

# Sara Jeannette Duncan's *A Daughter of Today*

## Nineteenth-Century Canadian Literary Feminism and the *Fin-de-siècle* Magic- Picture Story

In his survey of London in the 1890s, Karl Beckson recounts “the magic-picture mania” (47) that swept through *fin-de-siècle* fiction. From this period he names a wide range of short stories and novels featuring mysterious pictures or mirrors (the symbolic equivalent of the picture). The novel *A Daughter of Today* (1894), written by Sara Jeannette Duncan, offers a fascinating study of the *fin-de-siècle* magic-picture story. In the preface to the modern reprinted edition, Misao Dean reports that Duncan “was a voracious reader of Canadian, British, American, and Continental works” (v). While she and other Duncan scholars have explored the literary background of *A Daughter of Today*, there has been no attempt to connect it to *fin-de-siècle* magic-picture stories like Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). Yet there are good grounds for reading the novel as a magic-picture story. Indeed, a close reading reveals a complex and innovative adaptation of the conventions of this genre. Most striking is the exploitation of the conventions of the magic-picture story to dramatize the challenges facing women artists of the 1890s. The narrative of the magic-picture story intersects with a feminist narrative that traces the heroine’s efforts to free herself from the Victorian ideal of the Angel in the House and to succeed as a professional artist, as she embraces some of the principles associated with Aestheticism and Decadence, while simultaneously exposing the limitations of Aestheticism and Decadence for women artists at the *fin de siècle*.

Kerry Powell provides a good account of the historical development of the magic-picture story, and a comprehensive catalogue of its features. She traces the origin of the magic-picture device to Horace Walpole’s *The Castle*

of *Otranto* (1764), which features “a picture capable of sighing deeply, heaving its breast, and stepping out of its frame to censure . . . [the protagonist’s] evil behavior” (148). She chronicles the transformation of the magic portrait from a mere device into a vehicle to explore “the duality of art and life, the myth of Faust, the theme of the pariah, the dream of eternal youth, the clash of puritan morality and unbridled hedonism, and the like” (149) in the writings of Edgar Allen Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Nikolai Gogol. She notes that “by the 1880s, especially toward the close of the decade, the number of magic-portrait stories swelled to the proportions of a deluge” (150). In her view, the most remarkable “instance in a curious efflorescence of novels and stories dealing with ‘magic-pictures’ of one kind or another” (148) was *Dorian Gray*. Based on her extensive reading, Powell identifies the following features as characteristic of the *fin-de-siècle* magic-picture story:

Often a beautiful model . . . sits to an inspired painter who produces an unexampld masterpiece of portraiture. Sometimes the personalities of the artist and subject are curiously fused and recreated in the portrait itself, giving rise to speculations about true and false identity and the relations of art and life. In some stories a mirror is employed prominently as a device to contrast the reality of life to the sublime or demonic representation in the portrait; in others, a “magic” mirror replaces the portrait altogether. On the one hand the portrait is likely to embody some “ideal”—perhaps . . . aesthetic . . . perhaps moral . . . and it may exercise a mysterious influence on characters to do good. On the other hand the picture is associated frequently with evil impulses, even with Satan. . . . It teaches the handsome model to be vain of his beauty and to contrast enviously his human mutability with the static loveliness of the painting. In extreme cases the disillusioned model turns to a life of decadent self-indulgence, scorning the normal ties which bind mankind and inviting his own damnation. . . . The model may seek to change places with his “other self” in the portrait . . . (or . . . mirror) . . . [and] the portrait frequently takes on, among its other functions, the role of conscience. . . . Urged to repentance by what he sees, the remorseful subject of the portrait is either redeemed by his new outlook or driven to despair and suicide. In any event the portrait is likely to be attacked by the model or painter, slashed or burned and thus finally destroyed. The toll taken by these events upon the model may be reflected in his sudden aging, disfigurement, or death. (151-52)

Most obviously identifying *A Daughter of Today* as a magic-picture story is the sequence of events in which the beautiful American heroine Elfrida Bell poses for the English artist John Kendal. In keeping with the conventions of the genre, the portrait Kendal produces is a masterpiece—the best work he has ever done. The narrator states that “[h]e had for once escaped . . . the tyranny of his brilliant technique[,]” subjecting it to “the truth of the idea” (260).

The scene where Kendal captures his idea of Elfrida on canvas exhibits specific parallels to the scene in *Dorian Gray* where the artist Basil Hallward transforms Dorian into the “visible incarnation” of his “unseen ideal” (114). Before unveiling the finished product Basil looks “for a long time at . . . Dorian . . . and then for a long time at the picture” (24). Similarly, Kendal gives his model “long, close, almost intimate scrutiny” (248) before finally allowing her to see her portrait. When Dorian first glimpses his portrait “his cheeks flush[] for a moment with pleasure” as “[t]he sense of his own beauty c[omes] on him like a revelation” (24-25). “In the first instant of her gaze,” Elfrida’s face grows “radiant” at the “almost dramatic loveliness” (248-49) of her portrait. In both instances, joy quickly turns to pain as the protagonist grasps the import of the artist’s achievement. According to the narrator, Kendal experiences an epiphany as he puts the last touches on Elfrida’s portrait, sensing that “[i]t was the real Elfrida” (250). In the same terms, Basil refers to his work as the “real Dorian” (29). The narrator’s remark in *A Daughter of Today* that Elfrida’s portrait “revealed . . . the human secret of the face underneath” (250) recalls Dorian’s admission that his portrait “held the secret of his life” (91). Art emerges in both novels as more than reflecting or representing life, namely as usurping or superseding it. “Don’t you feel,” Elfrida asks Kendal, “as if you had stolen something from me?” (251), while Dorian declares of his portrait, “[i]t is a part of myself” (27). Elfrida and Dorian’s portraits thus serve to encourage a Decadent conception of life as art or self as image.

