December 1904, Box 9, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁴⁶ Katherine Cecil Thurston, *John Chilcote, M.P.*, (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1904), p. 228.

Chilcote, M.P. 247) As the narrative progresses, however, both Eve's role in the book, and estimation in Loder's eyes, expands substantially.

As previously mentioned, the novel's eponymous protagonist deflects his responsibilities and indeed his entire life onto the destitute Loder, who is charged with the task of rising above obscurity and playing his part in ruling an empire. But while Eve's task was seemingly limited to mere observation, Loder grew to acknowledge her significance in maintaining the ruse:

On his first sight of her she had appealed to him as a strange blending of youth and self-possession – a girl with a woman's clearer perception of life; later, he had been drawn to study her in other aspects: but now for the first time he saw her as a power in her own world, a woman to whom no man could deny consideration. (*John Chilcote, M.P.* 142)

The conclusion of the novel sees the death of the original Chilcote from a drug overdose, leaving his double to contemplate the choice of either abandoning his role as British M.P. or continuing to live another man's life. Seeking reassurance from Eve, Loder questions his hand in the hoax and the course of action that has led to this turn of events. The recognition of his failings seemingly casts doubt on any definitive course of action. The death of Chilcote should herald the end of the deception, leaving Loder the choice of flight, or continuing to live another man's life. At this point Thurston makes Eve the catalyst for the novel's resolution. Throughout the work, Eve accedes that success in the political sphere is infinitely more important than marital happiness. Given Loder's value to the Persian peace process, his continued adoption of the John Chilcote persona is deemed imperative. Eve's steadfast dedication to her husband's career, and to the maintenance of Loder's deception is vital in assuring not only the doppelganger's safety, but also the continued security of the British cabinet. Loder, upon learning of his double's death decides to flee, but this is quickly discouraged by Eve:

You think it finer to go away and make a new life than to live the life that is waiting for you, because one is independent and the other means

the use of another man's name and another man's money [...] It is far nobler to fill an empty niche than to carve one for yourself'. (*John Chilcote, M.P.* 368)

The freedom to reinvent the self defined Thurston's fiction from the first to final novel. John Loder's very sense of self became bound with the conformity of his newfound status as politician. Eve Chilcote appears as little but the subservient wife throughout the novel, yet it was only through her influence on the imposter Loder that the masquerade surrounding the life and death of John Chilcote could succeed. The final line of the novel sees Loder admit Eve's authority when, in response to the request that he become the Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, he states 'My consent or refusal, lies with my wife'. (*John Chilcote, M.P.* 370) The suggestion that the covert nature of the bond between Eve and the imposter Loder drew inspiration from Charles Stewart Parnell's relationship to Katharine (Kitty) O'Shea is given further credence in light of the focus on Eve's overall contribution to the narrative.

Kitty O'Shea had been separated from her husband, Captain William O'Shea for a number of years when she first encountered Parnell. Situated in Eltham, both she and Captain O'Shea (a Catholic Nationalist M.P. for the Galway Borough) took an active part in the negotiations that led to Ireland's first Home Rule bill in 1886, with Kitty O'Shea becoming the liaison between the British Prime Minister, William Gladstone and Charles Stewart Parnell. In her autobiographical account of her life with Parnell⁴⁷, she acknowledged her part in aiding negotiations, but also revealed that her interest in politics began and ended with Parnell:

I was never a 'political lady' and apart from him, I have never felt the slightest interest in politics, either Irish or English and I can honestly say that except for urging him (Parnell) to make terms with the government in order to obtain his liberation from prison, I did not one once throughout those eleven years attempt to use my influence over him to 'bias' his public life or politics; nor, being convinced that his opinions and measures were the only ones worth consideration, was I even tempted to do so. In many interviews with Mr. Gladstone I was

⁴⁷ Katharine O'Shea, *Charles Stewart Parnell: His Love Story and Political Life*, (New York: George H.Doran company, p. 1914).

Parnell's messenger, and in all other work I did for him it was understood on both sides that I worked for Parnell alone.⁴⁸

The devotion shown to Parnell and his cause reflects the type of commitment that Eve Chilcote demonstrated to Loder throughout *John Chilcote, M.P.* O'Shea admitted a lack of interest in national matters, but as her autobiography progresses, it becomes obvious that her involvement with Parnell stirred an inclination towards political activity. 'But to me personally, he always showed me the marvellous charm of manner which sent me away feeling that I was at least a compelling force in the great scheme of politics and worthy of the place I held'.⁴⁹ In a similar vein, Eve Chilcote's sense of disappointment in not being actively involved in shaping the British nation is worn away, as her pride in her husband's (Loder) success comes to the fore. The narrator elaborates on Eve's sense of fulfilment following Loder's rousing speech in the House of Parliament: 'It seemed that life came to her now for the first time – came in the glad, proud, satisfying tide of things accomplished. This was her hour' and the recognition of it brought the blood to her face in a sudden happy rush. [...] She was no longer lonely, no longer aloof; she was kin with all this pitiful, admirable, sinning, loving humanity'. (*John Chilcote, M.P.* 284-285) As the narrative nears its close, Thurston litters the novel with numerous remarks which re-enforce Eve's sense of triumph: 'Her manner was not that of the ill-used wife, but resembled his own – seizing the present' (*John Chilcote, M.P.* 316); 'This past fortnight belonged to you – now it's my turn: today is mine' (*John Chilcote, M.P.* 318) and 'And so, once again, the woman conquered' (*John Chilcote, M.P.* 319). Eve's crowning achievement is perhaps delivered with the esteemed politician's revelation that the sole reason he continued with the masquerade was to earn her respect. (*John Chilcote, M.P.* 344) Charles Stewart Parnell mirrors this level of commitment to Kitty O'Shea, addressing her as his 'Queenie' and stating his need for her support throughout his various ordeals 'for her own husband's sake'.⁵⁰ Perhaps the greatest example of support from Kitty to Parnell was shown during the well-documented divorce proceedings between Kitty

⁴⁸ O'Shea, preface xi.

⁴⁹ Ibid. p. 258-259.

⁵⁰ O'Shea, from letters dated 12 and 21 November 1881.

and erstwhile husband, William, in 1889. It was with the legal separation of the O'Sheas that perhaps the strongest similarity is shown between Parnell and his fictional counterpart, Loder.

Upon the discovery of John Chilcote's body in the latter stages of the novel, Loder and Eve scramble to decide upon the best possible course of action. As previously mentioned, Loder expresses the wish to escape abroad; disavowing all ties to the both his doppelganger's life and indeed the British nation. His decision to remain as Chilcote is brought about by Eve's intervention: 'No, don't say anything! You are going to see things as I see them – you must do so – you have no choice. No real man ever casts away the substance for the shadow', (*John Chilcote, M.P.* 367) Parallels can be drawn between Loder's quandary and the moral dilemma that Parnell and O'Shea faced when Captain O'Shea filed for divorce. As it stood, the world at large was aware of the romance that existed between the couple for close to a decade. William O'Shea's decision to begin legal proceedings brought the issue into the spotlight, where the religious and moral implications of Parnell's romance would come to spell the downfall of his political career. Kitty documented the disgust that she felt towards her colleagues, and indeed the Irish nation, in the wake of the divorce. She references the English Prime Minister's sudden disdain when she states:

For ten years Gladstone had known of the relations between Parnell and myself, and had taken full advantage of the facility this intimacy offered him in keeping in touch with the Irish leader. For ten years. But that was a private knowledge. Now it was public knowledge, and an English statesman must always appear on the side of the angels.⁵¹

Elsewhere she bemoans the country's muted response to Parnell's legacy: 'Poor Ireland – a child in her asking, a child in her receiving and so much a child in her forgetting'.⁵² Should Thurston have borrowed from Parnell and O'Shea's forbidden romance as inspiration for her two lead characters, Thurston's decision to defy the ethical route and allow the couple of Loder and Eve to continue, was a direct response

⁵¹ Ibid, p.153.

⁵² O'Shea, vol. 2. p. 42.

to what she would have deemed, the very unethical behaviour of British and Irish society following the public announcement of the divorce.

Although Thurston may have downplayed the influence of Irish politics in the writing of *John Chilcote, M.P.*, there exists substantial evidence to suggest that she was able to combine her own preoccupation with identity re-invention with a substantial commentary on gender discrepancies and channel this through a narrative in which she could effectively demonstrate what women were capable of, given their restricted roles in society. The Loder/Eve, Parnell/O'Shea parallels gain further credence upon consideration of Thurston's knowledge of both her father's political background and close friendship with Parnell. Even though the biographical aspects of *John Chilcote, M.P.* appear as quite loose, the possibility remains that the tumultuous nature of the Parnell/O'Shea relationship and the subsequent scandal that it entailed, in some ways informed the difficulties that befell Loder and Eve. A more direct commentary on the relationship between the sexes in an Irish setting can be witnessed in both *The Fly on the Wheel* and *The Gambler* – Thurston's only two novels based primarily in Ireland.

(4.6) Autobiography and a Duty to Despondency in The Fly on the Wheel

By adopting a largely apolitical approach in her work, Thurston can be seen to have taken an alternate path to national identity when compared with many of her contemporaries. By choosing not to devote herself fully to the popular nationalist agenda in her two 'Irish' novels *The Fly on the Wheel* and *The Gambler*, she offers a more objective and credible insight into life in Ireland at the beginning of the twentieth century. With Thurston, we receive a largely personified response to the question of the nation, by identifying a core constituent of the nation: the Irish middle class. *The Fly on the Wheel* was written in 1907, the year of a painful separation from Thurston's husband, Ernest Temple Thurston. The setting of the novel was Waterford, the stronghold of the provincial Catholic middle class in the first decade of the new century, which Janet Madden-Simpson dubbed 'A rising yet insecure class, strong in

its own narrow purpose, held together by material ambitions and common ideals'.⁵³ As mentioned previously, the plot focuses on the life of Isabel Costello, a free-spirited socialite who returns to her Waterford home, after spending some time in Spain, only to be smothered by what she saw as its claustrophobic atmosphere. She enters into an affair with the local solicitor, Stephen Carey, but is later spurned when he rejects her advances for fear of its potentially harmful implications to his home life. Unable to transcend the limitations placed on her by a society, intolerant of people or ideals that clashed with the mores of their class, Isabel resorts to suicide.

At its centre, *The Fly on the Wheel* is a story about the disapproval of divorce in Ireland. Stephen Carey refuses to leave his wife and children for Isabel, because doing so would cause irreparable harm to his sons' future. Through the character of Isabel Costello, a woman in revolt, Thurston sets out to attack the society that was responsible for her unhappiness. Whereas her previous novels relied somewhat on elaborate set-pieces and melodrama, *The Fly on the Wheel*, portrays more of a social realism, possibly influenced by the author's own marital unhappiness. The reviewer from *The Glasgow Evening Times* comments on the originality of the piece when placed alongside Thurston's other novels:

Probably Mrs. Thurston will continue to be known chiefly as the author of *John Chilcote, M.P.* Not improbably, also, John Chilcote as a hero will hold the reader's regard more effectually than Stephen Carey. But it must be claimed for the latter that his personality suggests real flesh and blood in a matter not possible to the M.P. with the flavour of the semi-supernatural, which hangs about him. Stephen Carey is one of those people, with whom first contact is almost bound to inspire prejudice, if not actual dislike. Therein however, lies something of the secret of his intense humanism, and the first effect of his outstanding characteristics upon the reader is perhaps the best of tributes to the intense realism of his creator.⁵⁴

⁵³ Janet Madden Simpson, Afterword to Katherine Cecil Thurston's, *The Fly on the Wheel*, (London: Virago, 1987), p.331.

⁵⁴ Untitled Article, *Glasgow Evening Times*, 10 April 1908, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

Stephen's paramour, Isabel Costello, is identified as different from the outset. Her determined refusal to adhere to the accepted values of Waterford society marked her out as a deviant, someone who threatened the very nature of her class. Her affair with Stephen Carey constitutes this threat. Whereas Isabel sought a partner unshackled by convention, Stephen sought liberation from the conventional and repressive. He likened his affair as 'going down to hell', (*The Fly on the Wheel* 262) but in seeking his ultimate freedom, he failed to recognise the possible ramifications of the would-be couples' actions. Stephen escaping with Isabel would be akin to abandoning his place in the patriarchal order. Janet Madden-Simpson argues that Stephen's very sense of self was intimately bound to conforming to both the demands and the recompenses of this order.⁵⁵ His desertion would have had a devastating effect on those closest to him, so his decision to re-assume his position in society came not from his lack of affection for Isabel, but from his own admission that leaving his old-life behind would do more harm than good.

Given the dramatic separation of the lead characters and the female protagonist's dismal fate, the possible autobiographical element to the text is apparent. Reviews of the novel recognised something of a discrepancy between the novel and its predecessors in terms of its primary motivation:

One rather wonders what was Mrs. Thurston's motive in writing the book at all, for it certainly does not read with the conviction and purpose of much of her earlier work. There is a smattering of Irish politics and national life, but it is evident that the book is not intended to present a serious consideration of the Irish question.⁵⁶

The possibility exists that the autobiographical elements accounted for this fluctuation in purpose. The novel was published in the year following Ernest Thurston's desertion, so it is possible that Katherine drew upon her painful life experiences and essentially constructed or remodelled Waterford society around it. The success of her

⁵⁵ Madden Simpson, p. 340-341.

