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Lucy Ella Rose

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**Goldsmiths**  
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

## *Yellow Book* Sisters in *The Dream Garden*: A New Woman Network

Lucy Ella Rose

University of Surrey

In her autobiography *The Sheltering Tree* (1939), critically-neglected New Woman writer Netta Syrett (1865-1943) records her pride as editor of children's annual *The Dream Garden* (1905): 'I think I had a right to be proud of my Dream Garden, which by now should be a rarity worth the attention of book collectors, if only for the names of some of the contributors!'<sup>1</sup> In a further comment that is both self-effacing and self-congratulating, she writes, 'I marvel at my boldness in asking such distinguished people to contribute to a more or less private venture [...] only a limited number were published'.<sup>2</sup> The wealth of notable writers and artists boasted by the contents page offers insight into Netta's creative network and her esteemed place within it. While this list features well-known male writers including Laurence Housman and Arthur Ransome, the contributors are overwhelmingly female. They include artist, author and playwright Constance Smedley (1876-1941), who founded the International Lyceum Club for Women Artists and Writers in 1904 (of which Netta was chairwoman in 1906); Marion Wallace Dunlop (1864-1942), hailed as the first hunger-striking suffragette (in 1909); Slade-trained artist Alice Woodward (1862-1951), a founding member of the Women's Guild of Arts (1907); and feminist artist, writer, and editor Pamela Colman Smith (1878-1951). *The Dream Garden*, like Netta's autobiography, evidences her 'genius for friendship': that is, her ability to form mutually-beneficial career-enabling companionships and creative partnerships, where 'socialising becomes part of [her] artistry'.<sup>3</sup> The volume illustrates the importance of networking and professional sociability for women (authors, artists, aesthetes, and activists) at a critical and especially productive time for women, as they carved out careers in male-dominated professions and as the women's suffrage movement gained momentum.

This article examines *The Dream Garden* for the first time, focusing specifically on its New Women contributors who previously contributed to the iconic literary and arts journal *The Yellow*



*Book*. These are: lesser-known sisters Netta and Nellie Syrett (1874-1970); prominent suffragette Evelyn Sharp (1869-1955); prolific late-Victorian children's literature author Edith Nesbit (1858-1924); and journalist and poet Nora [Eleanor] Chesson (née Hopper) (1871-1906). It was through her fortuitous friendship with Mabel Beardsley (with whom she taught at the Polytechnic School for Girls in Langham Place), that Netta met Aubrey Beardsley and Henry Harland. She was present when Harland first proposed the idea of *The Yellow Book*, and her autobiography documents her place not at the periphery but 'at the centre of the most exciting developments in art and literature'.<sup>4</sup> Crucially, *The Yellow Book* – famously associated with 1890s aestheticism and decadence, and more often with a male coterie – welcomed work by women: both female aesthetes (participating in a 'high-art tradition') and New Women (participating in a 'political movement').<sup>5</sup> Exemplifying the latter, the Syrett sisters, Sharp, Nesbit, and Chesson addressed feminist issues (female roles, marriage, education) and promoted female emancipation (to varying extents) in their lives and works. They all challenged Victorian gender conventions, and Nesbit was an archetypal 'New Woman' in her rejection of Victorian corsets, her short hair, heavy smoking, and feminist friendships.<sup>6</sup> The Syrett sisters' collective involvement with *The Yellow Book* throughout its production years meant they knew – and attended the same parties as – many of its women contributors. Netta, Sharp and Nesbit all featured in the notorious Keynotes Series of avant-garde fiction published by John Lane, with book covers boasting designs by Beardsley. This ideologically-progressive series, opening with *Keynotes* (1893) by 'George Egerton' (the masculine pseudonym of Mary Chavelita Dunne), includes Sharp's first novel *At the Relton Arms* (1895), Netta's first novel *Nobody's Fault* (1896), and Nesbit's *In Homespun* (1896).

An understanding of the death of *The Yellow Book* is crucial to understanding the birth of *The Dream Garden*. In Netta's view, the *Yellow Book* phase of London literary life was 'killed by Oscar Wilde's tragedy'<sup>7</sup> – when, after being arrested holding a yellow-backed novel, he was tried and convicted for sodomy and sent to Holloway Prison – and the subsequent departure of Beardsley as art editor. This symbolic demise of male decadence presented women with an

opportunity to redirect or develop their own creative careers, partnerships, networks and outputs. Jad Adams notes that although some ‘established writers eschewed the *Yellow Book* after the Wilde trial for fear of guilt by association, women writers hungry for publication showed no such disdain’, and women artists filled ‘the space left by [Beardsley] and his almost all-male commissioning process’; thereafter, more women contributed to the periodical and it became ‘a more woman-friendly publication’.<sup>8</sup> While male contributors ‘erupted in a frenzy of hypermasculine’ writing in response to the association of decadence with ‘sodomy and yellow books’ established by press coverage of Wilde’s arrest, ‘women, already marginal, could more safely articulate thoughts that had become dangerous for men’; they could publish (still in accordance with Lane’s agenda) provocative material that voiced women’s own ‘ambitions and resistance to social norms’.<sup>9</sup> The shifting role of women in *The Yellow Book*, I argue, facilitated and galvanised female creative partnerships at the fin de siècle. The Syrett sisters, all three of whom contributed to *The Yellow Book* after Wilde’s conviction in 1895, thereafter more actively worked together and with their female contemporaries on children’s fiction.

One of the constraints on New Women writers in the literary marketplace was their lack of ownership and editorship of periodicals, but their increasingly authoritative (but nonetheless collaborative) roles in illustrated periodicals at the turn of the century contested those limits. Colman Smith supported women’s creative networks and set a precedent as the first woman to edit, publish, and contribute to a magazine of her own, *The Green Sheaf* (1903-1904). This title likely influenced Netta, whose editorial role in *The Dream Garden* – affording her authority over its planning, compilation, and production – similarly marked a radical departure from *The Yellow Book*’s male editorship, showcasing a sorority that was biological (in the case of the Syretts), professional (sisters in art), and political (feminist sisterhood). Drawing on *The Yellow Book*’s collaborative origins and ‘communal impulse’,<sup>10</sup> *The Dream Garden*’s foundation on female inclusivity and collectivity challenged women’s historical ‘position[s] of exclusion’.<sup>11</sup> Word and image, separated in *The Yellow Book*, are re-engaged in women’s co-production of illustrated texts

(stories, poems, and plays) in *The Dream Garden*, supporting their joint artistic enterprise. While *The Yellow Book* and *The Green Sheaf* indicate shifts to greater gender equity, *The Dream Garden* showcases an almost-exclusively female network. This was nurtured through the cultural, political, and publishing changes that took place in the intervening years (between *The Yellow Book*'s final issue in April 1897 and *The Dream Garden*'s publication in 1905): the development of the feminist fairy tale as a political tool; the collaboration of women artists and authors on children's books; and the growth in women's personal, professional, and political networks.