After his portrait is done, Dorian starts to fashion himself into an *objet d’art*, distancing himself from “nature,” in the sense of both biological nature and the “natural” norms of morality and sexual behaviour. He lives his life as a series of different artistic poses, becoming an icon of fashion and an arbiter of taste in London society. During the same period, he turns to Decadent self-indulgence, exploiting his portrait to transform himself into “the visible symbol” of the “new Hedonism” (22) expounded by his friend Lord Henry Wotton, who acts as the main mouthpiece for Aestheticism and Decadence in the novel. In the aftermath of his ruthless abandonment of the actress Sibyl Vane, he first grasps the portrait’s marvelous aspect, detecting a line of cruelty about the mouth not visible in his own face when he scrutinizes it in the “oval glass” (90) given to him by Lord Henry. This discovery forces him to confront an apparent impossibility. On the day of the portrait’s completion, while keeping Dorian company before the final unveiling, Lord Henry had introduced him to some of the tenets of Aestheticism and Decadence, dwelling particularly on the transience of

youth and the necessity of exploiting every opportunity to experience novelty and pleasure. His words had led Dorian to exclaim, "If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that . . . I would give everything! . . . I would give my soul for that!" (25-26). In apparent accord with this wish, the portrait has become to Dorian "the most magical of mirrors," the hidden record of his life. Dorian laments the "horrible sympathy . . . between him and the picture" (106), but does nothing to try to end it. Instead, he exploits the opportunity to pursue every novelty and pleasure without sacrificing his youth and beauty, successfully defying both biological nature and "natural" morality and sexual behaviour, and realizing the potential that Lord Henry glimpses in him during their first encounter.

Beginning when Elfrida is fifteen and still living in her hometown of Sparta, Illinois, portraits and mirrors serve as touchstones in her efforts to make herself into an *objet d'art*, distancing herself from biological nature and moral and sexual norms.<sup>1</sup> Filled with pride over her daughter's accomplishments, Mrs. Bell shows off a photograph of Elfrida to the highschool teacher Miss Kimpsey. Her remark that the photograph is "full of soul" (repeated by Miss Kimpsey) highlights the relationship between art and life, while her observation that Elfrida "posed herself" emphasizes her daughter's self-consciousness. The narrator reports, "It was a cabinet photograph of a girl whose eyes looked definitely out of it, dark, large, well shaded, full of desire to be beautiful at once expressed and fulfilled." She adds, "The nose was a trifle heavily blocked, but the mouth had sensitiveness and charm. There was a heaviness in the chin too, but the free springing curve of the neck contradicted that; and the symmetry of the face defied analysis. It was turned a little to one side, wistfully . . ." (8). This description evokes an image that is strikingly pre-Raphaelite, suggesting that in her early efforts to make herself into an *objet d'art* Elfrida is heeding Wilde's argument in *The Decay of Lying* (1891) about life imitating art. The image displays the same stylized sensuality as Dante Gabriel Rossetti's paintings of women. Miss Kimpsey's comment that Elfrida reminds her of an actress highlights her air of artificiality.

Home from art school in Philadelphia, Elfrida continues to use mirrors and portraits in order to turn her life into art. The most obvious instance is the scene where she stays up late to recite poetry in the spring moonlight. Before going to bed, she pauses in front of "the looking-glass, and wafts a kiss, as she bl[ows] the candle out, to the face she s[ees] there . . . full of the spirit of Rossetti" (16). Again, it is as if she were stepping out of one of Rossetti's paintings.

Her efforts to turn her life into art redouble when she moves to Paris to finish her training in art. In Paris, she adopts a costume “of which a broad soft felt hat, which made a delightful brigand of her, and a Hungarian cloak formed important features” (26), and her conversation acquires a new air of calculation, evident in her first recorded encounter with Kendal. Also in Paris, she commits herself to a “repudiation of the bourgeois” (29), although not of an extreme form like Dorian’s. It is on the ostensible grounds of repudiating the bourgeois that she later denounces her friend Janet Cardiff, whom she accuses of “adulterating the pure stream of ideality with muddy considerations of what the people are pleased to call the moralities, and with the feebler contamination of the conventionalities” (267–68). Her suicide marks the fullest expression of her Decadence, aligning her with famous Decadent heroes like George Moore’s Mike Fletcher.