⁵⁶ Untitled Article, *Chicago Interior*, 29 October 1908, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

fiction amounted to a considerable level of fame both at home and abroad. She surpassed her husband and many of her contemporaries in terms of literary recognition. As addressed in Chapter One, this increased level of popularity resulted in the dissolution of the Thurstons' relationship as Ernest grew increasingly frustrated at his wife's success, to the point that it ultimately forced him to terminate the marriage. Ernest initially helped support Katherine's career as a novelist but only to the point that it dwarfed his own. Katherine Thurston proved to be a capable author in her own right, who craved freedom for both herself and her characters. Ernest could not accept that the relationship between the two was evolving beyond his control, leading him to abandon the marriage and use his supposedly domineering erstwhile wife as the scapegoat. It is arguably the case that Thurston's distance from her home life in Ireland and sudden abandonment by the man who took her away from that life contributed to the author's own sense of personal dislocation. Obvious similarities are then apparent between Thurston and Isabel Costello in *The Fly on the Wheel*, who self-destructs in the wake of Stephen Carey's desertion. If the text is to be read at an autobiographical level, the book might appear to be tricky and unreliable in terms of accuracy or even as an historical source, but there still exists a fine level of insight in this largely personalised response to living in middle class Irish society.

A number of critics applauded Thurston for providing 'a very realistic picture of middle class Irish life in an Irish provincial town, with all its petty hypocrisies, its sordid narrow-mindedness, its social bigotry, its comedy and its tragedy'.⁵⁷ Other reviews of the novel criticised, what they saw, as the distance that Thurston demonstrated in depicting her fellow countrymen – a similar complaint levelled against both her husband, Ernest and Emily Lawless following the publication of *Hurrish*: 'She appears to write of her characters from an elevation – standing on a chair, as it were, and looking down on them – consequently, she never makes us feel as if she really *knew* her people'.⁵⁸ Elsewhere, the reviewer for the *Glasgow Evening*

⁵⁷ Untitled Article, *Irish Daily Independent*, 6 April 1908, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁵⁸ E. Desmond Deane, Untitled Article, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

News states: ‘It seems to us that Mrs. Thurston does not much like her characters or even pity them; she is too superior to the triviality of Daisy, the sarcasm which Mary takes to be humour, the ardour of Tom for the Gaelic League and she stands aloof from the others even at the big moments’.⁵⁹ Comments such as these add credence to the suggestion of Thurston’s sense of dislocation from her home country.

Nevertheless, in exploring the orthodoxies of her own class, Thurston succeeded in exposing/challenging some of the preconceived notions of a life in a society which was less concerned with upholding the virtuous ideals of the either the Catholic church or Edwardian propriety and more with self-aggrandisement. As discussed in Chapter Three, Thurston openly criticised the notion of marriage in the novel, depicting it less as an expression of love and more as an economic or social arrangement. Even with the author’s noted cynicism on the issue, she was willing to praise the efforts of Father James - one of the champions of this particular sanctity, whom she depicts as sincere and honourable. Isabel Costello, by attempting to seduce a married man threatened the very foundations of the family and on a larger scale, the community. Yet Father James shows a great deal of compassion and understanding to the supposed deviant’s plight. Daisy Norris is portrayed as the defender of Waterford’s sensibilities, but her condemnation of Isabel’s potentially destructive presence is thwarted by the priest’s call for charity:

‘Oh well, I can’t help it, Father James!’
‘And what has the poor gipsy done?’
‘I can’t explain to you. She is different from the rest of us’.
‘And perhaps a little change is no harm!’
‘Or it may be a great harm, Father James’.
[...] ‘Ah well’, he said; ‘it’s not for us to judge her, Mary. The poor child will meet her own troubles’ [...] it struck me then that maybe life wouldn’t be too easy for her. She’s one, God help her, that’ll be asking too much from it’. (*The Fly on the Wheel*, 190-191)

⁵⁹ Untitled Article, *Glasgow Evening News*, 26 March 1908, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

At numerous times in the novel, the priest attempts to speak to Isabel about her apparent inability to re-acclimatise to life in Ireland, but while the character proves appreciative of Father James's efforts, she is resolute in her belief that 'It's not me, Father James, it's the world that's out of joint!' (*The Fly on the Wheel*, p. 195)

Horace Plunkett remarked in his controversial *Ireland in the New Century* that the sentiment of nationality in Ireland in his time was largely political and anti-English. He viewed the Irish response to the British presence to be overly sentimental, characterised by an undying hatred, which in itself was very un-Irish.⁶⁰ In terms of literary efforts there was a certain level of insecurity in approaching the topic of national identity with many Irish writers. The tendency to effectively select and manipulate aspects of the Irish tradition as a result of this insecurity was a feature in both the writings of the coloniser and colonised. While we have acknowledged that Katherine Thurston's work was marked by a love/hate relationship to her native soil, it did not obscure or tarnish her undoubted popularity or the undoubted popularity for her fiction at the time. Thurston attained a level of popularity in Ireland too, but it was significantly muted in comparison with her foreign successes. A possible reason for Thurston's ultimate exclusion from the Irish canon could have been her tendency to shy away from the nationalist agenda in her literature. Unfortunately for Thurston, her own particular brand of fiction may not have been sufficient to whet the appetite of the nation's readership as it could be said that the Ireland at the time did not judge by literary merits, rather it expected its own home-grown talent to help refute the prejudices that resulted from a national identity under fire.

Given the level of success that she enjoyed and the seeming comfort held in either creating or casting her protagonists in more exotic locations, the possibility that Thurston began to write for a more esoteric or foreign readership is a distinct one. Self-reinvention in an overseas setting became something of a constant in Thurston's fiction. From her debut work *The Circle*, in which the young Anna Solny sought to

⁶⁰ Horace Plunkett, *Ireland in the New Century*, (Dublin: Browne and Nolan, 1904), p. 287.

escape the limitations of her home life by travelling abroad, through to her most controversial work *Max*, in which a young woman escapes to Paris in order to become a successful artist, Thurston, it seems, held something of a fascination with exoticism and self-discovery in foreign locations. Isabel Costello in *The Fly in the Wheel* was perhaps the sole Thurston creation who chose to seek freedom in an Irish setting, but given that this endeavour results in the character's suicide, the rather bleak possibilities for change in Ireland are again suggested. The author's description of Stephen Carey, the most revered man in the village, emphasises this sense of pessimism:

In Ireland, the bread of expediency is the staff of life, and Stephen Carey had early seated himself at the frugal board. If now, in these later days, a ghost of the lost ambition every glided behind his chair, pointing a wavering hand towards the great market-place of life, where the fountains flow to quench all thirsts, only his eyes saw the passing of the shade: none guessed that for a moment his achievements shrank to their true proportion, and the good substantial bread became as ashes in his mouth. (*The Fly on the Wheel* 35)

Elsewhere in the novel, the characters become embroiled in a debate over Irish nationalism, with Tom Norris bemoaning the influence of modern thought: 'We'd have been a nation long ago – a nation in the commercial and intellectual sense – only for the poisonous spirit of depreciation that's spread over every honest effort to raise the country'. (*The Fly on the Wheel* 104) Here Thurston uses Stephen as a foil to Norris's antiquated train of thought:

Wait a minute, Tom. You hold that when England robbed us of our language, she threw us back into a sort of national childhood – out of which we are now slowly struggling? [...] Now that she has been trounced into learning her English, for goodness' sake, let her do what she can with that, instead of setting her down to a dead language! If you want advancement, let it be educational by all means; but let the education be modern! Souse the country with modern thought – Spencer and Huxley, Haeckel and Kant - and be hanged to sentimentality. (*The Fly on the Wheel* 105-106)

Perhaps in an attempt to re-enforce the sense of fatalism in Ireland, the other characters that are present for Stephen's outburst express shock, deeming the writings of these chosen authors to be 'a dangerous doctrine'. (*The Fly on the Wheel* 106) At another point in the narrative, Stephen's sister-in-law, Daisy, refers to Tolstoy and Zola as 'those horrible foreign writers' (*The Fly on the Wheel* 188). Here, Thurston again demonstrates the parochial mindset of her creations.

By drawing on the more negative aspects of Irish society, especially as it concerned the resistance to modern thought, Katherine Thurston suggests that her real passion lay elsewhere, perhaps with a more appreciative foreign audience. This theory finds its greatest support in the professional correspondence between Ernest, Katherine and her publisher in Edinburgh, William Blackwood. The archive contains a number of letters from spring 1907 in which Blackwood became increasingly frustrated with Thurston's reticence to disclose her preferences for publishing/submission dates and agreements.⁶¹ Blackwood made repeated allusions to Thurston's American publishers, the Harpers and McClures⁶² to whom, he believed, Thurston's primary allegiance lay. Thurston openly confirms William Blackwood's suspicions in a letter to Mr. Perris of the Literacy Agency in 1905, when she asks to be released from her contract:

I also wish to acknowledge your letter of May 16th but as regards the new proposals which you make, I do not feel that they would very materially change the position – in the most important changes you suggest are in connection with the British market - which, as you know is not of nearly such importance as the American.⁶³

In terms of her fiction, it is with the novel of the same year that Thurston's preoccupation with self-invention abroad and the acknowledgement of the inescapability of nationality found its first expression.

⁶¹ Letters dated 1 and 8 February 1907 from Blackwood to Thurston, Box 1, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁶² Of the Hutchinson publishing house in New York.

⁶³ Letter from Katherine Thurston to Mr. Perrin of the Literacy Agency, 22 May 1905, Box 13, National Library of Scotland Archive, Acc 13378.

(4.7) Figuring the Family in The Gambler

The plot of *The Gambler* centres on the life of Clodagh Asshlin, a young Irish woman, who devotes the early stages of her life to the care of her younger sister Nance and her spendthrift father Dennis in Orristown, County Wexford. The father is revealed to be a degenerate gambler whose misdeeds have led the family's holdings to near ruin. Following Asshlin's death, the Englishman, James Milbanke agrees to marry Clodagh in an effort to safeguard her and her sister's estate. The couple retire to Venice, where Milbanke's unexpected death results in Clodagh inheriting a great deal of money. She soon falls back on hereditary practices and gambles away her fortune, only to be saved at the last minute by Sir Walter Gore, who agrees to marry her, despite her past indiscretions.

The Gambler was Thurston's follow-up to *John Chilcote, M.P.*, and while it proved to be commercially successful, critical reaction was decidedly mixed. Certain critics applauded Thurston for her handling of more realistic, less melodramatic subject matter, whilst others argued the opposite, deeming the novel to be too stagey and filled with caricatures. The mixed response was recorded in several reviews of *The Gambler*, most notably in *The Bookman*:

The opening chapters describing Clodagh's unhappy girlhood are the best thing Mrs. Thurston has written. They have pathos and many touches of skilful characterization. The rest of the story is frankly theatrical, and the characters, with scarcely an exception, are but types – very black villains and very white plaster saints. But with Mrs. Thurston the story is everything, and she displays her usual power of rapid and engrossing narrative.⁶⁴

The divided nature of the critical reception echoed the varied depictions of the Irish character. The brutish savage, as featured in 'The Hazard' finds expression once again

⁶⁴ Untitled Review, *The Bookman*, 6 March 1906, Box 4, National Library of Scotland Archive, Acc 13378.

in Clodagh's father, whose propensity for unsocial behaviour and vulgar manner of speech indicates a primarily negative portrayal of Irish disposition. Other characters, such as Clodagh's younger sister Nance and Hannah the cook ably demonstrate the more positive traits of compassion and charm, foreshadowing those exhibited by Father James in *The Fly on the Wheel* and Ned Blake in *Max*. Whereas Thurston's Irish characters were frequently relocated to foreign settings as they attempted to reinvent themselves, *The Gambler's* Clodagh Asshlin is either repeatedly returned to Orristown, or is forced to re-evaluate habitual customs in an effort to make sense of her life. As such, Thurston uses her as a case study to examine the influence of nationhood on individual growth.

From the outset, Thurston's preoccupation with types is evident. The opening lines of the novel describe James Milbanke's character as 'the average Saxon'⁶⁵ who lacked imagination and could not appreciate the beauties of life that surrounded him. Shortly thereafter, Dennis Asshlin's self-deprecating sarcasm points to the Irishman's stagnation in terms of life and ambition: 'Everything in this country is too damn old. [...] Accumulated time is the disease we're suffering from. 'Tisn't the man who uses his time in this country, but the man who kills it who's mastered the art of living. Oh we're a wonderful people, James!' (*The Gambler* 12) It is only through Clodagh's initial meeting with Milbanke that preconceived perceptions of the national character are put into question. Shortly before the meeting with Milbanke, Dennis Asshlin comments on his sense of ancestral pride: 'My great grandfather, Anthony Asshlin [...] was as fine a specimen of the Irish gentleman as ever lived – I don't care who denies it. [...] An appreciation of good wine was the one thing he left his descendants' (*The Gambler* 17). The glowing endorsement of ancestry is quickly rebutted by Clodagh when she exclaims 'He was the worst in the country – and the greatest fool!' (*The Gambler* 18) Thus, from an early stage of the novel, Thurston sought to bestow Clodagh with the sense of awareness that characterised each of her wilful, fictional heroines. Unlike Anna Solny and Maxine, however, Asshlin, although she is reunited with erstwhile lover Gore at the end of the novel, was to suffer much more throughout

⁶⁵ Katherine Cecil Thurston, *The Gambler*, (London: Hutchinson, 1906), p. 1.

the course of the narrative. This perhaps aligns her more closely with fellow Irish citizen, Isabel Costello and emphasises the sense of pessimism associated with Irish society.