Marketed as a Christmas gift book, *The Dream-Garden* is now a little-known volume, partly due to the rarity of the collection. Although *The Dream Garden* was intended as an annual, it never became a serial, echoing the ephemerality of *The Yellow Book*. It was published by artist and art gallery owner John Baillie, who promoted his gallery in *The Green Sheaf* advertising pages, and who published the second issue of *The Venture: An Annual of Art and Literature* (1903, 1905) in the same year as *The Dream Garden*, also with the Arden Press. There was significant overlap between the annuals' artistic and literary contributors.<sup>12</sup> Comparable with the feminist agenda of *The Venture*, *The Dream Garden* promotes the achievements and contributions of New Women who, in Netta's view, 'had a special gift for interesting the younger generation' – and particularly a new generation of women.<sup>13</sup> While a contemporary press review of *The Dream Garden* hails it the best children's book of the year 'which no nursery library should be without', it also acknowledges the collection's appeal to an culturally-engaged adult audience and New Woman book market appreciative of its 'literary quality' and respected, well-known 'writers and picture-makers': 'even when the children have gone to bed there will still be heads bent over this really artistic volume'.<sup>14</sup> This article shows how the Syretts, Sharp, Nesbit, and Chesson use figures and spaces typical of children's fiction – dreamscapes, enchanted gardens, fairies, and angels – as vehicles for the exploration of New Woman themes suitable for an adolescent audience: rebellion and escapism; struggle for independence and freedom; maternal and sororal bonds; and the transition from girlhood to womanhood. Appropriating a genre which was dominated by male writers (such as Hans Christian

Andersen) but which ‘invite[d] the attention chiefly of girls’,<sup>15</sup> these women wrote fairy stories charged and encoded with feminist content for young women growing up in a new century.

### **Sororal Creative Partnership: The Syrett Sisters**

Born in Kent, Netta (a writer) and Nellie (an artist) cohabited in London with their creative sisters Mabel (an illustrator) and Kate (a designer) during the 1890s. Here they accessed training and employment, pursued creative careers, and hosted and attended parties unchaperoned.<sup>16</sup> They were related to author Grant Allen, whose novel *The Woman Who Did* (1895) featured in the Keynotes series. The sisters were regarded by friends as ‘pioneers’ for the way they lived in a shared flat as independent professional New Women moving in aesthetic, decadent, and feminist circles, leading ‘a very full and busy life of alternate work and amusement’.<sup>17</sup> Nellie studied with suffragists at the Slade School of Art, while Netta mixed with prominent feminists – including Sarah Grand who coined the term ‘New Woman’ – at the Women Writers’ Dinner of 1902.<sup>18</sup> Netta actively participated in women’s groups and events, forging female and feminist alliances that she recruited as contributors to *The Dream Garden*.

Collectively, the Syrett sisters published in volumes II, VII, X, XI, XII, and XIII of *The Yellow Book*. Nellie contributed a drawing to Volume X and designed the front cover and title page for Volume XI (fig. 1), and Mabel produced the cover design for (the final) Volume XIII (fig. 2). Margaret D. Stetz and Mark Samuels Lasner argue that the ‘sensibilities of artists’ including Nellie played a part in directing *The Yellow Book*’s ‘visual style’.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, her front cover design marks an innovative shift in *The Yellow Book*’s content as it took ‘children’s book illustrators and illustrations seriously’, presenting them alongside ‘High Art’ subjects and increasing representations by women artists.<sup>20</sup> By featuring Nellie’s monogrammed work on the front cover of *The Dream Garden* (fig. 3), Netta developed and promoted her sister’s reputation as a book-cover illustrator; she had also previously illustrated and produced cover designs for Netta’s collection *The Garden of Delight* (1898) and Sharp’s *The Other Side of the Sun* (1900). *The Dream Garden* is, along with *The Garden of Delight*,

the most obvious record of the Syrett sisters' hitherto-unexplored sororal creative partnership. Despite the notoriety of the other contributors, it is Nellie (affectionately referred to as 'Nell') who dominates Netta's description of *The Dream Garden* in her memoir:

Its charming cover, designed by Nell, represents a fairy child standing in a chariot composed of flowers, driving ribbon-harnessed lambs tandem-fashion, the 'leader' guided by a little pierrot waving a bouquet. The first story, which gives its name to the volume and was written by me, has a delightful coloured picture by way of illustration of the 'Dream Garden' when the 'Ivory Gate' has swung open and the dreamers enter their paradise. This also was Nell's work.<sup>21</sup>

Nellie's work is foregrounded in *The Dream Garden*: she is listed as the artist in the first two 'Contents' page entries, and copies of her 'extremely decorative' frontispiece with its 'exquisite colour and strong yet delicate handling' were sold separately by the publisher.<sup>22</sup> Nellie also provides a full-page illustration for playwright Osman Edwards's story 'Recollections of a Japanese Baby', and her depiction of the close maternal and sororal bonds in the text reflects her aesthetic interest in nurturing female relationships as well as dreamscapes and Japonisme.<sup>23</sup> Nellie's prominence in *The Dream Garden*, and in Netta's account of its production, illustrates Netta's admiration of her sister's artwork as well as their shared social and creative circles, combining Nellie's artistic connections and Netta's literary connections. It was also *The Dream Garden* that led to the meeting of Nellie and her husband, *Punch* theatre critic Joseph Peter Thorp, who was recommended to Netta by John Baillie in her quest to get the book printed; as a wedding present, Netta (who, like many New Women, never married) gifted the couple a specially bound copy of the volume.<sup>24</sup>

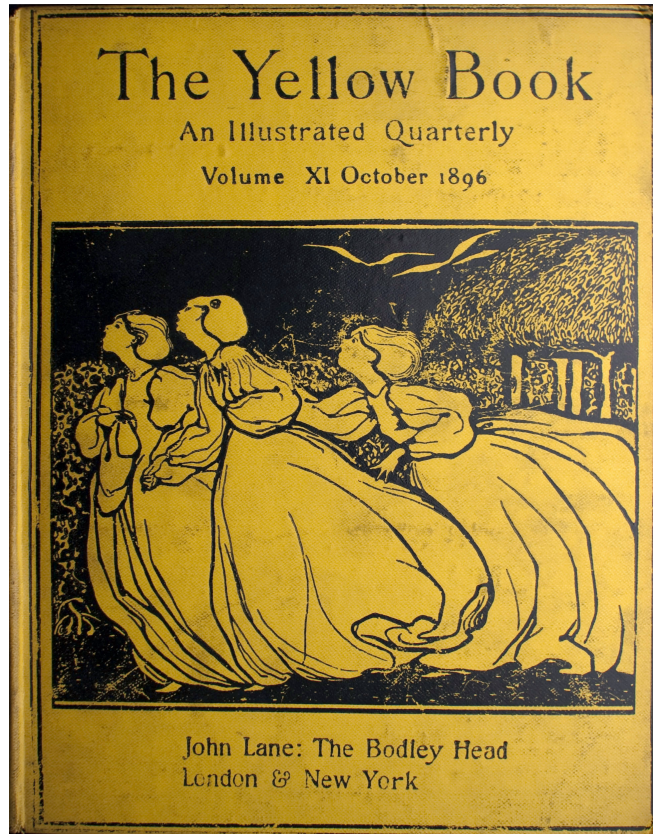


Fig. 1: Nellie Syrett, Front Cover, *The Yellow Book*, vol. XI (1896).  
 © *Yellow Nineties 2.0*, Ryerson University Centre for Digital Humanities