In *A Daughter of Today* the portrait plays no role in encouraging the protagonist’s Decadent life. In this novel and *Dorian Gray* it does force the protagonist to question his or her life, serving a crucial function in the resolution of the plot. Dorian’s portrait assumes the role of his conscience, representing the progressive deterioration of his soul. Elfrida describes the effect of her portrait as a “moral shock,” stating that “an egotist doesn’t make an agreeable picture, however charmingly you apologize for her,”<sup>2</sup> although she wavers between contrition and defiance. “Don’t think I shall reform,” she warns Kendal, “as people in books do . . .” (250). Yet she at least flirts with the idea of change, asking him, “[D]o you want me to give it up—my book . . . my ambition?” (252).

Elfrida’s portrait is not magical. Indeed, there is no supernaturalism in the novel at all. Yet Powell identifies a number of magic-picture stories that “omit even so basic a feature as the painting’s supernatural qualities” (152). In its lack of supernaturalism the novel resembles other instances of realistic fiction within the magic-picture tradition like Henry James’s *The Story of a Masterpiece* (1868), James Payn’s *Best of Husbands* (1874), and Charles Reade’s *The Picture* (1884). Elfrida’s portrait displays an especially strong resemblance to Stephen Baxter’s portrait of Marion Everett in *Story of a Masterpiece*. Kendal’s work, like Baxter’s, brilliantly succeeds in capturing the beauty of its subject while ruthlessly exposing her shallowness and egotism.<sup>3</sup>

Dorian and Elfrida conceive the same plan to free themselves from the influence of their portraits. Dorian hopes to attain peace by killing “this monstrous soul-life” (223). Elfrida claims to have destroyed her portrait in order to end a personal torment, writing to Kendal afterwards, “I . . .

[came] either to kill myself or IT. It is impossible, I find, notwithstanding all that I said, that both should continue to exist” (276). As such, *Dorian Gray* and *Daughter of Today* uphold Powell’s observation that in the magic-picture story “the picture is not so much a moral or immoral ‘double’ as a rival aesthetic self which threatens to destroy its real-life counterpart” (158), despite Kendal’s dismissal of Elfrida’s act as merely self-gratification.<sup>4</sup>

*Daughter of Today* imitates *Dorian Gray* in combining the motif of the altered picture with that of the changed model, as the act of destroying the portrait leads Dorian to inadvertent, and Elfrida to deliberate, suicide, affirming the apparent interchangeability of art and life. Powell complains that most magic-picture narratives present the double as an evil simply “to be rejected outright and obliterated,” praising Wilde’s ending for illustrating “that to destroy the ‘shadow’ self, with its dark and destructive impulses, is actually to cancel one’s identity altogether” (160). The ending of *Daughter of Today* avoids the same kind of moral over-simplification.

Indeed, the narrative as a whole exhibits a complexity that suggests a debt to Wilde that extends beyond the conventions of the magic-picture story, as both authors use the magic-picture story as a vehicle to explore the implications of Aestheticism and Decadence. By the time Wilde came to write *Dorian Gray*, his association with Aestheticism and Decadence was famous. When critics attacked the morality of *Dorian Gray*, he composed a Preface for the novel in which he flaunted this association. Yet as has since been widely recognized, the events of the narrative call into question some of the principles set out in the Preface. The novel achieves a strikingly objective analysis of the attractions and dangers of Aesthetic and Decadent life, as Wilde approaches Aestheticism and Decadence not as “a creed but a problem” (310), to borrow Richard Ellmann’s phrase. This approach seems to have inspired other *fin-de-siècle* writers interested in contemporary debates about art who would not necessarily have aligned themselves with Wilde, including Duncan. Duncan displays a specific interest in analyzing the implications of Aestheticism and Decadence for the female artist. The final sequence in which Kendal paints Elfrida’s portrait emerges as the crux of an ongoing feminist narrative addressing both the difficulties facing the female artist at the *fin de siècle*, and the consequences of the heroine’s efforts to fashion herself into an *objet d’art* according to Aesthetic and Decadent principles.

From the beginning of the novel, mirrors and portraits mark stages in Elfrida’s struggle not only to transform her life into art, but also to free herself from the ideal of the Angel in the House. Prominently displayed in the family drawing-room are paintings of the Virgin Mary and the reformed

Mary Magdalene. Symbolically, this decor suggests that the main prospect Sparta offers Elfrida is the role of angel-woman (in the case of Mary Magdalene, reformed from the monster-woman). This prospect becomes clear upon her return from Philadelphia. While her mother pronounces her “tremendously improved” (10) by Philadelphia, her father asserts that it is time she married and settled down in Sparta. While allowing that painting will be a lifelong interest and that “if ever she should be badly off she can teach” (11), he cannot imagine her pursuing art seriously, or even teaching art except as a means of subsistence. The photograph Elfrida poses for when she is fifteen, and the scene in which she blows a kiss to her reflection in the mirror suggest a search for some alternative. Significantly, in the second scene Elfrida directly violates paternal injunction. Mr. Bell objects to his daughter’s late night communions with Rossetti, which he fears will produce “headaches and hysteria” (15). Elaine Showalter attests that doctors during the nineteenth century “linked what they saw as an epidemic of nervous disorders including anorexia, neurasthenia, and hysteria with the changes in women’s aspirations” (*Sexual* 40), inviting the conclusion that Mr. Bell’s unstated concern is with Elfrida’s ambitions in art.