When speaking of his daughter's disposition, Dennis Asshlin makes the comment that 'She's the whole race of us in one' (*The Gambler* 19) seemingly acknowledging that she embodied the disparate strands of Irishness, be they of a complimentary, or derogatory nature. The reviewer of the *Western Morning News* echoed this claim:

Clodagh Milbanke is a type of the Irish nature at its worst and best: to a reckless grasp of present pleasure no matter at what cost of future pain, impulsive emotions, ready to exult or despair with equal facility and still less reason, and the weakness that will always shirk a present difficulty at the cost of creating a future one, there is a strong sense of honour and honourable obligations, and a nature that can love deeply and deeply, even when love seems slighted.⁶⁶

The reviewer for the *Glasgow Herald* commented on the skill in which Thurston develops the dual nature of Clodagh's character:

The elaboration of the theme chosen for exposition implies a close and patient study of the twofold play that is brought to bare on the motive through hereditary influence and individual temperament and the successive details furnish a brilliant illustration of subtle and vigorous handling. [...] The conflict between her native virtue and the inherited spirit of self-indulgence and reckless gambling is depicted with unflinching candour and fidelity.⁶⁷

Thurston sets up Clodagh with the necessary attributes to follow her ambition and succeed in life. She actively resists her father's reckless lifestyle, as she was all too aware of its detrimental effects. She was charged with the task of catering to the needs

⁶⁶ Untitled Article, *Western Morning News*, 2 March 1906, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁶⁷ Untitled Article, *Glasgow Herald*, 27 February 1906, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

of her family in the presence of her father's slow extinction and through her selfless acts and loyalty to her family she was, as Thurston puts it 'voicing the sentiments of her race'. (*The Gambler* 47) Thurston adds 'An Asshlin might neglect everything else in the world, but his debts of honour were sacred things'. (*The Gambler* 47) The laudable characteristics that Clodagh displayed in Ireland did not make the transition to Italy, however; as following her marriage to Milbanke and their move to Venice, Clodagh loses her sense of purpose and falls back into hereditary practices, thus exhibiting the family's predisposition to the self-destructive behaviour.

Marriage, as has been explored in the previous chapter, was a key component in the New Woman's downfall. As mentioned, at the beginning of the chapter, the subscription to traditional practices often constituted the fictional heroines sole means of survival in a society that proved intolerant of persons or activities that challenged its overall sovereignty. Nowhere is this notion more evident than in *The Gambler*, as Clodagh's duty to her family necessitated her unwanted union with Milbanke:

From the day on which she recognized that the state of matrimony was something irrevocably serious, she had taken upon herself an attitude of reserved surrender that was difficult to analyse – difficult even to superficially understand. By a strangely immature process of deduction, she had satisfied herself that marriage was a state of bondage, more less distasteful as chance decreed – a state in which, by a fundamental law of nature, submission and self-repression were the chief factors necessary upon the woman's side. (*The Gambler* 133)

What is noteworthy about marriage's treatment in *The Gambler* and also in *The Fly on the Wheel* is the level of dejection or sense of resignation that was associated with the institution. Clodagh marries Milbanke out of a sense of obligation to her family, whereas Stephen Carey opts to remain with his wife, Daisy, despite his deep affection for Isabel. Elsewhere in Thurston's body of work, there exists the same sense of despondency associated with marriage, but the characters seem less fatalistic about its implications for individual prosperity. Eve Chilcote effectively manipulates her status in her relationship with both Chilcote and Loder, by spurring their ambition and offsetting her own sense of self-worth through their achievements. The drug-addled

Chilcote is embarrassed by his perceived weakness in her eyes, while Loder continues with the masquerade, attributing his decision to remain as Chilcote, solely as a result of Eve's involvement. In 'The Hazard', Bridget ably resists the advances of the brutish Roger Trale and postpones their nuptials, despite the imposing threat of physical violence to her person, resulting in her chosen union with Patrick. What becomes apparent in these examples is the manner in which these women essentially manipulate their status within their relationships to achieve their own desired effects. Conversely, Clodagh Asshlin, Isabel Costello and even Stephen Carey, are shown to struggle against the restrictions that national duty has placed on both their ambitions and the manner in which they govern their day-to-day lives. Isabel's life ends in her premature death, Stephen is forced to return to a loveless marriage and Clodagh is resigned to a life of addiction and excess, in which she loses her entire sense of self as a result of the lifestyle she so strongly resisted. Towards the close of *The Gambler* she is presented with a picture of her dead father, and in recognition of the weakness that they now both shared, she despairs: 'Oh God. Who made me? I am afraid!' (*The Gambler* 285)

Despite Clodagh's recognition of her gambling problem, she fails to revisit the levels of self-awareness and proficiency that featured so prominently throughout the opening sections of the book, instead relying on the intervention of either her sister Nance, the philanderer Deerehurst, or the gentleman Gore to free her of the ramifications of her addiction. Her helplessness is not only a cause of consternation among critics, but also an acknowledgement on Thurston's part of the inescapability of what Mariott Watson dubbed 'The Celtic Melancholy',⁶⁸ essentially denoting the Irish person's proclivity towards predestination. As Clodagh says herself: 'all people are to be envied who have power – and freedom. I get so tired of myself sometimes – so rebellious against myself! I am always doing the things I should not do and failing to do the things that I should. I am hopeless. (*The Gambler* 301) Whereas Isabel Costello fights for her right to independent action up to her dying breath, thus

⁶⁸ Untitled Article, *Daily Mail*, 17 February 1905, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

garnering respect or admiration from the reader, Clodagh's sense of fatalism leads her to escape a fate such as Isabel's through the efforts of others. The majority of Thurston's female protagonists are depicted as being self-willed women in revolt; the fact that Irish society disallowed both Isabel Costello's revolution and Clodagh Asshlin's ambition, bringing both women to brink of suicide, demonstrates Thurston's deep-rooted scepticism as it pertained to lasting opportunities for growth in an Irish setting. Like Mary Anne Sadlier before her, Thurston's fiction, in its exploration of nationhood, duty, Catholicism and restricted personal freedoms, spoke to subsequent Irish Women novelists of the twentieth century, most notably Limerick's Kate O'Brien.

(4.8) Munster's Literary Craftswomen: Thurston and O'Brien

O'Brien's career came to resemble Thurston's with both women achieving a significant amount of success during their respective lifetimes, only to have their oeuvres fall into neglect during the course of the twentieth century, and then benefit from a rejuvenation of interest as the century drew to a close. Born in Limerick in 1897, O'Brien, like Thurston, would later leave Ireland for Britain, where she composed most of her fiction. Her novels achieved notoriety for the radical manner in which they mobilised feminism and opposed Irish conservatism. *The Ante Room* (1934) in particular, is of special interest when it comes to the discussion of Thurston's work and its lasting impact on the canon. In the works of both authors, the subject of Irish life is broached solely from the micro level of social politics and parochial conventions; in both we have the discord between personal freedom and communal obedience, with the handling of female agency and sexuality being the primary focus.

O'Brien's *The Ante Room* offers a fascinating insight into the internal war between a woman's duty and desire – mirroring quite closely the struggle that Isabel Costello faced in Thurston's *The Fly on the Wheel*. Set in Ireland in 1880 *The Ante-Room* documents Agnes Mulqueen's story as she is torn between her duty as her family's caretaker and the forbidden love she held for her brother-in-law, Vincent. As

Isabel falls for the unattainable Stephen Carey, so too does Agnes fall for Vincent. While the focus of the novel is very much centred on Agnes' struggle, the familial dysfunction that features in the Mulqueen's family home, makes the work all the more reminiscent of Thurston's handling of middle class Waterford society. Like *The Fly on the Wheel*, *The Ante Room* is a study of types – a study of the people who comprised the Irish middle class identity. The manner in which O'Brien dissects these types is strikingly similar to Thurston's own treatment.

Doctor William Curran is introduced to the novel as a possible love interest for Agnes. Having returned from the continent, it is reported that Curran 'was dynamic, direct, and in spite of a reputation for brilliance, unpopular. But he had plenty of self-confidence [...] Scrupulous, quick and given to calling a spade a spade, he was said by many of his patients to be unsympathetic'⁶⁹ As the exotic Isabel Costello invaded middle-class Waterford with her loose mores and disregard of convention, so too did Curran shirk any preconceived expectations of his character. Elsewhere in the novels, and again echoing the treatise on divorce in *The Fly on the Wheel*, the other characters would ponder the implications of marriage for their future happiness. Agnes' brother-in-law Vincent O'Regan bemoans the failing of his romance with Agnes' sister Marie-Rose – demoting marriage itself to serve as merely a social function, with the strength of expectation overpowering genuine affection:

He though in fact what every young man thinks of marriage – only he came to it out of habit of great loneliness, and with no experience of the traps and intricacies of feeling. [...] Marriage, however it fails, marks and changes its participants. Vincent's marriage was a failure. They were still thus childless, and inclined to an unspoken superstition that that was only a symptom of the predestined misfortune of their union, which beneath its decent worldly gloss of peace, was unstable and unhappy.

(*The Ante-Room* 102-103)

As Thurston sought to draw attention to the manner in which marriage was treated on the communal level, so did O'Brien with *The Ante-Room*. As Thurston infused her male lead Stephen Carey with a certain New Woman ethos, so too did O'Brien as her

⁶⁹ Kate O'Brien, *The Ante-Room*, (London: Virago, 1989), p. 53.

male protagonists contest their deep-seated grievances with their place and function whilst living within the confines of Mellick. The importance Thurston attached to the guiding hand of faith in her fiction is again raised in O'Brien's novel. Even Curran, the learned outsider and sceptic, recognises its gravitas in the Mulqueen residence:

An hereditary Catholic, he took prayer as a matter of course, a natural human impulse which it was not his business, or perhaps anyone's to explain. As a doctor, he observed it to be the most salutary of medicines. The pros and cons of religion never stayed his thought, life as he found it being the only field of concern. And in that field, it seemed to him that the Catholic Church provided as good a system as might be found for keeping the human animal in order – a necessity which he emphatically accepted.

(The Ante-Room 67)

As Agnes spurns Vincent's advances for the harmful implications their union would have on her sister Marie-Rose, so too does Stephen Carey deny Isabel Costello - even though both Agnes and Stephen are temporarily infused by the force of individual desire which overrides social responsibility. The rejected suitors: Isabel in *The Fly on the Wheel* and Vincent in *The Ante-Room* resort to taking their own lives as a form of protest in defence of this force of individualism – resulting in two very uncommon instances of suicide in an Irish Catholic novel.

There is no record of Thurston's influence on O'Brien's fiction, but given the former's vast popularity in the early 1900s, it is perhaps fair to assume that O'Brien was aware of her predecessor's work. Indeed, John Wilson Foster makes mention of 'the explicit Catholic cruxes'⁷⁰ and 'religious life (being) a form of emotional rebound for women'⁷¹ which inhabited the work of both novelists – noting the conflicts between personal freedom, faith, love and conscience, which defined the oeuvres of both authors. *The Land of Spices* (1941), and *The Ante-Room* in particular are strongly reminiscent of the work of the Cork-born author.

⁷⁰ Wilson Foster, p. 472

⁷¹ Ibid. p. 473

(4.9) Conclusion

Save the personal letters in the Edinburgh Archive, little biographical information exists on Katherine Thurston. Given her elevated social status, not just as a result of her success as a novelist but also the staunchly nationalist household in which she was raised, it is frustrating to realise that her true feelings on Ireland may only be conveyed through her fiction, with its plot-points and protagonists set in a myriad of foreign locations. In describing the work of Jennifer Johnston, Kathryn Kirkpatrick notes that ‘national identity is an inescapable element for a woman’s sense of self, even if a woman’s relation to the nation state is complicated and unresolved’⁷² – a statement that is undoubtedly applicable to Thurston. Katherine strove to legitimise her connection to Ireland in their fiction. *The Fly on the Wheel* and *The Gambler* in particular, tapped into the air of despondency that characterised Ireland during its most pronounced period of social and political upheaval. Thurston died during a largely transitional time in Ireland’s storied history, yet her fiction succeeds in highlighting the complexities involved when addressing questions of Irish identity and representation from a woman’s perspective. The tendency in her fiction to relocate her heroines is indicative of her pessimism as it related to the possibilities for change and growth in an Irish setting. Yet through suggestive allusions to prominent historical figures, descriptive evocations of the beauty of the Irish landscape, relatively positive commentaries on institutions such as the church, and a number of highly sympathetic Irish characters who ably demonstrated the more positive traits of her home country, Thurston’s latent fondness of her native soil becomes apparent. Her subtle observations on her home country only add to the richness and variety that characterises the Irish literary tradition and, as seen in O’Brien’s fiction, succeeds in its cultivation for future generations of female novelists.

⁷² Kirkpatrick, p. 11.

