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Item Type	Thesis
Authors	Ballard, Colleen
Download date	2026-05-13 13:39:44
Item License	https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/
Link to Item	https://doi.org/10.34961/researchrepository-ul.24992811



“A Fuller Knowledge of Themselves”:

Personal Autonomy and the Fictional Female Reader
in the Writing of May Laffan, Katharine Tynan, and George Egerton,
1880-1900.

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Award Sought:

Doctor of Philosophy in Literature

University of Limerick

Supervisor:

Dr Tina O’Toole

Submitted to the University of Limerick, 22 August 2023.

This thesis is dedicated to

Grace McDermott (1991-2017)

Doctorate Scholar

and

Lyndall Davey

You saw my potential all those years ago

Your efforts were not forgotten and were not in vain

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Abstract


“A Fuller Knowledge of Themselves”: Personal Autonomy and the Fictional Female Reader in the Writing of May Laffan, Katharine Tynan, and George Egerton, 1880-1900.

Colleen Ballard

This thesis analyses how personal autonomy is facilitated or enabled through reading and using books. It focuses on the fictional female reader in the writings of May Laffan, Katharine Tynan, and George Egerton. I explore the capacity for individual choice for girls and women despite societally constructed expectations. I acknowledge women’s public activism, but this is not my focus. I argue that small behaviours enacted by the individual girl or woman in the private space have validity and value; ultimately, they can achieve a sense of selfhood. This thesis concentrates on the act of reading, the impact of religion on reading practice, and the role of the book. I identify specific behaviours which indicate autonomy; small behaviours are demonstrated in how, when, why, what, and even where reading was practised. My analysis encompasses how the fictional female reader chooses to respond to what they are reading, and if and how they assimilate what they are reading. These behaviours are examined in conversation with cultural commentary disseminated via periodicals and advice manuals. Commentators sent clear messages regarding reading and books, and I am interested in how these directions were received and how this is represented through the experiences of the fictional female reader. Spanning the decades 1880-1900, the context of my analysis enters the Victorian fin de siècle, a time of transition and change. I explore if and how this climate is evident in fictional portrayals and how it informed the choices, however small, characters were making. My examination is centred within the private space of girls and women; the domestic home and the religious convent. It is noteworthy that autonomous acts are written into the reading lives of fictional characters which indicates author awareness of choice, its potential, and the consequences for the individual. This research is an important contribution to the revival of authors and offers fresh perspectives within the field of Irish Studies; it also expands on research on reading and books in the Victorian era.

Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is my own work. It has not been submitted for any other academic award at any time to any institution. The work of others used herein has been fully acknowledged and referenced.

Signed 

Date.....22 August 2023.....

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my supervisor Dr Tina O'Toole.

Thank you to Clare Dwyer in Inter Library Loans who always did her best for me.

Thank you to AHSS UL for the funding which enabled some of this work.

Thank you to the WRENs.

Thank you to Rosaline who was there when it mattered most.

Special thanks to Dr Tracy McAvinue, there from our first day of academic life in UL and always generous with her time, knowledge, and experience.

My heartfelt gratitude to my fellow scholars and friends Dr Jessica Brown, and Dr Sean Aldrich O'Rourke. Your support has been invaluable. My doctoral experience would not have been the same without you.

Adam, especially – thank you, for so much, always.

Introduction

This thesis examines the capacity and experience of personal autonomy in the fictional female reader in relation to reading and using books. I argue that small behaviours—visible actions, nuance, details, and gestures—accompanying reading and book use are manifestations of personal autonomy. Autonomy or agency¹ empowers the individual—female child, girl, and woman in the context of this thesis—to have an element of control in the private space in an otherwise distinctly disciplined society of the late-Victorian era. Autonomy can ultimately enable an individual to realise a sense of selfhood.² I argue that such seemingly small behaviours indicate whether the individual is complying with or ignoring cultural commentary on reading and books. How the fictional character interacts with a book—which is not always through reading—is also evidence of autonomy. Autonomy is of significant interest because the way society functions, particularly in the Victorian context of this analysis, dictates that “human action is shaped by well-nigh inescapable norms that cultures inevitably generate, and from which no individual can ever be free” (Plotz 70). I propose that despite these impositions autonomy via books and reading is attainable and can shape the reader; this will be evident in the fictitious portrayals which furnish the chapters of this thesis.

Reading is a potent pursuit, more so as it often a private activity. During the late-Victorian era, this was an area of societal concern. Fiction particularly was regarded as a conduit for thinking and thinking potentially enables an individual to consider options. In their book *Women, Power, and Consciousness in Nineteenth-century Ireland: Eight Biographical Studies* (1995), written to retrieve “‘lost’ histories of Irish women”, Mary Cullen and Maria Luddy explain that “[I]n the nineteenth century, as in earlier centuries,

¹ Autonomy and agency are interchangeable in this thesis.

² By selfhood I mean the state of being one’s own person, having a distinct identity or individuality.

the central issue for women was that of autonomy, the power to direct one's life to ends of one's own choosing" (15). Conventional assumptions and claims about how reading, of novels especially, impacted the female reader were disseminated predominantly via advice manuals and periodicals. Often this discourse assumed readers needed correction and direction to improve their reading practice and better their choice in books. My focus on the female reader holds particular relevance. The Victorian era saw a profusion of reading material deemed inappropriate saturate the market and the prevailing message was that reading novels infiltrated and influenced the minds of supposedly vulnerable girls and women. In his collection of essays, *Literary and Social Judgements* (1873), W. R. Greg (1809-1881) asserts:

novels constitute a principal part of the reading of women, who are always impressionable, in whom at all times the emotional element is more awake and more powerful than the critical, whose feelings are more easily aroused and whose estimates are more easily influenced than ours. (86)

The female reader is apparently "always impressionable", "emotional", and "easily influenced" making them susceptible to perilous reading material. Novels, it was claimed, encouraged "introspective digressions" (Gettelman, "The Psychology of Reading" 200). They corrupted, misled, and diverted the female reader from the presumed role of congenial domesticity. In short, they were dangerous. This discourse continues in the 1890s. Interviewed for an article in *The Sketch* in 1893, an artist, Mrs Jopling, is asked about the "study of art in relation to matrimony" and her reply speaks to the perspective on reading: art keeps "a girl . . . out of mischief, giving her a healthful and purposeful occupation, instead of leaving her with nothing to do but to read trashy novels, to study the fashions, and to husband-hunt in the Park" ("Mrs Jopling in her Studio" 396). Apparently reading can so easily slip into being a trivial or frivolous

activity. In addition, Herbert Maxwell (1845-1937) in “The Craving for Fiction”, highlights reading’s predilection for escapism stating, “the truth about the popularity of novels is that most people, being discontented with their environment, find relief in contemplating an ideal society where tedium is unknown and disappointment is generally circumvented”; “a woman” especially is “free to identify herself for the time” with more fortunate characters (194). The idea of an alternative way of being which was realised by connecting with the characters they read about was worrisome. I argue that though reading associated with thinking was mooted as a cause for concern, an optimistic and productive stance is found in the female readers within the pages of fiction. George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans 1819-1880) recognised the efficacy of reading,³ observing in a letter:

We cannot, (at least those who ever read to any purpose at all)—we cannot I say help being modified by the ideas that pass through our minds. We hardly wish to lay claim to such elasticity as retains no impress. We are active beings too. We are each one of the *Dramatis personae* in some play in the stage of life-hence our actions have their share in the effects of our reading. (George Eliot, *George Eliot’s Life* 42)

Eliot, who was vocal on reading practice, clearly connects “the ideas which pass through our minds” with actions resultant from the “effects of our reading”. She identifies those who “ever read to any purpose” as impacted by reading; I disagree that the effects of reading, whether they are “ideas” or “actions”, are dependent on “read[ing] to any purpose”; the very act of reading, with no specific aim, can be an expression of autonomy. Similarly, Irish writer Frances Power Cobbe (1822-1904)

³ George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans 1819-1880), eminent writer of the Victorian period. Eliot’s famous work *Middlemarch* (1871/72) features further on in this thesis.

connected reading books with “the sense of having learned something, or cleared up some hitherto doubted point, or added a store of fresh ideas to my mental riches”, the experience of which she felt “was one of purest satisfaction” (71). Cobbe appreciates that time spent with books expands learning and clarity, and is something of personal value, adding “fresh ideas” to a person’s “mental riches” which is satisfying. My analysis of the fictional female reader in my chosen texts reveals or indicates the relationship of reading and books to an individual’s agency.

Terms Used

Before I proceed further, it is necessary to address the use of two words imperative to this thesis: female and autonomy. I am aware that using the word female is contentious. Established Feminist scholarship and contemporary cultural commentators consider the word female as problematic and divisive.⁴ The meanings, associations and contexts of words can change over time and female is considered by many to be a pejorative term. The use of female is especially problematic when referring specifically to a woman, which is not my intent; I am not substituting female for woman.⁵ I deliberated the use of this word and sought a substitute; there is no neutral word. I offer a specific analysis within the realm of cultural representation: the female reader’s experience of autonomy. When I use this term, it is to define a demographic: the reading female spans from childhood through girlhood to womanhood. For this thesis therefore, female is adapted as an umbrella term encompassing all (female) life stages.⁶ This enables a cohesive discussion. This said, I am not using the term female exclusively; I also use the terms

⁴ Mari Mikkola’s article, “Feminist Perspectives on Sex and Gender” gives an overview of feminist history on terms used within this fraught issue. See <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-gender/>.

⁵ In 1895, an obstetrician Howard A. Kelly was reminded, “[T]ake care not to use the word *female* as meaning ‘a woman’”.

⁶ The OED includes this definition: “female, adj., sense I.4: Of a group, etc.: composed or consisting of women or girls” (“female”).

girl, girlhood, woman, women, and womanhood.⁷ The word female continues to be used in scholarship when it enables an understanding of a demographic. During August 2023, I entered “Title: Female”, into the search facility of the academic digital library, *Jstor*, and specified the period of 2020-2023; it returned 328 results. It would seem at times the use of female is unavoidable in fulfilling the task of academic research. By way of example, I draw on established scholars Linda K. Hughes, and Talia Schaffer; they both focus studies on the late-Victorian era and (separately) use the word female in discussing the female aesthete.⁸ They both acknowledge the term they use is “riddled with tensions and contradictions” but is suited to purpose and the era under discussion (Hughes 173). In her opening chapter alone, Schaffer speaks of “female writers”, “female poets”, “female characters”, “female heroines”, and of course, frequently, “female aesthetes” (4, 6, 7, 8). I am not adopting the distinctive challenges accorded a discussion of “female aesthetes”. I am affirming that using the term female is, in certain contexts, unavoidable. Likewise, my use of the word female speaks to the context of my analysis in the late-Victorian era. I am examining how children, girls, and women (all females in the texts I analyse) at varying life stages challenged the status quo of Victorian expectations through thinking, and potentially by instigating action for themselves; in exercising choice, I argue they question societally assigned female roles and demonstrate an individualistic response thus asserting selfhood. Evident throughout my analysis is how the autonomy of female readers is tacitly conveyed via fictional narrative so as not to upset societal conventions. The use of female also serves as a

⁷ In fiction of this era, the years of the young female reader between childhood and adulthood is frequently referred to as “girlhood”. This said, the term lacks clearly defined boundaries; Susan Cahill explains that girlhood “tends to articulate notions of transition, process and transformation that do not necessarily imply an achieved endpoint” (“Making Space for the Irish Girl” 170).

⁸ Linda K. Hughes, “Female Aesthete at the Helm: “Sylvia’s Journal” and “Graham R. Tomson”, 1893-1894.”, published in 1996; Talia Schaffer, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (2000).

reminder of societal expectations within which the female reader could potentially exercise autonomy.

Various concepts exist when defining autonomy, so it is necessary to clarify what is meant by personal autonomy in this discussion. The concept of personal autonomy is not dependent or reliant on other people or external circumstances but initiated by the individual; autonomy is not something someone else can do for you. I draw on scholar of philosophy John Christman's discussion in which personal or individual autonomy is explained as "the capacity to be one's own person, to live one's life according to reasons and motives that are taken as one's own and not the product of manipulative or distorting external forces" ("Autonomy in Moral and Political Philosophy"). Jane Dryden offers an additional relevant point to this analysis that autonomy is "based on features of the action and decision-making process purely internal and particular to the individual agent" ("Autonomy"). More specifically, Diane Meyers' defines personal autonomy as when a person is "doing what they, as individuals, want to do" (216). Throughout this analysis, how an individual expresses autonomy is not up for judgment; choice is whatever form it takes which is practicable to an individual.¹¹ Meyers observes that "it must be possible for a life to contain pockets of autonomy and threads of autonomy which do not add up to an autonomous life" (624). This thesis is concerned with such pockets and threads of autonomy as portrayed in the fictional space. These are tacit yet tangible private acts—or borrowing from Lucy McDiarmid who uses Erving Goffman's term—the "small behaviours" of the individual (4). My methodology is to transfer these concepts of autonomy applicable to actual persons and apply them to the fictional reader. Through close reading, and contextual conversation with periodicals and advice manuals, I examine fictional portrayals of the

¹¹ To read further on this, see Youngkin pp. 10, 11.

female reader and her relationship with reading and books in correlation to autonomy. In McDiarmid's context, these "small behaviours" reveal social change in process, in miniature" within the public space (4). My argument allows that for some individuals visible displays of autonomy does not appeal; for others, the opportunity for public activism may not be available or accessible. Inconspicuous acts of the individual in the private and personal space do not necessarily "add up to an autonomous life", but are no less valuable than public expressions of autonomy. Affirmatively, Meyers explains the private space is "yet another arena in which the true self might find expression" (622). The private space is frequently domestic, though this is not to preclude other spaces. I argue how nuns confined to the convent employed autonomy in their reading practice and choice of books (and enabled other nun's reading habits). Autonomous "miniature" acts are often seemingly minor details shown through nuance and gestures which indicate the thoughts and choices of the individual. These behaviours are visible but often subtle, sometimes discreet ways of exercising and indicating autonomy. As already noted, this thesis is concerned specifically with the portrayal of autonomy through reading and using books. I define how autonomy is evident in several ways: in response to cultural commentary on reading practice, in the act of reading, in response to the content of reading material, and how the book is used. Choice prior to reading is evident in how a character sits when reading, where they sit, whose advice they take, and choosing which book to read; Tynan's character Aunt Theodosia sits "upright in the little straight-backed chair" to read, complying with culturally imposed directives on how to sit when reading (*That Sweet Enemy* 119). Portrayals of how the reader responds to what she—girl or woman—is reading is also defined as an indication of autonomy. I examine whether the fictional reader assimilates what she is reading into her own life. Choice is also evident in how a book is utilised. For example, for May Laffan's character Marion, a book is used as a means of escape in a roomful of people rather than

for reading, when she “withdrew into the window-seat, and letting herself fall softly into her own favourite corner, picked up the book that lay open there, and seemed as if she read” (*Ismay’s Children* 379). Significantly during the Victorian era reading was an obligatory undertaking for girls and women, but it could be adopted as an opportunity to implement personal choice. I am analysing how this is communicated in the fictional realm.

Daydreaming, which I discuss in Chapter One, was also an opportunity for the individual to exercise control over their thinking and make choices. Initially perceived as a symptom of insanity, by the late-Victorian period it was, for the most part, accepted as a useful space for thinking and getting to know oneself. While I will identify evidence and indications of thought process, it is not the purpose of this thesis to probe the complexities of the mind by examining in depth the equally complex areas of psychiatric and psychological research of the Victorian era. Athena Vrettos (2002), Deborah Gettelman (2012), and Suzy Anger (2018) to name a few provide informative articles on psychology during the Victorian era. As well, I will not presume to know what these fictional readers are thinking. I am aware, as Kate Flint notes, that for the fictional reader (as for a real reader), rather than predictable reactions, there is a “range of potential responses available” in the reading experience, and I add, potential consequences (*Woman Reader* 257). Within this thesis, the word autonomy may at times interchange with the word agency.

Irish Context

Renée Fox in her chapter “Reading Outside the Lines: Imagining New Histories of Irish Fiction” (2020), mentions the churlish claim of novelist and playwright Rosa Mulholland (1841-1921). In a column in the *Irish Monthly* in 1891, Mulholland wrote that “Irish literature does not become enriched as time goes on, and we shall have little

to show for the work of our period at the close of the nineteenth century” (369). Fox states that this attitude influenced critics for over a century (276). My thesis confronts this misapprehension. It is a contribution to the evidence that there is more than “little to show” in fiction during the late-Victorian era and expands the “reparative work” necessarily ongoing to lift the long-established notion of “second-rate nineteenth-century literature” in an Irish context (277). It contributes to the continuing work by scholars of Irish writing to refute Mulholland’s assessment that a “lack of worthwhile material” exists in the era she inhabited alongside the writers I study (277). My research can be firmly situated within the recent “representation, retrieval and reconsideration” of Irish women writers instigated both through the Irish Women’s Writing Network (IWWN) established in 2016, and the ensuing connected collection *Irish Women Writers at the Turn of the Twentieth Century: Alternative Histories, New Narratives* (2020), edited by Kathryn Laing and Sinéad Mooney (1). Acknowledging the basis of recovery this endeavour has enabled and its pursuit of original scholarly critique in the field, I believe I am offering a fresh perspective on the work of writers who belong to this cohort of recovery and visibility.