Elfrida’s Parisian image suggests a continuing search for an alternative to the Victorian feminine ideal, affirmed in her acceptance of her friend Nádie Palicsky’s *union libre* with fellow artist André Vambéry. She later vocally denounces love and marriage, the first for falsely idealizing a biological urge, and the second for binding couples in “commonplaceness,” “routine,” and “domestic virtues” (158). She regards them as “interesting” and necessary for the survival of the species, but “degrading” and “horrible” for women, especially for those “to whom life may mean something else” (157). Beginning in Paris, she asserts the “sexlessness of artistic sympathy” (131)—an assertion repeated in the inscription on her funeral stone, “*Pas femme–artiste*” (281). She asks to be treated “not as a woman, but as an artist and a Bohemian” (46) by Kendal, treating him in the same terms. “For the artist she had . . . admiration,” the narrator writes, “for the man nothing, except the half contemptuous reflection that he was probably as other men” (44).<sup>5</sup>

Yet the novel also explores the dangers of Aestheticism and Decadence for the female artist, raising concerns about the impact of Elfrida’s ideal of creativity on her art. A belief in the sexlessness of artistic sympathy justifies a demand for recognition as an artist and Bohemian. However, there is evidence that Elfrida’s failure at the academy might not be due simply to lack of talent, but to the ideal of creative androgyny endorsed there. In an early scene at the women’s atelier, the master Lucien pauses to admire one of

Nádie's sketches. Praising "[t]he drawing of the neck" as "excellently brutal," he confides, "[i]n you, mademoiselle . . . I find the woman and the artist divorced. That is a vast advantage—an immense source of power" (21). Turning to Elfrida's work, he exclaims in exasperation, "Your drawing is still lady-like, your colour is still pretty, and *saprist!* You have worked with me a year!" (23).

In *Slip-Shod Sibyls: Recognition, Rejection and the Woman Poet* (1995), Germaine Greer denounces the ideal of creative androgyny that evolved during the nineteenth century as damaging for women artists. In her view, "the post-Romantic claims that the great artist does not . . . [create] as a member of either sex but as a representative of humanity is . . . insidious and absurd." The contention that "[a] man does not write/sculpt/paint as a man . . . [and] therefore a woman may not write/sculpt/paint as a woman" is a fallacy, since a man's "'sexuality' colours everything he . . . [creates], even the very act of . . . [creating] itself." Greer insists that "[t]o deny this is to deny to the sex that is acutely conscious of its otherness the right to artistic expression" (101).<sup>6</sup>

*Daughter of Today* indirectly validates this argument. While Lucien's remark about divorcing the artist and the woman might seem to celebrate a capacity to transcend sex, the praise of Nádie's sketch as "excellently brutal" and the dismissal of Elfrida's drawing as "lady-like" and "pretty" points to a conception of art that is inherently masculine rather than androgynous. It appears that Lucien, instead of advocating androgyny is simply valorizing one set of gendered attributes over another. He admires Nádie not for transcending sex in her art, but for painting like a man. If Nádie meets the academy's criteria of excellence, she is exceptional among her female colleagues. The narrator indicates that it was the work of the male students that was "constantly brought up for the stimulus and instruction of Lucien's women students" (22), not the other way around. The relegation of the women to an upstairs atelier, and the discouragement of female speech at the academy, yields further proof of discrimination. The narrator observes that "[i]t chafed . . . [Elfrida] that she must day after day be only the dumb submissive pupil" (29). She sees the problem as the dynamic between pupil and teacher. However, it is clear from the narrative commentary that the atelier downstairs where the male students paint is full of noise and debate.

The intense competition between female students at the academy attests to their struggle for acceptance there, although Nádie imputes it to "a weakness of her sex" (21). The narrator explains that Elfrida is popular in the atelier because "her enthusiasms [were] so generous, her drawing so



bad" (27). Elfrida herself reacts badly to the news of Nádíe's first triumph. After announcing to Elfrida and Kendal that Lucien wants to send two of her pieces to the salon, Nádíe asks Elfrida to embrace her. The narrator describes Elfrida as pushing Nádíe away "almost violently," banishing both friends from her apartment with "almost hysterical imperativeness" (52). The use of the term "hysterical" in this context is telling. The narrator intimates that nineteenth-century female hysteria results not from ambition, but specifically from thwarted ambition. She employs the word "hysterical" again later in her description of Elfrida's reaction to the news of Janet's successful first novel. Signs of Elfrida's persisting grudge against Nádíe appear in the description of Elfrida's London apartment, where "a study of a girl's head that Nádíe had given her was struck with a Spanish dagger over the fireplace," while "a sketch of Vambéry's and one of Kendal's, sacredly framed, hung where she could always see them" (58).