Chapter 5 – Thurston and Early Modernist Discourse

(5.1) Introduction to Modernism

‘No first step can be really great; it must of necessity possess more of prophecy than of achievement; nevertheless it is by the first step that a man marks the value, not only of his cause, but of himself’ – (*John Chilcote, M.P.* 208)

Short epigrammatic statements, such as this, became a feature of Thurston’s fiction. The succinct, quotable excerpts found themselves adorning the title pages of the weekly book reviews, offering snippets of wisdom and oftentimes revealing the home truths of her age. Yet while the author was happy to impart knowledge to her Edwardian audience, the above quote perhaps indicates that her fiction was intended to speak to the subsequent generations as well. As the previous chapters have shown, Thurston’s sense of dislocation from Ireland, the seclusion she enjoyed in Ardmore coupled with her attempts to evade the media’s scrutiny would point to a figure far removed from the extravagant society belle of the 1900s for whom she has posthumously been known.¹ The deviations from traditional moral purpose, the complex issues that disallowed the publication of a number of novels and plays, together with a gravitation towards the more pressing concerns of her gender in the later stages of her literary career demonstrate a growing preoccupation with both self-reflexivity and a questioning of her role as popular novelist. With the height of her career ostensibly behind her² and mixed reviews of *The Gambler* and *The Mystics*, it is possible that the rejection of the sensation and melodrama that marked her earlier works facilitated a more provocative brand of fiction, that was perhaps an indication of a less-fashionable but undeniable emerging shift in literary ideology and practice. The concept of literary modernism is perhaps as difficult to define as the shifting perception of the New Woman character that featured at the close of the nineteenth

¹ Gerardine Meaney, ‘Decadence, Degeneration and Revolting Aesthetics: The Fiction of Emily Lawless and Katherine Cecil Thurston’, *Colby Quarterly*, vol. 36, no. 2, (2000), p. 169.

² None of Thurston’s subsequent fiction achieved the same level of critical attention or sales figures of *John Chilcote, M.P.*

century,³ yet the movement has been commonly associated with the following notions: a disassociation from Victorian conventions, the breaking of tradition, a disbelief in absolute truths, significant experimentation within style and narrative structure and a primary focus on individualism.

The reappraisal of narrative form and structures is probably the least prevailing modernist aspect of Thurston's fiction. A self-proclaimed storyteller, Thurston's duty was to the advancement of the plot and not to stylistic experimentation. The straightforward method of writing won acclaim with a number of critics at the time. As the reviewer for the *Daily Mail* comments:

All this is to say that Mrs. Thurston handles her plot like a master. She never loads her narrative with superfluous detail. There is just enough of that to indicate the picture and nothing more is wanted. True economy is true generosity and makes for a proper richness. We do not want narratives cluttered up with the unessential, however pretty or clever that may be. A direct and straightforward narrative is the truest way of art. There is nothing to impede the current of *John Chilcote, M.P.* The proportion is excellent, the book is devoid of the trappings that merely bedeck and bedrape; it is naked drama. And the effect is enhanced by the ease of style. Simplicity is better than exaggeration and Mrs. Thurston is gracefully simple.⁴

A number of reviews for *John Chilcote, M.P.* confirmed Thurston's preoccupation with the story development, insisting that the dramatic nature of the plot demanded a certain level of urgency in terms of narrative layout: 'it is well to say at once that it has much dramatic instinct and sense of proportion, and if the capacity for detail seems wanting, it may simply be because of the exigencies of the plot demand broad and general treatment. It is a tragedy [...] told with grace and a fluidity of expression'.⁵ Thematic preoccupations then, would constitute Thurston's association to the

³ Peter Faulkner adds that 'The immense variety of works in all the arts to which the term modernist has applied constitutes a formidable challenge to any attempt of exactness', taken from *Modernism*, (London: Routledge, 1990), Introduction, p. ix.

⁴ Unknown Title, *Daily Mail*, 1 October 1904, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁵ Untitled Article, *Yorkshire Post*, 26 October 1904, Box 9, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

movement, with the most pertinent link involving the modernists' discerning awareness of the world in which they wrote. The Romantics of the previous century opted to focus on representation and the imagination, whereas writers of the mid 1800s responded with questions of morality, the intellect and a preoccupation with realism. The Modernists, conversely, addressed the conflict between inner and outer realities, objectifying art and its use, and exploring their own life experiences and questioning its representation in their work. The increasing levels of self-consciousness in the modernist writer's fiction allowed for greater complexity in their art, both in terms of subject matter, style and form. As Morag Schiach adds: 'In relation to modernist fiction, innovations in the representation of time; complex explorations of the nature of consciousness; formal experiments in narrative structure; and an intense use of the imaginative power of the image have always been understood as central'.⁶ Thurston's relationship to modernist literature is perhaps less obvious. Unlike later writers such as Dorothy Richardson, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf or any of the other noted modernists, she did not seek a radical overhaul of convention or literary practice. The innovation that the above writers brought to their work happened in the decades following Thurston's death. Indeed, Thurston's writing period (1901-1910) largely predated the more celebrated years of twentieth-century literary modernism, but as Gerardine Meaney, Eibhear Walshe, Tina O'Toole and other contemporary critics of her oeuvre have argued, Thurston's written works, while largely reflective of their time, and not ground-breaking in their approach, contained sufficient subversive appeal to prefigure the movement and add significantly to the formation of a pre-modernist discourse.

⁶ Morag Schiach, *The Cambridge Companion to the Modernist Novel*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 5

(5.2) Thurston and Modernism

The years pre-dating the advent of Literary Modernism are perhaps instrumental in understanding the factors that led to its emergence.⁷ In discussing Virginia Woolf's essays, Anthony Fothergill argues:

We too should see the essays and the kinds of questions they ask of earlier novelists, the possibilities they foresee for the modern novel, as attempts of self-understanding on the part of the writer in the early days of the century faced with the dilemma, as she saw it, of an absence of models to guide the experimental fervour of writers searching for alternative forms to express their changed relation to the world.⁸

Thurston, as we have discussed, explored questions of self-invention, feminism and nationalism in her fiction, yet the stretching of subject matter and the fragmentary nature of her work has left her outside the more recognised bounds of Irish and twentieth-century literary history. Thurston's relationship to the world was somewhat skewed: traditionally, she was willing to play the role of novelist, to the extent that it facilitated a comfortable life with her respective partners, but as the decade progressed, she was less inclined to do so and her fiction was to become much less populist and far more critical of convention. If there was an absence of models to guide the experimental hand of the earlier novelists, Thurston's oeuvre, which could be seen as partially subversive, lacked an underlying consensus and was thus sidelined from the accounts of literary modernism. But as Fothergill argues, this exclusion did not ultimately deny the validity of their efforts to comment on the shifting perception of experience and representation. Thurston's ideas of self-reflexivity and the questioning of gender roles were relayed within a traditional format and delineated through a standard narrative structure, but modernism, as Seamus Deane argues, entailed the combination of tradition and the modern as it 'defined itself as the new

⁷ The years following the First World War are generally denoted as marking the beginning of modernism in literature. The movement is often situated with the years 1914-1965.

⁸ As quoted in Faulkner, p. 29-30.

emerging from the old: it needed the presence of the archaic elements in order to articulate its difference from them'.⁹ The transformation of Thurston's play *Harlequin* is perhaps significant here as within itself, it denotes these artistic fluctuations in Thurston's style and purpose. As addressed in Chapter Two, the opening act depicts a bawdy comedy in which three characters become embroiled in a farcical stage show involving costumes and dance, while subsequent instalments include a complete removal of dramatic buffoonery as the play is shaped into a novel and the eponymous protagonist gets schooled on the dangers of the preconceived notions of gender by the Mrs. Havisham-esque Madame. The play/novel itself remained unpublished, but it goes some way in showing the inner contestation of the author's artistic design. Similarly, her final two novels *The Fly on the Wheel* and *Max* depict protagonists involved in conventional romantic scenarios only for the narratives to contest much more pressing social and cultural concerns. *The Fly on the Wheel's* oppressive connotations of marriage are delimited, ultimately necessitating the death of the protagonist, while *Max's* typical Parisian romance is undermined by the presence of the homo-erotic and issues of gender equality.¹⁰ The pessimism that was characteristic of the modernist movement would be reflected in these, Thurston's later works, most notably the Irish-based novels with their rejection of history's outdated social systems, the questioning of traditional morality and the undeniable sense of spiritual loneliness. Douglas Hewitt comments on the tendency of the modernist writer to shy away from society and adopt a more introspective approach:

But it is clear that during this period the novel shows in the hands of many of its practitioners a tendency to move away from supposedly objective representations of social life towards the inner experiences of the characters, and there is an increasing tendency for the novel to be left in suspense at its conclusion as if to assert the impossibility of the stable resolution which is normal in earlier fiction¹¹

⁹ Seamus Deane, *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing since 1970*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 53.

¹⁰ This aspect of the discussion will be addressed in section 5.5.

¹¹ Douglas Hewitt, *English Fiction of the Early Modern Period 1890-1940*, (London: Longman, 1988), p. 6.

As was discussed in Chapter Two, Thurston sought seclusion from the public to which she owed her livelihood, especially towards the end of her life. The relative public isolation was to become a trend for modernist writers of subsequent decades, as Hewitt notes in reference to Woolf: 'Her emphasis on the need to move away from the public to the private, the social to the introspective, the political to the individual, fits well with that rejection of the public sphere which characterises so many of the artists who are central in all accounts of Modernism'.¹² For Thurston, this imposed exile served only to aid her art, as the resulting levels of self-analysis heightened the critical merit of her fiction. While Thurston's oeuvre may not, on the surface, contain many of the trademarks of high literary modernism, the extent to which her novels interpreted increasing notions of self-reflexivity, in terms of how the protagonists view their relationship with their surroundings, would demonstrate a leaning towards one of the fundamental principles of modernism: a preoccupation with Individualism.

(5.3) Thurston and Individualism

In his 1903 work, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', sociologist George Simmel comments:

The deepest problems of modern life derive from the claim of the individual [...] autonomy and individuality of his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces, of historical heritage, of external culture, and of the technique of life [...] seen to preserve subjective life against the overwhelming power of metropolitan life.¹³

Thurston as has been seen, moved / situated the majority of her protagonists to urban settings. The crux of many of her narratives explored how they adapted to displacement. Anna Solny in *The Circle* and Maxine in *Max* travel to Metropolitan centres of London and Paris and excel in their respective professions, but only through, what Thurston impresses as, the sacrifice of their personalities. Clodagh

¹² Hewitt, p. 130

¹³ George Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', 24 August 2011, http://www.berlin.ucla.edu/hypermedia/1905_people/texts/Simmel.pdf

Asshlin's experiences in continental Europe serve only to expedite the pangs of hereditary influence, bringing her to the brink of suicide, while the returning Isabel Costello chooses death rather than living within the confines of middle-class Waterford society. Whether they were departing from, or returning to the city, measures of adaptation or self-invention when faced with external forces proved necessary.

The notion of self-invention or reformation appears most notably in Thurston's daring work *Max*. The novel, coming at the end of author's career, tells the story of a Russian princess who journeys to Paris in an effort to escape an arranged marriage. She concludes that the only way that she could achieve the level of freedom that she desired was by, in essence, becoming a man. Maxine conceals any semblance of her femininity, shortens her name to Max and sets about constructing a new life for himself in the Montmartre district, where she could safely and unobtrusively practice her art. Throughout the novel it is often the case that our attention is drawn to the disparities that the young Maxine/Max felt limited not only the freedom that she sought for her life as an artist, but for herself as a young woman in a society that sought to return her to her abandoned identity. The narrative proceeds with Max becoming annoyed at her Irish suitor Ned's growing fascination with his female self¹⁴ and the friendship effectively ends, when Max fails to understand why Ned cannot attribute to him, the same affection that he would his sister. The re-awakening of Max's own sexual identity takes place with the aid of the art that was at once thought prohibitive as Max realises (through, among other things, the help of a love song) that the suppression of his femininity in his attempt to adapt to his surroundings has resulted in him losing more than he has gained. Notions of aesthetic and sexual liberation permeate Thurston's *Max*, to the point that one necessitates the existence of the other. In attempting to deal with the often-punitive criteria that would facilitate her freedom, Maxine had to both deny and embrace herself as artist and woman. What this indicates is the influence of conflicting internal and external forces on the shaping

¹⁴ As immortalised in a painting of the young Max's 'sister'.

of identity. Indeed the crux of the novel hinges on the tensions between inner and outer realities.