In recent decades, the late-Victorian period in the Irish context has become an established convergence of research. Scholars have built on the comprehensive work of James H. Murphy and John Wilson Foster, who “brought renewed attention to the contributions made by women writers to the literary landscape of the era” (Pilz and Standlee 4).¹² Close consideration of the works of the writers I have chosen augment the “acts of recuperation and innovative readings of recovered writings” boosting this ongoing ambition on behalf of historical women writers in Ireland during the years 1880-1920 (Laing and Mooney 3). My work intersects with the established research of

¹² Specifically, James H. Murphy’s *Irish Novelists and the Victorian Age* (2011), and John Wilson Foster’s *Irish Novels 1890-1940: New Bearings in Culture and Fiction* (2010).

scholars instrumental in this recovery including Faith Binckes, Elke D’hoker, Heidi Hansson, Kathryn Laing, Margaret Kelleher, Gerardine Meaney, Maureen O’Connor, along with many others whose work I refer to more specifically in the following pages. Situating my research in the period 1880-1900, I am contributing to the ever expanding and encouraged “stimulating avenues of thought” Marjorie Howes speaks of in the introduction to the recently published *Irish Literature in Transition, 1880-1940* (2020) (2). My own “avenue of thoughts” led me to the work of May Laffan (Lady Mary Laffan Hartley 1849-1916), George Egerton (Mary Chavelita Dunne 1859-1945), and Katharine Tynan (Katharine Tynan Hinkson 1859-1931). In determining the authors for this thesis, their fiction had to clearly depict fictional reading as an act or experience rather than a passing mention and portray engagement with books through reading or how the book is used. Close reading of these writers allows for exploration and comparison of fictional portrayals of the reading experience in the final two decades of the Victorian era, or the “Victorian fin de siècle” (Ledger and Luckhurst xiii).¹³ With May Laffan I concentrate on published works of the latter 1870s and 1880s; George Egerton’s work is situated in the 1890s, and Katharine Tynan’s work spans both decades. This timeframe allows me to explore whether each writer portrays similar experiences of personal autonomy for the fictional female reader. It also allows an analysis of the emergence, if any, of changes in reading practice and use of books as time progressed.

Authors and Works

This work aims to revive scholarly attention to writer May Laffan and her work and

¹³ I step over this periphery of dates to include 1876 and 1878 for two of May Laffan’s texts, and 1901 and 1902 for two of Katharine Tynan’s texts as they are important in relevance to my discussion and contribute to the fin de siècle context.

offers a close and fresh analysis of specific content in works by the more familiar Katharine Tynan and George Egerton. I now provide a brief overview of these writers.

May Laffan was born in Dublin and lived there during her writing years. Research by her descendant Helena Kelleher Kahn seems to indicate she “avoided being well known” (6). Laffan’s parents’ religiously mixed marriage and her convent school education is embedded in her writing, and as my examination corroborates, reflected in her fictional characters. From a retrospective perspective, her work is considered influential to familiar writers including George Bernard Shaw, James Joyce, and Kate O’Brien (Kelleher, Margaret “Prose” 484). As an author, she has been situated alongside Emily Lawless, Violet Martin, George Moore, and Edith Somerville (Kahn 1). As will be noted within this thesis, her work shows evidence of an interest in issues coeval to her writing; an article, “Convent Boarding-Schools for Young Ladies”, was published in *Fraser’s Magazine* in 1874, highlighting problems with secondary education. Laffan was a well-regarded writer, with one critic describing her as “to some extent the precursor of a new school in Irish fiction” (“Miss Laffan” 310).¹⁴ This same source notes regarding her exposure of societal “shams” in Ireland, “[H]er writings in this respect mark unquestionably a new era in Irish literature” (310). Writer and influential critic, John Ruskin (1819-1900) voiced admiration for her work,¹⁵ and W. B. Yeats included one of her novels in his list of best Irish Books, which appeared in the October 1895 issue of the *Bookman* (974).¹⁶ Laffan’s works I focus on in this thesis are *Hogan, M. P.* (1876); *The Honorable Miss Ferrard* (1877); *Christy Carew* (1880); *A Singer’s Story* (1885); *Ismay’s Children* (1887). Her collection, *Flitters, Tatters, and the*

¹⁴ In *The Cabinet of Irish Literature: Selections from the Works of the Chief Poets, Orators, and Prose Writers of Ireland, Volume III* (1880).

¹⁵ John Ruskin wrote on a variety of subjects including literature, education, and politics. He was interested in social reform.

¹⁶ James H. Murphy critiques some of Laffan’s works in *Catholic Fiction and Social Reality in Ireland, 1873-1922* (1997), and *Irish Novelists and the Victorian Age* (2011).

Counsellor and Other Sketches (1881), does not have relevance for my discussion but was particularly popular, receiving “unanimous praise” and several reprints (“Miss Laffan” 310; Kahn “Hartley, May Laffan”). It seems mental health issues cut short her literary career (Kahn). What Laffan did achieve according to the brevity of material available, confirms her and her work worthy of revival.

Where limited information on Laffan suggests a private persona, Katharine Tynan in contrast was a public force in the literary worlds of Ireland and England, both of which she was fond. Born in Dublin, on marrying she moved to England where she is buried. Tynan and her work feature in scholarly recovery projects, notably by Anna Pilz, Whitney Standlee, and James H. Murphy. Tynan was prolific in producing her own biographical sketches, recording five volumes on her life: *Twenty-Five Years: Reminiscences* (1913); *The Middle Years* (1916); *The Years of Shadow* (1919); *The Wandering Years* (1922); and *Memories* (1924). Despite this, Keiron Winterson notes “all the voluminousness of her biographical works” lack information on family biography (157). She held literary salons and was friends with W. B. Yeats and many other writers including Rosa Mulholland, of whom she described as having “enriched my life” (*Twenty-Five* 209). Her first published material was a poem, “Dreamland”, which she contributed to *Young Ireland* in 1875.¹⁷ Her poetry was also published in the anthology which *Poems and Ballads of Young Ireland* (1888); she was instrumental in the compilation of this anthology (Davis 41). Her poetry and stories were published in several periodicals including the *Irish Monthly* and the *Dublin University Review*. Tynan undertook a revision and extension of the comprehensive four-volumed *The Cabinet of Irish Literature: Selected from the Works of the Chief Poets, Orators, and Prose Writers of Ireland. With Biographical Sketches and Literary Notices* (1879-80),

¹⁷ *Young Ireland: An Irish Magazine of Entertainment and Instruction*, ran from 1875-1891. This is different to the *Young Ireland (Éire Óg)* newspaper which ran from 1917-1923.

which M. R. in the June 1903 volume of the *Irish Monthly* states is done with “admirable skill and judgement” (338). M. R. also tells us the fourth volume is “her own and completely new” (339).¹⁸ Strangely for someone who chose to be in the public eye, Tynan did not include herself in this compilation. She wrote more than 100 novels. My analysis draws on several relevant titles: *A Cluster of Nuts: Being Sketches Among My Own People* (1894); *Three Fair Maids* (1895); *The Way of a Maid* (1895); *The Dear Irish Girl* (1899); *The Handsome Brandons* (1899); *She Walks in Beauty* (1899); *Her Father’s Daughter* (1901); *Daughters of the Field* (1901); *That Sweet Enemy* (1901); and *Love of Sisters* (1902).

To include George Egerton in this analysis is to add a writer distinctly affiliated with the fin de siècle. The inclusion of her work in *The Yellow Book: An Illustrated Quarterly*, a periodical which, according to contributor Richard Le Gallienne, was regarded by the public “as symbolic of new movements” meant this association was inevitable (227). Egerton in her writing sought to represent woman as “she knew herself to be” and this is evident when I examine her portrayals of the female reader and autonomy; her fiction includes depictions of childhood, girlhood, and womanhood (Egerton “A Keynote to *Keynotes*” 58). Born in Australia to an Irish father and Welsh mother, she has been adopted into Irish writing in the spirit of “generous inclusion” (Ingman and O’Gallchoir 5). She felt “intensely Irish”; her formative years were spent in Dublin, an experience which she draws on in the fiction I examine (Egerton *Leaf* 14). I have focused on the following works: *Keynotes* (1893); *Discords* (1894); *Symphonies* (1897); *The Wheel of God* (1898); and *Rosa Amorosa* (1901) which, though published in 1901, has content of noteworthy import for my discussion.

¹⁸ The first edition was compiled by Charles A. Read and T.P. O’Connor.

To consider these writers in concert, I insert my research within the perimeters of Margaret Kelleher's commentary that the 1880s "is a period of particular significance for the history of Irish women's writings, in which the professionalisation of female authorship was markedly advanced, and in which the generic forms produced by women, and the nature of the readership for women's writings, expanded in fascinating and influential ways ("Representing Ireland" 91, 92). Examination of Laffan's fiction is particularly relevant to this decade as it spans the period 1876-1887. Her writing hints at the attitudes and experiences that would to an extent define the final decade of the nineteenth century such as women's education and agency. My analysis complements and builds on the extensive biographical research published by a descendant of May Laffan, the author Helena Kelleher Kahn. Kahn's book *Late Nineteenth-Century Ireland's Political and Religious Controversies in the Fiction of May Laffan Hartley* (2005) is currently the sole comprehensive research on Laffan and is enhanced by anecdotal inclusions through family connections. May Laffan was not a prolific writer, but she is described as "a writer of quality . . . one who enjoyed exercising her skills, received favourable reviews" (Kahn 6). Kahn describes Laffan's novel *The Honorable Miss Ferrard* (1877) as "not only readable but also interesting and valuable for its vivid evocation of late-nineteenth-century Ireland" (1). Further discoveries of her work were found to be

witty and entertaining, presenting contentious issues of the day in a more objective and realistic manner than did other Irish novels of the time. By comparison with contemporary novels, the Laffan books seemed not only better written and more deserving of republication, but also of being analysed and explored. (Kahn 1)

It could be argued that bias informs this perception as Kahn is related to Laffan. However, a review in 1877 in the *Saturday Review* noted that the author of *The Honorable Miss Ferrard* “seems moderate and impartial in his views, is content generally to do his teaching incidentally, casting it into narrative shape . . . we are ready to be grateful for it when our instructor is so capable as in the present in stance”, and one a decade later in the *Athenaeum*, noted Laffan’s work held “a combination of qualities rare in female writers—strength, breadth of humour, and impartiality” (“The Honorable Miss Ferrard” 403; “Novels of the Week” 501)¹⁹. Kahn states Laffan’s work focuses on “search for identity, and growth towards maturity” as well as to “circumstances that they learn to control or to overcome” (2). This approach is well-suited to my analysis and suggests intention on the part of Laffan to convey autonomy on an individual level. My focus on the fictional female character’s interaction with reading and books speaks to a “search for identity” or selfhood and learning to “control or to overcome” personal situations as an individual through employing choice. Kahn also observes that some critics “found fault” with Laffan’s “‘difficult’ characters”; perhaps their being “difficult” was when they demonstrated agency (3).

Margaret Kelleher’s comment of women’s writing expanding “in fascinating and influential ways” continues with Katharine Tynan and George Egerton’s fiction. Tynan was generous in her own appraisal and opinions of reading and books, a record I have drawn on and interrogated in conversation with her fiction. Tynan, by her own admission, “lived with my nose in a book” (*Twenty-Five* 37). Anecdotal writing published about Tynan informs us “[S]he learned to read very soon and always loved reading”; she had a “passion for reading as a child” and displayed “sound judgment . . .

¹⁹ Regarding the gender inference here, her biographer Helena Kelleher Kahn explains, “Laffan did not even use a pseudonym, as did most women writers of her time. She simply did not want to be identified publicly as a novelist” (2).

about certain books that she had read” (“Poets I Have Known” 252). Her novels and short stories frequently echo her own proclivity for reading and books; whether her personal experience of autonomy translates to her characters offers a stimulating argument. Elke D’hoker, Tina O’Toole, and Margaret D. Stetz, have been pivotal in successfully focusing scholarship on George Egerton.²⁰ In 2021, The British Association for Victorian Studies (BAVS) initiated what is to be conceived as “the first edited collection of essays dedicated to the life and work of George Egerton” recognising the resurgence of interest in and dissemination of her work (Hind). My own close examination of female autonomy portrayed through reading and using books contributes an additional angle to this scholarship, spanning from her familiar short story collections to her to her lesser explored works.²¹ My initial research on Egerton’s fiction was an important generative stage in the development of this thesis. During my analysis for a previous paper, I noted her frequent inclusion of reading and reading material and this instigated interest in interrogating the use of reading practice and ancillary material within fiction.

As articulated by Mary Cullen in the Foreword to *Gender Perspectives in Nineteenth-Century Ireland: Public and Private Spheres* (1997), the challenge in historical research to extrapolate the “perspective of how women themselves experienced it, distinguishing women’s actual experience from establishment prescriptions of what they should have experienced” has informed my approach to close reading as far as is feasible in exploring fictional portrayals focusing on the individual

²⁰ Works on George Egerton by these scholars include: Elke D’hoker’s article, “‘Half-Man’ or ‘Half-Doll’: George Egerton’s Response to Friedrich Nietzsche.”, and her book, *Irish Women Writers and the Modern Short Story*.; Tina O’Toole’s “Keynotes from Millstreet, Co. Cork: George Egerton’s Transgressive Fictions.” and “George Egerton’s Translocational Subjects.”; Margaret Stetz’s “Keynotes: A new woman, her publisher, and her material.”, and “Feminist Politics and the Two Irish ‘Georges’: Egerton versus Shaw.”

²¹ Familiar collections: *Keynotes* (1893) and *Discords* (1894); lesser explored works: the short story collection *Symphonies* (1897), *The Wheel of God* (1898), and *Rosa Amorosa* (1901).

female's experience of reading, of using the book, and how autonomy has led or impacted on their experience (5). As Cullen also notes, through history being female inevitably meant a "curtail[ing]" of autonomy. In Ireland, this took the form of diminished autonomy in social, political, and economic spaces. The initial seeds of this thesis stemmed from my own query that surely in the private space of their home or sometimes more specifically their own room, individual girls and women were resisting these curtailments, enacting small behaviours for themselves (6).

This is not to ignore the public activism emerging strongly during the period I am analysing.²² Marjorie Howes notes that, "the prominence of innovative and alternative political activity, and its close relationship to literary production, offered Irish women significant opportunities to participate in public life in new ways" ("Introduction" 6). As she further confirms, "a number of scholars have explored the determination and varying degrees of success with which women all over Ireland pursued expanded rights and greater agency across a range of literary, public and political spheres"; these scholars include Mary Cullen, Declan Kiberd, Margaret Kelleher, Maria Luddy, Gerardine Meaney, Tina O'Toole, and Margaret Ward among others (7). Tina O'Toole notes the 1890s emergence of new woman fiction introduced narratives "premised on a central character who, having her consciousness raised by feminist ideas, gains confidence in her ability to voice her rights and is ultimately willing to fight for them . . . By creating fictional feminists who pursue social change, or at least illustrate the need for it, many new woman novels made the way for readers to follow in the footsteps of their literary heroines" ("New Irish Woman" 152). Thus, a firm link was forged between "social activism and literary representation" (152).

²²The definition of activism relevant here, from the Oxford English Dictionary is "[T]he policy of active participation or engagement in a particular sphere of activity; spec. the use of vigorous campaigning to bring about political or social change" ("Activism").

Likewise, Anna Pilz and Whitney Standlee in the introduction to *Irish Women's Writing, 1878-1922: Advancing the Cause of Liberty* (2016) note that women writers felt “inclined and at liberty to exercise their political influence through unofficial channels”, namely “their work” of writing, particularly fiction, immersing themselves in what Marjorie Howes asserts as “arguably the richest period to date for Irish literary production” (5; “Introduction”15). Susan Cahill addresses the lack of representations of Irish girlhood in fiction during the latter end of the nineteenth century, focusing on the fiction of two writers. Cahill explores how L. T. Meade’s (Elizabeth Thomasina Meade Smith 1844-1914) work “produces girls as active participants in a critical and artistic culture and as presences that disrupt the norm” (“Where Are the Irish Girls” 221). She explains how Rosa Mulholland is interested in “the relationship between nation and girlhood and for her the Irish girl takes on an explicitly moral and philanthropic role” (Cahill “Making Space for the Irish Girl” 171). Both approaches suggest portrayals of the public persona supporting a national perspective. My exploration provides an additional representation of fictional girlhood in the late nineteenth century: the girl in the private space practising personal autonomy enabled by how she reads, the books she chooses to read, and how she chooses to use books. Her choices are for her own fulfilment and sense of selfhood. I am aware that certain experiences of the female character in the fictional texts I analyse present scenarios which were frequently visited in novels. However, I am contributing a detailed analysis of such tropes from the perspective of these characters using their situations to experience autonomy. My exploration takes in female readers of all ages if they are portrayals involving reading and books.

While public activism is not my focus, my examination of small behaviours as evidence of autonomy speak to established studies and offer an additional conversation. My choice of George Egerton in exploring autonomy align with Aintzane Legarreta

Mentxaka's comment that Egerton "sought to further female autonomy" even if only revealed in a character's thoughts ("'Modernist Silence' in Irish New Women Fiction" 112). It also offers an alternative but complimentary stance on what O'Toole describes as "Egerton's distinctive version of young women coming to consciousness" as potential activists ("New Irish Women" 153). Elke D'hoker and Stephanie Eggermont observe that short stories such as Egerton's allow for a rendition of "ordinary moments" of life which "felt to be more interesting for the lasting effect it could have on consciousness, whether that of the character, the writer or the reader" (299). This articulates the value of exploring small behaviours or "ordinary moments" in the works of Egerton but also those of Laffan and Tynan; there is potential for long-term effects. While acknowledging autonomy as a force for public change, my arguments are situated literally closer to home. In focusing on personal autonomy within the private sphere, I explore how reading and using books could or did incite the fictional individual to personal productivity, to change or adapt their own life choices. This approach acknowledges what Debra Gettelman in her 2012 article "The Psychology of Reading and the Victorian Novel" notes, that "readers with little social agency often viewed reading as a way to exercise mental independence" (202). Gettelman, in her own exploration of reading during the Victorian era, notes that more recent studies in this field provide evidence that rather than compliance to coercive dictates via fiction, "Victorian readers used books unpredictably, independent of authorial direction, and as a prompt for their own associations and speculations" (201).²⁴ Prior to this revised approach, the scholarship followed the assumptions of Victorian critics, that the female reader would be "easily swayed" by the text and

²⁴ Regarding coerciveness and reading, see D. A. Miller's *The Novel and the Police* (1988), and Garrett Stewart's *Dear Reader: The Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (1996).

sympathise with the experiences she was reading, rather than assume an alternative and more personalised view (201).