Elfrida might seem at first to realize an ideal of creative androgyny more convincingly in London than in Paris. Her *Decade* review impresses Kendal with its "young mocking brilliant voice," its "delicacy and truth," and its air at once "strong and gentle, with an uplifted tenderness, and all the suppressed suggestion that good pictures themselves have" (88-89)—strikingly androgynous terms of praise compared with Lucien's earlier characterization of her painting. Elfrida chooses a deliberately unladylike subject for "An Adventure in Stageland," her most ambitious and well-received literary project, temporarily adopting life as a chorus-line dancer to research it.<sup>7</sup> It remains unclear, however, to what extent we can attribute any success to her attempt to transcend her sex. As the modern editor astutely observes, "Elfrida . . . insists on writing about subjects which are manifestly not ladylike" but also "reflect aspects of women's lives in society" (xviii), and her writing might be said to draw its inspiration from the record of female experience. The recurring insistence on the flaws of Elfrida's writing suggest that she is unconsciously at odds with the ideal of creativity she embraces. The narrator remarks that "[i]n the pleasure [Elfrida's *Decade* article gave Kendal] he refused to reflect how often it dismissed with contempt where it should have considered with respect, how [it was] sometimes inconsistent . . . exaggerated and obscure" (88). She remarks elsewhere that as a journalist Elfrida, "went very well, but . . . was all the better for the severest kind of a bit" (163), referring to the warning of the editor-in-chief of *The Illustrated Age* that "the paper doesn't want a female Zola" (101). There is also Lawrence Cardiff's criticism of Elfrida's manuscript "The Nemesis of Romanticism" as "hopeless" (178), and the author George Jasper's negative evaluation of "An Adventure in Stageland" after the narrator has described

him as a man of “notable critical acumen” (277).

Elfrida’s ideal of creativity increasingly fails to provide her with needed confidence in art. Envious of the success of Janet’s first novel, she sets out purposely to hurt her. She wrongly attributes Janet’s disapproval of “An Adventure in Stageland” to jealousy, commenting, “We are pretty much alike, we women, aren’t we, after all?” (225). This tendency to disparage women, exhibited also by Nádíe, incidentally reinforces the claims of twentieth-century feminist critics concerning the inherent misogyny of Aestheticism and Decadence.

Elfrida contributes to art mainly through the influence of her conversation and personality on other artists. While in Paris she poses for other pupils, “filling impressive parts in their weekly compositions” (27). After her departure to London, Nádíe recalls, “She always understood! It was a joy to show her anything . . . she was good for me” (79). From their first encounter Janet finds Elfrida’s talk stimulating, and she perhaps owes to Elfrida some of the impetus for her novel. Elfrida’s *Decade* review fills Kendal with a “fine energy” and “a longing to accomplish to the utmost of his limitations” (89). He pronounces Elfrida herself “curiously satisfying from an artistic point of view” (233). She, of course, inspires his masterpiece.

Elfrida’s efforts to turn herself into an *objet d’art* arguably sabotage her struggle towards artistic agency by repeating the historical pattern of female objectification in art. Showalter identifies a number of women artists of the *fin de siècle* for whom becoming “muses themselves” and having “their lives appropriated and simplified in the interest of another’s art, seemed a tragic fate” (*Daughters* xv-xvi). There is a persistent danger of Elfrida’s control over the process of her own objectification slipping away from her, and of her becoming appropriated and simplified in the interest of another’s art. Indeed, her desire for an audience encourages her to court that danger. She welcomes the opportunity to be “the medium of . . . [Kendal’s] inspiration” (247).

Elfrida’s portrait effectively illustrates the dangers of becoming an *objet d’art*. During her last sitting, she confides to Kendal, “I, whom you see as an individual, am so many people. Phases of character have an attraction for me. I wear one today and another tomorrow[,]” speculating, “it must make me difficult to paint” (247). When she accuses him of not listening to her, he responds, “You said something about being like Cleopatra, a creature of infinite variety, didn’t you?” (248). The Shakespearean echo inadvertently exposes the source of his attraction to Elfrida. In William Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606-07) it is Cleopatra’s resistance to fixity that

emerges as a primary source of her attraction and power—the same quality Kendal finds most alluring about Elfrida, as he strives “to find out more about her, to guess at the meanings behind her eyes” (122). There is a recurring tension between Elfrida and Kendal as he attempts to fix her, and she resists being fixed, just as there is between Cleopatra and Caesar and his followers in Shakespeare’s play. In the end, Elfrida’s adoption of different poses fails to prevent Kendal from fixing her. One might even argue that her poses encourage him to label and dismiss her. Once he gets past the superficial fluctuations in her moods, he sees that at the core of her personality is a single guiding principle, which he unflatteringly captures on canvas.