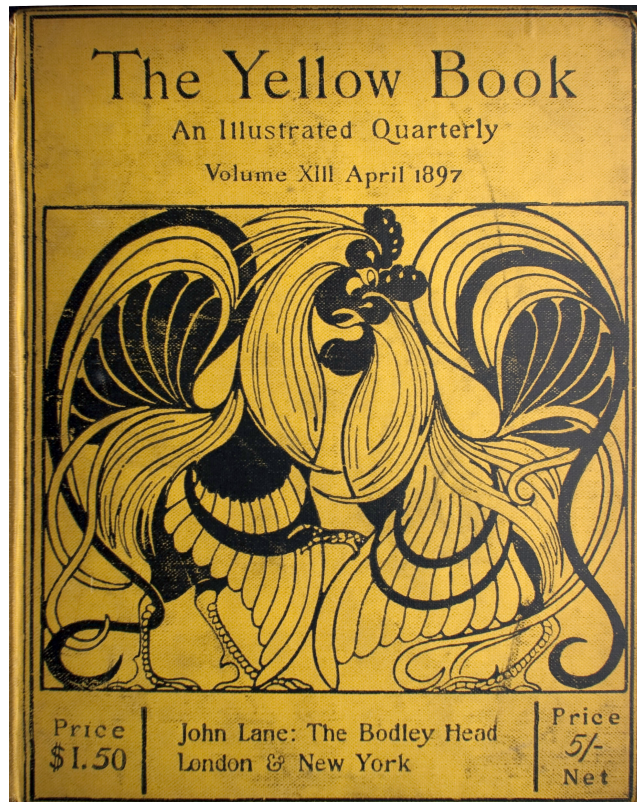


Fig. 2: Mabel Syrett, Front Cover, *Yellow Book*, vol. XIII (1897).  
 © *Yellow Nineties 2.0*, Ryerson University Centre for Digital Humanities





Fig. 3: Nellie Syrett, cover design, *The Dream Garden: A Children's Annual*, ed. by Netta Syrett (John Baillie, 1905). © *Yellow Nineties 2.0*, Ryerson University Centre for Digital Humanities

The first story in the volume, 'The Dream Garden', is written by Netta and illustrated by Nellie (fig. 4). It draws on the dream world device famously used by Lewis Carroll in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) but is more comparable with Olive Schreiner's feminist visionary work *Dreams* (1890), which was celebrated by the suffragettes.<sup>25</sup> In Netta's story, the impoverished, shy, lonely protagonist Anne, who finds no solace in absent parents or cruel friends, discovers the invaluable escapism of literature and dreamland, where suffering, prejudices, and hierarchies (related to class, appearance, and intellect) are eliminated. In the Dream Garden, Anne can play with Sylvia, the schoolgirl she so admires but cannot find courage to speak to, and Netta's story concludes with the girls – depicted in the foreground of Nellie's illustration – united in flight. Syrett's story is comparable with stories by fellow *Yellow Book* writers Charlotte Mew and Ella D'Arcy, similarly featuring isolated characters who momentarily escape mundane reality through

fantasy and dream sequences, blurring the boundaries between social realism and aestheticism in a feminist phantasmagoria.<sup>26</sup>



Fig. 4: Nellie Syrett, 'The Dream Garden', frontispiece to *The Dream Garden: A Children's Annual* (1905). © *Yellow Nineties 2.0*, Ryerson University Centre for Digital Humanities

Nellie's full-page three-colour illustration of an ethereal dreamscape stands out in the context of the black-and-white designs dominating *The Dream Garden* and, for example, the social-realist illustrations by Gertrude Steel. It represents a key passage in Netta's story: the entrance of Anne, guided by the kind Dream Fairy, into the beautiful Dream Garden. This is marked in the text by the narrator's sudden direct address to the reader: 'picture to yourself stretches of velvet lawns with fountains tossing crystal showers into the sunshine [...] where [...] white lilies glistened [...] to where beyond the mountains the distance lay veiled in shimmering mist'.<sup>27</sup> Demonstrating Netta's proficiency in, and perhaps nostalgia for, *Yellow Book* imagery, nature is aestheticized in its velvet lawns, crystal water, glistening lilies, and shimmering mist. The garden is an Italianate paradise, possibly inspired by the Syrett sisters' Italian travels together in the late 1890s.<sup>28</sup> Nellie



depicts the elaborately carved ‘great white’ ivory gate, leading into an idyllic landscape, featuring fountains and pointed Cypress trees. Crucially, it is not an external, wild landscape, but rather an internal aestheticized dreamscape, that offers the protagonist a liberating escapism from a ‘miserable, dull monoton[ous]’ life – particularly for girls and women bound to the domestic sphere – in a London cityscape. Netta’s story creates a space for enchantment in a disenchanting modern world, emphasising the transformative and self-liberatory potential of the creative imagination for young girls.<sup>29</sup> In its suggestion that the child possesses the capacity to liberate herself, or at least that aesthetic escapism can be a valuable form of self-preservation, it has empowering implications for a young female readership. Netta draws on the popular trope of the garden in children’s fantasy as a ‘heterotopia’ (an ‘other’ world within a world) where children regain agency, but with a feminist agenda to challenge conventional limits and categories (fantasy and reality).<sup>30</sup> The Dream Fairy’s declaration, ‘I am so many things. I can easily be that too’ also highlights the fluidity of (gender) identity, as embodied by the dissident New Woman.<sup>31</sup>

Netta’s narrative and Nellie’s illustration reference each other in a symbiotic relationship between text and image, co-constructing the imaginary dreamscape, and Nellie’s illustration is also an interpretation of Netta’s text. True to Netta’s story, Nellie’s illustration features the cloudlike gown of the dream fairy, the winged figures, the wooded hillsides, and winding pathways. Yet while the paganistic procession of people in Netta’s story includes male and female figures, Nellie’s image depicts exclusively-female figures in an intergenerational community entering a matriarchal universe. The liberation of a woman (Anne) by a woman (Dream Fairy), with its socio-political implications, is emphasised in Nellie’s illustration by the two female figures in the group (one adult in especially decorative dress and one child) with direct, stoic, or determined gazes. The Syrett sisters’ shared feminist vision of a liberatory female community is reflected in *The Dream Garden’s* New Woman network. The title of the volume itself seems to refer to a utopian, heterotopic space of sororal collaboration in which female collectivity is key. Significantly, it is dawn in Netta’s Dream Garden:

the sun was shining! Between the mountain peaks, from beds of pink and primrose clouds, it was soaring into the blue sky. The dew was yet on the grass, where the long shadows lay [...]. And oh, the birds! [...] Only within the Ivory Gate was the sunrise and the morning.<sup>32</sup>