Reading and Books

Beyond my contribution to the revival of Irish women writers, this thesis intersects with international research on reading and books in the late-Victorian era. The subject of reading and books continues to be an area of focus and fascination within the expansive and established field of Victorian scholarship. Mary Poovey notes the cultural commentary on reading and books during the 1880s was moving on from what should be read to being “about what readers were *actually* reading and about how actual readers do and ought to read” (“Discriminating Reading” 24). I have narrowed my subject but also its context to the specificity of portrayals of fictional female agency through the reading experience and use of books. In his book *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1980), Wolfgang Iser (1926-2007) explains that the fictitious reader “shows up the prevalent norms of the day . . . arousing the reader’s attention in such a way that he finds himself quite involuntarily opposing attitudes and ideas he had previously taken for granted” (153). I would argue with the assumption here of “quite involuntarily” adjusting a perception previously familiar. While this may sometimes be the case (and is apparent at times), it presupposes that the reader does not think for themselves and then respond to a preferred new way of understanding. Rather than assume a reader is at the disposal of uncontrolled or un contemplated change, the “opposing attitudes and ideas” may affirm the reader’s established, familiar views. This thesis sets out to explore the experience of the fictional female reader adjusting her viewpoint, or at least reconsidering her options when it comes to her perceptions of Victorian ethos.

Born at the beginning of the period I am analysing, writer Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) acknowledged the impact of reading on women. In her lecture, *How Should One Read a Book?* (1926), she encouraged the female reader to “follow your own instincts, to use your own reason, to come to your own conclusions” (23). This was an individualistic mode of inviting “independence” and a “spirit of freedom”, which I argue is or can be personal and private and does not rely on a public and or socially active response. Woolf immersed herself in the rudiments of the reading experience, speaking and writing on this subject. She recognised the capacity within the reader, as Kate Flint reiterates, that “reading potentially leads . . . to the building up of confidence in one’s own individuality”; this includes the capacity to make personal choices (“Reading Uncommonly” 196). In the context of Woolf’s salient observations, the idea of reading as a consciously feminist act is unlikely to be a sentient thought in the girls and women portrayed in the works of Laffan and Tynan which I am examining. This said, I strongly believe that these characters evidence a sense of needing to assert individuality despite societal constricts, and indeed constructs of girls and women as individuals, even if a distinctly defined expression of this is not always or specifically voiced. This is in part at the crux of analysing the fictional female portrayals of responses to books and reading; reading was a familiar and expected pursuit but one which potentially enabled, through small behaviours, autonomy through how they read, or responded, or used a book. My close reading further identifies ways in which an awareness of “the struggle and aspirations of other women” is embedded in the reading experience; while this becomes evident in my analysis, it is perhaps markedly noticeable in George Egerton’s work (Flint “Reading Uncommonly” 195).

My thesis is an addition to the field of established scholars whose research concerns the area of novels and reading, particularly those whose scholarship my work converges with, including Rachel Ablow, Stephen Arata, Debra Gettelman, Leah Price,

and Talia Schaffer as well as established scholars on reading in the Victorian period. Further, in offering close readings of portrayals of fictional female readers this thesis not only draws on but complements Kate Flint's informative *The Woman Reader, 1837-1914* (1993). She notes how in artists' images of reading women during this time, the "private activity of reading . . . hints at the subject's vulnerability to textual influence . . . It suggests the potential autonomy of her mind, mirrored in her self-sufficient postures" (4). More recently, in 2022, Tricia Cusack devotes a book to the image of the reading female in *The Reading Figure in Irish Art in the Long Nineteenth Century*. She notes that the image of a female reader "could also serve as a trope for an independent woman with private thoughts" (2). Cusack highlights the image of the female reader in art as a trope. As in art, so in fiction: evidence of independence and private thoughts in the fictional female reader is what this thesis is examining.

Writing in 1897, Lucy Helen Muriel Soulsby (1856-1927) in her book *Stray Thoughts on Reading* (1897), encouraged her readers, "We cannot always choose our company in life; let us resolve that, in our books at least, we will live only with the best" (25).²⁵ Cultural commentators persistently defined what they believed as "the best" in books. However, this thesis is allowing the individual girl or woman realised she had the capacity to decide what is "the best" for her, what "company" she chose. Soulsby acknowledged "novels may serve a most important purpose in our self-education" which speaks to the focus in this thesis on personal autonomy (27). Through reading practice, the reader is informed of options and examples which they can choose to ignore or employ. Writer Robert Louis Stevenson realised this noting, "[T]he most influential books, and the truest in their influence, are works of fiction" (8).

²⁵ Lucy Helen Muriel Soulsby (1856-1927) was born and lived in England. She passed the women's external exams of Cambridge University and became a headmistress. She wrote several advice manuals upholding the Victorian ethos for girls and women.

Influence can be for good or bad and this characterises the ongoing rhetoric of good books versus bad books prevailing instructional columns in periodicals and content of advice manuals. The word “bad” was frequently applied to reading regarded as unsuitable and was adopted because it was judged by the literary elite to be language the masses understood.²⁶ As will be seen in this paper, commentators also used the word “trash” which likewise implied unsuitable reading and was often applied to sensation fiction.²⁷ This marked vocabulary not only got the message across to those whom it was felt needed it—the general reader—but also assured literary hierarchies were maintained.

Periodicals and Advice Manuals

Through columns and articles, periodicals were vocal about the appropriate assignation and consumption of novels, determinedly informing their readership. Advice manuals, several of which were published during the 1880s and 1890s, focused solely on or incorporated sections on reading and books. The interrelation between the fictional reading experience and media guidance on reading, both within advice manuals and periodicals, invites comparison. This thesis explores the fictional reading experience in conversation with the prevailing discourse on reading practice and books dispersed via periodicals. It focuses on if or how fictional representation on reading complemented or confuted the message from periodicals and how this informed the personal autonomy of the reading individual. Constant refrains about reading assumed this space to be a danger zone. For instance, prolific novelist and religious stalwart Charlotte Mary Yonge

²⁶ See *Language and Class in Victorian England* (1984) by K. C. Phillips.

²⁷ Popular in the 1860s, Sensation fiction appealed to the senses. Commentary of the time noted “[T]he whole object of these books is to take their readers into an imaginary world” (qtd. in Allingham). See the online article, “The Victorian Sensation Novel, 1860-1880—“Preaching to The Nerves Instead of The Judgment’” by Philip V. Allingham at <https://victorianweb.org/genre/sensation.html>

(1823-1901) in her book *What Books to Lend and What to Give* (1887) notes that young women are “for the most part indiscriminate devourers of fiction, and . . . need to have their appetite rightly directed” (10).²⁸ This could be interpreted as young women making choices and avoiding direction; the vocabulary of “indiscriminate” asserted as a perspective of those who felt responsible to confine the experience to what was conventionally appropriate. Advice was dispersed through popular titles predominantly by women: Mary Bell, *A Book of Counsels for Girls* (1888) Phillis Browne, *What Girls Can Do* (1880); Sydney Cox, *Friendly Counsel for Girls; or Words in Season* (1867), Lucy Helen Muriel Soulsby, “*Things in Books’ Clothing,*” *Or, Suggestions on Reading* (1892) and *Stray Thoughts on Reading* (1897). These are in addition to numerous articles in periodicals, including the *Irish Monthly*, *Nineteenth Century*, *The Woman at Home*, *Girls Own Paper*, and the *Monthly Packet*, with titles such as, “A Word About Novels”, “‘If I Were You!’ A Chat with Girls Who Have Just Left School”, “What Girls Read”; “What Should Women Read?”; “Novel-Reading”; “How to Form a Small Library”; and “The Craving for Fiction”.²⁹ Periodical publication reached its peak in the late-Victorian era.³⁰ The limits of space within this thesis as well as the predominantly Irish context of my chosen texts, initially led me to narrow down my search to Irish periodicals. Columns and articles within periodicals needed to fulfil the requisite of discussing reading practice and books. It became evident that the *Irish Monthly*,³¹ as well as enabling publishing for women writers, figured prominently in discourse on

²⁸ Prolific English, and devout writer Charlotte Mary Yonge (1823-1901) was intent on upholding religious ethos and Victorian morality. She wrote several advice manuals as well as fiction.

²⁹ William Hughes, “A Word About Novels”; James Mason, “How to Form a Small Library”; Edward G. Salmon, “What Girls Read”; Annie Swan, “What Should Women Read?”. Other articles are cited by title.

³⁰ British historian and novelist Walter Besant (1836-1901) who wrote prolifically during the 1880s and 1890s, noted in his book, *The Pen and the Book* (1899) “[T]here are at this moment in the country hundreds of papers and journals and magazines, weekly and monthly, published at prices varying from half-a-crown to a penny, the latter, of course, vastly outnumbering the former. The circulation of some is enormous, far beyond the wildest dreams of twenty years ago: they are the favourite reading of millions who until the last few years never read anything” (54, 55).

³¹ The *Irish Monthly*, founded by Matthew Russell, ran from 1873-1954. Catholic based. Contributors included Rosa Mulholland, Katharine Tynan and Oscar Wilde among others.

reading. James Murphy explains that it “was one of the more significant Irish literary journals of the late nineteenth century” (“Insouciant Rivals” 221). As noted previously regarding novels, the *Irish Monthly* facilitated the agenda noted by Murphy, of contributors choosing to “conform to perceived Victorian standards of action” (224). However, turning my focus to subject matter, I realised my approach needed some adjustment. The *Irish Monthly* remains the prominent periodical cited throughout this thesis but others—British based—which discuss reading and books, for example, the *Monthly Packet*, and the *Nineteenth Century*, were proven to provide valuable contextual conversation. As far as possible, columns and articles focusing on reading and books were selected which correspond with the publishing year of the text under analysis. This medium enables a comprehensive comparison between how reading and books were supposed to be experienced and how this experience is portrayed in fiction.

Molly Youngkin’s *Feminist Realism at The Fin De Siècle: The Influence of the Late-Victorian Woman’s Press on the Development of the Novel* (2007) offers important foundational research in this field. The title alone features themes relevant to my thesis: fin de siècle, Late-Victorian, and the novel. In her theory, I recognised a scholar exploring woman’s agency in the context of fiction. Molly Youngkin coined the term “feminist realist aesthetic” as a lens through which to examine the reviews of fictional representations of literary women based on the approach asserted by nineteenth-century periodicals *Shafte* and *The Woman’s Herald* (32). Youngkin explains that the reviewers sought literary representations of agency as evident through an “*internal perspective* to indicate transformations of consciousness, highly developed *dialogue* to illustrate women’s use of spoken word, and *descriptions of characters’ actions* to show how women acted as well as thought and spoke” (7). The approach of these reviewers speaks to my analysis of autonomy. Whereas this approach identifies how fictional representations of agency impact on the real reader, I am examining how fictional

representations of agency impact on the fictional reader. Fiction was understood to be an active channel for disseminating ideas which would transfer into the real world. Literary representations of women needed to reflect the real everyday life of women for connections to be made, encouraging implementation of personal agency. As Diana Maltz notes in her review of Youngkin's monograph, "Youngkin coins the term "feminist realism" to characterize a brand of realist fiction that depicted women's internalized consciousness and valued it as a precondition for their further acts of agency" (734). *Shafts* and *The Women's Herald* encouraged actual readers' engagement with fiction as a force for individual change that ultimately impacted social change. Examples to emulate, they asserted, were found in fiction. Unlike these reviewers, my analysis focuses not on actual readers but on the fictional reader and their response to books and reading. As well, the personal experience of autonomy is solely for the benefit of the individual; their small behaviours are not necessarily leading to a publicly autonomous life. This is not to assume autonomy is easy to practise or that individual change, ultimately selfhood, is easy to achieve. Notable writer of the fin de siècle, Sarah Grand (1854-1943) acknowledges that it takes numerous attempts, and time to "develop the good material which she finds in herself" through "silent contemplation" over years (89). The point is, autonomy is possible if desired, as will be argued through this thesis.

Overview of Chapters

In Chapter One, I focus on the reading experience of the fictional female. My analysis determines if as reader she complied with or challenged the established conventions on reading practice. Cultural commentary on reading, particularly novels, was relentless. Reading was deemed a necessary occupation, yet how it was experienced was the thrust of instructive columns, articles, and advice manuals, with the objective of ensuring it was carried out correctly. How, why, and even when reading was engaged in was

determined as either appropriate or potentially disruptive to the conventional status quo. It could be considered frivolous or purposeful, avoided or embraced. I identify how the female reader responded to this contextual narrative. I examine whether her responses indicate autonomy, and if so, how. The second part of the chapter will focus on the daydreaming state and its repercussion. Mental processes, whether productive or not were inherent to the reading experience. The potency of this notion is increased with the acceptance, as scientific research progressed, that daydreaming had a role in reading and reflection. D. A. Miller writes of “the immense amount of daydreaming that accompanies the ordinary reading of a novel” (215). By the late-Victorian era fiction, particularly novels, were valued for “the introspective digressions they elicit”, explicitly the digression of daydreaming, and in turn the potential for constructive thinking (Gettelman “Psychology of Reading” 200). Clearly, active minds accompany reading, even when the focus is transferred from book to immersive thought. A link is clearly forged between self-knowledge and daydreaming. Gettelman writes that “novels prompt readers to daydream about their own lives, even while turning a novel’s pages” (207). Daydreaming, interchangeable with mind-wandering and reverie during the Victorian period and claimed as an area of interest by both science and literature, is not easily defined. Natalie Mera Ford argues that the state has “a broad spectrum of meaning” (86). Pertinent to my analysis, I borrow the succinct description of Jerome L. Singer, established scholar on daydreaming, who describes it as “private experiences in the form of interior monologues and visual images” (417). The notion of “interior monologues” sits appropriately in a discussion of the thinking girl or woman with book in hand. This was a time for thinking and introspection. This intimately personal space was invaluable in enabling autonomy.

Chapter Two focuses on religion and reading. The reading experience and religious influence have long been intimately yoked. Opinions and instructions on

reading and reading material was rooted in religiously motivated discipline, disseminated via religiously based periodicals, such as the *Irish Monthly*, *The Friend*, the *Monthly Packet*, and others. Hilary Fraser has established how religious precepts are disseminated repeatedly within fiction, both informing and challenging religious intercourse in the Victorian cultural arena (101-118). Joshua King discusses extensively the impact of religious affiliation during the nineteenth century on reading material and the act of reading in his book *Imagined Spiritual Communities in Britain's Age of Print* (2015). On the influence of novels on religious belief, J. Russell Perkin notes in his book *Theology and the Victorian Novel* (2009) that for some readers “fiction filled the need for an authoritative text, and novels became secular scriptures” (10). I will argue that autonomy is manifest in how the reading girl or woman responded to religious precepts conveyed through reading material. I will examine how the influence of religion on reading is portrayed, and if and how the reader responds to this influence. Did they comply or reject the advice on what to read? These experiences of female readers are situated within the domestic space but also the confines of convent life. Catholicism is the core faith addressed in this analysis, though not exclusively, as it pertains to the experience of the fictional female readers in the works of Laffan, Tynan, and Egerton.

In the final chapter I examine reading content. This includes the titles and subjects the female reader is expected to read. I focus on how small behaviours are evident when choosing books. Books held the power to inform autonomy, thus recommendations and warnings accompanied lists of appropriate books. I analyse which titles or authors were chosen or ignored as evidenced through dialogue, but also when perusing bookcases. I also ascertain how the book is employed in interactions with others: is a motivation in using the book implied? To what intended end does the book facilitate relationships? I argue that how an individual interacts with or uses a book

beyond reading is a distinct act of autonomy. The position of books in the home also holds significance in relation to autonomy; where were they placed? Where were they stored? Personal choice is indicated in how they were treated and perceived, whether as “friends” who are cherished, or an item to throw aside at will. The second section of this chapter will examine three specific characters who have a life-long interaction with books. This allows me to consider how autonomy is employed over time, and what the consequences are. How the book is treated as an object is shown to be as relevant as its role in leisure and learning.

Additional Notes on the Time Period

I have chosen the decades 1880-1900 for their historical significance as a time of transition and change. Sally Ledger and Roger Luckhurst describe this period as a “collision between the old and the new”, a time “fraught with anxiety and with an exhilarating sense of possibility” (“Introduction” xiii). Inspecting this period with its state of flux allows me to explore whether the experiences of the fictional female reader resonated with emerging attitudes. Frances Knight states that certain “moods and movements are part of the package which is understood to indicate the *fin de siècle*” (12). As James H. Murphy referencing writer Rosa Mulholland notes novels at this time were “an opportunity to demonstrate a loyal adherence to Victorian standards, both in the sort of novels written and in the sort of code for life advocated in them, rather than an opportunity to question or challenge the position allotted to women within the Victorian ethic” (“*Insouciant Rivals*” 224). I argue that within the fictional discourses I examine, small behaviours are evident that suggest writers facilitated a “question or challenge” to the ethos they were also complying with.

May Laffan, writing in the 1880s is on the brink of women’s issues associated with the *fin de siècle*, yet a dissatisfaction with societal conventions which impact on

personal autonomy are evident in her female characters. Katharine Tynan's character Jessie Oliver is "unconventional" and her attitude is "revolutionary" (270, 274). Her "views were so fresh and original" that her love interest, Jim, "felt her a comrade at once, and found himself talking to her as he would to a brilliant boy" (270). The introduction of a New Woman indicates Tynan's awareness of cultural commentary surrounding the representation of alternative narratives.³² Nonetheless, Tynan bestows Jessie with "feminine ways, too" and in contriving marriage for this heterodox couple conforms to the Victorian ethos and keeps her own reputation as a writer of "wholesome" fiction intact (270; *Daily Telegraph* qtd. in *Love of Sisters* 345). Significant to George Egerton's writing, the concept of degeneration was a component informing reading at this period,³³ gaining attention in part via the briefly influential contribution of Max Nordau's polemic, *Degeneration* (1895); reading and books did not escape his vitriol.³⁴ Attacking work (such as Egerton's) which directly or tacitly presents an alternative to the dominant narrative, he writes:

Books and works of art exercise a powerful suggestion on the masses. It is from these productions that an age derives its ideals of morality and beauty. If they are absurd and anti-social, they exert a disturbing and corrupting influence on the views of a whole generation (viii).

Nordau aligns books and reading with the degeneracy he determined characterised the fin de siècle. That reading material had power over "the masses" is without contest.

However, Nordau's slant suggests an obtuse readership unable to practise discernment,

³² My focus is not on New Women writing. However, the connection is inevitable in a discussion of women's writing of this period, and, herein, in analysis of George Egerton and her work.

³³ Degeneration was considered "anything deviating from a middle-class defined 'normalcy'" (Ledger and Luckhurst xxii).