As explored in Chapter Three, it was essentially the case that Max's aesthetic success 'intensified his own personal dilemma'.¹⁵ He tried to exorcise his femininity by channelling it into his art, but ended up losing himself and his companion in the process. As was the case with John Loder in *John Chilcote, M.P.*, Max's salvation could only be reached through acknowledging and acceding to the lifestyle, that society demanded he adopt. In *John Chilcote, M.P.*, Loder's previous life as miscreant had effectively ended, as he grew accustomed to his burgeoning status as outspoken politician. Similarly Max discovered that his own happiness depended on being able to embrace, rather than deny the role or identity, to which she was born. Thurston seemingly endorsed the return to the status quo when she states: 'It is a good thing to rejoice in spite of the world, it is an infinitely better thing to rejoice in company with it'. (*Max* 42) What this indicates then, is the author's disposition to conservatism. Thurston was content to bestow her creations the freedom to invent themselves and rail against whatever restrictions had been put in place, but only to an extent. Like the New Woman novelists of the previous century, her protagonists were free to 'act out' and test the lengths of their own individualism, but were often reigned-in by the close of the narrative. Reviewers of Thurston's novels often found fault with what they saw as her challenging plots being given unsatisfactory endings. John Wilson Foster speaks of the Thurston heroine's propensity towards self-fashioning, and this being acknowledged as a nod to modernity, but acknowledges the restrictions that the author would put in place:

What she seeks as an artist makes sex irrelevant: individuality, in praise of which Thurston is insistent. In Notre Dame cathedral, though an unbeliever, she prays for the strength to possess herself. This higher theme keeps in check what might otherwise appear to be Thurston's flirtation with Blake's homoerotic friendship with Max and with the transvestism involved in Maxine's regular impersonations. The

¹⁵ Meaney, p 172.

modernity of the novel lies not in that but in Thurston's notion of self-fashioning as an expression of individualism. The theme of impersonation is big in Thurston. [...] But if nature tragically loses in *The Fly in the Wheel*, it wins out in *Max* and self-fashioning as an expression of will fails in the end while love succeeds, and this is Thurston's conservatism behind her daring.¹⁶

The author's tendency to include subversive subject matter in her novels, only to seek a return to convention by the close of the narrative was also acknowledged by the then contemporary press. A reviewer for *Black and White* comments on the refinement of her art, but openly denounces the manner in which the plot plays out:

Mrs. Thurston's new book is more ambitious work from the point of view of literature. It is the most ambitious piece of work, indeed, that she has yet written. It is an attempt to see life, not sensationally, but steadily, and is therefore fuller of promise than her earlier and more successful stories. [...] Why however did she give the story so foolish and unconvincing an ending?¹⁷

In Thurston's *The Mystics*, the character of Enid is described as being 'too feminine to be truly modern, too modern to be wholly womanly' (*The Mystics* 81). This assertion in a sense reflects her creator's near-hesitancy to arm her narratives with a greater sense of conviction, especially in terms of the author's willingness to more formally contribute to the interrogation of gender roles in the transitional age in which she lived. In a speech at the Criterion for the Annual Writers Dinner in 1909, Thurston declared: 'I have gained a new sense of the value of work in the development of woman. Work has broadened her outlook and widened her sympathies. Let us give the world our best. Let us realise that we are participators in the making of the moment.'¹⁸ The rousing call to her fellow novelists to do justice to the modern woman in their literary efforts is seemingly rebutted by an earlier speech in which Thurston proclaimed the same modern woman to be 'so very complex a creature that she would

¹⁶ John Wilson Foster, *Irish Novels 1890-1940: New Bearings in Culture and Fiction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 281.

¹⁷ Untitled Article, *Black and White*, 28 March 1908, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

¹⁸ Untitled Article, *Lady's Pictorial*, 26 June 1909, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

need a subtler brain and a readier tongue than mine to express her adequately!’¹⁹ Whether this statement is representational of the author’s modesty, or another example of her noted conservatism, it again adds to the argument that Thurston’s unwillingness to effectively contribute to the more pressing matters of her day, either in her fiction or through her public persona,²⁰ helps account for years of obscurity.

The orthodoxies of her conclusions notwithstanding, the lengths to which Thurston experimented with self-invention and individualism in her fiction must be commended. What is important to note is that Thurston, while eager to question conventional perceptions, practices and moralities, was still very much bound to them in her own life, certainly while under the scrutiny of the contemporary media. As was explored in previous chapters, Thurston’s status as one of the more noted craftswomen of her day meant that any transgressions in her private life found resonance in her fiction. The interplay between the two refutes the suggestion that popular novels were ephemeral entertainment. The blurring of the personal and the professional imbued her novels with a certain contemporaneous relevance and poignancy. As such, there is still much value to be gleaned from her representations of the pressures of Edwardian society, especially as it relates to the formation of the modernist agenda. John Wilson Foster notes that her explorations of ‘...sexual identity, love and marriage can be conducted as forms of experiment, reflecting the uncertainties and transitions of the age in which these matters were of deep concern’.²¹ The reviewer for the *Glasgow Evening Times* commented that the society novel (of which Thurston was affiliated) was used to reflect the changing population: ‘the successful modern novel must have a close relation to actual life – not realism per se, but a glorified version. The society novel has replaced the historical novel’.²² One of the more

¹⁹ Untitled Document, 4 November 1908, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

²⁰ Caroline Copeland adds that ‘she did not give advice to her readers through political tracts, nor did she contribute any journalistic pieces to the political or popular press’ taken from Caroline Copeland ‘An Oasis in the Desert: The Transatlantic Publishing Success of Katherine Cecil Thurston’ in *Journal of Edinburgh Bibliographical Society*, Issue 2, (2007), p. 26.

²¹ Foster, p. 364

²² Untitled Article, *Glasgow Evening Times*, No Date Given, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

interesting aspects of Thurston's fiction, particularly when assessed under the modernist handle involves the author's frequent tendency to provide morally unsound elements in her work, particularly when it came to the resolution of each respective plot. The ethical instability that appeared in Thurston's oeuvre would come to reflect uncertainties of the Edwardian era, which, since the beginning of the twentieth century, was undergoing significant upheaval, particularly in matters of religious belief. As Douglas Hewitt adds:

Christianity was declining [...] Darwin's theories were all on the rise. Linked with the loss of religious certainty goes a feeling that social, familial stability has been weakened, not merely in such obvious matters as changes in sexual mores and standards of decorum and in relationships between parents and children but in larger and more impalpable ways.²³

Given Thurston's strict Catholic upbringing, it is perhaps surprising that each of her six novels contained significant deviations in proper moralistic behaviour. The following section will explore the ethical dilemmas presented in both Thurston's published fiction and also her two unpublished novels, *Sandro* and *The Healer of Men*.

²³ Douglas Hewitt, *English Fiction of the Early Modern Period 1890-1940*, (London: Longman, 1988), p. 6.

(5.4) Thurston's Ethical Dilemma

The moral irresponsibility of the Decadents in the closing years of the nineteenth century meant the question of proper ethical conduct in fiction was a pressing one, especially in the writings of the conservative media. Thurston's preoccupation with contesting some form of moral conundrum was perhaps reminiscent of the earlier French writers whom she admired and emulated.²⁴ The decision to call into question the mores of the age in fiction was undoubtedly born of the restrictions that these writers felt hampered their art. As Faulkner suggests:

This sense of the limitation imposed on the writer as his part of the social consensus became increasingly irritating, as the period went on, to those more interested in the true and the beautiful than the good. On the continent, especially in France, this had long been the case. Neither Baudelaire nor Flaubert would have fulfilled the bourgeois conception of morality, and both were acutely aware of their alienation.²⁵

As previously mentioned, Thurston's fealty was to the art of storytelling. Her tendency to incorporate ethical dilemmas could have been in service of a good story, employed to reflect contemporary concerns or used simply because of the widely accepted acknowledgement that controversy sells. Indeed, each of Thurston's novels had the rather advantageous result of increased attention in both the British and international press as a result of these fluctuations in moral purpose. Thurston's first novel received widespread acclaim for a first effort, but met some criticism from the press for the manner in which the young Anna Solny so freely abandons her elderly father in the pursuit of her career.²⁶ It was with the conclusion of Thurston's second novel, *John Chilcote, M.P.*, that the conservative media would condemn the author's lax moral judgement, in letting Loder continue in the role of John Chilcote, while the real Chilcote lay dead in the former's apartment. During the autumn of 1904, *The New York Times* devoted a number of successive weekly columns to the discussion of the

²⁴ The Archive (and indeed Thurston's oeuvre) contains numerous references to Balzac, Dumas and other notable French writers.

²⁵ Faulkner, p. 4.

²⁶ The reviewer for the *Montreal Star* berates the character's actions but acknowledges that 'the moral unobtrusively impressed on the reader is that the one failure to be dreaded in life is failure in loyalty to duty, while supreme success consists in the achievement of nobleness of life', from an undated review in Box 9, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

author's moral failing.²⁷ The topic became so heated that the editor of the column was obliged to call a halt to the discussion by denouncing the story as being beyond the bounds of ethical discussion and of having little relation to the actualities of life.²⁸ Conversely, a reviewer for the *Edinburgh Evening News* linked the morally vacuous nature of the conclusion to the decline of religion in contemporary London:

The conclusion is only the strongest indication of an extraordinary want of moral tone, manifested by the leading characters. Nowhere is there the smallest indication of duty or of forbearance other than that of amused tolerance of wrong. If this book, written by a woman, is to be taken as fair representation of the London society of today, then ours is an age in which we are entitled to take whatever of pleasure or profit comes within reach, without scruple for the weak, whose faults furnish merely a reason for shouldering them aside. It is a society from which religion has thoroughly faded, and the only consideration which has any weight in the counsels of strenuous men is the destiny of the empire – perhaps rather of the imperial party. It is a sorry conclusion, but it is the only one possible from such a book as “John Chilcote”.²⁹

Thurston herself expressed surprise at the amount of attention the novel's conclusion received, ignoring the supposed ethical fluctuation and confirming her commitment to the story:

Yes, one of the most interesting has been the oddly diverse criticisms of *The Masquerader* that appeared in the US and England. I have received a great many letters asking me why the book ended as it did. The English critics have even taken me a good deal to task for allowing Loder to take advantage of the situation in which he finally found himself. But the American critics said that it would have done no good to anyone and would only have caused much suffering for him to have

²⁷ Another example of the pervading negativity stemming from the immoral conduct: ‘Mrs. Thurston, by ending her novel as she has seen fit to end it, has unintentionally done the cause of right and honour an injury. I regret this the more because her book is clever, original, well told and fascinating.’ (Untitled Review, *Lady's Pictorial*, 24 October 1904, Box 9, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

²⁸ Untitled Review, *The New York Times*, 26 November 1904, Box 9, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

²⁹ Untitled Review, *Edinburgh Evening News*, 1 October 1904, Box 9, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

followed any other course. I must say that my sympathy is with America in this respect.³⁰

Thurston's decision to circumvent the ethical debate by pleading obedience to the needs of the story is interesting here. It is perhaps difficult to state that she chose to be purposely subversive, especially given the conservative streak that has been attached to her fiction and also her reticence to offend or stand-out from her contemporaries³¹, yet as subsequent novels would demonstrate, ethical quagmires were to become an increasingly conspicuous component of her fiction. *The Gambler* (1906) focused on Clodagh Asshlin's attempt at self-fashioning, in spite of the morally dubious nature of her actions:

Ideals were a mistake – things made to be shattered, as hopes were made to be broken! To live – to live fully, heedlessly, extravagantly - was the only wisdom [...] She had been wrong in supposing she had a debt to work off; on the contrary, life was her debtor. It was she who had a score against life!³²

The Fly on the Wheel (1908) was a concerted attack on the idiosyncrasies and prejudices of middle-class Ireland – Stephen Carey abandons his perceived role in Waterford society by entering into an affair with the impassioned Isabel Costello. As previously mentioned, the novel featured much less of the literary sensationalism that had characterised Thurston's earlier efforts and displayed more of a social pessimism in regards to the treatment of marriage. Thurston's separation from her husband and media outcry that followed forced the author to seek the seclusion of her summer home in Ardmore. The tumultuous nature of both the author's private and artistic lives is perhaps reflected in the fiction as the characters' attempts at self-fashioning are thwarted by the conformities to social convention. The reviewer for the *Passaic News* commented on the failure of both author and text in their demonstration of slack morality:

³⁰ Untitled Review, *Indianapolis Indiana News*, 17 March 1906, Box 9, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

³¹ Thurston's reticence as a public figure was addressed in Chapter Two.

³² Katherine Cecil Thurston, *The Gambler*, (London: Hutchinson, 1906), p. 241.

On one point the author has most seriously failed. A point on which no author ever ought to fail. And we do not believe that Mrs. Thurston intended to fail at this point. An author should never have his or her position in doubt on a moral issue. Isabel's conduct, her thoughts, her desires are all profoundly, fundamentally wrong and Stephen's also. We believe the reader will feel the wrong. But there is nothing to lead us to feel that the author disapproves of Isabel and Stephen. Nowhere in the story is the seal of disapproval stamped in their conduct. If authors will put such characters to the front then the least they can do is to clear their own skirts of being in league with them. We like to feel – I think we have a right to expect that the author shall not appear as one approves of the lax morality he or she chooses to portray.³³

The decision to return Stephen to his family and end the novel with the suicide of the adulteress constitutes Thurston's attempt to re-instate moral order. John Wilson Foster comments that the inclusion of tragic elements (such as the death of Isabel Costello) was a means by which the author could circumvent the negative implications of an illicit and morally reprehensible romance: 'tragic accident may validate the forbidden or unfulfilled love but it is also a resolution by which the novelist can evade the implications of true love successfully pursued amidst social disapproval'.³⁴ Thurston frequently employed tragic elements when it came to the resolution of each successive plot, but while her lead protagonists often found happiness in the reinstatement of the heteronormative relationship between man and woman, the author was quite willing to include ethically dubious elements to attain this return to the status quo. Clodagh Asshlin is saved from suicide, seemingly (and curiously) at the expense of her cousin Larry, who kills himself following his gambling loss to the protagonist the previous evening. Similarly, Loder not only knowingly covets his predecessor's wife, but also supplies her husband, the addict Chilcote with morphine tablets, which ultimately leads to his death. Probably the most significant of all of Thurston's work (in regard to moral impropriety) is her novel; *The Healer of Men*, whose subject matter was

³³ Untitled Review, *Passaic News*, New Jersey, 23 January 1909, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

³⁴ Foster, p. 267.

enough to make even the author herself take exception – the end result being that the novel remains unpublished.

