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Fibres, Folds, and Trimmings:
The Decadent Materials of Sarah Grand's *Emotional Moments*

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The emergence of the late Victorian 'New Woman' – a term popularized in a series of articles by Sarah Grand and Ouida, published in the *North American Review* in 1894 – has often been linked to fin-de-siècle sartorial discourses such as the rational dress movement and Aesthetic dress. 'Rational' ensembles inspired by menswear 'allowed women physical and social mobility' and were therefore an important means of expressing dissent towards Victorian gender ideologies.¹ By contrast, the connotations of Aesthetic or artistic dress, associated with 'looseness and lack of structure, natural waist' and 'disavowal of the corset', were less explicitly political.² As Kimberly Wahl writes, Aesthetic dress 'was rarely viewed as a direct challenge to hegemonic norms of gender in Victorian fashion culture', but it was based on artistic conceptions of naturalness instead.³ Yet Aesthetic dress, too, appealed to New Women, in both fiction and fact.

Sarah Grand (born Frances Elizabeth Bellenden Clarke, 1854-1943), one of the most successful New Women writers, exemplifies this confluence of artistic and political meanings in the domain of fashion and textiles. A series of photographs of Grand by H. S. Mendelssohn, published alongside an interview of 1895, depicts the 'Aesthetically dressed' author with a curly hairstyle that 'mimics and mocks Pre-Raphaelite iconography',⁴ alongside pictures of her tastefully furnished Kensington flat.⁵ Grand was often portrayed by contemporaries as an authority on fashion: 'not only has she a very pretty taste of her own in dress', writes Helen C. Black in her 1906 account of the author, 'but not infrequently is requisitioned to supply a judicious hint or original idea when consulted by her friends as to the becomingness of this or that gown, hat, fold, or trimming'.⁶

Folds, trimmings, and fibres of fabric also inform Grand's narrative fiction, where textiles appear not only as elements of dress but also in descriptions of interiors, artworks, and

atmospheres. In Grand's short fiction, as this article sets out to demonstrate, references to the material qualities of textiles bring to the fore complex perspectives on art and beauty, artificiality, and excess – concepts more typically associated with Aestheticism and decadence than with New Women's writing. By shifting attention to the functions of material culture and by focusing on Grand's short stories, I wish to contribute to a recent 'effort to uncover and understand Victorian women writers' often complex relationship with literary decadence'.⁷ This involves undermining simplistic distinctions between 'the more self-consciously Aestheticist work of such writers as Vernon Lee and Alice Meynell' and the arguably 'more explicitly feminist work of so-called New Woman writers such as Grand, Egerton [...], or Syrett'.⁸ I argue that textile materiality acts as a constitutive element in the narrative design of Grand's short stories, specifically in her collection *Emotional Moments*. This volume was first published in 1908 but was inspired by Grand's life in London in the 1890s, where she moved after having split from her husband. Centring on Grand's achievement in short fiction – rather than her realist novels such as *Ideala* (1888), *The Heavenly Twins* (1893), or *The Beth Book* (1897) – shifts the emphasis towards a genre which stands out for its 'compressed' material form and which serves as a vehicle of (proto-) Modernist experimentation.

Compression, density, and formal flexibility are characteristics of the short story, but also of textiles. In nineteenth-century narrative fiction by women, descriptions of textile objects and textile crafts often highlight Victorian middle-class women's expertise in fashion, needlework, and interior decoration, and serve to indicate changing understandings of femininity.⁹ Textiles are integral to the 'craft paradigm' at work in mid-Victorian novels, as described by Talia Schaffer,¹⁰ and they give rise to what Christine Bayles Kortsch, focusing on late Victorian fiction, calls women writers' 'dual literacy': a combination of 'literacy in fabric (sewing and interpreting dress) and literacy in print'.¹¹ Such interwoven codes of text and textile inform representations of female characters as makers of fabrics – at home or in industrial settings – and as consumers of textiles, in depictions of outfits, shopping practices, and interiors. But the materiality of cloth also structures texts themselves. As Roland Barthes notes in *The Fashion System*, '[w]ritten clothing is

carried by language, but also resists it, and is created by this interplay'.¹² Even though language and fabric remain entirely different media, words can imagine and mimic the materiality of cloth through description; at the same time, fabric can 'shape' the material of the text itself, when densely woven prose descriptions approximate the interlaced textures of cloth, or when textile imagery serves to evoke atmosphere and scenery.

In its choice of theme and method, this article builds on the 'material turn' in studies of Victorian literature, which has directed critical attention to the physical, formal, and symbolic significance of objects in nineteenth-century written texts.¹³ I approach material culture in Grand's *Emotional Moments* on the level of story and discourse. Textiles occur as narratively represented things – as properties of the story world – but references to fabrics and items of clothing also fulfil metaphorical purposes. They shape the style of Grand's prose as well as encoding ideas of gender, material affluence, and art. I start by introducing the different conceptions of materiality that surround the short story genre and Grand's vision of fin-de-siècle culture, drawing on two of her authorial prefaces. Then follows my analysis of textile materialities in *Emotional Moments*, in particular in the story 'The Undefinable', where I argue that narrative appropriations of material culture accentuate Grand's subversion of gender norms and furthermore reveal her appropriation of Aesthetic and decadent culture, in which her fiction both partakes and which it parodies.