This passage dialogises with fin-de-siècle feminist iconography, where dawn signals rebirth and the advent of ‘a new age of equal opportunity’<sup>33</sup> for women at the start of the twentieth century. In ‘The Dream Garden’, Netta envisions not just ‘an Arcadia for the Industrial age’<sup>34</sup> but a utopian future of female enlightenment and empowerment. As Matthew Beaumont notes, ‘writing utopia represents for the New Woman a species of activism’ which ‘move[s] people to build an alternative world’ and refers a female readership to a ‘possible future opposed to the patriarchal present, to be put to political purpose in the struggle for women’s rights’.<sup>35</sup> The Syrett sisters’ collaborative construction of this post-patriarchal Dream Garden, then, is a feminist ‘species of activism’ that promotes equality, liberty, and community among women.



Fig. 5: Nellie Syrett, ‘The Five Sweet Symphonies’, *The Yellow Book*, vol. X (1896), p. 257.  
© *Yellow Nineties* 2.0, Ryerson University Centre for Digital Humanities

Female collectives in garden settings are also characteristic of Nellie’s work for *The Yellow Book*. Her cover illustration for Volume XI, which depicts three female figures in forward motion with raised or entwined limbs, creates a graceful fluidity and sense of community; they seem to

make reference to the three Syrett sisters (Netta, Nellie, and Mabel) who contributed to the periodical. Her internal illustration *Five Sweet Symphonies* (1896) (fig. 5), alludes to the poem ‘The Blessed Damozel’ by Dante Gabriel Rossetti and features a group of five weaving women in creative female community, perhaps referencing the five Syrett sisters who cohabited in London.<sup>36</sup> Prefiguring her illustration for ‘The Dream Garden’, two central women in *Five Sweet Symphonies* bear a strikingly sororal resemblance to each other in their frontal poses, facial features, and direct gazes, highlighted through the contrast with the profile poses, tilted heads, and averted gazes of the other figures. In a reflection of the sisterhood that was integral to the Syretts’ artistry and partnership, these two figures could be seen as a self-portrait of Nellie and a portrait of Netta – the Syrett sisters who worked together most closely and collaboratively, especially given that Nellie worked a self-portrait and a portrait of her ‘no less distinguished sister’<sup>37</sup> into her fan designs around the time *The Dream Garden* was published.

Nellie’s illustration for Netta’s opening story ‘The Dream Garden’ bears a striking resemblance to her illustration (fig. 6) for Sharp’s opening story ‘The Weird Witch of the Willow-Herb’ in *The Other Side of the Sun* published five years earlier, highlighting connections between these women writers and their works.<sup>38</sup> Both illustrations feature an idyllic, verdant, sloping landscape with a tree-framed pathway winding upwards to the horizon, and – most notably – almost identical female figures with frontal poses and direct gazes, the same hairstyles and expressions. The large, foregrounded, statuesque female figure in Nellie’s illustration for Sharp’s story, where she is the witch, is transposed into the female procession entering the Dream Garden in her illustration for Netta’s story, where she is the Dream Fairy. In both illustrations, the viewer’s eye is drawn to the winged, barefoot woman in decorative dress (featuring flowers and butterflies or cherubs) with large sleeves shaped like arum lilies, her raised arms holding a basket on her head. Such visual similarities suggest a twin-like resemblance between these female figures with supernatural powers, highlighting dialogues between Sharp’s and Netta’s opening fairy stories, while also drawing connections between the women writers as children’s authors, *Yellow Book*

contributors, and suffrage supporters. Nellie's allusion to Sharp's book in *The Dream Garden* was perhaps also a marketing strategy designed to raise the profile of the collection, expand its readership, and promote the careers of the Syrett sisters in their respective roles as editor and cover artist of the volume.



Fig. 6: Nellie Syrett, illustration for Evelyn Sharp's 'The Weird Witch of the Willow-Herb', *The Other Side of the Sun*, 1900. © *Yellow Nineties 2.0*, Ryerson University Centre for Digital Humanities

### ***Yellow Book* Sisters: Edith Nesbit, Evelyn Sharp, and Nora Chesson**

An analysis of the works produced by *Yellow Book* authors for *The Dream Garden* illuminates fresh connections between the work of Nesbit, famed for her adventure stories; Sharp, known for her feminist fairy tales; and Nora Chesson (née Hopper), associated with Irish folklore. Comparable to Netta's fiction typically featuring non-conformist or 'strange' children and particularly 'girls who do not fit in',<sup>39</sup> Nesbit's, Sharp's and Chesson's protagonists in *The Dream Garden* – a bird, a princess, and a group of schoolgirls, respectively – are all dissident, rebellious, resourceful and/or questioning, seeking greater experience, freedom, or fortune. A complimentary contemporary

review of the annual lists the Syretts, Sharp, and Chesson among its ‘clever’ contributors, along with writers – (Netta’s friends) Mary E. Mann and Smedley – and illustrators – (Nellie’s friends) Helen Stratton and Woodward.<sup>40</sup> Chesson and Sharp featured in the same *Yellow Book* volumes (Volume V, the last in which Beardsley was involved, and Volume VIII), and Fabian writers Nesbit and Sharp both contributed to Volume IV – the literary contents of which Henry Harland perceived as particularly high quality – and to *Blackie’s Children’s Annual* in 1910.<sup>41</sup>

Surrey-born Nesbit wrote poems ‘Day and Night’ – decadent in its subject of an adulterous ‘woman having sex with her husband but thinking of her lover in the conceit of enjoying the sun but longing for the night’ in a celebration of transgression<sup>42</sup> – and ‘A Ghost Bereft’ for *The Yellow Book*.<sup>43</sup> She turned to children’s fiction in the ‘yellow nineties’, and in the early twentieth century she published *The Rainbow Queen and Other Stories* (1903) and *The Wonderful Garden* (1911), which are comparable to *The Dream Garden* in their focus on fantasy, children’s adventures, magic, gardens, and fairy godmothers. Nesbit’s utopian fantasy *The Magic City* (1910) shares the title of Netta’s earlier fairy tale collection (*The Magic City* [Lawrence and Bullen, 1903], illustrated by Mary Corbett [Headlam], who also features in *The Dream Garden*), inviting comparisons between their works. Nesbit gained a ‘reputation as a key contributor to the “golden age” of children’s literature’, and to late-Victorian female-authored fairy tales and fantasies infused with feminist commentary on Victorian gender constructions.<sup>44</sup> A socialist and co-founder of the Fabian Society, Nesbit stood against inequality and social injustice; her work was praised for its ‘radical vision’ and ‘merging of social protest and lyric pathos’.<sup>45</sup> Despite her apparent ‘impatience with the suffragettes’,<sup>46</sup> Nesbit was a political activist with ‘radical ideas on the role of women’; her famous novel *The Railway Children* (1906) is ‘her ultimate assertion of female superiority’<sup>47</sup> in which the mother figure is herself a talented children’s story writer. In Nesbit’s work for *The Dream Garden*, too, the beloved maternal figure is a gifted storyteller who ‘has the loveliest tales to tell’ and fosters infants’ imaginations, illustrating a nurturing female influence on the younger generation.<sup>48</sup> This is perhaps what New Women writers for *The Dream Garden* embodied for their readership.