The novel recounts the tale of William Ansell, a celebrated English surgeon who purposefully takes the life of a patient in an effort to prove to himself the absence of God and the power of free will. It is a fascinating book in that it explores a number of Thurston's usual fictional preoccupations, but more importantly that it interrogates Thurston's conception of faith. Ansell, like most of Thurston's protagonists is depicted as a self-willed man in revolt, whose assertiveness and strength of character experiences the most dramatic test as a result of his morally superfluous behaviour. In the latter stages of the novel, he bemoans the lack of direction in his life, even though his disgust at faith and sentiment clearly identify him (from the outset) as the object of Thurston's own moral lesson. The following excerpt demonstrates the main thrust of the novel, as Ansell and his friend, Rufus Coningsby adopt opposing viewpoints in the debate of science and religion, duty and free will:

Ansell: 'The great Primal laws'!

Coningsby: 'Look here, Ansell! You scientists talk a lot about the primal laws, but what do they really mean? What do they amount to, after all? What are they but so many cloaks to cover the general inability to deal with big things? You are so incapable as I am to deal drastically with the world, as so you put all the wrong and sin and suffering down to the great primal laws. But do they help individually? You arrange Phyllis' life in a few sweeping words; but you forget that even if she does divorce Mark the other man and the other life are not open to her. Her religion does not acknowledge divorce'

Coningsby: 'You doctors think it wrong, when a physical monster is born, to rid the world of it; yet it is outside your province to interfere with the most hideous moral monster that encumbers the earth. And why do you spare the morally diseased? Simply because he is a man like yourselves; because he stands before you in your own image, evidence of a power higher than your own – something you dare not tamper with'.

Ansell: ‘I refute every word of it – there is no plane outside man’s government, and there is no higher power than the reason – the intellect – of man’.

Coningsby: ‘Yet you wheeled around as though I had struck you when I asked you if you had ever taken a man’s life!’

Ansell: ‘Oh, that was the mere physical weakness that we are all open to! My nerves were not attuned to the idea’.

Coningsby: ‘Then our actions only depend on how far our nerves have been attuned?’

Ansell: If you like to put it that way! Surely if the brain can dictate and reason out a plan of action, it can dominate the body which is its instrument’.

Coningsby: ‘In plain words then, your reasoning man is tantamount to God?’

Ansell: ‘We place the reasoning man a good deal higher than your God, Coningsby – your God is a vindictive power; and vindictiveness argues an unsound armour.

Coningsby: “ Good heavens! The egotism of you scientists!’

Ansell: ‘The inconsistencies of you sentimentalists! You worship strength as represented by this God of yours and by the great machinery of your religions, yet you scout it as egotism the moment it comes to you in individual guise!’.³⁵

Ansell’s final words here are probably the most salient when discussing Thurston’s stance on morality in the novel. Intent on demonstrating his own free will, his decision to allow Rufus’s brother Mark to die during a routine operation points to a serious transgression in Thurston’s ethical purpose. Even though Thurston’s own conservatism would punish Ansell for his act, the scope of the action points to the suggestion that for Thurston, the force of individuality puts into question the need for

³⁵ Extract taken from Katherine Cecil Thurston, *The Healer of Men*, Box 5, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378, p. 14-18. An interesting stylistic aside involves the inclusion of large sections of dialogue in the novel, formatted as they would appear in a draft of a play. The frequent shift from the third person narrative to dialogue is reminiscent of the writing style of modernist author, James Joyce.

moral control. The same notion appears in the closing of *John Chilcote, M.P.* as Loder allows the death of the original Chilcote to remain unacknowledged, as he decides to continue to live out the politician's life, with the full blessing of the deceased's widow. *John Chilcote, M.P.* was Thurston's second novel, but continued the trend of seemingly unethical behaviour that was established in her debut work. Unlike the conclusion of *The Circle*, however, when Anna Solny repents for her sinful behaviour, Thurston fully endorses Loder's masquerade, a result, (which we have seen), was met with condemnation by the critics. In the case of William Ansell in *The Healer of Men*, Thurston's own steadfast faith demanded that the doctor suffer for his sin and that any Thurston-inspired act of self-realisation be marked as futile. As Cathy Caruth points out: 'the survival of trauma is not the fortunate passage beyond a violent event, a passage that is accidentally interrupted by reminders of it, but rather the *endless inherent necessity of repetition*, which ultimately may lead to destruction'.³⁶ Ansell's repeated disavowal of religious practices and unflinching commitment to his scientific purpose meant that he would not receive any measure of absolution. With Caruth's model in place, the instrument of destruction comes with the accidental death of Ansell's wife and unborn child.

The Healer of Men was scheduled to be published after 1906's *The Gambler* and before 1908's *The Fly on the Wheel*, and as such, it came during Thurston's most self-reflective period, as she sought seclusion from the media blitz surrounding her troubled life. What it perhaps demonstrates is the author's attempt to reconcile her own personal discord, in spite of the many external factors that demand the subscription to the conventional codes and practices. Although Ansell and Thurston occupy opposing sides on the religious debate, they each represented the difficulties in maintaining principles when faced with coercive influences. Ansell was committed to his humanist ideologies, regardless of his heinous actions and Thurston was devoted to the upholding of duty and moral obligation, in spite of her husband's adultery and desertion. As mentioned in the previous chapter, in discussing Kate O'Brien's *The*

³⁶ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience – Trauma, Narrative and History*, (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 63.

Land of Spices, John Wilson Foster makes the comment that ‘the religious life is a form of emotional rebound for women’.³⁷ It could be surmised that Thurston, in turning to a treatise on religious belief with *The Healer of Men*, was attempting a measure of introspection in light of the disharmony with her husband. The ethical transgressions of the novel could be viewed as a reflection of the consternation that the modernists felt between the duties to life and art. In exploring the ethical quandaries inherent in *John Chilcote, M.P.*, the reviewer for *The Methodist Times* acknowledged the difficulties in sustaining proper moral conduct when faced with external tensions:

What has impressed me most is the forceful way in which the writer has conveyed that undoubted fact that prejudice and loyalty and even truth are heavily handicapped in the concrete. We talk about these three things and have many fine theories about them but wait until you meet them in real life.³⁸

Possible internal dilemmas notwithstanding, the reasoning behind Thurston’s decision not to publish *The Healer of Men* is unknown. Correspondence with Blackwood’s magazine shows Thurston proclaiming the novel to be ‘a much more serious undertaking’ than initially anticipated.³⁹ The author frequently granted her creations the freedom to evolve and carve their own fate. *The Healer of Men* on the other hand, demonstrates Thurston taking a much more heavy-handed approach in governing the outcome of the plot. Ansell’s fate was seemingly preordained, so it is possible that she reached the conclusion that the more grave elements of the plot, with its pronounced ethical dilemma was too much of a departure for her willing audience. The novel, as it exists in the Archive, is comprised of two parts. The first section is a fully-fledged typescript, whereas the second (and final) section is presented in a synopsis format as a number of handwritten notes. Thurston, as the notes attest, was content to condemn Ansell for his moral infraction, yet the decision to abandon the project and start anew

³⁷ Foster, p. 473.

³⁸ Untitled Article, *Methodist Times*, 24 September 1904, Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

³⁹ Taken from correspondence with her publisher, William Blackwood, 17 May 1906, Box 1, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

with *The Fly on the Wheel*, seems somewhat strange. Moral conundrums had played a significant role in each of her previous works; its more pressing presence here, with its presentation of the tensions between faith, morality and duty and its more drastic consequences seemingly forced its premature conclusion.

Thurston's other unpublished novel, *Sandro*, explored similar thematic content, as her eponymous protagonist contests notions of religious belief and free will. The work combines many of Thurston's literary motifs: relocation to a foreign setting, the pangs of hereditary influence, the nomadic Irish and a reliance on mysticism. The work also follows the same route of *The Healer of Men* in that its protagonist denounces religion in the name of humanism, only to come to realise the errors of this judgement by the close of the narrative. The novel is littered with epigrams that reflect the theme: 'I cannot see entirety in your religion; and in my feelings for the Roman church, there lingers the tiny seed of scepticism sown in me unconsciously so long ago – I often think that my belief is like a plant burdened by too many grafts' and also 'Self is too brittle a God for the artist'.⁴⁰ Excerpts such as the above, written at a time when the Irish, a people historically associated with a strict allegiance to Catholicism, could perhaps appear somewhat provocative. Thurston's decision not to publish the novel again reflects her uncertainty in dealing directly with matters of faith versus humanism, particularly during the opening years of the twentieth century - a period of pronounced social and political agitation. While not as daring as *The Healer of Men* in terms of its overall scope, it displays Thurston's deeper ruminations on her creed and the manner in which such ideologies are addressed in contemporary society.

Interviews and correspondence suggest that the author was eager not to offend her willing audience, yet Thurston's perplexing intentions in terms of plot and characterisation, and the numerous unapologetic deviations in moral purpose in both the published and non-published works indicate an oeuvre characterized by a greater

⁴⁰ Katherine Cecil Thurston, *Sandro*, Box 3, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378, p. 7 and 4 respectively.

complexity than initially believed. Critics such as Gerardine Meaney and Tina O'Toole stress the need to re-evaluate the fragmentary nature of these discourses in an effort to more fully grasp the complexity of these largely forgotten aspects of the Irish literary canon. In Thurston's case, the subversive qualities of her treatment of gender in literature would form the basis of much of the discussion.

(5.5) Gender Interrogation in Thurston's Max

Max was Thurston's final published work. Written at the beginning of 1909, the novel continues the author's trend of addressing notions of self-reflexivity and self-fashioning in her fiction, but what marks *Max* out as noteworthy is the choice of setting and subject matter, namely the bohemian district of Paris and, what was essentially, a study of early twentieth-century transvestism.

I know myself for an individual – for a definite entity; I know that here – here, within me [...] I have power - power to think - power to achieve. Sex is only an accident, but the world has made man the independent creature - and I desired independence. (*Max* 324)

As the epigram suggests, the author's intention was to seemingly contest the inferred inequalities that existed between the sexes and the consequential limited possibilities for women to succeed outside of the domestic sphere. Thurston's decision to base the novel in Paris is provocative, in no small part because of the role the French played in inciting insurrection on the grounds of female subjugation, dating back to the French Revolution of 1789. Ann Ardis adds:

To the old aristocracy, the lower class was a woman, a woman who could no longer be dominated sexually, a woman who would no longer submit to domestication. Almost one hundred years later in England, the same logic, the same need to protect the cultural hegemony of the dominant class, fuels comparisons of the New Woman with the 'sexual anarchists' of the French Revolution.⁴¹

⁴¹ Ann Ardis, *New Women, New Novels, Feminism and Early Modernism*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), p. 24.

Given the revolution's influence on the reappraisal of gender through both the New Woman movement of the late 1800s and beyond, it was doubtful that Thurston was unaware of the transgressive associations of Paris. The large collection of memorabilia in the archive and the knowledge of Thurston's vested interest in French culture and art⁴² came to be reflected, in no small part, in *Max*. Correspondence with Gavin not only documented the author's various exploits in the city, but point to the suggestion that Thurston, through her experience of French culture, was committed to the presentation of a glorified form of realism that had begun to feature in the works leading up to her death. *The Fly on the Wheel* contested the restrictions of marriage and the influence of Catholicism in middle class Ireland, *The Gambler* was founded on the bleak social and economic prospects for women in a small Irish town, while *Max* combined the decadence and mystique of Bohemian culture with the struggle for self-possession – a setting in which it is assumed, the freedom to self-articulate would, presumably, prove more possible.

Again the author's own conflict between the desire to feed her aesthetic temperament in Paris and the seclusion that she sought from artistic demands is demonstrated in an undated letter to Gavin, presumably written during Thurston's stay in France in early 1909. The letter recounts the author's interactions with an unnamed Princess, whom Thurston escorted to various theatrical productions. The extravagance of the accompanying lifestyle made Thurston long for a return home:

Paris looks very charming and the Princess is very keen indeed about the play – but everything here makes me long and long for you my beloved, I am moving In an atmosphere of excitement, and I am seeing all I could desire in the matter of the artistic temperament - (Last night, especially, when I sat for a couple of hours with the princess in her dressing room at the theatre, while she received numerous relays of actors, artists and heaven knows what in the way of strange Parisians!) - It all left me with one over-mastering sensation - burning thankfulness that my life is not cast in bohemian places - that my existence is made

⁴² Thurston's interest in and comparisons to French writers has already been alluded to. The substantial amounts of ticket stubs and programs from French theatres serve as proof of Thurston's interest in French culture. Also, the inclusion of notebooks on Spain and Spanish culture, and maps of Persia and Afghanistan, is suggestive of the author's passion for travel and exploration.

up of real things – and that the future holds for us a home - most precious, deep-meaning word in the world.⁴³

It is possible to draw a correlation between the Princess that Thurston depicts here and the runaway Princess Davorska of *Max*. If such was the case, the preceding letter demonstrates quite effectively the contestation between exuberance and domesticity – the former, being enjoyed by the Princess and pursued by Maxine, the latter being the culmination of both the protagonist’s endeavour and the author’s desire.