Material Environments in the New Woman Short Story

Short stories were at the heart of the fin-de-siècle literary scene, where a quickly expanding market for periodicals sharpened the genre's contours and ensured its success.¹⁴ The short story craze also contributed to the rise of the New Woman in fiction and fact. Alongside novels such as Olive Schreiner's *Story of an African Farm* (1883), Grand's *The Heavenly Twins*, George Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893), or Grant Allen's *The Woman Who Did* (1895), short narrative texts, too, were populated by the unconventional, witty, educated, and free-spirited female characters that came to define the New Woman in the 1880s and 1890s. Short stories were also an important medium of

expression for women writers.¹⁵ Published in widely-read and fast-selling magazines, the genre ‘afforded women an unprecedented opportunity to launch their careers’.¹⁶ The short story’s brevity and open format created new possibilities of exploring and subverting gender norms and subjectivities. As Angelique Richardson puts it, ‘[i]nconclusive, open-ended, evasive short stories were a perfect fit for the modern woman, as she released herself from repressive social codes, and tried out new identities’.¹⁷ What is more, the short story’s ‘compressed narrative’¹⁸ gave rise to a material text notably different from the novel, given its economical use of space in the printed work. ‘Rather like interlining fabric’, writes Winnie Chan, in reference to an 1896 advertisement for Fibre Chamois interlining, ‘the short story presented a way to have fiction cut into and sold by lengths’.¹⁹

Sarah Grand took advantage of the creative opportunities offered by short fiction.²⁰ Throughout her career, three collections of stories appeared: *Our Manifold Nature* (1894), *Emotional Moments* (1908), and *Variety* (1922). Like most of her contemporaries working in the genre, Grand published individual stories in magazines before reissuing them in book form. For instance, the story ‘The Undefinable: A Fantasia’ from *Emotional Moments* – which is included in Elaine Showalter’s seminal anthology *Daughters of Decadence: Stories by Women Writers of the Fin de Siècle* (1993) – first appeared in two consecutive issues of *The New Review* in 1894.²¹ The fact that the story originally appeared in two instalments demonstrates that brevity was subject to editing decisions and publishers’ compartmentalizing of fictional material. Grand critically comments on such processes in the preface to *Our Manifold Nature* (1894), noting that her stories, when first published, were ‘mutilated for convenience of space or in order to remove from them any idea of unusual import’.²²

Editing processes, even censorship, determined the material form of the short story at the fin de siècle. As she reflects on such treatments of her work, Grand admonishes her critics for their confusion of ‘art’ with ‘artificiality’ and evokes the analogy of fashion. Readers who doubted the truthfulness of Grand’s ‘studies from life’ (p. iii), as she terms her short fiction, exemplify a

literary scene obsessed with artificiality, a trend she compares to the normalization of the silhouette of the corseted Victorian woman: ‘We are accustomed to the false and conventional in this branch of art as we are to the distorted figure of a fashionable woman’ (p. v). This scepticism towards artificiality is crucial to Grand’s narrative approach in *Our Manifold Nature* and *Emotional Moments* and governs her stories’ treatment of material culture.

In the preface to *Emotional Moments*, Grand describes her life in London during the 1890s, which shaped her authorial identity. Different conceptions of materiality and materialism inform the argument and its sketch of fin-de-siècle urbanity. Grand conceives of the literary work as a product of its circumstances: ‘There is always the question of environment’,²³ wherefore ‘[t]he influences to which we are subject create the matter we would mould into shape’ (p. xi). In other words, when the raw material of real-life experience is transformed into the fictional text, it is subject to individual impressions and perspectives. Grand then details how the fabric of London’s ‘social atmosphere’ (p. x) changed with the amount of time she had spent in the city. To the occasional visitor, London appeared as ‘a pleasant dream-region, delicately tinted in healthy colours, with every beauty accentuated, and all the ugliness successfully concealed; the goodness was made apparent; the underlying misery, the cruelty, the evil, little suspected’ (p. xii). Yet once she experienced daily life in the city, it turned into

a world in which there was too much of everything: too many people, too many events, too much to hear and to see and to eat and to drink – too much of everything that pertains to the flesh, that is to say, but never a crumb for the spirit, and never a perfect moment to enjoy. (p. xiv)

Initially, London produces a flood of sensual stimulations which engender the city as a realm of beauty. Grand’s account recalls the kind of art experience described by Walter Pater in *The Renaissance* (1873), where ‘each object is loosed into a group of impressions – colour, odour, texture – in the mind of the observer’.²⁴ Grand’s vision of a dreamlike city, its ‘beauty accentuated’ through colours, evokes the Aesthetic cult of beauty and, in the ekphrastic manner, suggests the hazy styles of impressionistic art of the period, such as James McNeill Whistler’s *Nocturnes*.