Nesbit's 'child-centred' fiction gives children 'a positive independence' and 'a voice: they are still children, bounded by, but no longer intellectually controlled by, adult value systems'.<sup>49</sup> Children's navigation of adult value systems through fantasy and fairy worlds is the keynote of *The Dream Garden*. Nesbit's notion of the 'immeasurable value of imagination' which 'gives to the child a world transfigured' and is 'the best magic in the world' is at the heart of Netta's story 'The Dream Garden'.<sup>50</sup> In contrast to Sharp's *The Youngest Girl in the School* (1901), which reflects her own happy schooldays as a boarder, Nesbit recalls in *My School-Days*, 'when I was a little child I used to pray fervently, tearfully, that when I should be grown up I might never forget what I thought and felt and suffered then'.<sup>51</sup> Nesbit, who spent much time travelling in Europe with her chronically ill sister, was no stranger to suffering, and this is a dominant theme in both her verse for *The Dream Garden* and in New Woman fiction more broadly (for both children and adults), often in the form of painful growth experiences and narratives of female exclusion.

Nesbit's poem (six quatrains of rhyming couplets) for *The Dream Garden*, titled 'The Scolded Eaglet', is narrated by an orphan eaglet, scolded by its aunt for playing with the merry little stork family because eagles are (supposedly) superior birds to storks.<sup>52</sup> The avian imagery she employs was a significant feature of early feminist iconography, often manifest in the contrasting motifs of caged and wild birds. The eaglet, with an assertive voice, questions this divisive hierarchical system (eagle/stork) when it says, 'Why was it wrong? I *cannot* see!' and threatens to rebel against its aunt's authority by changing its identity and community: 'And if Aunt does not stop her talk | I'll go and try to *be* a stork'.<sup>53</sup> Nesbit's verse can be seen to challenge essentialist definitions and categories, and forms of segregation that re/produce inequality and oppression, encouraging her young readership to question arbitrary rules and break out of traditional power structures. Indeed, her prioritisation of personal freedom in childhood, and her attack specifically on stifling patriarchal systems, is conveyed in *Wings and the Child* (1913), which illuminates the socio-political (socialist and feminist) significance of her verse:

liberty is one of the rights that a child above all needs – every possible liberty, of thought, of word, of deed. The old systems of education seem to have found it good to coerce a child for the simple sake of coercion – to make it do what the master chose [...] to ‘break the child’s spirit’.<sup>54</sup>

Her discourse here – employing a feminist lexis of ‘liberty’, ‘rights’, ‘word’ and ‘deed’, ‘old systems’, ‘coercion’, ‘master’ – is in dialogue with that of the increasingly-militant women’s suffrage movement prior to the Representation of the People Act (that saw women’s partial enfranchisement) in 1918.

The questioning of coercive authority in Nesbit’s ‘The Scolded Eaglet’ compliments Wallace Dunlop’s story for *The Dream Garden*, ‘The Elf and the Grumbling Bee’, which is similarly Aesopic in its non-anthropocentric narrative and concern with injustice. The fairy punishes the mischievous elf and rewards the innocent Flower-baby, but ‘nothing happen[s] to the spider or the bee, who were the real cause of all the trouble’.<sup>55</sup> Its comparable lack of fair resolution seems designed to encourage young readers to question biased (masculinist) systems of law and punishment. This story would have been read, at least by adult and adolescent audiences, with an awareness of the first militant action by The Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) in Manchester that same year (1905), which later led to the imprisonment of ‘troublemaking’ women – including Wallace Dunlop and Sharp – for campaigning for equality.

Like Netta and Nesbit, London-born Sharp was a *Yellow Book* contributor and New Woman writer who became renowned as a children’s author, contributing a fairy tale to *The Dream Garden*. Taught by her sisters until around age twelve, sorority was integral to her upbringing and her political activism as a prominent suffrage campaigner in adulthood, as well as to her creative collaborations with her female contemporaries, including the Syretts, Woodward, and *Yellow Book* artist Mabel Dearmer.<sup>56</sup> Netta and Sharp both attended the North London Collegiate School for Girls, contributed to the *Quarto*, and were members of the (international writers’ movement) P.E.N. Club. The Syretts’ creative partnership with Sharp has never before been examined, but the autobiographies of both Sharp and Netta attest to their lifelong comradeship. Sharp (who lived

with *Yellow Book* author D'Arcy in a flat in Knightsbridge in the 1890s) lived with Netta at the New Victorian Club (founded 1893) on Piccadilly's Sackville Street. Netta fondly recalls her modest attic room next to Sharp, where they enjoyed a shared freedom:

long ago at that little club she and I used to have a great deal of fun in those attic rooms, whose windows were so close together that a great deal of conversation went on in the open air when we put our heads out of them to talk to our neighbours.<sup>57</sup>

Such clubs offered young unmarried women opportunities for professional development and networking, a product of which is *The Dream Garden*. Though their living arrangements were regarded by some as a 'slightly dangerous innovation', Netta and Sharp 'normalize[d] new urban living for working women'.<sup>58</sup>

Both Sharp and Netta were at the hub of collaborative creativity generated by the *Yellow Book* circle. Just as Netta entered 'the world of brilliant, interesting men and women who knew all about books and pictures and music' through her friendship with the Beardsley family,<sup>59</sup> Sharp describes her entry into John Lane's 'charmed circle' as a liberatory time: 'I knew it was very heaven to be young when I came to London in the 'nineties'.<sup>60</sup> Sharp and Netta regularly attended the same gatherings such as Harland's notorious parties (along with *Yellow Book* writers D'Arcy, Mew, and Dollie Radford), which were 'central to the success of *The Yellow Book* as a forum for women's creative work, since women could take part in them on an equal footing as they could not in gentlemen's clubs and public houses'.<sup>61</sup> Sharp's autobiography mentions Netta among the *Yellow Book* writers that contributed to its cultural value, and the inclusion of Sharp's portrait as a 'Bodley Head' in *The Yellow Book* shows her esteemed place in it.<sup>62</sup> D'Arcy notes Sharp's and Syrett's apparently particularly close relationship with Lane in a jealous letter to him: 'I expect you are having a good old time, with tea parties every day, and Evelyn Sharp, and Netta Syrett [...] for ever popping in upon you'.<sup>63</sup> Nonetheless, Netta records a close companionship with D'Arcy in her memoirs; D'Arcy visited the Syrett sisters at their London flat and stayed with Netta in Paris, where Netta encouraged her to fulfil her potential as a writer.<sup>64</sup> Like Netta's memoir, *The Dream*



*Garden* testifies to her advocacy (rather than jealousy) of her successful female contemporaries and her collaborative approach particularly to children's fiction.