³⁴ Max Nordau (Max Simon Nordau 1849-1923) born in Hungary, was a physician, prolific author, and social critic. He was a co-founder of the Zionist Organisation. His book *Degeneration* offered a relentless narrative on the "spirit" of the fin de siècle including theories on Oscar Wilde and his sexuality. For a viewpoint by one of his contemporaries see William H. Carpenter's short article in *The Bookman*.

thus complimenting the dominant Victorian narrative on reading. As Flint reminds us, “[N]ovel-reading was warned against because of its capacity to raise false expectations, and engender dissatisfaction with one’s present mode of life” (*Woman Reader* 74). The capacity of reading to infiltrate thoughts and exert influence was a familiar refrain; the notion that a “disturbing and corrupting influence” would impact “a whole generation” was ambitious. John Ruskin’s argument “There are good books for the hour, and good ones for all time; bad books for the hour, and bad ones for all time” weakens Nordau’s assumption (*Sesame and Lilies* 8). Whether Nordau’s “disturbing and corrupting influence” is evident in the life of the individual fictional woman will be examined in conversation specifically with Egerton’s work.

Conclusion

In an article in the *Irish Times* in 2020, Claire Connolly highlighting the publication of the series, *Irish Literature in Transition*, notes how “[L]iterature has often been called upon to step in and tell the story of Ireland”. My contribution to that story is an understanding of the autonomy carved out by late-nineteenth-century female readers as a direct result of reading and access to books. As will be seen, in the Irish context of the fiction under analysis, the private space is domestic but also inside convent walls. This paper will show how girls and women navigate privacy within the communal space of family or nuns, and how reading and books facilitate this. Connolly further explains that Ireland’s relationship with its historical literary output is “yet to break free from the cycles of retrieval and forgetting”. While this may be an ongoing challenge, this research adds to the voice of retrieval and if forgotten, can be revived again. It is my endeavour with this thesis to, as writer Lia Mills articulates, “enlarge, promote, and help to extend” the life of the fiction of three specific writers, May Laffan, Katharine Tynan, and George Egerton (xv). This analysis contributes to the ongoing research on women

writers in Ireland in the late-Victorian period. Importantly, it highlights the value of personal autonomy for the individual fictional female reader as experienced or gained through reading and using books. Ultimately, it demonstrates the possibility of selfhood achieved and sustained in the private space.

Chapter 1: Reader as Herself: The Act of Reading

In anything fit to be called by the name of reading, the process itself should be absorbing and voluptuous; we should gloat over a book, be rapt clean out of ourselves, and rise from the perusal, our mind filled with the busiest, kaleidoscopic dance of images, incapable of sleep or of continuous thought. The words, if the book be eloquent, should run thenceforward in our ears like the noise of breakers, or the story, if it be a story, repeat itself in a thousand coloured pictures to the eye. (R. L. Stevenson 247)

Writing in the 1880s, Robert Louis Stephenson could well have induced apoplexy in the demographic of women and men who promoted a disciplined version of reading practice. Due to the proliferation of reading material in the final two decades of the nineteenth century, cultural commentators continued to disperse admonition on reading. The very notions of gloating, engaging raptly, and being unable to sleep due to the repercussive dancing of content alone were the antithesis of “proper” engagement with a book. Add the attributes “absorbing and voluptuous” and you have truly riled the tenet touters who believed reading entailed at minimum wholesome and purposeful content, objective notetaking, timed sessions, and ramrod seating positions. Self-imposed reading regulators dispensed the need for appropriate reading, communicating instruction through advice manuals and periodicals. These benefactors believed they had valid reason to inform others, as Lucy Soulsby articulates, “we more insensibly fall into the tone of the books we read than of the people we meet” (*Stray Thoughts on Reading* 50). Diligence and discrimination were to be personally implemented when distasteful deviation in reading content seemed imminent. W. R. Greg describes novel consumption as “like soup or jelly . . . easily and rapidly absorbed into the system”; a distinct fear existed that novels would pervade a person’s very being (87). As becomes

apparent in the fiction I am analysing, young women were often prioritised, viewed as particularly vulnerable having acquired surplus time between education and marriage which it was assumed would be spent in deteriorating practises of some form or other if not told what to do (Cox; Soulsby; Yonge). Katharine Tynan articulates this problematic phase relating that “for three or four years after I left the convent school I was endlessly idle and endlessly busy” (*Twenty-Five* 62). Through selected close readings of May Laffan, Katharine Tynan, and George Egerton, this chapter explores the impact of reading on the individual and ascertains if fictional depictions of the act of reading, and on occasion daydreaming, were complying or challenging established conventions on reading practice. As well, I ask, was reading impeding, facilitating, or fomenting personal autonomy? Stevenson’s quote above is acknowledging reading content impacts on the reader, both during the process of reading and in the residue of subsequent thought.

The notion as Stevenson eloquently conveys it of “a thousand coloured pictures” repeating “to the eye” speaks to the experience of time spent escaping to the interior state of a wandering imagination (247). The core Victorian penchant for regulation and control does not bypass the daydreaming mode. Debra Gettelman, having noted a quote in which a reviewer provides detailed instruction on how to use a reverie amusingly acknowledges, “[L]eave it to a Victorian writer to regularize the process of having a reverie here and there as one reads a book” (“Those Who Idle” 66).³⁵ Reverie, or daydreaming, in the Victorian period was a conflicted site of study embedded with “unresolved nuances of meaning” with consequences of the experience ranging from dysfunction to disease and perceived to be mentally and physically detrimental (Ford

³⁵ See the article, “Reading as a Means of Culture”, which appeared in *Sharpe’s London Magazine* in 1867. Steps are recommended to enable the reader to ruminate, examine and compare points when they are reading.

81). This view was significantly modified during the fin de siècle. Though daydreams continued to an extent to be viewed with suspicion, there were endeavours to appreciate an individual's daydream experience as "healthy, everyday . . . significant modes of consciousness" (Gao 12). At a time when new theories on the brain abounded, it was recommended to acknowledge the value of these private experiences in how they "shaped individuals' experiences of personal agency" (Shuttleworth *Victorian Brain* 9). This chapter will focus on the act of reading and the daydream experience and how they "shaped individuals" as expressions of personal autonomy.

Reading unregulated: An Alternative Reading Experience

The preoccupation with female reading practice, emerging in the 1600s, had by the fin de siècle ironed out various theories, settling on the importance of woman as mother and the belief that disruptive reading routine and fictional content threatened this role.³⁶ Culturally, reading for girls and women was designated to the home and reading fiction, especially novels, appears alongside domestically conceived activities. Aligning reading with the core Victorian female domestic hegemonic suggests encroachment on an individual capacity for personal autonomy. In exploring how fictional representation of reading ignites autonomy, the act of reading is fundamental, but also how the reader engaged with the book infers the act as perfunctory performance or personal choice. This raises the question, was reading perceived as fulfilling a dutiful, domesticated activity or was it an expression of autonomy in a societally conceived sphere? In May Laffan's novel *Christy Carew* (1880), the character Mrs Carew observing her stepdaughter Christy notes, "her dark eyes drooped over her prayer-book or novel or sewing, as the case might be" thus enforcing the idea of reading aligned as a domestic

³⁶ For discussion on why women are singled out as problematic readers and theories thereof, see Kate Flint's *The Woman Reader* (1993).

task (232). Religion, reading, and purposeful work are assumed pastimes within the circumscribed female role. There is a sense of weariness surrounding imposed notions on reading in Laffan's representations, implied by "eyes drooped" and "as the case might be" suggests options end with this brief surmise. In depicting such constraints, Laffan often utilises humour. While simultaneously employing a pun on a biblical verse, "for they neither sow, nor do they reap"³⁷, family friend Sugrue engages in "serio-comic banter" with Christy:

"Well! considering you have a natural love of reading—rare gift though the same be—I do not consider that a particularly great merit. You never sew, of course."

"Yes, I do—indeed I do."

"Wonderful! Oh! truly wonderful! For indeed, of all the convent-trained young ladies I ever heard of it is well said, "They sew not, neither do they read". (201)

Reading and sewing are united in domesticated compliance. Books and needles are often compatible companions. In *The Dear Irish Girl* (1899), Katharine Tynan depicts a scene of "girls gathered about the fire with embroidery or books in their hands" (217). This echoes her own experience within convent life wherein a "nun read aloud and we clustered about her with our fancy work to listen" (*Twenty-Five* 47). This suggests the coupling of activities is a learnt behaviour suited to an idealised picture of the domesticated female. Tynan's Mrs. O'Hara "sat comfortably knitting, and, at the same time, reading an open novel on her knee" (*Dear Irish Girl* 141). Aside from marvelling at her dexterity, her stance is notable. Mrs O'Hara has accomplished the application of both being appropriately busy and reading in a leisurely way. Comfortable in her activities (as well, she is not hiding the novel, it is open, exposed on her knee) she is

³⁷ *Douay-Rheims Bible*, Matt 6:26.

pleasing both the pervading narrative and her own preference for novel reading, suggesting autonomy. Not everyone combined their tasks. In this example from Katharine Tynan, the choice is reading or sewing; family friend Ross Lismore asks: “Are you always sewing, Miss Featherstonehaugh?” to which she replies, “When I am here and can talk to someone at the same time. A book distracts me too much” (*Love of Sisters* 76). Notably, when others are present, Miss Featherstonehaugh sews so she can converse, as a book “distracts” or absorbs her, and she is unable to interact with others. For some, they can be absorbed in novels and have company: “They were quite happy together usually, Miss Carew reading or lace-making, Nora engrossed in a novel or book of poems, or doing some frivolous little bit of work” (Tynan *The Way of a Maid* 89). Here, reading a book is a companionable activity. This description suggests autonomy. Reading does not appear to be a domestic task; in fact sewing, whether it is “lace-making” or some “frivolous little work”, has been put aside for reading. The women sit companionably each with their choice of reading material. However, perhaps they have swapped books. On a previous occasion, Nora and Miss Carew are sitting together and again a novel is holding someone’s attention:

Nora looked round at her aunt, who was deep in a novel of Miss Braddon’s.

“Auntie, dear, you won’t mind my leaving you?” she said. “I feel rather tired.

Christmas is such a heavy day, don’t you think?”

“Go, dear,” assented her aunt. “I am very well amused with my book”. (178)

This time Nora’s aunt, Miss Carew, is “deep in a novel”, one by Mary Elizabeth Braddon (1835-1915) (179).³⁸ She is “very well amused” by her book which suggests

³⁸ Mary Elizabeth Braddon (1835-1915), prolific and popular novelist of the Victorian era wrote in several genres. Her most popular work, *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) is described by literary critic Elaine Showalter as “a witty inversion of Victorian sentimental and domestic conventions” (*Literature* 164). *Aurora Floyd* (1863) was the sensation book Tynan’s mother took away from her (see Chapter Two, p. 143 of this thesis).

the day is not as “heavy” to her as it is to her niece. Her choice of reading appears to be beneficial to her. Rather than a cause for concern, I suggest engrossing or absorbing reading has a place in the reading practice of an individual, to escape or relax. We are not privy to whether the book Nora’s aunt is reading is the sensation novel *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862), its sequel *Aurora Floyd* (1863), or one of her supernatural or historical fictions, but her choice suggests she was cognisant of popular literature of the time. She is “deep” in her novel and “amused”, confirming the ability of the novel to consume the reader. As a teenager, Tynan had also been “amused” by Miss Braddon’s books; she enjoyed reading “all the tales of Miss Braddon’s” in the periodical *Belgravia* (1866-1899), which Braddon founded (*Twenty-Five* 68). This “amused” or absorbed reading state is continually ventilated as a distraction from dutiful, purposeful reading, as is articulated in the *Irish Monthly* (1895), published the same year of Tynan’s *The Way of a Maid*:

Books that are merely amusing, that are read without effort, that absorb us and tend to prevent attending to serious duties should be used like sweet things in bodily food, with great moderation. It would be lamentable to give way to an excessive fondness for light reading, when so much solid satisfaction and benefit of every kind may be derived from more serious books. (Sutton 260)

It feels paradoxical that “light” reading material invites “deep” reading engagement. Absorbing and amusing reading apparently negates “solid satisfaction and benefit” which speaks to the fear implied in naughty novel-reading narrative. Continuing a domestic connection by drawing an analogy with food, amusing novels must only be consumed moderately like sugar-based sweets. “Lamentable” or not, such advice plainly sets out types of reading, styles of reading, and the consequences of reading, enabling

the individual to make choices. Miss Carew, deep in Braddon, and “very amused” is happy to be left alone to continue her choice of “sweet” reading.

Expectation relating to female readers stretched to comportment in reading and was maintained in advice manuals as an aspect of correct reading. Addressed in novels, the fictional seat, be it starchy or slumped, indicates an attitude, and can be clearly adopted as an expression of personal autonomy. Egerton’s portrayal of the reading experience accompanying personal autonomy includes deportment when reading. Defying the accepted demeanour consigned to book reading, Egerton reflects an attitude prevalent at the fin de siècle, specifically relating to the New Woman, communicating alternative ways of being that shirked convention and manifested autonomy. The protagonist of “The Spell of the White Elf” notes a woman, “stretched in a big arm-chair reading. She is sitting comfortably with one leg crossed over the other, in the manner called shockingly unladylike of my early lessons in deportment” (Egerton 82). The reader is comfortable and clearly ignores conventional dictate on how to compose oneself when reading. The mention of “early lessons” signifies an understanding of expectations, even in this matter, and acknowledging how “shockingly unladylike” the reader’s position is clarifies this seemingly small act as subversive. Guidance was clear on what was expected. Numerous reminders appeared in guidebooks on deportment when reading including Soulsby recommending a straight-backed chair because as she says, “I have no faith in reading that is compatible with an arm-chair” (*Stray Thoughts* 6). Whether reading or not, sitting etiquette conveyed by H. O. Ward in 1878 dictates, “A lady who sits cross-legged or sideways on her chair, who stretches out her feet . . . a man who lounges in his chair, or nurses his leg, or bites his nails, or caresses his foot crossed over on his knee, manifests an unmistakable want of good home training”,

thereby gendering the seated position and confirming the “lessons” Egerton’s protagonist would have understood (394).³⁹

May Laffan also drew attention to the conventionally expected seating position that is to accompany reading:

Miss Alice looked over at her niece, who, with both legs curled up tailor-wise in her chair, was buried in her book. In a moment she was beside her.

“Helena, my dear, a young lady does not sit so. Stand up.”

Down came both legs with an impatient jerk. Helena was standing bolt upright, the book clasped wide open against her breast.

“Lay down your book, dear, if you please. Now, like me.”

Miss Alice spread out her handsome skirt at each side and seated herself gracefully. Helena imitated her as nearly as she could, and her aunt walked off content. She did not notice that her pupil, whose book had been laid rather out of reach, was obliged to disarrange her pose again to resume it, and that in reseating herself she completely forgot the lesson she had just received. (*Miss Ferrard* 71)

In highlighting Helena’s curled up position, Laffan displays an opportunity where the female reader can express personal autonomy. An individual could sit comfortably or correctly. Focusing on reading over mien, Helena forgets the requisite pose and obeys her own preference. Tynan juxtaposes convention with comfort in portraying another reader:

³⁹ Henrietta Oxnard Ward is a pseudonym for Clara Sophia Jessup Bloomfield-Moore (1824-1899), an American philanthropist and philosopher interested in science, and equality for women.

Aunt Theodosia was sitting upright in the little straight-backed chair she affects, her feet in their black silk stockings and red-heeled shoes on a foot-stool, and her air one of extreme comfort. She was reading; by the shaded lamp a highly romantic love story, and was apparently lost to the world about her. (*That Sweet Enemy* 119)

Aunt Theodosia is appropriately “sitting upright” in a “straight-backed chair” but in an amusing small behaviour exudes “an air of extreme comfort”. In a further manifestation of choice, rather than reading a serious book befitting her composure, Aunt Theodosia is completely immersed in “a highly romantic love story”. Tynan has merged obedience to societal expectations on comportment with romantic reading which is continually warned of as dangerous. Not only this, but she is “lost to the world”. Tynan is sending a clear message that for the autonomous reader, how they sit and what they read is a personal choice.