Grand's sense that these impressions 'concealed' an underlying layer of misery, however, hints at a more complex material reality. The more she was exposed to the flood of beautiful impressions, the more the city turned into 'a world in which there was too much of everything' (p. xiv). London emerges as a spectacle of decadent excess. The cult of art for art's sake mutates into a search for the perpetual gratification of physical, material desires, 'too much of everything that pertains to the flesh' (p. xiv). In his essay 'The Decadent Movement in Literature' (1893), Arthur Symons uses similar imagery of abundant sense experiences, defining decadence as 'an over-subtilizing refinement upon refinement, a spiritual and moral perversity'.²⁵ Grand's preface sets the tone for *Emotional Moments* as a portrayal and critique of not just decadent but also affluent lifestyles, where '[e]verything is provided on the most lavish scale' and 'the most admired of all attainments is the attainment of wealth' (p. xvi). This is enhanced by Grand's retrospective perspective and her asserting control over the editing of her stories. Just as the volume assumes material form, it also enables Grand to voice a sharp anti-materialist critique of '[t]he modern ideal of achievement', which 'is not in the quality of the work done, but in the price to be paid for it' (p. xv).

Textile Materialities in *Emotional Moments*

Grand's portrayal of decadent Aestheticism and her critique of excessive materialism in *Emotional Moments* converge in the representation of material objects and textures. In particular, her deployment of various strands of textile materiality – meaning diegetic as well as metaphorical references to the properties of fabrics, dresses, and other textile objects – showcase these tensions. Already in the preface, Grand conjures a dense 'mass' of unspecified, fabric-like material as a fitting image of decadent excess: 'I saw Society, at that time, all about me, piled up into a dense mass – a mass in which the more attractive attributes of human nature were obliterated, the more repulsive features forced into prominence' (p. xv). The image suggests a heap of discarded clothes or pieces of fabric, a 'dense mass' which at once covers up truths and procures new, distorted forms.

The twelve short stories collected in *Emotional Moments* exemplify Grand's concern with art and artificiality and her interest in representing subjective consciousness. As they narrate 'moments' in the lives of mostly upper-class Victorians, the stories portray variations on the search for sensual and emotional fulfilment. From romantic love to the perfect artwork, Grand's characters – often young women – strive for an 'undefinable' or elusive thing, feeling or quality that will enrich their lives. The plots are connected by the stylistic textures of Grand's prose, combining, for example, interior monologues with accounts of external environments. Textiles form part of these physical settings, while also enhancing Grand's rendering of psychological and sensory spheres. In 'A New Sensation', the protagonist, Lady Flora, is tired of her life as a spoiled rich socialite, whose main ambition in life 'had been to perk about in new clothes and trifle with men' (p. 56). She contemplates the furnishings of her home:

When her guests had gone, she strolled through the empty rooms. They were decorated to excess, and reeked of luxury of the stifling kind, reflected from France. Everywhere were hangings, everywhere was silk or satin, even on the ceilings. The house was lined like a bonbon box, and it suddenly seemed to her ridiculous. She felt the artificiality, the stuffiness of it, and her impulse was to tear down the hangings and fling the windows wide open. (p. 60)

The 'bonbon box' effect of silk and satin wall hangings denotes a conspicuous display of wealth and luxury as much as conveying a decorative style centred around 'excess' and 'artificiality', here associated with French interiors. This sensory overload is, initially, made to contrast with the naturalness and simplicity of the rural setting to which Lady Flora escapes in the main section of the story. In the country, she befriends a gardener and is struck by his 'well-cut clothes' (p. 67) and elegant manner. He further confounds the lady's assumptions of rustic simplicity when he recites a stanza from Swinburne's poem 'By the North Sea' (1880), which, significantly, constructs a landscape scenery by way of textile imagery: 'Far flickers the flight of the swallows, | Far flutters the weft of the grass | Spun dense over desolate hollows | More pale than the clouds as they pass' (p. 80). Suggesting spidery weaving and manufacture, Swinburne's lines depict nature as a crafted

site. In the context of Grand's narrative, these images link the rural setting with Lady Flora's fabric-lined urban home.

In 'The Man in the Scented Coat', Grand draws on textile materiality to establish another kind of urban setting. A description of a thick fog at the onset of the story, focalized through the main character Josepha, evokes the texture of fabric:

She could see nothing through it, not the twinkle of the nearest lamps, nor could she hear a sound. For a moment the mist seemed solid as a wall, but the heat of the house meeting it melted its density, frayed it at the edges, and released it, so that it came streaming into the hall, fast filling it with vapour, which rapidly spread itself over everything, gauzily, like a veil, bedimming the brilliant lamps, shrouding the luxurious furnishings, and adding to all that touch of mystery which dignifies commonplace ordinary elegance with interest. (pp. 275-76)