The six stories Sharp contributed to *The Yellow Book* all present New Woman dilemmas, such as the navigation of female roles in society and the struggle for financial independence and personal freedom. They include her 'feminist fairytale' 'The Restless River', which prefigures her children's fiction.<sup>65</sup> Sharp's fiction for both adults and children focuses on protagonists' 'struggle with and confrontation of social gender expectations, which Sharp portrayed as cruel and marginalizing'.<sup>66</sup> Unlike many of her contemporaries, but like Nesbit and Netta, Sharp refused to romanticize children's experiences and insisted that 'Childhood, at its worst, is unhappy; at best, it is uncomfortable.'<sup>67</sup> Comparable with Nesbit's *Wings and the Child*, Sharp's *Fairy Tales: As They Are, as They Were, and as They Should Be* (1889) is a non-fictional defence of fairy tales as they appeal to children's imaginations and 'the marvellous in their minds'.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, the marvellous is key to Sharp's surreal story, reminiscent of Carroll's *Wonderland*, for *The Dream Garden*.

Sharp's story 'The Castle with the High Bell' subverts Victorian notions of gender. Its princess is inquisitive and strong-willed, challenging the idea that it is 'the prince [who] always has to go out into the world to find his bride' instead of the princess doing the finding.<sup>69</sup> The Prime Minister's sixteen-year-old daughter, Limosella, has to overcome bizarre obstacles and crack a riddle to ring the high bell that makes her queen.<sup>70</sup> It can be read as a 'coming of age' story and journey to adulthood that traces the female protagonist's transgression of the domestic sphere (along with its triviality and court dresses) and dangerous journey 'through the forest in search of someone who could tell her the way to grow up'.<sup>71</sup> This story demonstrates how Sharp's fiction often treats children as 'creative, intelligent beings' and displays empathy with 'the child's perception of the world, depicting "grown ups" as the mysterious, irrational ones'; her fairy stories are 'neither patronizing nor moralistic though they reflect her own increasingly progressive views on gender'<sup>72</sup> and are 'deliberately subversive'.<sup>73</sup> The sympathy in Sharp's story is with the adventurous teenage girl, rather than the 'grown ups' who 'are apt to be stuffed with sawdust'.<sup>74</sup>

Speaking to a hawk, Sharp's protagonist says, 'it is so tiring to be told the same thing all day long'<sup>75</sup> (that is, to grow up), evoking Nesbit's eaglet's opening cry, 'I have been scolded all day long'.<sup>76</sup> Limosella's quest for autonomy no doubt resonated with Edwardian teenagers railing against Victorian notions of femininity.

Given their close relationship as friends, neighbours, and collaborators, Sharp may have influenced Netta's feminist views and works. Indeed, the increasing radicalism of Sharp's career (in her move from the progressive National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies to the militant WSPU) is also detectable in Netta's fiction: from her *Yellow Book* stories of the 1890s exploring women's social roles and positions of exclusion, to her suffrage play *Might is Right* (1909) and novel *Portrait of a Rebel* (1929) – recalling Sharp's *Rebel Women* (1910) focused on the lives of suffrage supporters.<sup>77</sup> Sharp and Netta both wrote about suffragette militancy, and Sharp's 'awakening to militancy came in 1906', the year after the publication of *The Dream Garden*.<sup>78</sup> This was a pivotal time for Sharp's creative career and campaigning. While Nesbit expressed concern that suffrage would divert attention from the broader socialist cause, Sharp made suffrage central to her political agitation. She subsequently became vice president of the Women Writers' Suffrage League (founded 1908) and she became editor of the WSPU's official newspaper *Votes for Women* (1912). Netta's increasingly feminist stance – previously denied by critics<sup>79</sup> – likely informed her selection of prominent suffragettes and feminists (that is, Sharp and Wallace Dunlop, who both went on hunger strike in Holloway prison, Colman Smith, and American author Margaret Deland<sup>80</sup> who overtly supported women's rights) as contributors to *The Dream Garden*.

Lesser-known journalist, story writer and poet Nora Chesson was a member of the Lyceum Club along with Netta and Smedley. Like Sharp, Chesson wrote children's fiction for the *Girls' Own Paper*, and contributed to many contemporary periodicals and 'little magazines'. Chesson lived in London, in an all-female household with her mother and unmarried aunt, until her marriage in 1901, when (unusually for the time) her own literary earnings enabled her to move to a house in Surrey.<sup>81</sup> Her 1890s stories and poems – *Ballads in Prose* (1894), praised by W. B. Yeats, and *Under*

*Quicken Boughs* (1896) – were published by Lane at the Bodley Head. Her novel *The Bell and the Arrow: An English Love Story* (T. Werner Laurie, 1905) was published in the same year as *The Dream Garden*, which would be one of her final projects; she died the following year in 1906. A memorial essay in the *Monthly Review* by suffrage-supporting poet and journalist S. Gertrude Ford applauds Chesson as ‘a woman who speaks for her sex’ and ‘shows us a new world in the midst of our own’, comparing her poetry to that of *Yellow Book* writer Olive Custance.<sup>82</sup> While Chesson, better known as Hopper, felt that ‘the press refused her the privilege of being equally well known’ under her married name, *The Dream Garden* ensures her post-marital literary legacy.<sup>83</sup>

Chesson’s works for *The Yellow Book*, where her ‘beautiful verses’<sup>84</sup> were commended by contemporary reviewers, include: her Swinburnian ‘Shepherds’ Song’ celebrating the vibrancy of paganism; ‘A Song and A Tale’,<sup>85</sup> referred to by a contemporary reviewer (who was not generally in sympathy with *The Yellow Book*) as ‘charming in an individual way’;<sup>86</sup> and ‘Wolf-Edith’<sup>87</sup> which offers ‘the most innovative take’ on the subject of ‘love lost’, as the solitary, uncivilised and sexualised ‘heroine maintains a haunting romance with a lover killed in battle’.<sup>88</sup> Her ‘Lament of the Last Leprechaun’ for *The Yellow Book*, which led one reviewer to call her ‘a young writer of much promise’,<sup>89</sup> thematically prefigures her verse ‘The Leprechaun’ for the *English Illustrated Magazine* (1903), her story ‘The Fairy Cobbler’ for *Blackie’s Children’s Annual* (1910), and her piece titled ‘The Leprechaun’ for *The Dream Garden*.<sup>90</sup> Despite the apparent inspiration of Irish fairy-lore, folklore, and mythology on her work (which returns to the figure of the leprechaun), she had never been to Ireland and her writing was apparently ‘spun out of the moonshine of [her] own brain’.<sup>91</sup> In *The Dream Garden*, Chesson seemingly employs a supernatural being in Irish folklore in order to stage controversial New Woman issues (financial aspiration, collective female power) in a form more palatable to Edwardian society and appealing to her young readership.