Avoiding reading experiences which facilitated digression from a prescribed role remained paramount in the narrative surrounding female readers. In 1877, Charlotte Mary Yonge reminded those writing for a public audience: “we are seriously accountable for the effects of the words and ideas we send out into the world” (*Womankind* 230). Advice manuals frequently addressed young women at the girlhood stage of life. Yonge asserts, “the mind is capable of taking in and digesting much more effectually in youth than in girlhood” (83). Reading in youth or childhood was perceived as effective. This effectiveness apparently diminished as time passed. Girlhood, the period between education and marriage, was precarious as Yonge explains “we may make ourselves what we please between fifteen and five-and-twenty” (Yonge 67). Time was a commodity allowing space for the infiltration of ideas and influence; in other words, it enabled a girl to understand and develop personal autonomy. This

included choice as to how they spent time. Katharine Tynan recalls she and her sister used this time, “seventeen or thereabouts”, for reading books, stating, “we read—how we read!” (*Twenty-Five* 68). The potential for personal autonomy from reading was thus facilitated. However, as Esther O’Neil states to Christy Carew in May Laffan’s novel *Christy Carew*, words and ideas in reading were predominantly to prepare the female reader for “matrimony or the convent” which she adds “is the natural state for all women, so the canon says” (22). The clear dictate via advice manuals and periodicals was the purpose of reading for self-improvement and moral clarity. Apparent digressions within reading practice invited continual reminders in printed media on the dangers of types of reading. Twenty years after Yonge’s comment, Lucy Soulsby unequivocally articulates the influence of novel reading reminding readers during the fin de siècle as to the purpose of the novel:

If we get up from a novel, dissatisfied with that state of life to which we have been called, and inclined to pity ourselves, then we may be sure that such a novel is our poison, and should be laid aside. The main use of novel-reading should be to let fresh air into our lives, instead of such malaria; novels should give us a change of air and scenery, to send us back to our own lives with fresh vigor with nobler aims and hopes than before. (*Stray thoughts* 1897; 49, 50)

Resonating with Esther’s comment, Soulsby confirms girls and women are designated a “state of life”. The societally conceived impact of a good novel was to send the reader back to their own life rejuvenated, not dissatisfied. Dissatisfaction, it is implied could lead an individual to consider an alternate “state of life”, perhaps such as they are reading of. Considered “poison” such novels should be discarded. George Egerton’s letter writer in *Rosa Amorosa* (1901) agrees reading has a propensity for stealthy ingestion leading to a detrimental outcome, informing her recipient, “reading can

become—I have known victims—an insidious disease leading to mental paralysis” (152). This comment does not come with the same caveat as Soulsby’s. Dissatisfaction with the “state of life” is not the issue harboured by Egerton, rather, failing to respond to the experience of dissatisfaction as an opportunity for autonomy is cause for consternation. George Egerton has no qualms about vocalising through fiction an alternate dissatisfaction with women’s reading practice. Conveying a sense of judgment in calling women “patients” and, it seems, leaving aside of the message in her earlier work of women exercising choice, her narrating letter writer opines a disgruntled view on women’s reading:

Every country town with a lending library has women patients. They pay a penny a volume, and read steadily through book after book. They never have any clear idea of any book, any writer’s style or any thinker’s aim. They have sometimes, when the reading habit has grown on them, to choose a more solid book because no other happens to be in. (160)

This implies collective reading lethargy rather than active individual choice. This remark suggests a lack of clarity and purpose when reading is an ailment. For the so-called “patients” attending the library, “solid” reading is a last resort, rather than being read with intent because it is beneficial. Monotonous reading practice and consumption of indiscriminate content by women is conceived as thwarting personal autonomy attained through reading. However, a book that does not require thinking about is a personal choice. The letter writer continues:

Reading to these women I speak of becomes a sort of daily drug, and gradually takes the place of exercise, household duties, indeed active interests of any kind; until their will becomes paralysed by disuse, their judgment fuddled, and their whole mentality a mere sieve for the sifting through of indiscriminate reading

matter; of which not a grain remains behind to take root and be perhaps the germ of some independent idea or individual opinion. (161)

As noted previously, reading infringing upon domestic activities is undesirable. It is interesting that the letter writer has taken the choice of a fellow woman, and because it is a cheaper option has determined that this cohort's habit of "indiscriminate reading" is an obstacle to "some independent idea or individual opinion", the very essence of autonomy. This is to dismiss the idea that cheap reading is possibly a choice of these women so they can forget the tedious duties of domesticity; perhaps such books are chosen for their druglike inducing properties enabling them to take a mental break from what seems a monotonous existence. But observing these women, the letter writer assumes they are incapable of choice. Yet perhaps this display is their own form of individuality. Egerton's depiction echoes Yonge's rhetoric of 1887, wherein "the cottager's wife who does as little needlework, washing, or tidying as possible, has a good many hours to spend in gossip or in reading. She may get cheap sensational novels, and the effects on a weak and narrow mind are often very serious" (*What Books to Lend* 7, 8). Again, judgement has been rendered on the woman who dismisses her domestic role for humdrum reading. This "wife" and "these women" have disregarded appropriated activities for reading; her own judgement is perceived "fuddled", her will is "paralysed" and reading "indiscriminate", all apparent symptoms within the realms of "mentality". Surely this choice is an act of autonomy, even if apparently accompanied by reckless reading. Where it leads is possibly dubious and supposedly weakens them, but the initial shift was a personal decision to choose reading over housework. Alternatively, it may eventually lead to time thinking about options they want in life. However, while Soulsby, Egerton, and Yonge's narratives, fictional or not, voice agreement on the dangerous and druglike potential of reading on (apparently) a certain class of women, opinion on what such reading inhibits is divided. Egerton's take on the

(previously mentioned) purpose of novels to infuse a “change of air” and “fresh vigor” is not to propagate Soulsby’s “nobler aims” but to enable “some independent idea or individual opinion”. Having iterated the kind of reading which exasperates, Egerton’s letter writer is succinct in describing reading that is advantageous, albeit through a “lovely madam” novelist who fails to deliver:

Her books have no influence on her heart or soul, are neither formative for good, nor restrictive for evil, nor cultivators of beauty or truth. They have neither broadened her tolerance, widened her sympathies, nor helped her one step on the road to better selfhood. (147)

Influential reading should inform the reader for good, restrict evil, cultivate beauty and truth, and generally improve the individual, surely a reiteration of Soulsby’s “nobler aims” after all. In contrast to the letter writer above, “E. K.”, a contributor to the *Monthly Packet* in 1880, seemingly exasperated with passive reading, suggests the popular, relentless dictates on purposeful reading had become wearisome. E. K. offers a satirised commentary via the thoughts of “Maud”, a fictional female character, who espouses the “virtues” of dutiful reading:

I will do my deep reading; it will improve my mind to spend half an hour on the conic sections. I am sorry that I chose such a thick volume, it is rather dull, but I must finish it now that I have begun—how many half hours it will take! I daresay none of the other members [of the Deep Reading Society] have chosen so learned a book. (88)

Deep, dull, and designated time slots are perfunctory features of reading for self-improvement articulated via advice manuals. The presence of E. K.’s article within the

pages of the *Monthly Packet* is of interest.⁴¹ In this periodical edited by Charlotte Mary Yonge, satire is perhaps used to offer a reprieve to an audience who were continually being told how to read; being advised how long to spend reading, how “deep” reading would “improve” the mind, and how to choose a “thick” or “dull” book, likely took away from the pleasure of learning through reading. Not that leisurely reading for pleasure was ignored in the advice columns of periodicals. Like all periodicals of the era the *Monthly Packet* not only contained essays but frequently recommended current books to read for all ages and classes. Yonge acknowledged that when young women are tired “the book is recreation, and they cannot be expected to want to improve themselves when their brains and bodies are alike weary” (*What Books to Lend* 10). Yonge, it appears, endeavours to offer a balanced outlook in her counsel. The concern for young women, such as Maud above is, with time on their hands their “capacity and will for self-improvement . . . is frittered away” usurped by dawdling and gossiping thus affecting their potential (Yonge *Womankind* 81, 82). Continual instruction about how to read properly warrants potential for individuals to consider not only what they were reading, but also the various consequences of reading. Notions of suitable reading were not without disagreement and could be perplexing. This is illustrated in the following review in *To-Day*, 1894:⁴²

“What sort of a book must “Dr Grey’s Patient” be? *The Standard* described it as “unpleasant and unwholesome reading,” and “unfit to read.”⁴³ While no less a

⁴¹ The *Monthly Packet* was initially rooted in the Church of England but subsequently was considered Anglo-Catholic. Charlotte Mary Young was its editor from 1851-1894. It had a strong religious ethic with an interest in education and social issues.

⁴² *To-day* was a British journal founded in 1893 by Jerome K. Jerome.

⁴³ *The Standard* was founded in 1827 and ran until 1916. It was known for reporting in detail on foreign news.

personage than Miss Frances Willard⁴⁴ writes in *The Christian World*,⁴⁵ “This book is one which it would be well to place in the hands of every girl, as she stands where the brook and river meet on the threshold of womanhood. ...” (“The Bookmarker” 23).

Clearly, what is considered suitable reading is ultimately subjective. This instance of disagreement can lead an individual to believe personal choice is both viable and more reliable.

Another reading repercussion becomes apparent; the collision of fictional experience with “real” life as represented in fiction. This potentially can make choice difficult. In the context of this thesis, autonomy is reliant on what is learnt through reading books. If the reader cannot distinguish between reality and fantasy their choices may be hindered, frustrated by an unattainable ideal. As the following episodes show, this can be relatively harmless or decidedly dangerous. Continuing in Laffan’s novel *Christy Carew*, while dissecting her own muddled perception of what she has read and what is real, the character Mrs Carew notes the capacity of reading to impinge on real or actual life to the extent a person lives in the experiences conveyed through reading as well as claiming them for themselves. Trying to establish why her stepdaughter Christy possesses a letter, which belongs to Christy’s brother Lanty, and is from a male friend, Sugrue, Mrs Carew considers a romantic liaison between Sugrue and Christy with Lanty as mediator because,

⁴⁴ Miss Frances Willard (Frances Elizabeth Caroline Willard 1839-1898) an American, was a feminist, active and influential in social reform, including women’s rights.

⁴⁵ The Christian World Magazine was founded in 1866. Adopting the Bible as its authority, it also promoted women’s role in public, political and religious life. See Julie Melnyk’s article “Emma Jane Worboise and “The Christian World Magazine”: Christian Publishing and Women's Empowerment.”

[S]he had heard of such things—that is to say, she had in reality only read of them; but in these days, when people who lead quiet provincial lives borrow so much of their experiences from books, and live so much in a possible rather than an actual life, she may be pardoned the suspicion. (Laffan *Christy Carew* 2:103,104)

Mrs Carew has allowed what she has read to infuse her imagination and has equated what is “possible” and lived through books with the real experience, a process she perceives as the norm “in these days” (104). This distorts her perception of what she thinks she has heard and what she has read which in turn leads to her basing her interpretation of a real relationship on a fictional one and misunderstanding the real situation with her stepdaughter; at this point, there is no romantic liaison. Charlotte Mary Yonge’s short story, “That Stick”, appearing in periodical the *Monthly Packet* in 1891, implies experiences from books assimilated into life are a recognised experience. She describes the young woman, Ida, who “unlike some who do not seem to connect their books with life, she made them her realities and lived in them; and as she hardly ever read anything more substantial, her ideas of life and society were founded on them” (Yonge “That Stick” 41). Connecting books with life and reading of lives to emulate was feasibly an accepted learning experience. Yonge’s fiction emulates her advice. In her book *What Books to Lend and What to Give* (1887) she asserts not all women are susceptible to this faculty, and for those who are not industrious “the links between book and action are in many cases never joined. Sometimes they are not connected at all, sometimes a strong impression is unexpectedly made” (8). In contrast, for young women she asserts “their ideal is capable of being raised by high-minded tales, which may refine their notions” thus they need reading which “will not give them false views of life” (10). Ida’s reading is not “substantial” and this is evident in her personal reality; she saw herself as a future “heroine” (43). Later, based on her “thought of many a novel, and in real life, of what she believed” regarding the (spurious)

parentage of her toddler cousin Michael and a possible diversion of inheritance—all redolent of fictional content—she fakes his drowning and has him “kidnapped” (250). Aware of the “evil she had attempted”, Ida dies slowly from illness (619). Feasibly, this is a lesson in reading from Yonge. Ida’s mother had warned her that novels “are turning your head . . . they put such things in your head” (43). Added to which, her dying was abetted by the publishing of “such a sensational story” of which those in her locality knew the factual event it was based on and “every now and then whispers would go about that Miss Morton was the heroine— or rather the villain—of the piece” (614). Thus, Ida’s novel led ambitions and failed notions of aspirations as a heroine are a lesson for readers of the *Monthly Packet*. Her experience is also a lesson in how choice is used. The influence of reading and implementing choice based on fictional content has misfired; assimilating tales of revenge into real life decisions, Ida became the villain.

In contrast to Yonge’s character Ida, who was castigated for her reading habit and its subsequent influence, Tynan’s *The Way of a Maid* (1895) portrays a protagonist, Nora Halloran, who reads novels to the exclusion, it appears, of purposeful reading and is not punished for her preference, or indeed for her assimilation of romanticised notions of men and marriage. The influence of Nora’s novel reading results in her choice of marriage partner. Whilst betrothed to solid Jim Hurley, her head and heart is turned by romantic St Edmund Hilliard. A distinction made between the two men feasibly aligns with the type of reading to which Nora is accustomed. As noted previously in this chapter, solidity or fancy were often in contrast as features of correct or incorrect reading. H. O. Ward notes in the absence of real-life models or advice, “it is natural that [girls] should imitate what they have learned to admire, and that when they come to act their part in life, they do as the light women do in their favourite stories” (366). Nora Halloran is copying what she admires. Her choice of Hilliard is because he

“meant all kinds of romance to her—such romance as she had read of in books, but never thought of as coming to ordinary human folk, and, least of all, to her hum-drum corner of the world” (Tynan *Way of a Maid* 143). Concern surrounded fiction depicting romantic notions unconnected with reality, or indeed which infringed on reality and gave the wrong impression to the reader. Ruskin writes that “the best romance becomes dangerous, if, by its excitement, it renders the ordinary course of life uninteresting, and increases the morbid thirst for useless acquaintance with scenes in which we shall never be called upon to act” (Ruskin 81). Nora’s immersion in romances has made, as Ruskin asserted, “the ordinary course of life uninteresting”. She perceives herself as “ordinary” in comparison with the heroine in her book, and her life now seems decidedly “humdrum.” In 1885, writer George Moore (1852-1933) in his critique *Literature at Nurse: Or, Circulating Morals: A Polemic On Victorian Censorship* explains that when a “young girl” is “seduced through the influence of a novel, it is by a romantic story, the action of which is laid outside the limits of her experience. . . it teaches the reader to look to a false ideal”, and gives an “erroneous and superficial notions of the value of life and love” (22). Nearly a decade later, Nora Halloran’s experience is presented as an alternative to Moore’s discourse. Tynan’s portrayal of Nora’s “romantic story” does not concede to the “erroneous and superficial notions” attributed to romance books, plausibly a response to Moore’s polemic.

Nora’s thoughts and considerations reflect that of a character in a romance novel. At times she posits herself as the heroine; she is “like the girl in the poem”, and her love interest, St Edmund Hilliard, “spoke to her as though she had been that wonderful woman in the poem” (181, 143). Hilliard’s character is straight from a novel. He has a tragic past; for Nora, “[T]he story of his long faithfulness to the dead woman had captivated her fancy before she had seen him” (143). He quotes poetry and literature. Tynan expands this improbable personage further explaining he has met

literary greats in person: he “had visited Meredith at his house in Surrey, and had been the guest of Tennyson; he had sat by George Eliot in her corner at some of the Priory Sunday evenings . . . He knew Rossetti” (80).⁴⁸ Regarding Nora, “her passion for him was strong enough to overpower all the world” (239). There is a protracted episode where Hilliard literally rescues her, the damsel in distress belonging to romance stories (168-173). Tynan visits the romance trope also through character Mabel Egerton who declares about a prospective love interest, “Frankly, Laura, he is a thousand times too good for me. Since I was a little child I have looked upon Gervase as a hero of romance. When I used to read about knights and crusaders, I always thought of them as looking like Gervase; I suppose that was how I first came to—to care for him.” (*Daughter of the fields* 147). Mabel has conceived a notion of her ideal lover based on a romantic hero crusading through a novel and transferred it to reality. Gervase resembles the dream.

Returning to Nora Halloran, novel reading has conceivably enabled autonomy, reading and thinking having led to a personal preference in the choice of husband. Furthermore, her choice is rooted in reading. Hilliard is preferred in part due to his reading of poetry:

If she had never known anything but Jim’s quiet love and her own affection for and belief in him, she felt she would have lost something that for the time gave her mortality wings. She thought of Hilliard reading poetry:

“Is this the face that launched a thousand ships?”

Why, there had been as great a passion in his voice this evening when he spoke to her as though she had been that wonderful woman in the poem! (143)

⁴⁸ George Meredith (1828-1909), poet and writer. Most likely Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), an English poet, but may be his sister Christina Georgina Rossetti (1830-1894), also a poet.

This is the sort of fanciful notion female readers were frequently warned against. Tynan has interposed the conventional trope, which dictates applying fanciful ideas from novels leads to downfall. Choosing to read and so expressly mirror novel content in one's own life is itself an autonomous act. This story offers an alternate to conventional mandate and facilitate a positive outcome and happy ending ostensibly rooted in novel reading. Tynan gives Hilliard and his "little rose of the world", Nora, the fictionally perfect happy ending, one rooted in the fiction Nora reads (238). Portraying a girl who reads novels in a novel, Tynan is saying romance does work, romance does come "to ordinary folk" it is not a "false ideal". In making the ideal apparently "real", Tynan is defending romance and balking the media narrative that romance is dangerous. Affirming her alternative take on romance fiction, at the end of the story we are assured "Nora Hilliard is a more madly happy woman than Nora Halloran ever dreamt of being in her wildest romances" (298). Tynan has penned a romance reflecting the derided romances popular in books, but in her own act of autonomy has offered a happy ending. Via the fictional reading experience, Tynan suggests digression need not be detrimental thus subverts societal expectations and enables autonomy.

Representations of alternative choices for girls and women in Tynan's fiction appear to have been overlooked by critics of the time. Perhaps Tynan's prolific output assuaged any detailed analysis in favour of popularity and readership consumption. Her protagonists are frequently young women, which bode well for her audience and for reviewers who highlighted Tynan's writing style and content as healthily appropriate:

The Heroine of Miss Katharine Tynan's new novel is as fresh and wholesome; as her story, which is not to be wondered at, for Miss Tynan has the happiest manner of drawing charming girls . . . There are several sweet women in the book. (*Daily Telegraph* qtd. in *Love of Sisters* 345)

Critics were also profuse in their recommendations of Tynan's work. On page 345 of *Love of Sisters* (1902), quotes advertise her tales which are "sure of a welcome", "pretty, graceful" (*Pilot*); "fresh, pleasant" (*Gentlewoman*), and her female characters are "Irish graces" (*Spectator*); "charming" (*Daily Telegraph*; *Freeman's Journal*; *Athenaeum*) "at their best" (*Punch*); "lovable . . . natural . . . fresh and sweet" (*Athenaeum*). Manifestly, Tynan's own indiscriminate reading did not harm her or her future prospect as a writer producing appropriate role models in her stories. Yet, covertly beneath the pleasant fictional surface there are intimations that all is not so well in the fictional female's lot.