Grand's imagery conveys the mutability of London's infamous 'pea soup fog', produced by a mix of air pollution and wet climate.²⁶ This 'yellow mist' (p. 279), as the narrator later terms it, was a popular emblem of Victorian literature. Oscar Wilde's poem 'Symphony in Yellow' (1889), for example, compares London's 'thick fog' to 'a yellow silken scarf' which 'hangs along the quay'.²⁷ Both Wilde and Grand draw on the material properties of fabric in their depictions of fog. Whereas Wilde's image evokes the opacity and smoothness of silk, Grand suggests the multi-functionality of different kinds of fabric: textiles can block vision and noise, they can occlude, mystify, and decorate people and things, and change the atmosphere of a place. While the fog is dense and almost solid at first, muting sound and sight like a thickly woven piece of cloth, it gradually turns more translucent and fragmented. Heat and light slowly permeate the damp air, making the mist seem like fabric that is 'frayed [...] at the edges'. In its most 'gauzy' state, the fog adopts the suggestive qualities of a veil. As it enters the house, the mist transforms the aesthetics of the interior, 'adding to all that touch of mystery which dignifies commonplace ordinary elegance with interest'. The intruding fog creates the appropriate atmosphere for adventurousness and change, enwrapping the main character in excitement and directing her to the outside world: 'She found herself being rapidly wound up into the mood for adventures. Her quick imagination began to present possibilities to her' (p. 278). As with Lady Flora in 'A New Sensation', Josepha's

abandoning of the home sphere and the material surrounding of the interior initiates her emancipation from restrictive gender roles.

‘When the Door Opened – ?’, a story which anticipates ‘twentieth-century fragmentation and fluidity²⁸ by way of its ambiguous title, expands on the urban and materialist imagery of Grand’s preface. London is portrayed as a densely textured mass, saturated with experiences and impressions. In the story’s opening paragraph, the urban crowd appears as a ‘tangled mass of movement’, where ‘the commonplace doings of people in the commonplace moods and phases [...] weave themselves into the weft of wholesome lives’ (pp. 171-72). Like an unstructured jumble of threads which is arranged to form the orderly pattern of woven fabric, significant moments or periods in life take shape, once contemplated from a distance: ‘they stand out to view, these intervals of intensity, the beginnings of episodes – tragic, heroic, amorous, abject’ (p. 172).

Layers of fact and fiction shape the form and plot of ‘When the Door Opened – ?’ The frame narrator relays a conversation with a stranger on a bus, who shares anecdotes about his married life. The embedded narrative revolves around a fancy-dress ball, where the stranger suspected his wife of committing adultery, only to find that he mistook another party guest, dressed in a similar costume, for his wife. The wife’s costume is described as ‘a silver-grey domino, lined with pale pink, and trimmed with white lace’, accompanied by a mask ‘fringed with lace’ (p. 178). As artfully crafted as the story itself, the outfit’s flamboyant yet tasteful combination of materials and colours signifies feminine agency and a self-conscious play with identities. As part of a nineteenth-century wedding dress – such as Queen Victoria’s costly silk and lace gown²⁹ – white lace would connote purity and submissiveness. By comparison, the incorporation of lace in the costume of Grand’s character seems to suggest playfulness and mystery. Contemplating the flirtatious behaviour of the woman he assumes is his wife, the husband wonders: ‘Was this the true woman [...], and was that other to whom I was accustomed only an actress earning her living?’ (p. 184).

Dressing up, and the performative, mystifying, and revelatory functions of textile objects, also feature in ‘The Undefinable: A Fantasia’, the final piece in *Emotional Moments*. The story offers the most explicit commentary on fin-de-siècle art, fashion, and decadent excess in Grand’s oeuvre of short fiction.

Unveiling Beauty and Truth in ‘The Undefinable: A Fantasia’

The narrator is a male painter based in Kensington, London. As some critics have observed, he is meant to be the same character who narrates the story of the costume ball in ‘When the Door Opened –?’.³⁰ During a period of creative deadlock, an unknown woman visits his studio, seeking employment as a model. A typical New Woman character, she is confident, intelligent, and altogether unconventional. The debates and shifting power dynamics between the two characters structure the short story. The woman criticizes the artist’s work for its lack of ‘human interest’ (p. 325). The artist, though initially appalled by the woman’s demeanour, finds himself increasingly intrigued by her presence and fresh ideas, gradually realizing that she embodies a new force of creative inspiration. The story ends with the model’s departure, having teased the painter into accepting her identity as a ‘free woman, a new creature’ (p. 357). In addressing the search for the ‘undefinable’ aspect that determines artistic genius, the story resembles Honoré de Balzac’s short story ‘The Unknown Masterpiece’ of 1832, which also features a master-student relationship and revolves around the mysterious ‘soul’ of great art.³¹ But as Grand’s choice of epigraph, ‘that certain Something’ (p. 303), attributed to Ruskin, indicates, ‘The Undefinable’ also constitutes a response to Grand’s more immediate cultural environment of the Aesthetic and decadent 1880s and 90s. This connection is supported by the preface to *Emotional Moments* and it is apparent in the story’s deployment of material culture.