Chesson’s ‘The Leprechaun’ is illustrated in *The Dream Garden* by Olga Morgan (b.1873), who illustrated several children’s books in the early twentieth century (figs. 7 and 8).<sup>92</sup> Chesson’s menacing verse in *The Dream Garden* urges the girls to ‘catch’ and ‘trap’ a ‘napping’ leprechaun – a

‘lonely’, hardworking boy or ‘cobbler fairy’ making ‘shoes from withered leaves’ – holding him against his will until he ‘give[s] up hope’ of ‘liberty’ and grants them their ‘fortune’ (the limitless ‘gold of Fairyland’) in exchange for his freedom.<sup>93</sup> Morgan’s accompanying illustrations depict two scenes: before the attack, as several girls creep up on the unwitting leprechaun; and during the attack, when two girls pull hard at the stretched arms of the leprechaun, who is depicted as a small, vulnerable, exploited figure on his knees with his face turned away from the viewer. The compositions, which show girls in dresses and hats working together to overpower the ‘cobbler lad’, can be seen to illustrate a class struggle as well as an unconventional gender dynamic which affords the group of girls physical strength and control over the solitary male figure (who, according to myth, is notoriously difficult to catch). Here it is not the leprechaun that is mischievous and devious, but the girls, thus subverting Victorian associations of femininity with passivity and propriety. Whilst parts of the verse suggest sympathy for the victimised leprechaun, financial and physical female empowerment is ultimately valued over male liberty in the text. It entreats young women to ‘be wise, be wary’,<sup>94</sup> and is politically charged in its promotion of collective female power, determination and even strategic violence. Linda Hughes includes Nesbit and Chesson among *Yellow Book* women poets who practised new creative freedoms, leaning ‘more overtly toward decadence’<sup>95</sup> – as well as, I argue, feminism – in the wake of the Wilde trial.

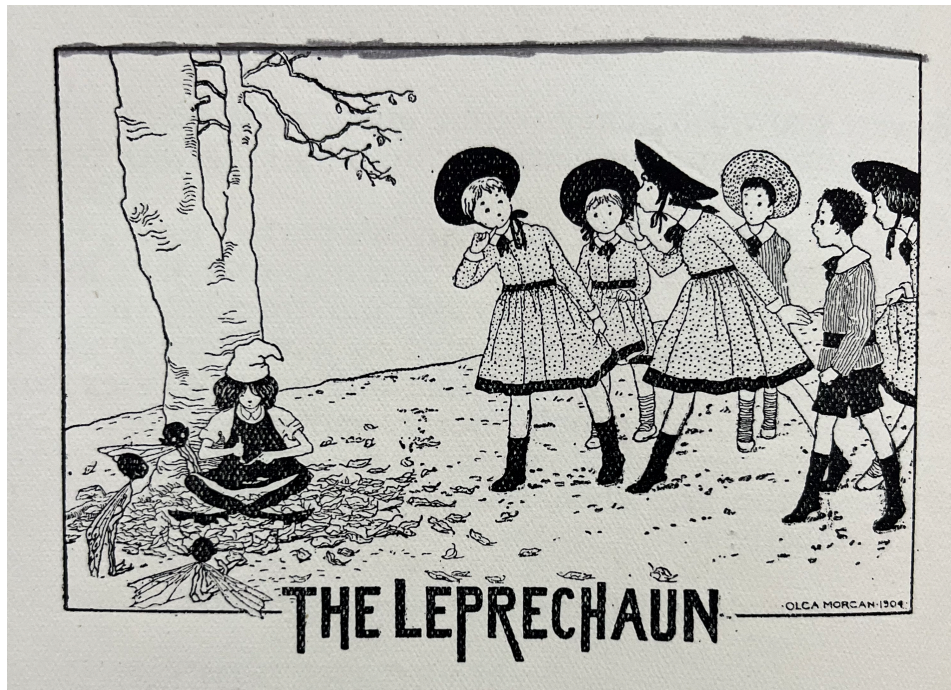


Fig. 7: Olga Morgan, illustration 1 for Nora Chesson's 'The Leprechaun', in *The Dream Garden: A Children's Annual*, ed. by Netta Syrett (John Baillie, 1905).  
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Fig. 8: Olga Morgan, illustration 2 for Nora Chesson's 'The Leprechaun', in *The Dream Garden: A Children's Annual*, ed. by Netta Syrett (John Baillie, 1905), © *Yellow Nineties 2.0*, Ryerson University Centre for Digital Humanities

## Conclusion

*The Dream Garden* is culturally valuable as a female-edited collection featuring numerous notable New Women writers, artists, and feminists, representing and contributing to late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century women's culture. This article reveals hitherto unexplored interconnections between the lives, works, and circles of the Syrett sisters, Nesbit, Sharp, and Chesson, revealing a symbiotic creative sorority formed during – and developed in the wake of – the *Yellow Book* years. The turn of the century was a particularly fertile time for female creativity and collaboration, and this article offers a broader understanding of the relationship between women and *The Yellow Book*, between *The Yellow Book* and *The Dream Garden*, and between the women contributors themselves. *The Dream Garden* offered women career-enabling or career-promoting opportunities, in some cases marking important points in their professional lives: Netta's editorial debut; Sharp's work on the cusp of militancy; and Chesson's final collaboration with her contemporaries. Their works – featuring female figures and communities, power struggles and systems, dreamscapes and utopias – engaged in subtle or encoded ways with contentious socio-political issues and early feminist discourses for the benefit of a school-age and teenage audience. As a volume, *The Dream Garden* portrays unconventional, educated, resourceful, aspirational, and irreverent girls rather than sleeping beauties or damsels in distress, challenging and subverting traditional gender roles. Documenting a New Woman network, *The Dream Garden* testifies to the formation of sororal creative partnerships as a feminist strategy through which Victorian-Edwardian women forged greater personal, professional and political freedoms.

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<sup>1</sup> Netta Syrett, *The Sheltering Tree* (Geoffrey Bles, 1939), p. 152; *The Dream Garden: A Children's Annual*, ed. by Netta Syrett (John Baillie, 1905). Henceforth Netta Syrett is referred to as 'Netta' and her sister Nellie Syrett will be referred to as 'Nellie', to avoid confusion due to their shared surname.

<sup>2</sup> Syrett, *Sheltering Tree*, pp. 149–50.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Le Gallienne, *The Romantic '90s* (G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1925), pp.191–92; Joseph Thorne, 'Decadent Sociability and Material Culture at the Fin de Siècle' (unpublished doctoral thesis, PhD thesis, Liverpool John Moores University, 2019) <<http://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/id/eprint/11254/1/2019thornephd.pdf>> [accessed 27 September 2023], p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Jad Adams, *Decadent Women* (Reaktion Books, 2023), p. 196.