Returning to Tynan's *The Way of a Maid*, the Oliver family has leapt from the pages of a conduct book. The two girls'—daughters'—"little plot of life was narrow, though it was sweet with love and all the virtues, and one of the girls at least often stood tip-toe gazing wistfully over the hedge, which, though it was made of rose-trees, was somewhat imprisoning" (13). Sisters Jessie and May have "all their lives been encouraged to have hobbies" ensuring they were "full of interests" which allowed no space for deviation (16). Their reading habits were of the restrained sort, redolent of the advice repeatedly applied to books and reading: "They read a good deal, but with restrictions. Here Mr. Oliver upheld his wife, and when Jessie pleaded for more liberty, pulled one of her long curls and fondly sent her packing" (16). Tynan's use of specific words precludes any manoeuvre for choice. The life of the girls' is "narrow", "imprisoning", ruled by "restrictions" making them wistful for the outside world or at least some autonomy within their confinement. The encouragement to engage in hobbies avoids time on their hands, time that potentially could be spent reading, which is not only "with restrictions", but any plea for liberty in possibly both reading practice and reading material is halted. A desire for autonomy is evident but frustrated. May and

Jessie Oliver are friends with the forementioned Nora Halloran. Where Nora has availed of romantic notions through novel reading, the Oliver sister's reading landscape has been thwarted, thus initially their characters are determined; May as "sweet", "prim", "dutiful", "gentle", "a little dogmatic" and "narrow toward what she could not understand", and Jessie as having a "fuller and richer nature. She often rather shocked her mother by a slang phrase or a too decided opinion" (14). Jessie, like her personality, becomes the more prominent of the two sisters as the story unfolds. Jessie's "fuller and richer nature" includes an imagination which she is encouraged to use as a basis for writing jocundly by the romantic Hilliard: "'What an imagination you have, Jess!'" laughed Hilliard, as they went into the dining-room. 'A pity you don't write novels and make money out of it.'" (188). Tynan has advocated an imagination as valuable to productive writing and reading and potentially as a source of income. Purposeful reading, intended for the dutiful woman has been circumvented for more compelling novels, and their impact on life representations in fiction is accepted rather than averted, sending a clear message of autonomous opportunities. Unlike Nora who endures "suffering agonies" and "heroic resolve" of a fictitious victim of romantic pursuit, Jessie's eventual binding to Jim Hurley is as unembellished as her girlhood reading material (205). Jim was solid but also ambitious; he furthered his studies in medicine, "read and wrote a good deal" and recognised the value of a woman with active autonomy (269). Enjoying the "intellectual society" of the Oliver family, "the unconventional Jessie interested him the most. Her views were so fresh and original, and she was so keenly alert about intellectual matters, that he felt her a comrade at once." (269, 270). He saw that Jessie was "a girl at the other end of the compass from Nora", a woman who in her own words spoke "revolutionary things" despite the constant restraints" imposed by her mother, which can be perceived in some part due to her personal choice in reading material when the opportunity allowed (271). Jessie is

clearly evincing conventional views and expectations, even noting of her sister and mother, “you both want to pour the whole world into your special moulds. And as for you, May . . . you are like a gosling in a rut. Your rut is your world” (272, 273). Clearly a remove from the rut but not free from it, Jessie recognises challenges accompany her desires to do “something very revolutionary” (275). I suggest it is not far-fetched to presume Jessie’s knowledge of alternative thought and action stems from reading. For instance, she is the member of the family who receives a book in the mail (225). In suggesting her personality has been formed by reading, it is notable no character is introduced in the novel that holds to these alternative ideas for a woman. Like Tynan herself, Jessie has a father who is not narrow-minded. We are told Jessie is like her father who “had been out in the world . . . and . . . had brought back from the world a wide tolerance and a ready sympathy” (10, 11). Though Mr Oliver is devout in his Protestant faith, it is not repressive and apparently receptive, for we are told “whether Mr. Scrope, the rector, would have thought his parishioner quite orthodox if he could have looked into his heart may be doubted”; Jessie herself describes him as “broader-minded” and he is interested in the opinions of women (10, 64). From the picture we are given of Jessie, I argue that as she progressed from the parentally imposed reading restrictions of childhood she was exploring and establishing “fresh and original” thoughts through reading, and her father not so “orthodox” in his heart was permitting rather than preventing her personal growth. The limitations imposed in Jessie Oliver’s childhood have not impeded her desire for knowledge. Certain reading material was prohibited but it could be argued this motivated Jessie’s thirst for knowledge taking her curiosity and interests in a satisfying direction, that of intellect and autonomous thought.

In contrast to Charlotte Mary Yonge, Katharine Tyan offers an alternative experience for the female protagonist who reads books, specifically novels, and lives by them. Nora Halloran lives happily ever after, her choices based on romantic novels.

Jessie's appeal is in her knowledge and individuality, arguably shaped by discerning reality from fantasy and endeavouring to follow her own choices and decisions. Tynan's own experiences of books and reading indubitably informs her work and strengthens her heterodox portrayals. Tynan records that as a child "I lived with my nose in a book" and "read and read incessantly" (*Twenty-Five* 37). The matter of reading content and its effect did not concern the young Katharine Tynan. She explains:

[T]o the matter of my reading. It was always my mother who cried "Don't," and my father who said "let her be" . . . It was my father who bought books into the house, miscellaneous lots picked up at auctions, of the most varied kind. He had no belief in a censorship. I cannot recall that he ever told me not to read any book, although I must have read some curious ones under his eyes. (*Twenty-Five* 40, 41)

Imitating her liberal father, Tynan chose not to be discerning in her reading but to consume whatever was available, thus disrupting the preferred and conventional approach to reading material espoused through media of the time. Such "varied" and "curious" books would affect her for life. According to Yonge, regarding young female readers, "books that she now reads will be landmarks, both in religious and secular matters" (60). A decade later in her book *What Books to Lend and What to Give* (1887) the young women are "for the most part indiscriminate devourers of fiction, and . . . need to have their appetite rightly directed" (10). Joseph Brevan Braithwaite (1818-1905) in his pamphlet,⁴⁹ *Thoughts on Books and Reading* (1880) urged readers to consume only "improving and profitable reading" of books which had a clearly defined

⁴⁹ British born Joseph Brevan Braithwaite (1818-1905) was a Quaker minister and barrister. He specified the Bible as the authority of Quaker life.

purpose in their consumption (12). Extolling the value and necessity of self-discipline and readerly discrimination he writes:

[I]f some of them, as may at times be the case, are of a mixed character, he who most diligently maintains a sound and healthy purpose will be the best prepared watchfully to exercise a right discrimination, by which the unwholesome will be rejected without injury to the mind. (12)

“Injury of mind” of course, was the root of the reading issue. Damage or deviation from the prescribed course would impact on more than the individual. Whole societies, it was believed would deteriorate and degenerate if reading was not accompanied by “sound and healthy purpose”. Traditionally, the mother was assumedly the instructor on reading, and despite her mother’s best intentions as indicated, Tynan sidesteps this parental influence and assumes her own authority as reader with her father’s support; “mixed character” books were consumed, and “right discrimination” bypassed.⁵⁰

Tynan’s approach to reading filters into her fiction, affirming the observation of Arthur D. Innes writing in the *Monthly Packet* in 1893 that “most great writers have been great, not to say voracious, readers, and the evidence thereof is patent in their works” (“Five English Poets” 30). Tynan’s understanding of reading restrictions and her response to same, is demonstrated in a short story “A Book-Lover” in the collection *A Cluster of Nuts* (1894). She depicts two “youngsters” spending their summers engaging in “indiscriminate reading” believing it “did us but little harm” (55). That Tynan identifies the “youngsters” reading content as “indiscriminate” associated with harm, suggests admonition to avoid pernicious works is valid nearly two decades on. As if in reply to the conventional belief random reading is literally harmful, Tynan’s

⁵⁰ On the mother’s role, see H. O. Ward, *Sensible Etiquette of the Best Society: Customs, Manners, Morals and Home Culture*, and L. H. M. Soulsby’s *Talks to Mothers*, also the article “On Mothers”.

“youngsters” have a criteria on reading; they “turn away from anything that is not a story; and even if one has to wade through much undesirable matter to get one’s story, it is with a single attention fixed on it that takes in little else” (55).⁵¹ Is this idealistic or a realistic expectation of the young reading mind? Did they understand literature as “a vehicle of moral improvement” and exercise discernment (Arata “On Not” 204)? The implication is, at a young age, readers were aware of desirable and undesirable material. This is debatable, and subjective. Feasibly, the capacity of discernment is not based on what was morally harmful but rather on what held interest. Indeed, it could be deciphered that the undesirable elements are the moralising aspects interjected through the “story”, distracting from the progress of the plot, rather than inferring conventional notions of harmful content. Unencumbered by professed “indiscriminate reading”, the youngsters went on to attend school and “the habit of rules and lessons” directed their lives (60). During their summers of reading, they evidenced discernment in differentiating between “coarse food for young imaginations”, and preferred books of “good taste” such as *The Wide, Wide World*, considered popular and proper reading for young minds (55, 53, 54; Mitchell 152).⁵² This experience did not stretch to Polly, the eighteen-year-old daughter of the book-lover who had grown up surrounded by “stacks of books . . . piled high” and “congested shelves” (Tynan “A Book-Lover” 50, 51). We are not told if she read any of them or slipped any surreptitiously from the many mountainous piles and stole away to immerse herself in their contents. Polly is described as “feather-headed”, “innocent” and “light and fluttering” like the moth (56). For one summer, she has a lover, is jilted, catches a fever, and dies. Is it being surrounded by books—the addiction of her father, “a peaceable diversion, and very desirable, seeing that other men’s diversions led to drink, to rows, and misery”—which

⁵¹ “harmful” was a word adopted in directions on reading, particularly in the *Irish Monthly*, who ran an occasional column, “Harmful Novels”.

⁵² *The Wide, Wide World* (1878) by Elizabeth Wetherell (Susan Warner 1819-1885).

impacts Polly's mental state or that she implicitly does not read? (51). Possibly, it is neither, but it is notable that her outcome is fraught with tragedy and books are a strand through the story. In contrast, the reading narrator, one of the "youngsters", notably ungendered, has a long-term memory and did not die young.

Returning to experiences of the young female reader, it becomes evident manifesting autonomy is not solely reliant on opportunity or following fictional fervour but utilising the capacity to choose. May Laffan's young Mary Brangan in *Hogan, M. P.* (1881) has been convent educated—like Christy in *Christy Carew*—but neither her inclination nor sights are intent on learning as indicated through autonomous acts. A concerned nun, Mother Paul, echoing the direction contained in advice manuals, exhorts her with reminders including light reading and the use of time:

"Mary dear, I was wanting to speak to you most particularly about what you know you're most inclined to love of dress, darling child; and oh! above all things, light reading."

...

Miss Mary assumed an air of resignation and quasi-penitence . . . As for the "light reading," that was the natural consequence of her once having brought to school, in a fit of bravado pure and simple, a yellow-backed railway novel, which had been pounced on and confiscated immediately, and the rumoured awfulness of which had thrown the school into a state of effervescence, and had invested herself with a delicious halo of wickedness and audacity that lasted nearly a week.

...

"You'll promise me, Mary, faithfully, never to read any book that hasn't got your confessor's approbation. Oh, Mary dear, if you only knew the—"

“I do, though, Mother Paul; and I’ll never read anything at all, if you like, there now!” vociferated Mary.

...

“And another thing, now you’ll find the time hang very heavily on your hands at home. Go on with your Italian, dear. You read your piece quite nicely to-day; and don’t forget it.”

“Augh! What’s the good, Mother Paul!” Mary was getting cross now; the burden laid upon her was beginning to be more than she could bear. “I know as much as anyone else; where’s the use of them things?”

“You never can tell, dear; you may be going to Italy one of these days; you never can know what may happen.”

Miss Mary had an eye for an absurdity, and stifled an inclination to giggle. She thought that a poor reason, but did not say so.

“I think that’s not very likely, Mother.” (*Hogan, M. P. 22-23*)

Mary has clearly precluded any suggestions from Mother Paul, and exercised autonomy on reading matter aware of the consequences, as deduced from “I do, though”. Her predilection for alternative, even subversive, action is expressed through the “bravado” of introducing a novel of “light reading” into the convent and enjoying the ensuing spectacle. The specifically identified “yellow-back railway novel” was the cheap and entertaining read intended for distraction while travelling. Soulsby writes she “knew a girl who cared for nothing but yellow-backed novels: she woke up to the fact that she was in a fair way to become an empty-headed frivolous woman”, thus asserting the effect of the yellowback content on “weak and self-indulgent” young women by proponents of worthy reading (*Stray Thoughts 14*). With titles such as *A Bit Of Human Nature*, *The Lively Fanny*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Dead Secret*, and *The Way of the World*, and often sensational and overly romanticised content, its presence is intentional

and inviting furore.⁵³ Laffan's choice of words relating to the novel, being "pounced on", "confiscated", having "*thrown* the school", into a "state of effervescence", I argue are intentionally adopted to highlight the ridiculousness of the overreactive response to reading content, especially juxtaposed with Mary's "delicious halo of wickedness and audacity that lasted nearly a week". The "rumoured awfulness" underlines response to a book whose content is reliant on hearsay for surely no-one in the convent should read it to prove the point of awful content. Farcical intent emanates from Mary's role in this episode. Mary understood the kind of response the book would garner and thoroughly enjoyed its fruition. Referencing the yellow-back feasibly enables Laffan amusement and autonomy of her own as a writer to raise its existence in both a religious setting and as a novel read by young women, hinting at a message of resistance to prescriptive reading and via Mary an alternative response to societal constrictions. The nun's words are dotted with appeals. A visit to Italy is presented as a possibility thus as an enticement to good reading, the whole notion of which is laughable to Mary. I will expand on the fictional representation of reading in convents in the following chapter.

"Realms of Adventure": Childhood Reading

George Egerton offers several fictional representations of autonomy in child readers through her works. Reflecting the fin de siècle appetite for experimentation, Egerton explores the effects of reading in "At the Heart of the Apple" in *Symphonies* (1897). The protagonist, a girl Evir, on the death of her mother is sent by her father to be reared on an island by Sigrid and Peter, segregated from usual society. Described as owning "unspoiled intelligence", Evir's notion of books is initially confined to picture books and at age nine she is still unable to read, seeing writing as "little black marks" (164,

⁵³ David Christie Murray (1847-1907), "A Bit of Human Nature" (1889) and "The Lively Fanny" (1889); Sarah Tytler, (1827-1914), "Beauty and the Beast: A Novel" (1884); Wilkie Collins (1824-1889), "The Dead Secret" (1874); David Christie Murray, "The Way of the world" (1883).

170). Egerton questions the assertion in advice manuals that “[N]othing is more important to the education of a child than its reading” (Ward 405). As time passes, Evir’s innocence is palpable. She meets a boy, Einar, who recognises her lack and offers to teach her to read; this he does “every day for a month” during the summer (Egerton “At the Heart” 179). The opportunity to learn how to read appeals to Evir as she “had often peered at the little black signs crawling, like files of ants, from the middle of the book towards the edges, until her eyes had ached” (173). She is “intensely receptive” to reading, and “once she had seen a word and named it, she never forgot it again” (179). She is not void of imagination which, limited, has been supplied via “a classical dictionary” (184). Aged fifteen, Evir has never seen or read a novel. Scanning the books available to her it is noteworthy “there was not one novel, not one romance among them” (183). This holds relevance; “of books on birds and beasts and fishes and plants with their lore, there were many . . . the miracle of sex, underlying every natural law . . . was no mystery to her” (183). However, “of love or marriage, moral or social laws, or the ordinary relationships of so-called civilised life, she was more ignorant than any savage; she had not even a rudimentary sense of family” (183, 184). The implication is in the absence of novels, there is an absence of knowledge pertaining to “social expediency” (184). For Evir, illiteracy is on the surface implied a handicap, though knowing words is a distracting challenge for Evir who found that “expression was more difficult than ever; since she had learned to read she sought for words” (“Heart of the Apple” 191). Purposeful, educational reading has imparted knowledge but has bypassed emotional engagement. Her lack in reading has not enabled undisturbed focus or even a “rudimentary sense of family” but deemed her unprepared for “domestic love and peace”. Though learning from the animal kingdom, Evir’s limited reading has not informed her of components needed to proceed as a societally functioning human being.

The implication is that reading of the experiences of others via novels is informative and initiates autonomous decisions.

Evir has not encountered literary representation of women or motherhood. Subsequently, Evir as “girl-mother” has a baby and when she meets the father of her son some years later, it becomes clear she has raised their child on her own; she has exercised choice and has “no use” for a man even if he is the child’s father (Egerton “At the Heart” 216). While the absence of the “scrapment system of modern education” in Evir’s upbringing is acknowledged in the text, the notion of the novel as having use value is also pertinent, and an alternative ensues, from the lack of fictional influence, which is deemed “unnatural” by the man and the perception of “no claim” to his role by Evir (201, 217, 215). Unwittingly, Evir has achieved personal autonomy without the influence of fiction which discloses ways to achieve it through relatable characters. Additionally, Egerton, recognising such autonomy is difficult to achieve within societal constrictions, indicates that isolated island living in the absence of external influences enables Evir’s choices. Novels as representations of what is possible for the autonomous girl or woman are unnecessary if conventional cultural conditions are absent. Arguably, Egerton’s approach is presented as the ideal. But is it ideal? Egerton has offered a closeted experience of reading, thought and decisions. One argument is that novel “reading offers an ideal way to learn about the psychology of other people, to experience social connection without the social coercion that particularly inheres in direct contact” (Gettelman “Psychology of Reading” 208). Evir’s “direct contact” with people was extremely limited so she lacked social connection and an awareness of others’ thoughts. But neither did she find this connection through novels because the reading available was non-fiction. She gained knowledge about words, and the animal and plant worlds, but not people; she has missed out on the advantages of fiction. Gettelman confirms how “novels afforded Victorian readers a fuller knowledge of

themselves” which extends to how an individual interacts with others (209). Soulsby notes the value of novels as facilitating an awareness of ourselves through engagement with characters, stating “fictitious characters read us practical lessons about our own faults, which would produce much irritation if given in words by our friends” (*Stray Thoughts* 27). I suggest Evir’s inability to understand the father of her child’s opinion reflects this. Where her choice of single parenthood may be perceived as a decision supportive of female autonomy, it also suggests a lack in a wider viewpoint and comprehension of other’s choices which novel reading may have facilitated.