Textile imagery first enters the story when the artist contemplates his most recent painting, which fails to move him. Even though he considers the ‘scene’ fit for ‘the proper appreciation of a noble work of art’ and ‘although I had reclined in a deep easy-chair long enough to finish a

cigarette, not a single fibre of feeling had responded to the call of canvas upon it' (pp. 305-06). The image of a 'fibre of feeling' links the artist's emotional life with the texture of the canvas. Complementing the descriptions of the studio's interior décor and atmosphere, it clothes the story's core theme of the quest for artistic genius in material terms. This connection is reinforced by the appearance of the female model. At first dismissing her as rude and unattractive, the artist's impression of his visitor gradually changes when he contemplates her dressed figure:

She had placed herself full in the light for my inspection, with her back to my picture, and I looked at her attentively, gauging the possibility of making anything out of such a face, and the rather tall bundle of loose, light wraps which was the figure she presented. (p. 314)

Focusing on her external appearance, the artist's gaze initially reduces the model to a potential art object. But the 'loose, light wraps' and flowing fabrics of her clothes resist the objectification of her body to a certain extent. Her outfit evokes the unconstrained 'looseness and lack of structure'³² of late Victorian Aesthetic and rational dress styles and thus signifies the visitor's status as a modern woman.

Material culture in 'The Undefinable' not only encodes feminist subversions of the male gaze but also shapes the story's ironic critique of 'art for art's sake'. Dismissing the artist's work-in-progress, the model tells him: 'You have fed your senses to such a monstrous girth that they have crowded the soul out of you. What you put into your pictures now is knowledge, not inspiration' (p. 324). Her objection is that the painter has gone too far in his pursuit of sensory spectacle. In seeking to translate the life of sensations into art, he has produced a technically skilled, yet soulless formalism. Embarrassed at her critique, the artist acts out his self-doubt in material terms: 'The next morning I was in the studio before ten o'clock, and the first thing I did was to cover my new work with a curtain, and then I set my palette' (p. 316). This seemingly minor plot detail indicates some of the story's most important fin-de-siècle contexts and intertexts. The charge that a painter has put the wrong thing into his artwork and a painting concealed by a piece of fabric also form part of the iconic decadent narrative of the 1890s, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Grand was familiar with Wilde's novella but did not approve of it. She recorded her reading experience in a letter of 1891:

I am just reading *Dorian Gray*, and find it only exasperating so far – the outcome of an unlovely mind [...] – poor, forced stuff, conceited, untrue to all that is elevating in nature & in art, and not improved by being polished up in passages to a laboured smartness, which one's head acknowledges but one's heart abhors.³³

Despite Grand's forthright critique of Wilde's novel, there are obvious similarities between the two writers' work and the shaping of their authorial identities, as Catherine Maxwell has shown: 'Like Wilde, Grand was accomplished at inventing herself as a public figure and celebrity, skilfully controlling her image and stage-managing her interviews, appearances, and artfully posed photographs'.³⁴ This connection 'extends to their literary work',³⁵ as Grand's writing critically engaged with, and anticipated, decadent debates surrounding beauty and artificiality. Grand's dismissal of *Dorian Gray* as 'untrue' and 'conceited' has parallels with the model's condemnation of a lack of 'human interest' in the painter's work, described in the short story. Her depiction of the dandy-esque artist reads like an ironic take on Wilde's male characters in *Dorian Gray*, who regard themselves as disciples of a decadent 'new Hedonism'.³⁶ In search of relentless sensual and Aesthetic stimulation, they contemplate how they might 'cure the soul by means of the senses, and the senses by means of the soul' (p. 155). Like Grand's artist, Basil Hallward strives after the 'undefinable' quality that defines great art. But the central conceit of Wilde's novel is, of course, that Basil's painting of his muse, *Dorian Gray*, contains too much of the truth, and develops an uncanny life of its own. The portrait not only exposes the artist's feelings, but it also reveals the real nature of its sitter and owner.

During the course of the narrative the picture changes to display the gradual degeneration of *Dorian's* soul due to a life of selfish excess, while his actual physical appearance remains youthful and beautiful. Horrified by the transformation, *Dorian* hides the painting in his house and shrouds it in cloth.

As the door closed, *Dorian* put the key in his pocket and looked round the room. His eye fell on a large, purple satin coverlet heavily embroidered with gold, a splendid piece of late

seventeenth-century Venetian work that his grandfather had found in a convent near Bologna. Yes, that would serve to wrap the dreadful thing in. It had perhaps served often as a pall for the dead. Now it was to hide something that had a corruption of its own, worse than the corruption of death itself – something that would breed horrors and yet would never die. (p. 101)

The embroidered Venetian coverlet epitomizes Aesthetic taste and prefigures Dorian's obsessive and orientalist accumulation of historic textiles and other luxurious objects later in the novel. But having once been used as a 'pall for the dead' and now veiling Dorian's sinful soul, the decorated cover also intimates the darkness and the 'horrors' that lurk beneath Aesthetic refinement, gesturing towards decadence's fascination with the transgression of boundaries and the Victorian anxieties surrounding social and cultural degeneration at the end of the century.