Further evidence from the archive adds credence to the suggestion that Thurston, when composing *Max*, borrowed heavily, in terms of character and setting from her Parisian trip. Should the aforementioned Princess, at least in part, have influenced the creation of the runaway Princess Davorska/Maxine, the time that Thurston spent in the Montmartre district and its environs resulted in their faithful recreation in *Max*. The Grand Guignol production company in particular, whose base of operations was also in Montmartre is paralleled quite closely in *Max*, with the company’s near sinister description in the Rue Chaptal⁴⁴ being reminiscent of the Paris encountered by Max on his arrival: ‘Outside the artificial light of the station ceased to do battle with nature, and only an occasional street lamp gave challenge to the gloomy dawn [...] Everywhere was darkness and chill and the listless misery of a winter dawn, when vitality is at its lowest ebb and the passions of man are sunk in lethargy’. (*Max* 23) Harry Fragson, when speaking of the production company alludes to ‘the allegorical paintings of the human passions, which form the plots of the little Guignol plays – hate, jealousy and envy’ and note that ‘the plays are wonderful little incidents, full of sheer dramatic force; marvellous little psychological studies in scarlet and black that are new to the stage. Ten Year ago, M. Max Maurey founded his school of realism at the “Guignol” – grim realities, associated with horror and raw

⁴³ Undated letter from Thurston to Gavin, Box 12, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁴⁴ Descriptions include being ‘buried out of sheer modesty’ and its muted, ‘utterly unpretentious’ presentation.

realism'.⁴⁵ The description of the company and its works bear a close resemblance to Thurston's own oeuvre, with its reliance on dramatic zeal, glorified realism and themes such as jealousy and envy – all of which were key features of the final novel, *Max*.⁴⁶ Perhaps most significantly, the description of the plays as psychological studies would come to reflect many of the reviews of *Max* upon its publication as Catherine Jay states:

The story is unique. It is a psychological novel - a study of love and friendship – that is a creation that seeks to analyse the underlying motives of human action and thus to evince the ethical quality of individual character. The emotions are of the deepest sort and are amazingly handled.⁴⁷

The psychological explorations of the novel and the levels of self-discovery inherent in the protagonist's struggle are worked out through the means of cross-dressing, as Maxine adopts masculine attire to pursue her dream of becoming an artist. While female to male cross-dressing was not a new feature in literature,⁴⁸ its appearance had been hitherto treated with suspicion, especially in light of the interrogations of gender by the New Woman novelists and the moral and sexual irresponsibility of the Decadents of the previous century, with some of the critics condemning female to male cross-dressing as an example of cultural degeneracy. William Lee Howard states:

The female possessed of masculine ideas of independence; the vagrant who would sit in the public highways and lift up her pseudo-virile voice, proclaiming her sole right to decide questions of war or religion, or the value of celibacy and the curse of women's impurity, and that

⁴⁵ Snippets of information concerning the Grand Guignol Company, as well as the quotation from Harry Fragson taken from undated articles in Box 4, of the National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁴⁶ It is also possible that Thurston named *Max*'s protagonist after the founder of the production company, M. Max Maurey.

⁴⁷ Catherine Jay, 'In the Library', Box 10, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

⁴⁸ William Shakespeare's Rosalind (*As You Like It*), Viola (*Twelfth Night*) and Sarah Grand's Angelica (*The Heavenly Twins*) being notable antecedents.

disgusting anti-social being, the female sexual pervert, are simply different degrees of the same class – degenerates.⁴⁹

With Howard's appraisal in place, the wide-ranging scope by which the cross-dressers were denounced, and the hesitancy with which the more conservative members of the press treated the act, meant that literary efforts that attempted to incorporate elements of transvestism needed to be wary of offending Edwardian sensibilities. Traditionally cross-dressers were accused of sexual perversion and for women, this in turn, only reinforced the viewpoint that by their un-womanly actions, they were showing themselves to be inherently deviant and in need of man's control. Jean E Howard adds: 'When women took men's clothes, they symbolically left their subordinate positions. They became masterless women, and this threatened overthrow of hierarchy was discursively read as the eruption of uncontrolled sexuality'.⁵⁰ The perceived danger that they represented to society had the adverse effect of them being further reigned-in by the establishment they sought to escape. Kaivola goes on to link conservative responses to cross-gender activities with homosexuality – again perceived as another form of deviant behaviour:

The conflation of gender and sexuality is perhaps most explicit, since the earliest models of homosexuality took gender inversion as the visible manifestation of deviant sexual desire. Such theories were, of course, prescriptive as well as descriptive: they reinforced white middle-class ideologies of gender and desire by establishing the bounds of the normative and appropriate.⁵¹

Thurston's noted conservatism again circumvents these traditional depictions of the grotesque cross-dresser who attempted to subvert social conventions, not only by *Max's* notable romantic qualities, but also by the secrecy in which her ruse is played-out, as well as the relatively non-threatening nature of her transvestism. With that said,

⁴⁹ William Lee Howard, *New York Medical Journal*, 1900. As quoted in Elizabeth Drorbaugh, 'Sliding Scales – Notes on Stormé DeLarverie and the Jewel Box Revue, the Cross-Dressed Woman on the Contemporary Stage, and the Invert' in *Crossing the Stage: Controversies on Cross-Dressing*, ed. Lesley Ferris, (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 120.

⁵⁰ Jean E. Howard in Ferris, p. 26

⁵¹ Karen Kaivola, 'Revisiting Woolf's Representations of Androgyny: Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Nation' from *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, vol. 18, no. 2, (Autumn, 1999) p. 246.

there still featured a number of significant transgressions of a homo-erotic nature, which called into question the nature of the relationship between her two lead protagonists. Again, the connection between self and setting is paramount in the exploration of Max's attraction to her Irish escort, Ned, as Paris in the early twentieth century was seen as a refuge for proponents of homosexual desire. The city was known to host a number of lesbian expatriates who settled there, presumably for similar reasons to Maxine, namely the sanctuary that Bohemian culture had to offer and the liberty to reinvent themselves, external to the demands of Edwardian propriety. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar speak of the lesbian writers 'constructing a literary tradition out of what they had: each other'.⁵² The dislocation that they felt from both male and female literary traditions forced a more introspective approach to their lives and fiction – paralleled quite closely with the cross-dressing Maxine's denial of her previous life as the Princess Davorska and her growing dependence on both her romantic interest Ned, and Parisian compatriot, Jacqueline, whose intervention was instrumental in the reconstruction of the protagonist's identity.⁵³

The closeness with Jacqueline, while not delineating sexual desire between the pair, was an essential feature of the reconstruction of Max's lost womanhood, with the subsequent romance with Ned facilitating the final transformation. The attraction between the two is suggested from the couple's initial encounter in which Blake takes his leave of the young 'Max' at the Gare du Nord station in Paris. His repeated displays of concern for the boy's welfare constituted Thurston's attempt to set the stage for the would-be-couple's romance by the novel's close. Yet while the boy was privy to his own circumstance, Blake was not, resulting in a number of situations in which he is forced to check himself for fear of giving in to, or embarking upon (un) natural urges:

'But if it comes to pass – your miracle – you will forget me? You will no longer have need of me, is that not so?' Max spoke softly, a disproportionate seriousness darkening his eyes, causing his voice to quiver. Blake turned to answer in the same vein, but something

⁵² Sandra M Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land: the Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, vol. 2, Sexchanges (London: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 222.

⁵³ This was explored in detail in Chapter Three.

checked him – some embarrassment, some inexplicable doubt of himself. ‘Boy’, he said sharply, ‘we’re running into deep waters. Don’t you think we ought to steer for shore’? (*Max* 163)

Again, Thurston’s conservatism comes into play, as Max’s display of affection is halted by Blake’s acknowledgement of the burgeoning feelings of attraction between them. The relationship, while not of a sexual nature, is still quite provocative in its presentation. Thurston litters the narrative with declarations of dependence and tenderness between the couple, such as ‘He loved Blake with a wonderful unsexual love’. (*Max* 266) and Ned ‘always had a queer respect for him’. (*Max* 323) Patricia Coughlan states that ‘*Max* opens a portal into contested territories of sexual and social identity, which reveal a far-reaching scepticism about the conventional sexual order.’⁵⁴ Tina O’Toole too comments on the suggestive nature of the homoerotic elements here by suggesting Thurston was attempting to induce a discourse on gender and same-sex desire:

At points such as this, it can be difficult to know if Thurston is in charge of the effect achieved by questioning sexual mores in this way. It certainly seems as if she is making a genuine attempt to open up discussion about sexual boundaries, and gender roles, and that she is fully aware of their implications. That she makes such strenuous efforts at the end of the novel to reconstruct the heteronormative social world implies that she fully understood the radicalism of this kind of writing as well as the potential dangers of challenging society in this way, and deliberately chose to demonstrate her conformity.⁵⁵

In discussing *Max*’s contestation between the personal and professional spheres and the demands of ambition versus sexual delimitation, Gerardine Meaney acknowledges the links between the New Woman’s clamouring for independence, the Decadents’ commitment to the demands of aestheticism and Thurston’s ability to voice their collective aspirations in a novel such as *Max*. She states:

⁵⁴ Patricia Coughlan, *Irish Literature: Feminist Perspectives*, (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2008), p. 6.

⁵⁵ Tina O’Toole, ‘Nomadic subjects in Katherine Cecil Thurston’s *Max*’, in Coughlan, and O’Toole, *Irish Literature: Feminist Perspectives* (eds.) Patricia Coughlan and Tina O’Toole, (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2008), p. 87.

It [*Max*] epitomises the particular achievement of decadents and New Women: to make the artifice of identity, particularly sexual identity, into art, to counter the terrible pseudoscientific certainties of their age with regard to gender and race with that art, and to develop an aesthetic which was much more ethical and subversive than the moralists who condemned it could imagine.⁵⁶

Meaney claims that the subversive nature of a novel such as *Max* demonstrates the prefiguration of the shift towards modernism in literature with its focus on ‘the presentation of gender as role play, its exploitation of the homoerotic, and its exploration of the relationship between sexual and aesthetic freedom’.⁵⁷ Meaney also states:

She epitomised the New Woman, since her advent was even more recent, modern and daring than the woman writer’s, but she also seemed to epitomise the new century of possibility. In representing women in such unconventional roles, these writers were part of the movement, which shattered the narrative paradigms of the previous century and laid the foundation for modernism.⁵⁸

What this suggests is that, while subservient to the orthodoxies of her conclusions, Thurston was committed to the exploration of alternatives to the gender definitions that curbed women’s lives – to effectively expose the limitations imposed by biological sexuality.

While the extravagance of *Max* succeeded in drawing attention to the discrepancies in gender identity, the suggestive nature of her narrative went unnoticed by the press at the time of the book’s publication. Thurston’s fiction displayed many of the characteristics of the popular romance genre, so it is possible that the more transgressive elements of her plot went unheeded by her audience. Another possible reason could include the perceived less controversial nature of female to male

⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 173.

⁵⁷ Meaney, p. 170.

⁵⁸ Ibid. p. 159.

transvestism in the twentieth century⁵⁹, as Gilbert and Gubar attest: ‘Male impersonation for the female artist/character is never so threatening, and this because of what Freud sees as the girl’s greater bisexuality, a bisexuality he attributes to the pre-Oedipal time when the little girl is ‘really’ a kind of ‘little boy’.⁶⁰ This in turn links directly to O’Toole’s suggestion that Max, in shedding his identity is making a concerted effort to strive for a pre-lapsarian existence as a means to pursue his/her/its chosen profession, uninhibited by the demands of preconceived gender roles.⁶¹ In equating Max’s transvestism with a young boy’s struggle for self-expression, the transgressive qualities of a novel such as *Max* remained unrecognised. The relatively muted deconstruction of gender roles would instead be superseded by Thurston’s concern with the force of individualism. Max’s declaration that he was ‘inspiration made manifest (and that he) belonged to no sex, no country’ (*Max* 70) clarifies Thurston’s stance on self-fashioning as the preeminent goal and the main preoccupation of the work. The thrust of the novel concerned Max’s difficulty in stabilising his new identity.

In many ways the struggle that Max felt in his attempts at self-definition anticipated Woolf’s 1928 novel *Orlando: A Biography*, in the gender interplay of its lead protagonist. The plot recounts the story of a young Englishman, Orlando, who was born during Elizabethan era of the Renaissance. Escaping to Constantinople he inexplicably metamorphoses into a woman, before traveling back to England and living out his life, switching between the sexes. The transitory nature of the gender fluctuations would come to reflect the instability that Max, ‘who belonged to no sex’, experienced in maintaining his/her chosen identities. As Karen Kaivola states:

If Orlando’s identity is androgynous, that androgyny is mobile, not static: presenting not a smooth synthesis of oppositions but a more chaotic hermaphroditic ‘intermix’. Orlando’s gender and her desires constantly change. Orlando both responds to and eludes gender

⁵⁹ It should be noted that Gilbert and Gubar’s evaluation of female-male cross-dressing is diametrically opposed to Howard’s ‘degeneracy’ model.

⁶⁰ Gilbert and Gubar, p. 326.