The story of Evir suggests an idealised domestic arrangement wherein the child can experience freedom from external impositions and exercise autonomy without societal constraints. However, fictional depictions of the female child rooted in conventional circumstances clearly indicate the capacity for autonomy exists. Additionally, autonomy is not necessarily reliant on experience that comes with age. As a child, Katharine Tynan herself manifested autonomy in her reading experience. She was “prepared to give no trouble at all if she was left with a book”, a small act of autonomy wherein she would not give “trouble” (she was one of twelve children) if “left with a book” implying she has decided the terms (26). On finishing books, she read penny story papers, “worse than novels in my mother’s eyes”, smuggled to “the very top of the house” having been “pushed up between my frock and my stays”, an autonomous action to assuage the need to read (42). She procured secret places to read including “the floor behind the window-curtains, or the floor under the round centre-table with a long table- cloth falling over and making an ideal place of concealment” which later progressed to “the loft over the stables at the end of a narrow town garden” (*Twenty-Five* 42). In girlhood, that liminal space between leaving education and marriage, she discovered a double-hedge across the fields, the “most delightful reading place imaginable” where she “lay *perdu*, with [her] novel” absorbed “until the light

grew dim” (64). Tynan used this time “making up for the starved years when I only read by stealth and had my novel confiscated if it were discovered”, possibly her convent years (64). Not only was Tynan hiding herself, she was also hiding her book. Her sister attempting to make the “idle” Katharine a domesticated woman fit for marriage had “swept all else readable” from the bedroom but intermittently would search “in a whirlwind” for “the contraband”; it remained undiscovered for where the curtain was looped, within the loop “the curtain always held a book” (66, 65). Tynan’s hiding experiences spill into her novels. Clearly reminiscent, in “A Book-Lover” the “youngsters”

reading-room was an overgrown orchard, where it was easy to elude pursuit or capture, and where we were wicked enough to lie low till voices were tired of calling us, and we were left in peace till the owls began to hoot and the moon swung into the delicate green and rosy sky, and the long, long, delicious day was over. (Tynan 54)

Finding a space to read and lying low when called to prolong the pleasure evidence autonomy. The capacity to figure out how to ensure valuable reading time has entailed thinking. Within a group, as depicted here, conversation has doubtless enabled assent from all to follow through with their choice to “lie low” and “elude pursuit” and avoid adult intervention. Tynan’s character Hilda Brandon also hid; she “used to read in the chestnut—I was always the reading one of the family—and used to love to hide in it while the others ran here and there calling me through the woods” an echo of Tynan’s own experiences (*The Handsome Brandons* 12). The very performance of hiding is an autonomous act. The foresight and acumen repeatedly employed in finding spaces for private reading and the refusal to relinquish novels surely demonstrates autonomy.

The letter writer in Egerton's *Rosa Amorosa* articulates the perspective of the reading child:

In early days books were the "open sesame" to realms of adventure, and one always played the part of hero or heroine in all one's wanderings . . . except when one becomes really a child again and lets oneself run the whole length of fancy's chain into lands of fairy lore . . . I can look back with delight to books I read as a child-girl, and can remember how I used to save up to buy some especially coveted volume. (141)

The power of reading to ignite adventures and enable individual immersion is clearly depicted here. For the "child-girl" and other children these adventures begin long before immersion with the story on the printed page. The personal adventure begins with procuring the book itself, often surreptitiously. Books are removed from shelves and read by stealth, frequently by firelight, suggesting both an awareness of what is considered acceptable reading and the choice, even as a child, to ignore convention and find ways of exercising autonomy in the reading experience. Spaces are sought for escape and indulgence in this private encounter. In "A Psychological Moment at Three Periods: I.—The Child", from her collection *Discords* (1894), Egerton opens the story with a child's explicit reading experience. A child has escaped the mayhem of "quarrelling child voices" and "gentle chiding" on the floor below:

A child is crouched on the old hearthrug, holding a book to the firelight. Her eyes run greedily along the lines, one little red hand holds the top of the right-hand page in eager readiness to turn it over; her long, tangled elf-locks catch a ruddy glint each time her head moves.

A bit of coal drops, and the flamelet goes out; she lifts her head and draws a deep breath; she is trembling with excitement, for she has been holding it

unconsciously. She makes a move to stir the fire, but a shade passes over the questioning child-face as the inner voice that she alone knows of, of which not even the tender little mother has an inkling, begins its warning and reproach. “Shut the book now—now, just when the exciting part begins. No, you may not read to the end of the page—no, not even a line more. If you want to be brave, if you want to be strong, sacrifice; sacrifice, mortify yourself. If you don’t want to! No, you are weak, you cannot do that, not even that small thing, for God. No, not after supper! Not until to-morrow, to-morrow evening—”. The small head with the straight white parting bends over the closed book, and a sobbing sigh floats out into the room full of shadows. She rises slowly and puts the book away, high up on a shelf on the old bookcase, and then looks fearsomely round her. (Egerton “Psychological Moment” 1, 2)

The representation Egerton offers here supports autonomous reading while conversing with reading as affective. The child is crouched by the fire using available light to read, each page ready for turning in eagerness. Rachel Ablow notes reading as “valuable as an affective experience as it was as a way to convey information or increase understanding” (2). The child is reading “greedily”, there is intimation she was holding her breath and she is “trembling with excitement” until light is extinguished with a dying fire. This pause allows an “inner voice” to disrupt her consuming reading, and an internal conflict proceeds from an awareness of what is expected of her as reader, to be disciplined, and likewise extinguishes her engagement. This, however, is temporary. The book is placed for her alone to find it “high up” and resume “to-morrow, to-morrow evening” thus autonomy remains.

A few years later, Egerton revives the mind of a reading child, and I suggest continues to endorse the potential of autonomy at a young age as well as tracing the

impact as life progresses. Acknowledged as semi-autobiographical, *The Wheel of God* (1898) follows the life of Mary Desmond in part through her reading experiences. It is reasonable to believe indications exist as to Egerton's approach to reading and reading material in this book alone. At the opening of the book, a child is reading:

A little child was lying bathed in the moonlight. The eyes looked strangely deep and dark in the expressive face, sharpened by the white light. Her long locks had been braided for the night and stuck out like a pigtail at the side of her head. The corner of a book was visible under the pillow. There was a smell of burnt candle-fat in the room, for she had only closed the book when the light had gutted over, carrying the last bit of wick with it. (3)

The child, Mary, clearly finds the reading experience absorbing, only finishing when light has gone. The position of the book under the pillow suggests both protection and secrecy. Her eyes are open, her face expressive suggesting a visible manifestation of internal thinking. The next lines offer a segment of explanation:

She had been reading *Jane Eyre*, and was still a-quiver with the strangeness of it. What was this love of which all the poets sang; that made men set out on ventures bold; and women sit and weep at lonely casements; that ran like a magic golden thread through very tale of romance and chivalry? (3)⁵⁴

The impact of *Jane Eyre* on a young mind is a revisited trope. Indeed, Charlotte Brontë explored the co-relation of reading and reverie as a space for personal growth. This alone would recommend the book as disruptive to the conventional notions of thought

⁵⁴ *Jane Eyre* (1847) written by Charlotte Brontë under the pseudonym Currer Bell, follows the life and development of Jane Eyre predominantly through revealing her "private consciousness" (224). Both Brontë and Eyre are considered early feminist models. See Daniel S. Burt's *The Literature 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Novelists, Playwrights, and Poets of All Time*.

and consciousness and the preferred experience of reading for a young female. *Jane Eyre* had its detractors when published which resonate on into the fin de siècle. Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), in one of his “Some Literary Notes” columns during 1889, is reviewing a “memoir” which in part includes the life of a Mrs Sarah Austin (1793–1867).⁵⁵ He is impressed by her letter writing which he says always “contain something clever or thoughtful or witty” (Wilde 165). One letter is reproduced in part in his column wherein she offers her view on novels and novelists of the day. She writes in 1853 of a dislike of introspective influences and her opinion resonates decades later, embedded in Wilde’s column:

I am not in love with the tendencies of our modern novelists . . . pleasing story is the last thing our writers nowadays think of; their novels . . . are the most minute and painful dissections of the least agreeable and beautiful parts of our nature, like those of Miss Brontë—“*Jane Eyre*” and “*Villette*”. (qtd. in Wilde 166)

Both during the mid and late-Victorian era, cultural commentators (and a candid letter writer) did not like the “most minute and painful dissections” of character’s minds portrayed in fiction, something both Brontë and Egerton do in their work. As Beth Tressler notes, Jane’s “mind is representative of the ecstatic possibilities that Brontë envisions within the act of reading” (8).⁵⁶ One of the “possibilities” ignited through “the act of reading” is an awareness of autonomy. For young Mary Desmond, this is manifested through a feeling of strangeness or secrecy. Egerton does not question the suitability of the book Mary is reading, but the feelings Mary has, implied by the use of

⁵⁵ Sarah Austin (née Taylor) was an editor and translator, commended for translating German works into English. She also had work published in the *Edinburgh Review*.

⁵⁶ See Debra Gettelman’s article, “‘Making Out’ *Jane Eyre*,” and Sally Shuttleworth’s *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*, for further discussion.

the words “strangely” and “strangeness”, and the physical “a-quiver” imply an involvement in reading extending beyond conventionally preferred perimeters.

The Present Writer, a contributor in a volume of the *Irish Monthly* of 1878, leaves readers in no doubt as to the influence of *Jane Eyre* in relating the experience of a young protagonist, Florence. Florence is unhappy and “wants to fling herself into “some pleasure that may lift her”; this pleasure “came to her in the shape of a book” which was “not fit reading for a little girl like her” (353). She finds “something very interesting about a clever little girl, called Jane Eyre” (353). Initially “she intended only to turn over a few pages and find out enough to take the edge off her curiosity” but “every new page she turned over suggested a new curiosity that must be satisfied” until finally, she cannot stop thinking about the book and is “going over and over every incident of the story” wondering how it might end (353). Eventually, in secret, she finishes the book. In conveying this tale as a means to explain a choice between good and bad reading and the temptations therein, The Present Writer has omitted to consider a perspective highlighted by Yonge which possibly issues from feminine experience. Yonge explains, “the undesirable passages are far less perceived than they are later in life. The child knows there are things it cannot understand, and passes them by, only accepting what it likes” (*Womankind* 66). Florence may not understand “things” within Brontë’s story, but she responds with curiosity accompanied with an “uneasy” feeling and “gnawing anxiety”, thus a heightened awareness of a different viewpoint is indicated (354). What is perceived of as bad by the critic was for Florence an act of autonomy. She contrived secretly to get the book and continued to sate her curiosity. At any point she could have stopped her actions—they were hers alone—but she chose to continue reading. Egerton’s depiction two decades later of a child reading *Jane Eyre* indicates there is a similarity in the reading experience. Both girls are conscious *Jane Eyre* is a book for concealing, Mary Desmond experiences a “strangeness”, Florence

feels an “uneasy sense of discomfort” and yet both exercise personal autonomy in reading it (534). It is of interest that Florence was drawn to the book because it told “something interesting about a very clever little girl” (533). Was it a girl who was clever enough to exercise autonomy? Brontë’s protagonist Jane Eyre, both as child and adult, experienced situations which were often challenging and restrictive yet made her own choices. If The Present Writer considered this, it was surely prudent to assimilate the book into an article on the harm of temptation and warn of this influential work under the auspices of concern. If the message of autonomy in the story was not the motivation of the article, a directive is clear: avoid reading that stretches beyond the confines of what is deemed acceptable. Egerton ignores or avoids this stance and sharing her own thoughts speaks of the “complexes and inhibitions, repressions and the subconscious impulses that determine actions and reactions” (“Ten Contemporaries” 58). Whilst this was written in retrospect and referring to her first book *Keynotes* (1893), the message is evident in the opening to *The Wheel of God* too. Mary, in her response to *Jane Eyre* suggests awareness of external inhibitions feeding the innate need to hide the book and subconscious impulses at work in her feeling of strangeness. Soulsby continues to offer advice, warning in 1897 against “investigating for yourself” when it comes to bookish curiosity (*Stray Thoughts on Reading* 53). She further invokes an avoidance of religious guilt noting that some readers believe the “recording angel takes no heed” of “*what novel they take up*” which allows them to engage with books not deemed good company (25). With this rhetoric pervading the reading experience it not surprising the girls in both examples, Florence and Mary, even across two decades have a sense of a book as a site of prohibition. Yet both swerve this censure and choose to read *Jane Eyre*.

Florence’s “tempting pleasure” comes to her from a “rummage” through a bookcase (353). Similarly, Egerton’s Mary Desmond has likely extracted *Jane Eyre*

from the shelves in the nursery containing books which were exciting in contrast to the “books with “morals”” housed in the drawing room (5). Such practise was censured as inappropriate minding in households where “children are permitted to select books at will from home libraries, which must always contain among their standard, works many things that should not be brought to the notice of immature minds” (Ward 404). Yonge is not so condemnatory of book selecting noting the “freedom to take down and use the real library books has been . . . a valuable part of the education of every mind that has come to any real power. The cramping into childish fictions till seventeen, and then sudden freedom to read sensation novels, has not been found to conduce to purity of taste or poetry of mind” (*Womankind* 66). Yonge’s observation of 1877 has been usurped in 1878 by The Present Writer. In the domestic space the selecting of books at random is an assertion of autonomy for the child, as Yonge highlights “every mind that has come to any real power” has practised perusing shelves in choosing what to read (66). Egerton affirms in 1901 that this practise has not been quashed. Mary continues as a child to read books “unfitted to her tender years” and having access to a variety of books from Shakespeare to Behn, from Walpole to Brontë, she “devoured them indiscriminately” (Egerton *Wheel* 5, 6). In deciding for herself, Mary reads whatever books are accessible, including on subjects “that should not be brought to the notice of immature minds”. If she did read such things, Mary had the capacity to remove them from her mind by shutting her eyes and asking Jesus to “make me forget” (50, 51). Though she is reading the wide variety of books available, she demonstrates the capacity to discern what is better forgotten and has employed a process to discard unpleasant scenes and thoughts. Katharine Tynan also notes this capacity in children to choose to disregard unwanted reading content explaining (likely from experience):

A child desires a story beyond all things, and will turn away from anything that is not a story; and even if one has to wade through much undesirable matter to

get one's story, it is with a single attention fixed on it that takes in little else. ("A Book Lover" 55)

Tynan suggests a child is only interested in a story and that any "undesirable matter" is passed over rather than assimilated; clearly the child is choosing what to read. As a child, Mary Desmond has set her own reading boundaries. She reads educational "schoolbooks" but also novels (51). She clearly evidences a thinking, questioning mind which informs her opinion on what she chooses to read. In contrast to a space wherein "the thoughts of others are smuggled into a putatively independent mind", Mary offers a confident representation of an autonomous mind, knowingly receiving reading content, and encompassing the ability of active decision making (Ablow 6). Mary's reading experiences as a child have enhanced her personal power.

"Vividly Portray Life": Modern Fiction

Books are a constant companion throughout Mary Desmond's life. As a woman and wife, she was compelled to socialise with the "genteeler circles" who "tried her on books; they were all devoted to the popular favourites, and doubted her sanity when she confessed a difficulty sometimes in reading them" (Egerton *Wheel* 255, 257). Mary's "difficulty" suggests an avoidance of popular books for those more intellectually stimulating; she is described as a woman of "intellect" interested in "out-of-the-way subjects" (301). Mary's proclivities as reader have impinged on how others—women predominantly—view her. Exercising autonomy and extending her interest beyond seemingly standardised reading matter has characterised her and likely becomes one of the features defining her as "exceedingly modern" in the eyes of women (255).

The notion of modern speaks to the fin de siècle as a time of "creative ferment" when realist and romance fiction were jostling for influence on, invariably, the minds of

young women; the former through faithfully depicting human nature, the latter for endeavouring to restore “lost worlds of innocence and certainty”; one to reveal, the other to “shield” young minds (Arata “On Not” 169, 183, 176). Oscar Wilde, in one of his book reviews in 1889 comments decisively, disappointed it seems that

the object of most modern fiction is not to give pleasure to the artistic instinct, but rather to vividly portray life for us, to draw attention to social anomalies, and social forms of injustice. Many of our novelists are really pamphleteers, reformers masquerading as story-tellers, earnest sociologists seeking to mend as well as to mirror life. (“Some Literary Notes” 224)

Ambitions of reformation, he asserts, has usurped romance thus personal purging usurps pleasure in reading. The implication is fiction is not to highlight social issues or tell people what to do but offer a means of enjoyable escape. Thus, Wilde reiterates the disconnect evident between the preference of the “ladies of the old towns” for popular fiction and Mary Desmond’s penchant for modern reading (157). However, he offers an objective view of realist fiction, which he implies in and of itself is not to be disregarded but how it is disseminated needs to be appealing:

Observation is perhaps the most valuable faculty for a writer of fiction. When novelists reflect and moralise, they are, as a rule, dull. But to observe life with keen vision and quick intellect, to catch its many modes of expression, to seize upon the subtlety, or satire, or dramatic quality of its situations, and to render life for us with some spirit of distinction and fine selection—this, I fancy, should be the aim of the modern realistic novelist. (Wilde 224)

Egerton achieved this. Among the mixed reviews for *Keynotes* (1893) which was published three years after Wilde’s comments:

“A rich, passionate temperament vibrates through every line” – *Daily Chronicle*;

“Singularly artistic in its brilliant suggestiveness” – *Daily News*

“The reading of it is an adventure, and, once begun, it is hard to tear yourself from the book till you have devoured every line. There is impulsive life in every word of it. It has passion, ardour, vehement romance. It is full of youth; often enough the revolt and despair of youth.”— *Irish Independent*. (“The Keynote Series” 2, 3)

Wilde has no contention with psychological moments, a subject associated with Egerton and aligned with “modern” fin de siècle writing. Reviewing a book by author Violet Fane, Wilde muses, “I cannot help wondering that the clever authoress cared to abandon, even for a moment, the superb psychological opportunity that this chapter affords” (223).⁵⁷ The aspects Wilde addresses and which I have highlighted arguably appeal to the process leading to personal autonomy. Wilde is referring to writing which attracts the mind and invites engagement and thinking which holds the capacity for choice resulting in action. Sally Ledger explains the “modern short story” of the 1890’s explored the “interior landscapes of human experience” and the “inner consciousness” of female subjects which quite possibly the response below in *To-day* magazine is built on (“Introduction” xv).