Grand weaves these connotations into her short story. Like Dorian, her artist-narrator dreads being faced with the painting again when a group of guests ask to see his work, as it contains an aspect of himself he prefers to conceal: 'I had not looked at it myself since I had covered it up, and now that I was forced to draw the curtain from before it, I felt it to be a distasteful duty' (*Emotional Moments*, p. 321). By introducing the New Woman figure, however, Grand adds a feminist twist to Wilde's character constellation. During her second visit to the studio, the model unveils the unsuccessful painting: '[T]hen she rose in her deliberate, languid way, and went, with her long wrap depending from her left arm and gracefully trailing after her, up to the picture, and drew aside the curtain that concealed it' (p. 325). The description of the gracefully trailing fabric of her gown, focalized through the eyes of the painter, stages the New Woman as a subject of artistic interest but also connects her with the piece of cloth that conceals the truth. As she removes the curtain from the painting, her role changes from art object to that of art critic:

'Now, look at that!' she exclaimed. 'Your flesh is flesh, and your form is form; likewise your colour is colour, and your draperies are drapery – although too luxuriant, as a rule; you riot in fulness and folds with an effect that is wormy – but there isn't a scrap of human interest in the whole composition, and the consequence is a notable flatness and insipidity, as of soup without salt.' She looked close into the picture, then drew back and contemplated it from a little distance, with her head on one side, and then she carefully covered it up with the curtain, remarking as she did so contemptuously, 'There is not a scrap of "that certain something" in it, you know; it is merely a clever contrivance of paint upon canvas.' (pp. 325-26)

The paragraph constructs a complex intermedial mesh of visual and material codes. Even though the story never provides a full description of the actual subject of the painting, Grand pays attention to the shape and arrangement of fabrics and forms, echoing the earlier references to the curtain and the model's outfit. Textiles here both enact and criticize the prioritization of surface over substance. In the model's view, the painter's rendition of drapery is accurate in form yet lacks depth and relevance beyond its Aesthetic effect. A 'luxuriant', 'wormy' spectacle of 'fulness and folds', the painted textiles contrast with the simpler, more natural flow of fabric represented by the woman's own 'gracefully trailing' and 'loose, light' garments. These semanticizations of textiles as materials are reinforced in a series of illustrations for 'The Undefinable', created by the American artist William Thomas Smedley and published alongside the story in *Cosmopolitan* in 1894. The first image depicts the painter in front of his framed work, with a piece of cloth covering the top of the frame. Another illustration shows the model posing for the painter in her loosely flowing dress. She stands amongst what is described in the story as 'two heavy curtains which screened off one side of the studio from an outer apartment' (p. 334) – a material indication of the boundary between art and life.

In Grand's story, the forms and materials of textiles facilitate a complex layering of Aesthetic and feminist meanings. Further descriptions of the model's dress underline her unconventionality; yet her outfit is also presented as a luxury object, which elicits Aesthetic pleasure:

I noticed that her own dress, which had struck me at first as purely classical, was not really of any form with which I was acquainted, ancient or modern; but was of a design which I believe to be perfectly new, or, at all events, a most original variation upon already-known designs. It was made of several exquisitely harmonized tints of soft silk. (p. 339)

Transcending Victorian fashion trends, the dress symbolizes the story's search for a kind of art that is both beautiful and meaningful. While the formlessness of the cut gestures towards feminist design choices, the 'exquisitely harmonized' colours and the 'soft silk' material present the dress as visual and tactile spectacle. Noting that 'New Woman writers often drew on the vogue for

Aesthetic fashion to make a point about rational dress’, Ann Heilmann argues that ‘it is this emphasis on the social rather than the sensual function of dress which differentiated feminists from Aesthetic dress reformers’.³⁷ Yet this distinction is dissolved in the short story. As Grand’s writing slips into ‘sensual’ descriptions of textile materials and designs, it complicates any assumption that New Women’s writing draws on fashion solely for didactic purposes.

Grand’s narrative both laughs at and partakes in the fabrication of Aesthetic and decadent culture. The model, finally, becomes the artist, when she invites the painter to dress up and pose in classical attire. Textile materiality directs her gaze, as she fits him in ‘a short-sleeved tunic, reaching to the knees, with a handsome Greek border embroidered upon it’ (p. 340). The model creates a tableau vivant: ‘she went to the chest and obligingly looked me out some yards of stuff, which she said, when properly draped, would do for a toga; and having arranged it upon my shoulders to please herself, she conducted me to one of the couches’, where she then asks him to ‘assume a classical attitude’ (p. 343). Initially reacting with laughter at her own creation, the model mocks the late Victorian idealization of classical culture as well as undermining the narrator’s authority. With his ‘ambrosial locks’ and ‘manly arms embraceleted’ (p. 342), the artist’s styling also playfully challenges gender roles. Greek dress was a source of inspiration for women’s fashion, as Wilde illustrates. In a magazine piece on ‘Woman’s Dress’, published in 1884, Wilde advises that

the laws of Greek dress may be perfectly realized, even in a moderately tight gown with sleeves: I mean the principle of suspending all apparel from the shoulders, and of relying for beauty of effect not on the stiff ready-made ornaments of the modern milliner – [...] but on the exquisite play of light and line that one gets from rich and rippling folds.³⁸

Wilde’s description of fabric ‘suspended from the shoulder’ prefigures the ‘loose’ attire worn by Grand’s female model as well as the tunic and toga in which she dresses the artist. In ‘The Undefinable’, the draped fabrics of classically inspired dress undermine rigid boundaries between feminine and masculine beauty standards. Grand’s textually mediated textiles, moreover, reveal the entangled concerns of decadence, Aestheticism, and the New Women movement.