Nevertheless, Kendal’s evaluation of Elfrida is problematic. The narrator indirectly questions his objectivity in the observation that he “felt an exulting mastery over . . . [his subject] which was the most intoxicating sensation his work had ever brought him . . . a silent, brooding triumph in his manipulation, in his control” (246-47). When he and Elfrida examine the portrait together we are told that he experiences “curious painful interest,” but no “remorse, even in the knowledge that she saw . . . and suffered” (249). There is a subsequent imputation that the portrait does not depict her “fairly” or “seriously” (250). While a number of critics have regarded Kendal as the moral centre of Duncan’s novel, Thomas E. Tausky emphasizes the instances of his emotional immaturity and other negative aspects of his character, concluding that “[t]here is no character at any point in the novel who can be said to represent a moral norm against which Elfrida’s excesses are judged” (119). Kendal himself qualifies his assessment when he tells Janet, “I have made it what she is, I think” (262). There is also the question of Elfrida’s own motives in accepting Kendal’s judgement of her. Preoccupation with display fosters her dependence on the opinions of others, rendering her vulnerable to being fixed by him. The value she places on male opinion exacerbates her vulnerability. Interestingly, the more conventional Janet displays less concern than Elfrida with impressing men, and in some respects emerges as more creatively and intellectually independent. The narrator notes her dislike that Kendal’s presence “invariably turned their intercourse into a joust; as if . . . they mutely asked him to bestow the wreath on one of them” (139), and her reluctance to raise the situation with Elfrida only because she fears speculation about her feelings for Kendal. In Elfrida’s case, love gives Kendal’s judgements extra weight, implied in her veiled offer of herself to him immediately after she accepts his reading of her character. Compounding the problem is her own tendency to reduce her personality to Aesthetic and Decadent precepts. In an early conversation with Kendal in London, she calls herself “a simple creature.”

Afterwards, she allows, "I am complex enough, I dare say," but insists, "my egotism is like a little flame within me . . . I see everything in its light" (126).

Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar famously link the appearance of mirrors and paintings in nineteenth-century women's fiction to the female author's attempt to free herself from patriarchal definition. They identify mirrors and paintings as common objects through which nineteenth-century women writers express their sense of entrapment in the patriarchy, and the trope of the woman looking at a painted or mirror image of herself as symbolic of the woman writer's confrontation of the negative female stereotypes of angel-woman or monster-woman.

Kendal might be seen to envision Elfrida rather stereotypically as a kind of monster-woman. Whatever the flaws of Elfrida's character, exaggerated by her adherence to Aesthetic or Decadent principles, such an assessment seems unjust.<sup>8</sup> The narrator encourages a certain amount of sympathy for Elfrida. She writes with infectious enthusiasm of Elfrida's discovery of art, declaring, "Some books, some pictures, some music brought her a curious exalted sense of double life. She could not talk about it at all, but she could slip out into the wet streets on a gusty October evening, and walk miles exulting in it . . ." (14). The same enthusiasm emerges in such sentences as "The Quartier spoke, and her soul answered it; and the world had nothing to compare with conversation like that" (28), conveying Elfrida's first impressions of Paris. Marian Fowler points to similarities in the temperament of the author and heroine, including the same desire "to do *good* things . . . and to have them appreciated" (217). While Duncan gives her own second name to Janet, she gives her mother's maiden name to Elfrida, hinting that both female characters are intended to represent different aspects of the author. Her journalistic piece "A Woman Doctor" recalls her own youthful ambitions as a painter, describing herself on a picnic with some girlhood friends, looking "affectionately upon a large and ambitious daub in oils that was secured in the fork of a sapling nearby, as in some way typical of a dazzling future career in art" (20). Like Elfrida, Duncan seems to have given up painting in order to pursue a career as a writer. Although there are elements of satire and irony directed at the heroine (significantly absent from *Dorian Gray*), these are directed specifically at her Aestheticism and Decadence. After describing the costume Elfrida adopts in Paris, the narrator adds, "The Hungarian cloak suited her so extremely well that artistic considerations compelled her to wear it occasionally, I fear, when other people would have found it uncomfortably warm" (26-27). The narrator's imitation of Elfrida's use of French words and phrases, referring to the heroine's "*appartement*" (26) and "*petits soupers*" (27), conveys more subtle

mockery. Janet, despite her reservations concerning the effects of Elfrida's Aesthetic and Decadent philosophy on her character, expresses recurring hope that she will change and realize her inner potential. When Kendal convinces her to feign indifference after Elfrida repudiates her, Janet has immediate qualms. As soon as she learns of the portrait's destruction, she rushes to Elfrida's apartment determined to tell her that she did not mean what she had said in her letter, only to find that she is too late.