⁶¹ This point was addressed more fully in Chapter Three.

imperatives and sexual codes that shape Western culture from the Renaissance to the early years of the twentieth century.⁶²

Although the novel is comprised of complete anatomical (and inexplicable) alternations between sexes, the ease with which Orlando vacillates between these states adds credibility to Judith Butler and Marjorie Garber's assertion that gender (the art of being male or female) was performative. As Woolf states in *Orlando*: 'There is much to support the view that it is the clothes that wear us and not we them; we may make them take the mould of arm or breast, but they mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking'.⁶³ As Thurston's narrative progresses, Max's alternations between male and female roles, in the pursuit of the desires of each respective sex, would ultimately come to reflect Freud's statement that anatomy was destiny, denoting the impossibility of overcoming biological sexuality and its accompanying demands.

Maxine's difficulty in maintaining the male persona is brought about by his burgeoning attraction to Ned. His attempt to resist the natural urges result in his distancing himself from the object of his affections as well as housing the feminine Maxine in a work of art, as an aesthetic exorcism of sorts. Morag Schiach makes the observation that the very attempt to transcend limitations through art was, in itself a characteristic of modernism: 'Modernism is characterized both by a recognition of fragmentation and by a desire to resolve or overcome this through the integrity of aesthetic form'.⁶⁴ Yet while Thurston insists upon the importance of the aesthetic, Meaney's suggestion that 'Max wanted to channel her femininity into her art, rather than deny it'⁶⁵ is problematic. The difficulties that Max felt in maintaining his male persona were brought about primarily by the compulsions of his feminine counterpart – the separation that he sought from Ned and the banishing of Maxine into a form of art would seem to be the only way to continue the life that he had previously sought. However, the intrusion of artistic forms, be it the reconstruction of Max's femininity

⁶² Kaivola, p. 235-236.

⁶³ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1928), p. 187-188.

⁶⁴ Schiach, p. 10.

⁶⁵ Meaney, p. 172.

in front of the mirror, the need for feminine expression in the painting or even the presence of the love song at the conclusion of the novel (which ultimately induced the return of Maxine) – all point to the inseparability of sexuality and aestheticism, in spite of Max's wish to refute his feminine self and pursue his career as a man. But while the link between the two is apparent, it was often the case that one would always take precedence over the other, as Margaret Devereux states: 'The attraction of art supersedes the attraction of actuality till it ends by absorbing the whole being. Aesthetic passion can only be indulged at the expense of human passion, and the sterilization of natural instincts follows as an inevitable result'.⁶⁶ Thurston's novel quite effectively demonstrates the importance of the aesthetic form in crafting individuality. The experimentation with self-fashioning in a bohemian setting, the flirtation with the homoerotic, the questioning of gender roles and the reliance on one's own creativity in an effort to shape one's identity all point to form of fiction that was seemingly more cognizant of the shift towards modernity in culture and society.

(5.6) Conclusion

I contend that Thurston's later fiction resisted the more obvious connotations of the sensation novel and instead embodied a greater overall complexity in its explorations of class, gender and society. The unpublished material in the archive gives further evidence of the oeuvre's generic diversity, and displays the internal tensions in the author's writing process, which may have resulted in a specific text not being fully realised or published. Like Virginia Woolf, Thurston was committed to exploring issues of identity formation in her writing, but ultimately veered away from the more radical implications of literary modernism. Thurston's lack of commitment to her daring notwithstanding, the introspective elements of her final novels, with the cross-examination of gender roles and aestheticism; the disruption of Edwardian moralities; the commitment to self-reinvention and frequently contested relationships between both protagonist and author's inner and outer realities, meant that the oeuvre, while not associated with either proto modernism or the high modernist canon, still

⁶⁶ Margaret Devereux, *The Ascent of Women*, as quoted in Ardis, p. 149.

contained many of the features and thematic preoccupations that we have come to associate with modernism.

Conclusion

The goal of this dissertation was to contest Thurston's liminal place in the canon by arguing for the complexities that existed in her writing. Through an extensive examination of both the subject matter in her fiction and associated materials in the Edinburgh archive, Thurston's contributions to movements such as the New Woman, Irish nationalism, and literary modernism have been carefully delimited. As such, I contend that her neglect is unwarranted.

The opening chapter of the dissertation illuminated Thurston's personal life, giving an exhaustive account of all readily available biographical information. Given my belief that many aspects from Thurston's personal life found resonance in her fiction, this section served as a basis for much of the discussion that featured in later chapters. The significant transatlantic success of her fiction, coupled with her tumultuous, and widely publicised personal relationships resulted in Thurston being a preeminent figure in the opening decade of the twentieth-century. Noted for her shyness in public situations, this section of the thesis succeeded in giving an intimate account of the novelist, which would inform the analysis in subsequent chapters. Chapter Two bridged the gap between biography and critical evaluation by exploring Thurston's inspirations and overall fictional preoccupations. Its main function was to elaborate on Thurston's writing style and signpost aspects of the discussion that would feature in chapters three through five. The lasting repercussions of fin de siècle feminism could be seen in many of Thurston's protagonists – this discussion formed the basis of Chapter Three as the author's body of work was examined under the lens of late Victorian feminism. The chapter addressed Thurston's handling of New Woman archetypes, the conflicting views of matrimony, the limitations imposed by sexual inequalities, and the clash between women's personal and professional aspirations. In spite of Thurston's reticence to more fully engage with the woman's issue in the public sphere, her fiction bore many of the qualities and asked many of the questions that featured throughout the movement, thus proving her affinity with the New Woman genre. Katherine Thurston's complicated relationship to Ireland

through her works warranted appraisal. The individual's response to Irish Nationhood was addressed in Chapter Four, denoting class and gender as prime determinants of representation. Katherine eschewed the more pressing questions of Nationhood in favour of dissecting Irish society at the communal level, unearthing its successes and vices. As evidenced in the chapter, her connection to Ireland and Irishness was notably ambivalent, but ultimately deserves recognition. The final chapter advocated Thurston's later fiction as a precursor to twentieth-century modernism in literature. The author's noted experimentation with self-fashioning as a response to external forces; the conflict between inner and outer realities in her fiction; the force of individualism overriding moral responsibility; the interrogation of gender roles, and the conflation between aesthetic and sexual liberation, are all indicative of the shift towards modernism in twentieth-century literature. This chapter demonstrated that Thurston's work, despite being labelled ephemeral during her lifetime, contained a number of the qualities that we associated with literary modernism.

My intention with this dissertation was to build upon the emerging rejuvenation of interest in disenfranchised Irish literary figures. Katherine Cecil Thurston's relative neglect within the canon is especially curious when considering her prominence in Edwardian society. As a reclamation project, one of its primary functions was to uncover the value of the oeuvre by exploring its relationship to contemporaneous issues and bring to light the connections that may not have been apparent to those reading Thurston at the time. The objective was to invalidate the reductive perception of Thurston as a mere genre writer, who, while highly successful at the time, had nothing of real value to impart. Through an extensive exploration of her works alongside the materials in the Edinburgh archive, and more recent examples of literary criticism, the noted complexities in her fiction have been established. It is hoped that this dissertation by drawing attention to a marginalised author such as Thurston, will allow fuller recognition of the heterogeneous nature of the Irish literary tradition.

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Appendix to the Introduction: Sales Figures

The popularity of Thurston's fiction and its overall commercial prosperity is reflected here in a brief summary of the oeuvre's sales figures, expected earnings and dealings with both American and British publication houses:

***John Chilcote, M.P.* (1904) and *The Gambler* (1905)**

John Chilcote, M.P., 24,000 copies England (Blackwoods 6/ edition, paying 9d per copy up to 9,000 copies – afterwards 1/)

John Chilcote, M.P., 250,000 copies 6^d edition – England (paying ¾ d copy)

John Chilcote, M.P., 250,000 copies in America (Harpers \$1.50 edition, paying 9d per copy up to 25,000 – afterwards 1/)

John Chilcote, M.P., 300, 000 copies – America – 75e edition (paying 2d per copy)

The Gambler 22,000 copies England (Hutchinsons 6/ edition, paying 9d up to 5,000 copies – afterwards 1/)

The Gambler, 100, 000 copies England 6d. Edition, paying ¾ d per copy)

The Gambler, 125,000 copies – America (Harpers \$1.50 edition, paying 9d per copy up to 5,000 copies – afterwards 1/)

The Gambler – 165,000 copies America 75c edition, paying 2d per copy)

***The Fly on the Wheel* (1908) and *Max* (1910)**

The Fly on the Wheel, 10,000 copies – England (Blackwood's 6/ edition, paying 1/6 per copy)

The Fly on the Wheel, 18,000 America (Dodd Mead's \$1.50 edition, paying 1.4 per copy)

Cheap edition 75e – arranged with Dodd Mead for autumn 1910, paying 3d per copy)

May 1910, *Max*, received from Harper's America, sterling 1,200.00 for serial

To receive on day of publication from Harpers (America), sterling 1,200.00 (in advance of royalties, representing, 15,500 copies)

To receive on day of publication from Hutchinson (England), sterling 1,200.00

(Harpers book terms 1/ per copy through out – Hutchinsons 1/6 per copy up to 20,000 copies – afterwards 1/8)¹

¹ The information here has been gleaned from a handwritten note taken from the Edinburgh Archive. A more comprehensive analysis of Thurston's sales figures and financial dealings is to be found in Caroline Copeland's 'An Oasis in the Desert: The Transatlantic Publishing Success of Katherine Cecil Thurston', published in *Journal of Edinburgh Bibliographical Society*, Number 2, 2007, pp. 23-41.

The notable dip in sales figures from Thurston's earlier to later novels demonstrates not only the author's dwindling popularity at the time, but also indicates the decline of popular fiction in the literary marketplace in the first decade of the twentieth century. When discussing *Max's* failure to live up to Thurston's commercial expectations, Thomas B Wells, a correspondent for her publisher in Harper and Sons states:

Being a frank person yourself, you must let me say with equal frankness that we never expected such a success with *Max* as we had with *The Masquerader*. In the first place, such sales are a thing of the past in this country – they just don't happen. Why, I don't know, but there is no doubt but that quantities of cheap editions of popular fiction now on the market have diminished the sale of regular editions.²

Thurston's disappointment with the sales of her final novel notwithstanding, these figures demonstrate the immense popularity that the author enjoyed during her relatively short career both in Europe and in the United States of America. Thurston's untimely death at the age of thirty-six meant that only a handful of works saw publication. Consequently, the scope of Thurston's professional accomplishments within such a short period of time is both atypical and noteworthy.

² Letter from Wells, Thomas B., to Thurston, Katherine C., 28 February 1911, Box 4, National Library of Scotland, Thurston Archive, Acc. 11378.

Appendix: Edinburgh Archive

Edinburgh. Acc. 11378 – The Katherine Cecil Thurston archive

Box 1: Correspondence

Personal letters: Re divorce (from friends)
General literary correspondence, 1903-1910
Letters from the literary Agency, 1903-1908
Letters from William Blackwood & Sons, 1905-1910
Literary agreements from 1902-1910. Correspondence concerning the publishing rights of *Max*.
Royalty Statements, 1904-1911
A number of photographs.

Box 2: Letter books

September 1905-March 1907
March: August 1907.

Box 3: Short Stories and plays

Manuscript of *The Hand*
'Votive Offering'
The Crucible: Typescript with manuscript pages for part of Act 1, Scene 1.
Typescript of *The Day After*: a play in 3 episodes.
Corrected typescript of *Fidelity*
Manuscript drafts of *Harlequin* as a play and as a novel
Partially corrected typescript of *Harlequin*
Max as a play – typescript
Corrected Galley Proofs of *Max*, 1910
Typescript of *Sandro* (novel)

Box 4: Novels as plays / Reviews / General literary correspondence

Typescript of adaptation of *The Masquerader* by John Hunter Booth
Manuscript with drafts of *Max*: a play in 4 acts
Typescript of *Max*: a play in 3 acts
Reviews of *Max* (folder)
Reviews of *John Chilcote, M.P.* (folder)
Reviews of *The Gambler* (not as many)
General literary correspondence

Box 5: Novels

Manuscript of *John Chilcote, M.P.*

Manuscript of *The Healer of Men* 1906, together with a synopsis of the remaining part of the novel.

Typescript of chapters I-IX of *The Healer of Men* with synopsis and corrected versions of chapters 1-11

Manuscript draft of *Harlequin*, 1910.

Typescripts of *Fidelity*, 'Votive Offering', 'Human Nature' and *The Crucible*.

Box 6: Domestic materials. Shopping lists etc.

Box 7: Finances (cashbooks etc.)

Box 8: Research, files and notebooks

Notebooks on modern Spain

Notes from 'The Opium eater'

Map of Persia, Afghanistan

Full copies of the short stories 'Temptation' and 'The Hazard'.

Box 9: Earlier press cuttings:

Two big folders – one red, one blue - *The Circle* and *John Chilcote, M.P.*

Pictures inside the jacket of the red folder.

Box 10: press cuttings, 1903-1911

A folder of reviews for each novel, plus a number of folders for undated material.

Box 11: Unsorted correspondence: To Thurston, from Gavin.

Box 12: Unsorted correspondence: From Thurston, to Gavin.

Box 13: Contracts, manuscripts, correspondence after her death,

Evidence of work on a new play: *The Letter*. Notes on the novel *The Hand* (handwritten) and a number of pictures.