For Grand, the folds and forms of decorative fabric mimic and mock the decadent preference of surface over substance and, moreover, serve as a symbol of liberation from the constraints of Victorian gender roles. ‘I am here to be painted’, professes the mysterious visitor towards the end of the story: ‘Just set your palette while I see to my attire. You seem to have forgotten lately that a woman is a creature of clothes in these days’ (pp. 350-51). However, she refuses to be reduced to a mere silhouette: ‘The mere outer husk of me is nothing [...] – you must reveal the beyond of that’ (p. 353). The materials of visual art and of fashion are both aligned and opposed in the narrative. Dress determines the woman’s status as an art object, but its fabric is also presented as something which the modern woman can actively shape: a material embodiment of the malleability of gender identities. The model finally abandons the artist right after he has regained a state of creative flow, which reaffirms the New Woman’s agency. By leaving, she deprives the painter of his source of inspiration but also initiates his acceptance of a realigned gender hierarchy.

Grand’s still under-researched short stories pay considerable attention to physical environments and a late Victorian culture of things. Worked into condensed and open narrative designs, references to interiors, objects, and clothes clearly exceed the function of mere backdrops to the characters’ actions. In these environments, textiles assume special prominence, encoding fin-de-siècle debates about art, gender, and the privileged lifestyles of the upper classes. But the textile – etymologically related to ‘text’ – also performs structural and intertextual functions, revealing connections such as Grand’s response to Swinburne’s and Wilde’s decadence and Aestheticism, and offering scope for intermedial experiments, for example, when the language of painting merges with the language of cloth in her prose narrative. If Grand enjoyed fashioning herself as an author with a sense of style, who was considered an expert on ‘the becomingness of [...] gown, hat, fold, or trimming’,³⁹ this literacy extends to her fiction, where the materials of fin-de-siècle society helped her to craft an art form that claimed to be both useful and beautiful.

- ¹ Madeleine C. Seys, 'Rational Dress', in *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Victorian Women's Writing*, ed. by Lesa Scholl and Emily Morris (Cham: Palgrave, 2022), pp. 1317-20 (p. 1318).
- ² Kimberly Wahl, *Dressed as in a Painting: Women and British Aestheticism in an Age of Reform* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2013), p. xi.
- ³ Kimberly Wahl, 'Bifurcated Garments and Divided Skirts: Redrawing the Boundaries of the Sartorial Feminine in Late Victorian Culture', in *Crossing Gender Boundaries: Fashion to Create, Disrupt and Transcend*, ed. by Andrew Reilly and Ben Barry (Bristol: Intellect, 2020), pp. 22-34 (p. 22).
- ⁴ Ann Heilmann, *New Woman Strategies: Sarah Grand, Olive Schreiner, Mona Caird* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p. 22.
- ⁵ For the photographs, see Jane T. Stoddart, 'Illustrated Interview: Sarah Grand', *Woman at Home*, 3 (1895), 249-50, in *HathiTrust* <<https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.a0011275609>> [accessed 14 October 2023]. On Grand's self-fashioning as an author, see also Catherine Maxwell, 'Sarah Grand and Oscar Wilde: Decadence, Desire, and the Double Life', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 49.4 (2021), 731-51 (pp. 732-33).
- ⁶ Helen C. Black, *Notable Woman Authors of the Day* (London: Maclaren and Company, 1906), p. 327.
- ⁷ Maxwell, p. 732.
- ⁸ Elke D'Hoker and Stephanie Eggermont, 'Fin-de-Siècle Women Writers and the Modern Short Story', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 58.3 (2015), 291-312 (p. 298). See also Linda Dowling, 'The Decadent and the New Woman in the 1890s', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 33.4 (1979), 434-43. A foundational source on women's contribution to the British Aesthetic movement is Talia Schaffer, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000).
- ⁹ See, for example, Lynn M. Alexander, *Women, Work, and Representation: Needlewomen in Victorian Art and Literature* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2003); Talia Schaffer, *Novel Craft: Victorian Domestic Handicraft and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Christine Bayles Kortsch, *Dress Culture in Late Victorian Women's Fiction: Literacy, Textiles, and Activism* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009); and Madeleine C. Seys, *Fashion and Narrative in Victorian Popular Literature: Double Threads* (New York: Routledge, 2017).
- ¹⁰ Schaffer, *Novel Craft*, p. 4.
- ¹¹ Kortsch, p. 5.
- ¹² Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System*, trans. by Matthew Ward and Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 4.
- ¹³ Lyn Pykett, 'The Material Turn in Victorian Studies', *Literature Compass*, 1 (2003), 1-5.
- ¹⁴ On this phenomenon, see Winnie Chan's *The Economy of the Short Story in British Periodicals of the 1890s* (New York: Routledge, 2007).
- ¹⁵ Critical editions of fin-de-siècle short stories with an emphasis on women's writing include *Daughters of Decadence: Stories by Women Writers of the Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Elaine Showalter (London: Virago, 2016), and *Women Who Did: Stories by Men and Women, 1890-1914*, ed. by Angelique Richardson (London: Penguin, 2002).
- ¹⁶ Kate Krueger, *British Women Writers and the Short Story, 1850-1930: Reclaiming Social Space* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 1. Women writers' success in the literary marketplace was also weaponized against them by critics who accused female authors of commercial greed. See Heilmann, *New Woman Fiction: Women Writing First-Wave Feminism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, and New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), p. 50.
- ¹⁷ Richardson, p. lxxvi.
- ¹⁸ Krueger, p. 2.
- ¹⁹ Chan, p. xvi. The advertisement is reprinted on p. ix.
- ²⁰ Neither monographs on Grand's fictional oeuvre nor studies of the nineteenth-century short story have paid much attention to her contributions to this genre, with some exceptions. The third and fourth volumes of *Sex, Social Purity and Sarah Grand*, ed. by Ann Heilmann and Stephanie Forward, 4 vols (London: Routledge, 2000), still the most comprehensive anthology of Grand's work, introduce her shorter writings. See also D'Hoker and Eggermont, 'Modern Short Story' and Stephanie Eggermont, 'The Scientific Design of Sarah Grand's Short Story Collection *Our Manifold Nature* (1894)', *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, 7.2 (2011) <<http://www.ncgsjournal.com/issue72/eggermont.html>> [accessed 21 June 2023]. Detailed commentary on collections and publication histories can be found in Kathryn Anne Atkins, 'Towards A Critical Edition of the Short Fiction of Sarah Grand' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of the West of England, 2015) <<https://uwe-repository.worktribe.com/output/806097/towards-a-critical-edition-of-the-short-fiction-of-sarah-grand>> [accessed 21 June 2023].
- ²¹ Sarah Grand, 'The Undefinable', *The New Review* 11 (September, 1894), 320-30 and *The New Review* 11 (October, 1894), 433-42. In America, the story was published in *The Cosmopolitan*, 17 (October, 1894), 745-57, featuring illustrations by W. T. Smedley.
- ²² Sarah Grand, *Our Manifold Nature* (New York: Appleton, 1894), p. iii. Subsequent references to this edition are cited in the text.