Once she accepts Kendal's verdict of her, Elfrida's artistic ambitions temporarily evaporate, as she offers to renounce her identity as artist and Bohemian for that of wife and mother. This gesture indirectly highlights a particular problem the author explores in relation to Aestheticism and Decadence—its encouraged repudiation of love and marriage. The account of Janet and Elfrida's debate on this subject implies a tacit agreement with Janet's position. Janet accepts the possibility that "the spirituality of love might be a Western product," but considers it "wanton" to disregard "a thing that made all the difference" (154). According to the narrator, it hurts her to hear sentiments against love and marriage "from . . . lips so plainly meant for all tenderness . . . the woman in her . . . [rises] in protest, less on behalf of her sex than on behalf of Elfrida herself, who seemed so blind, so willing to revile, so anxious to reject." The narrator's observation of Elfrida's tendency to declare her views "with curious disregard of time and circumstance, mentioning her opinion in a Strand omnibus, for instance, that the only dignity attaching to love as between a man and a woman was that of an artistic idea" (154), implicitly challenges their validity, suggesting that she has adopted them at least partly for effect. Lending weight to this interpretation is the developing relationship between Elfrida and Kendal. As Dean points out, "Elfrida's theories about sex are unseated by the evolution of her artistic camaraderie with Kendal into unmistakable physical desire" (xix). *A Daughter of Today* thus aligns itself with other New Women Canadian novels reflecting "a conservative response to the destabilizing force of first-wave feminism," depicting "women . . . [as] feminine in spite of themselves" (Dean, *Practising* 62-63). Ann Ardis goes as far as to cite an intolerance "of the New Woman's artistic ambitions" (148) in the fate assigned to Elfrida.<sup>9</sup>

The same principles that inhibit Elfrida's artistic achievement prevent her from winning Kendal. He explains to Janet, "It's a man's privilege to fall in love with a woman . . . not with an incarnate idea." When Janet responds, "It's a very beautiful idea," he counters, "It looks well from the outside, but it is quite incapable of any growth or much change . . ." (271). Although initially charmed by her poses, he regards Elfrida essentially as an object of

curiosity. Moreover, he has increasing trouble with her demands to be recognized as an artist and a Bohemian. According to the narrator, “the real *camaraderie* she constantly suggested her desire for he could not . . . truly tolerate with a woman. He was an artist, but . . . also an Englishman . . . He felt an absurd irritation, which he did not analyze, that she should talk so well and be so charming, personally, at the same time” (97). Although Kendal refuses to analyze his irritation, what evidently disturbs him is that a woman who insists on addressing him as a *camarade* can excite his romantic and sexual interest at all. Significantly, he never shows the same irritation towards Janet, whose intelligence and literary talents he rates as highly, if not more highly, than Elfrida’s. The reason seems to be because he regards Janet as “a natural creature” (81) and “a thoroughly nice girl” (121) whose feelings for him he takes for granted.

Kendal’s rejection of Elfrida leaves her lost. The narrator writes, “[h]er self-consciousness was a wreck, she no longer controlled it; it tossed at the mercy of her emotion. Her face was very white and painfully empty, her eyes wandered uncertainly around” (252). As her colour suggests, Elfrida has lost all sense of identity—she is like an erased page. Rejected by Kendal after having expressed her willingness to sacrifice her art for him, Elfrida is left with nothing. The final scene between the two in the studio invites a parallel with another *fin-de-siècle* magic-picture story, Poe’s *The Oval Portrait* (1842), where an artist paints a portrait of his bride that drains her vitality, killing her the instant it is complete.

At this point, Elfrida makes a concerted effort to recover from Kendal’s evaluation of her. Leaving the studio, she cries “I will never be different!” (253). Arriving home, she declares to her statue of Buddha, “It was a lie, a pose to tempt him on. I would never have given it up—never! It is more to me—I am *almost* sure—than he is[.]” reflecting, a moment later, “He thinks that he has read me finally, that he has done with me, that I no longer count” (254). Her destruction of the painting hurls her defiance at Kendal. However, if she challenges his assumption that he has done with her, she fails to repudiate his actual reading of her, setting the stage for her suicide. Her destruction of her portrait marks a symbolic self-annihilation, anticipating her real death. The final blow is the rejection of the manuscript of “An Adventure in Stageland,” only posthumously published. Her suicide marks an attempt to achieve value in the only remaining terms available to her within her artistic creed. The careful staging of her suicide evokes one last comparison between Elfrida and Shakespeare’s Cleopatra, who also chooses suicide in order to secure control over her identity for posterity.

To a certain extent, the effect of Elfrida’s careful staging is undercut. After

her death, her parents come to England in order to collect her personal effects and to arrange to have her body brought back to Sparta, where Mr. Bell erects a showy monument that becomes the subject of local gossip. When Janet visits Elfrida's grave she hopes that her friend is not aware of the incongruity between the inscription that proclaims "*Pas femme—artiste*" and the stone itself. Together, Elfrida's memorial inscription and marker encapsulate at once the obstacles she faces in her struggle towards professional artistic success, and the limitations of Aestheticism and Decadence particularly for the female artist. Yet there emerge no easy answers. Janet, all along suspicious of Elfrida's Aesthetic and Decadent ideas, manages to write her novel while also marrying the man whom she loves. However, she finally fails to combine art with life as a wife and mother, highlighting the elusiveness of female artistic success. Moreover, it appears that if Elfrida errs in her uncritical absorption of Aesthetic and Decadent ideas, the debate that she provokes inspires Janet, Kendal, and the author herself. After their marriage both Kendal and Janet renounce art for a life of quiet domesticity. The novel concludes with an image of Elfrida's statue of Buddha, smiling enigmatically among "the mournful Magdalens of Mrs. Bell's drawing room" (281), where it now resides. Throughout the novel, the statue of Buddha acts as a kind of confessor for Elfrida. It is to him she articulates her hatred of Sparta and her artistic ambitions, as well as her doubts concerning the path she has chosen. The final image of the statue in Mrs. Bell's drawing-room underscores Elfrida's failure to succeed according to Aesthetic and Decadent principles, but also expresses hope for some surviving legacy.