- <sup>5</sup> Talia Schaffer, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (University Press of Virginia, 2000), pp. 25 & 2.
- <sup>6</sup> Julia Briggs, 'Nesbit [married name Bland], Edith', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004, doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/31919.
- <sup>7</sup> Syrett, *The Sheltering Tree*, p. 95.
- <sup>8</sup> Adams, *Decadent Women*, pp. 122, 175, & 125.
- <sup>9</sup> Linda K. Hughes, 'Women Poets and Contested Spaces in "The Yellow Book"', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 44.4 (2004), pp. 849–72, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sel.2004.0038> (pp. 856 & 859).
- <sup>10</sup> Margaret Stetz and Mark Samuels Lasner, *The Yellow Book: A Centenary Exhibition* (The Houghton Library, 1994), pp. 12 & 17.
- <sup>11</sup> Hilary Fraser, *Women Writing Art History in the Nineteenth Century: Looking Like a Woman* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 11.
- <sup>12</sup> Contributors to *The Dream Garden* also contributed to *The Yellow Book*, *The Venture*, the *Quarto*, and *Temple Bar Magazine*, for example.
- <sup>13</sup> Syrett, *Sheltering Tree*, pp. 147–78. For more on *The Venture*'s feminism, see Emma Frascchetti, *A New Woman's Venture: Linking a Little Magazine to the Suffrage Atelier*, 2019, <https://y90sclassroom.blog.torontomu.ca/2019/09/09/a-new-womans-venture-linking-a-little-magazine-to-the-suffrage-atelier/> [accessed 9 January 2024].
- <sup>14</sup> *Daily Mirror*, 15 December 1904, p. 11.
- <sup>15</sup> *Liverpool Mercury*, 20 December 1899, p. 9.
- <sup>16</sup> 3 Morpeth Terrace in Victoria, London, was home to Netta, Nellie, Mabel, and, for a time, Kate and Georgiana during the 1890s.
- <sup>17</sup> Syrett, *Sheltering Tree*, pp. 92 & 116.
- <sup>18</sup> Sarah Grand, 'The Modern Girl', *The North American Review*, 158.451 (1894), pp. 706-14 (p. 707); Syrett, *Sheltering Tree*, p. 85. Suffrage-supporting Slade artists include Emily Ford, Evelyn De Morgan, Olive Hockin, and Bertha Newcombe.
- <sup>19</sup> Stetz and Lasner, 'Centenary Exhibition', pp. 44–45.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 40–41.
- <sup>21</sup> Syrett, *Sheltering Tree*, p.149.
- <sup>22</sup> *St James' Gazette*, 21 December 1904, p. 19.
- <sup>23</sup> Osman Edwards, 'Recollections of a Japanese Baby', *The Dream Garden*, pp. 131-39.
- <sup>24</sup> Syrett, *Sheltering Tree*, p. 149.
- <sup>25</sup> Lyndsey Jenkins, *Lady Constance Lytton: Aristocrat, Suffragette, Martyr* (Biteback Publishing Ltd, 2015), p. 123.
- <sup>26</sup> Maroula Joannou and Claire Nicholson, eds, *The Women Aesthetes: British Writers, 1870-1900, Volume 1: 1870-1880* (Pickering and Chatto, 2013), p. xxiii.
- <sup>27</sup> Syrett, 'The Dream Garden', *The Dream Garden*, pp. 9–10.
- <sup>28</sup> Syrett, *Sheltering Tree*, p. 138.
- <sup>29</sup> Syrett, 'The Dream Garden', p. 2.
- <sup>30</sup> Sandra Dinter, 'Spatial Inscriptions of Childhood: Transformations of the Victorian Garden in *The Secret Garden*, *Tom's Midnight Garden*, and *The Poison Garden*', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 40.3 (2015), pp. 217-37.
- <sup>31</sup> Syrett, 'The Dream Garden', p. 7.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- <sup>33</sup> V. Irene Cockroft, *New Dawn Women: Women in the Arts & Crafts and Suffrage Movements at the Dawn of the 20th Century* (Watts Gallery, 2005), p. 5.
- <sup>34</sup> Laurence Talairach-Vielmans, *Fairy Tales, Natural History, and Victorian Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 13.
- <sup>35</sup> Matthew Beaumont, "'A Little Political World of My Own': The New Woman, the New Life, and "New Amazonia"', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 35.1(2007), pp. 215-32.
- <sup>36</sup> Nellie Syrett, 'Five Sweet Symphonies', *The Yellow Book*, 10 (1896). Rossetti's work was first published in 1850 and is doubled by a painting of the same title (1875–1878).
- <sup>37</sup> *Derby Daily Telegraph*, 1902, p. 4.
- <sup>38</sup> Evelyn Sharp, 'The Weird Witch of the Willow-Herb', *The Other Side of the Sun* (The Bodley Head, 1900), pp. 3-24.
- <sup>39</sup> Adams, *Decadent Women*, p. 87.
- <sup>40</sup> *Daily Mirror*, 15 December 1904, p. 11.
- <sup>41</sup> Lorraine Janzen Kooistra and Dennis Denisoff, 'The Yellow Book: Introduction to Volume 4 (January 1895)', *Yellow Book Digital Edition*, ed. by Dennis Denisoff and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, *Yellow Nineties 2.0*, Ryerson University Centre for Digital Humanities, 2019 <<https://1890s.ca/yb-v4-introduction/>> [accessed 1 December 2024].
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- <sup>43</sup> E. [Edith] Nesbit, 'Day and Night', *The Yellow Book*, vol. 4, January 1895, p. 260, *Yellow Book Digital Edition*, <[https://1890s.ca/YBV4\\_nesbit\\_day/](https://1890s.ca/YBV4_nesbit_day/)>; and Nesbit, 'The Ghost Bereft', *The Yellow Book*, vol. 12, January 1897, pp. 110-112, *Yellow Book Digital Edition*, [https://1890s.ca/YBV12\\_nesbit\\_ghost/](https://1890s.ca/YBV12_nesbit_ghost/) [accessed 1 December 2024].
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- 53 Ibid., p. 193. Original emphasis.
- 54 Nesbit, *Wings and the Child*, p. 11.
- 55 Marion Wallace Dunlop, 'The Elf and the Grumbling Bee', in *The Dream Garden*, pp. 211-14 (p. 214). See also Wallace Dunlop's *Fairies, Elves and Flower Babies* and *The Magic Fruit Garden* (1899).
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- 68 Ibid., p. 2.
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- 70 Sharp's story is illustrated by Glyn W. Philpot, a prizewinning gay artist and founder member of the National Portrait Gallery in 1911
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- 72 John, 'Sharp'.
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- <sup>92</sup> Morgan's drawings are the only ones from the volume held in the Syrett archive, *Osborne Collection of Early Children's Books*, Toronto Public Library.
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- <sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- <sup>95</sup> Hughes, 'Contested Spaces', p. 857.