- ²³ Sarah Grand, *Emotional Moments* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1908), p. vii. Subsequent references to this edition are cited in the text.
- ²⁴ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. by Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 151.
- ²⁵ Arthur Symons, 'From "The Decadent Movement in Literature"', in *Arthur Symons: Selected Writings*, ed. by Roger Holdsworth (Manchester: Carcanet, 1989), pp. 72-78 (p. 72).
- ²⁶ On this phenomenon and its significance in Victorian culture, see for example Christine L. Corton's *London Fog: The Biography* (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2015).
- ²⁷ Oscar Wilde, 'Symphony in Yellow', in *Aesthetes and Decadents of the 1890s: An Anthology of British Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Karl Beckson, rev. ed. (Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 1981), p. 240.
- ²⁸ Heilmann and Forward, 4, p. 1.
- ²⁹ A commentator on the Queen's wedding noted 'the trimming of the gown, which is of Honiton lace' and which would 'alone cost 1000*l.*'. 'The Queen's Marriage', *Dublin Mercantile Advertiser* (17 January 1840), p. 2; in Rebecca N. Mitchell, ed., *Fashioning the Victorians* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), pp. 155-56 (p. 156).
- ³⁰ See Atkins, p. 45.
- ³¹ This link to Balzac is discussed by Sigrid Anderson Cordell in *Fictions of Dissent: Reclaiming Authority in Transatlantic Women's Writing of the Late Nineteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 13-16.
- ³² Wahl, *Dressed as in a Painting*, p. xi.
- ³³ From Grand's unpublished letter to Mr. Goodman, 7 August 1891, in the private collection of Mark Samuels Lasner. Quoted in Elaine Showalter, *Inventing Herself: Claiming a Feminist Intellectual Heritage* (New York: Scribner, 2001), p. 90.
- ³⁴ Maxwell, p. 372.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.* Her subsequent discussion of this intertextual dialogue centres on Grand's *The Heavenly Twins*.
- ³⁶ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 22. Subsequent references to this edition are cited in the text.
- ³⁷ Heilmann, *New Woman Fiction*, p. 124.
- ³⁸ 'Mr Oscar Wilde on Woman's Dress', in *Clothing, Society and Culture in Nineteenth-Century England: Vol. 2: Abuses and Reforms*, ed. by Clare Rose and Vivienne Richmond (London: Routledge, 2021), pp. 267-69 (first publ. in *Pall Mall Gazette*, 1884).
- ³⁹ Black, p. 327.