This final image is apt for a novel that, like *Dorian Gray*, ultimately refuses to dogmatize. This refusal to dogmatize accounts in part for its mixed contemporary reception. While *Daughter of Today* was praised as "a serious piece of work in a serious mood and demanding . . . [our] best attention" (*Athenaeum* 705), and as a "clever study" (*Nation* 473), it also discomposited critics. The majority assumed the novel to be a satire, but as *The Bookman* reviewer pointed out, as a satire it is "not altogether a success" (88) because of its ambivalence. As one critic put it, "[i]t is rather hard to discover what the author is driving at" (*Academy* 132). Yet this ambivalence is also arguably what makes the novel so compelling. In my view, *Daughter of Today* marks another remarkable instance in the "curious efflorescence of novels and stories dealing with 'magic-pictures.'" George Woodcock states that Duncan "was to see herself outside the sentimental conventions of Victorian women's writing" (218). Dean goes farther, arguing that despite the fact Duncan would not have called herself a feminist she

did practice a kind of literary feminism in writing “against the tradition.” She herself restricts her focus to the ways in which “Duncan . . . challenged the . . . conventions of the romance novel” (*Different* 8). I would argue that Duncan’s literary feminism extends to other genres or sub-genres, and that in spite of its conservative elements, *A Daughter of Today* offers an innovative version of the magic-picture story, and a powerful feminist statement about female artistic life at the *fin de siècle*.

## NOTES

- 1 The narrator’s observation that “self-consciousness was a supreme fact of . . . [Elfrida’s] personality” (15) suggests that Elfrida shares with Dorian a predisposition towards Aestheticism and Decadence, apparently nurtured by her reading. The lists of books on the shelves of the family drawing-room and on the shelves of her London apartment indicate possible early sources of some of her Aesthetic and Decadent principles.
- 2 Beginning with *A Fin de Siècle Tribute*, a sketch Kendal executes to expose the folly of Elfrida’s gesture of kneeling before a writer she admires at Lady Halifax’s in London, his art acquires an increasingly oracular status for her. Finding the sketch in his studio, she informs him bitterly, “It does you credit . . . immense credit. . . . It is so good, so charming, so—so true!” (172).
- 3 In *Story of a Masterpiece*, it is the model’s fiancé Lennox who understands the significance of the portrait, and finally destroys it. Elfrida and Lennox employ curiously similar weapons of destruction. Hers is a “silver-handled . . . dagger” (275), identified alternately as Spanish or Algerian, while his is “a long, keen poniard . . . bought . . . in the East” (232).
- 4 The account of Kendal’s discovery of his ruined masterpiece suggestively evokes Wilde’s sensational ending. Kendal, like Dorian, mounts stairs to the room where the portrait is kept only to make a horrifying discovery. Dorian discovers that his portrait, which he had hoped might be improved by an attempted act of kindness, is yet more hateful than before, driving him to his fatal effort to destroy it; Kendal discovers his masterpiece already destroyed. The narrator’s comment of Kendal’s ruined masterpiece, “Hardly enough . . . remained . . . to show that it had represented anything human” (275), indirectly conjures the image of Dorian’s portrait in his last moments.
- 5 As a number of critics have noted, in her rejection of marriage in favour of art school and a career Elfrida invites labelling as a New Woman. Linda Dowling’s contention that the New Woman “expressed her quarrel with Victorian culture chiefly through sexual means—by heightening sexual consciousness, candour and expressiveness” (52)—attributes shared with the Aesthetics and Decadents, also effectively applies to Elfrida. Despite the similarities, Elfrida expresses little interest in the situation of women in Victorian society, rejecting “the higher education of women . . . or the suffrage agitation” (185) as possible subjects for her book.
- 6 According to Showalter, “the decadent artist was invariably male, and decadence, as a hyper-aesthetic movement, defined itself against the feminine and the biological creativity of women” (*Sexual* x). In *Dorian Gray*, Lord Henry epitomizes the typical Decadent attitude towards female artistry, insisting that “no woman is a genius” (47),



- and that women “are charmingly artificial, but they have no sense of art” (102).
- 7 Dennis Denisof provides insights into the reactions of Elfrida’s friends to her adventures as a chorus-line dancer, noting that “women performers, whose very creation of art occurs in public view, were often associated with a sexual transgressivity akin to prostitution” (151-52).
  - 8 In the ambiguity surrounding Elfrida’s portrait Duncan picks up on a feature latent within the Decadent movement itself, a distrust with “mimesis and representational practices,” as one critic has put it. In the context of *Dorian Gray*, a number of critics have warned that to privilege the mirror-portrait as a moral centre is probably overly simplistic.
  - 9 For an excellent, well-balanced article surveying the complex figuration of the female artist in New Woman literature, in which *A Daughter of Today* receives a brief mention, see Lyn Pykett.

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