The differentiation between conservative and modern reading which Egerton flagged is addressed in J. K. J’s reply to correspondence in *To-day* during 1895, postdating Egerton’s own prominent “modern” works *Keynotes* (1893) and *Discords* (1894):

⁵⁷ Violet Fane was the pseudonym of Lady Mary Montgomerie Currie (née Lamb 1843-1905). A poet and writer, Wilde here, in his column “Some Literary Notes”, is critiquing her novel *The Story of Helen Davenant* (1889), of which he said she could have written “half a dozen psychological studies” (222). He admired her as someone who wrote as an observer, a philosopher, and a social critic (223). His remarks sit alongside the interest in psychology at the fin de siècle.

Diphthong is a young lady who wishes my advice. She tells me she is seventeen, nice looking, but vulgar. Her mother wants her to read poetry, and suggests that she should gaze at the beauties of nature instead of at the looking-glass. My fair correspondent tells me that she possesses a sordid mind, no imagination, and no desire to improve, but she is fond of art. She also enjoys all I write, but after her description of herself I am compelled to regard this as a studied insult. She wishes me to tell her how to overcome her vulgar nature. She evidently regards me as an authority on the subject. She thinks that poetry won't do her any good. I am inclined to agree with her. She possesses a certain power of analysis. I expect to meet her later on as a famous lady novelist. She seems to possess all the attributes of one, including a certain want of self-respect, and a large absence of reserve. I suppose seventeen is too late. Her mother should have taken her in hand ten years ago, and given her less poetry and more slipper. A frank nature is admirable, but when all you have to be frank about are the qualities my correspondent imagines she possesses artifice becomes a virtue. I fear the young lady has been reading too much modern literature, and has been developing to an undue degree a morbid self-consciousness. Maybe she is not such a little idiot as she writes herself down. (115)

The inference of “too much modern literature” sits alongside critical assessment of Egerton’s work. It is feasible to consider the “famous lady novelist” as alluding to Egerton—the reference to “power of analysis”, “absence of reserve” and a “morbid self-consciousness” reliably define Egerton’s writing of the years preceding this letter, as does a “frank nature”. In 1815, Isabelle de Montolieu noted that the novels of English writers “enter too much into the circle of real life”, engaging with the inner being (qtd.

in Jack 248).⁵⁸ She noted regarding Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* which was published anonymously, it could only be written by a woman, for "a man would not have known how to capture these nuances, develop these feelings, penetrate the heart of woman with so much detail and truth" (248). These sentiments are clearly echoed eighty years later in George Egerton's own description of her intentions to write. Explaining what informed her work, she explains:

I realised that in literature, everything had been better done by man than woman could hope to emulate. There was one small plot left for her to tell; the terra incognita of herself, as she knew herself to be, not as man liked to imagine her—in a word to give herself away, as man had given himself in his writings
(Egerton "A Keynote to *Keynotes*" 58)

Egerton had found a gap in writing, and through her own "modern" writing revealed the unknown territory of woman, primarily her inner being. Elke D'hoker notes how the protagonist in "Regeneration of Two"—of whom we will learn more later—"achieves autonomy and self-reliance through a process of self-discovery" (*Irish Women Writers* 33). Others concur. In his article "Egerton: Forgotten Realist", Wendell Harris acknowledges how Egerton's fiction explores "the development of a woman's personality" (32). Hugh Stutfield recognised in fin de siècle fiction what he calls "a morbid spirit of analysis" wherein character—and Egerton's are clearly implied—are "so dreadfully introspective" ("Literary Debates" 122).⁵⁹ The concern was the influence of inner thoughts—perhaps because they could not read them—the idea that "*interior*

⁵⁸ Born in Switzerland, Isabelle de Montolieu (1751–1832), was a writer and translator who first translated Jane Austen's novels *Sense and Sensibility* and *Persuasion* into French. See Ellen Moody's "Isabelle de Montolieu: A Life."

⁵⁹ Hugh Stutfield (1858-1929) was a mountain climber who had published on his area of expertise. In the 1890s, he aligned himself with social critic Max Nordau (1849-1923) and his book, *Degeneration* (1892). Stutfield wrote a derogatory essay, "Tommyrotics", connecting Egerton with degeneration, a so-called symptom of fin de siècle attitudes as asserted by Nordau which will be discussed further in this chapter.

conversations” have the capacity to “colour our minds” (Soulsby *Stray Thoughts* 14).

An attempt was made at the outset of Egerton’s writing career by publisher T. P. Gill to retract content it was believed Egerton’s readers had “no business being told”, an opinion which resonates with the concern by some that young minds are not to read “books which are not meant for them” (White 24; Linton 13). The viewpoint of both Mary Desmond and Diphthong as influenced by “modern” is potently fin de siècle relevant. A reviewer in 1901 acknowledges this influence. Regarding *The Wheel of God*, it is said:

A remarkably fine exposition of true womanhood of to-day . . . We would heartily recommend this brief record of a yearning woman to wide perusal and even close study. It is delightful as a piece of writing, and as a study of the present day it is deep, suggestive, and earnest. *Aberdeen Tree Press* (1901). (qtd. in *Rosa Amorosa*)

Egerton’s story speaks to the “true womanhood” of the day, one who is making choices as to her thoughts and life. The trajectory of Mary’s reading experience offers a representation from childhood to womanhood, the outer depiction offering inner indications of the reading female. Her reading experiences invite questions around independence which complements autonomy: is reading an expression of independent thinking or as consequence of independent thinking? Mary Desmond answers both questions in the affirmative. Her employment of choice at an early age in selecting her own reading material leads to choices which “cross the boundaries of normative feminine behaviour” in her own reading experience (Ledger “Introduction” XV).

Beyond the pinnacle of the fin de siècle, reading continued to be staunchly encouraged as an important developmental aspect of being the ideal, well-adjusted female. Lucy Soulsby in 1910 revising her crusade for girls in *Stray Thoughts for Girls*

initially published in 1893, writes to those “between the ages of thirteen and twenty-seven”:

[N]ever give up reading and thinking, the keeping in touch with abstract ideas. As long as you are young you can get on without this, but, when the charm of youth deserts you, you will find life (and others will find you) a blessing or a curse, according as you have developed or starved your powers of mind. (112, 113)

Soulsby clearly holds reading to a high bar further saying, “reading is the best thing to save your life from being eaten away by trifles” and her repeated admonition throughout her guide to read “stiff books” and “sensible books” holds to moral purpose in reading (111, 80, 82, 41, 46). She has also aligned reading with thinking, asserting the importance of the “powers of mind”. Though where reading led the thinking mind or conversely, how it protected the thinking mind was also elucidated: “[R]eading hinders castle-building, which is an inward disease, wholly incompatible with devotion” (142). The connection of reading with thinking is fraught in Soulsby’s mind, dependant on the how the reader has employed her ideas, whether “developed or starved” or I add intercepted thoughts leading to “castle-building” or daydreaming.

The Daydream as Productive Space

A book is often on the periphery of the daydreaming experience. As Tynan articulates in her story *The Dear Irish Girl*, “[T]here was absolutely nothing to do, but to dream all day in the sun, with an open book upon the knee” (268). A book is dropped, thrown, placed, or graced with a hand that holds it lightly. Tynan’s Miss Peggy’s novel reading has been usurped by daydreaming:

The novels she loved, and which her nieces and others of her friends were careful to provide for her when the town library was inaccessible, took a long time in reading . . . Now she would sit long without turning a page, her eyes looking down on the familiar beautiful country below the verandah, plainly showing that her thoughts were elsewhere. (186)

However, reading could also be a conduit to daydreaming. Wolfgang Iser notes a reader's pleasure in reading starts when the reader's own faculties engage with the text, in a "game of the imagination" ("Reading Process" 280). In a chapter of writer Rosa Mulholland's novel, *The Wild Birds of Killeevy*, published in the *Irish Monthly* (1880), the book and the imagination as daydreaming allies are evident:

Arrived in her own chamber, Fan threw open her window and trimmed her lamp and sat down to spend the night in reading Kevin's book . . . Overwhelmed with bliss she lay back in her chair to dream over what she had read, and the first sunbeam found her fast asleep; . . . a fresh breeze suddenly sprang up and blew a drift of rose-leaves over her face, her bosom, her little folded hands that rested on the open book; and with a slight shiver she awakened. (184, 185)

The potential for textual immersion and assessment offered potential for change, for digression, for assimilation, because "reading could provide the capacity to extend and redefine the boundaries of the self" (Brocklebank 234). While this surely begins within the text, it potentially strays beyond the text. The experience of reading allows the reader to be "temporarily isolated from our real world" (Iser *Act of Reading* 140). An individual's immersive experience when reading was one of the prominent problems worrying cultural commentators. Writing in 1887, prolific writer Rider Haggard (1856-1925) reflects the opinion of many cultural critics when he explained that novels were

“utterly false as a picture of life” and fed the imagination (“About Fiction” 177).⁶⁰

Brocklebank provides more details which fed this worry noting, “[P]eriodicals assaulted their audience with admonitions about the dangers to the mental health, both of the individual and of society, posed by excessive, rapid, desultory, passive, and dreamy reading habits—habits that the novel in particular encouraged” (235). Thinking and daydreaming are interlinked. The daydream allows “an overflow of possibilities that remain virtual as opposed to actual”; the journey a reading mind takes remains in the mind, distancing the reader from reality (Iser *Act of Reading* 126). The protagonist in Emily Lawless’s (1845-1913)⁶¹ *Plain Frances Mowbray* (1889) illustrates this:

[S]he went back after a while to her own particular seat in an angle between the fireplace and the window, and took up a book; the book dropped presently on to her lap, and she took to thinking, dreaming rather, open-eyed, over scenes, bygone scenes, many of which seemed to her now very little more real than if they had literally happened in dreams. She got tired at last of this exercise also.

(16)

A clear connection is conveyed of reading a book and it leading to thinking or “dreaming rather”; reality and dreaming have also overlapped to the point in being indistinguishable.

Though pervasive, the views noted thus far were not the only opinions on daydreaming; it was also viewed as both productive and creative. This seeming contradiction is supported in Ford’s comment that “the plurality of the nineteenth

⁶⁰ H. Rider Haggard, though the H is dropped in attributing the article. Haggard wrote non-fiction and fiction and is famous for setting his romance novels in Africa. His piece “The Modern Novel” in the *Saturday Review* (1888) was not well received. See Morton Cohen’s book, *Rider Haggard: His Life and Works*.

⁶¹ Born in Co. Kildare to aristocracy, Emily Lawless was a historian, novelist, and poet. Successful during her lifetime, she is considered an early proponent of modernism.

century English definitions exposes reverie's opposing suggestions of mental corrosion and creative vision" (86). Daydreaming as productive and creative was often cushioned within Romanticism as "creative mental drifting" (85). Viewed through a literary lens as a "Romantic form of pensive interiority" it is not too much of a stretch to argue a connection of daydreaming with the fin de siècle writers and their espousal of time to think and explorations of the inner being (83). Additional views included those grounded in religion and promoting strict morality. Mrs Ellis, in her popular book *The Daughters of England* (1842), writes, "Wisely has it been said, by the greatest of moral philosophers, that there is a time for everything. Let it be observed, however, that he has not, amongst his royal maxims, spoken of a time for doing nothing" (32, 33). Florence Nightingale adds her voice to an opinion on the daydreaming state highlighting time spent in thinking was dangerous, leading to exhaustion and inaction. (Plotz 71). Thus, depending on your allegiance as a Victorian, daydreaming was perceived as Ford notes as either "creative or debilitating" (82). By the fin de siècle it was perceived as a beneficial, reflective state contributing to the aesthetic experience of reading, albeit looking like idleness. It seems that by another name, daydreaming was decidedly acceptable, even perceived as beneficial, an advantageous enrichment to reading. The professional viewpoint asserts that "reveries became legitimated as capsules in which the normative, not pathologized, state of consciousness could be observed" (Gettelman *Reverie, Reading* iii). Meaning shifted from idle fancy or a mind "liable to run riot", to a time to "reflect", to "an intervening imagination" or "imaginative intervention", an opportunity for subjectivity (Gettelman "Those Who Idle" 67,68). It is feasible to wonder if this positivity continued with the intrusion of critic Max Nordau's polemic *Degeneration* (1895), which offered an additional perspective on the daydreaming state. Perhaps daydreaming took on a subversive tone. I will be discussing this in the latter part of this chapter. As will be seen, Egerton's work particularly lends itself to a

conversation with Nordau's point of view. As well, she was noted for her inclusion of reverie as a form of interiority, a concept which was scrutinised at the fin de siècle (Pykett *Engendering Fictions* 62).

Firstly though, I will spend some time with May Laffan's protagonist Christy Carew whose penchant for daydreaming is a defining feature of her character. Through the story her bouts of being busy "with her own thoughts" are frequently interrupted (*Christy Carew* 2:193). Catholic, middle-class Christy at eighteen years old has finished schooling and is teetering on the edge of courtship and marriage. At this point in the text, she is feeling agitated and has removed to her room to be alone: "Miss Carew let herself fall back in her chair, and abandoned herself to a reverie, that lasted till the children's nurse, Hannah, entered the room" (295). Observing Christy, Hannah says she is "looking dull" and deduces she has been "reading too much" which has led to "thinkin' constant" (296). The connection Hannah has made of reading with thinking is a reminder that reading prompts daydreaming (Gettelman "Psychology of Reading" 207). Even in the absence of a book, the relationship is decidedly inferred. Laffan adopts a common Victorian perspective surrounding daydreaming—a state of letting oneself go. The choice of language indicates a lack of control: to fall back and abandon oneself is the very position that would have those promulgating controlled Victorian sensibilities reeling. Christy's internal perspective is implied by her physical appearance and brief but questioning responses. Hannah's observation Christy is "looking dull" reflects a long-standing belief that reading leads to dullness.⁶² Such an appearance was perceived symptomatic of both daydreaming and inappropriate reading deemed undesirable to a segment of Victorian society extolling the health and wellbeing of the

⁶² See Ruth Livesey's 2023 published article, "Middleness: Provincial Fiction and the Aesthetics of Dull Life". Also: Gettelman, "Those Who Idle Over Novels"; Marisa Knox, "Identification Crises: Victorian Women and Wayward Reading"; Soulsby, *Stray Thoughts on Reading*.

nation. Christy's demeanour is Hannah's perspective, and one conceivably extracted from the pages of a moral guidebook, especially in context with the dialogue which ensues. Feasibly, it prepares the reader for a conventional view of Christy's state.

Earlier in the story, Christy "laid down the book she was not reading, and, reluctantly turning away her eyes from the view that lay beneath her window, rose slowly and walked out of her room" (Laffan *Christy Carew* 1:5). Daydreaming is intimated. Christy was not reading the book, which she was holding, and had been looking out the window. This suggests the book as a prop facilitating time to daydream, which was not an uncommon utilisation. Christy could be perceived as conforming to recommended reading periods mentioned earlier, yet also not conforming as she accosted this time for thinking. At this stage in a woman's life, the mind was seen as particularly susceptible and being busy was key; the belief was held that "far more happiness is laid up for after years by a person who occupies her mind" (Yonge *Womankind* 83). Reading, as previously discussed, was acceptable occupation for the feminine mind, but contained caveats. It is interesting that Hannah defines reading rather than novels per se. The tendency exists in discussions of reading to assert the novel as the culprit of daydreaming digression whereas reader response to what they are reading makes more sense (Gettelman "Those Who Idle" 61).

Christy is inclined to spend time in reading which leads to daydreaming. Novel-reading is aligned with, or rather maligned as a superficial timewaster by Sydney Cox, author of *Friendly Counsel for Girls, or, Words in Season* (1868). Cox alleges, "I aim at no higher standard on the subject than warning you off the quick-sands of frivolity, superficiality, novel-reading, and general waste of time, in which so many ladies allow their lives to be swallowed up" (242). Almost a decade later, Yonge is reiterating Cox's admonition offering an "excellent rule" namely "there should be no novel touched in the

forenoon, except in a language so unfamiliar that it becomes an exercise. Some portion of a solid book should be read daily either of history or science”; “a little reading” is not sufficient; it must be “solid and learned” (*Womankind* 83, 84, 81). However, appropriate reading, Cox emphasises, should be instigated daily for “stirring up the stagnant waters of their minds” and “by *reading*” she continues, “I do not mean that sort of superficial skimming and skipping which is now too much the fashion” (244, 245). Perhaps this is the reading practice of Christy in her current situation, a form of reading which does not engage the mind with “intellectual effort” preventing “mental lethargy” and “deterioration” (Cox 242, 243, 242). Such superficial reading could easily lead to daydreaming. However, this does not mean Christy read one sort of book. Visiting her one day, her friend Esther is surprised to find Christy reading an “*improving* sort” of book (Laffan *Christy Carew* 1:21). Esther’s surprise leads us to believe the “improving” sort is not Christy’s regular reading; it appears to be on the behest of Sugrue, an eligible bachelor. Christy is cognisant of the difference in reading material and its effect and argues that purpose was key to her interest noting in a conversation with her friend Esther, “I was clever at school, but I never mean to be so again. Then I had something to work for, but here I don’t know what to do with myself” (1:21). We can discern Christy recognises both what is acceptable reading and that reading enables a sense of purpose and even though currently feeling somewhat lost, is found reading a book “of the most improving sort” even if in speech she derides it (1:21). Possibly, both “frivolous” reading and improving “Essays” trigger daydreaming, the first by enabling “superficial skimming and skipping”; the second by being the “dullest and driest” improving type of book.

Reading, thinking, and debateable dullness have not been a “general waste of time” for Christy. Whether her thinking faculties have led to sin, damnation, and/or mental deterioration depends on how the consequences are perceived. Christy

understands the “delights of reading” and is described as having a “natural love of reading” (1:187, 201). She also spends much time daydreaming and is known to have bouts of being “busy, with her own thoughts” (2:129). In the moral guidebook *Beeton’s Young Englishwoman* (1875), the essay, “Life’s Spring-Time”, which is focused on youth, not only condones the reading of novels but asserts the ability of “sensible” young women in distinguishing between reality and imagination regarding reading and thinking:

To exclude fiction and poetry from a girl’s reading is to shut out sunshine, and no flower grows well in the dark. It is, of course, possible for a weak mind to lose all sense of reality, and imagine that the world before her is, or ought to be, nothing but a three-volume novel in action, that the persecuted, unappreciated, but lovely heroine, who will, in the end, marry a marquis, and be happy ever afterwards. Some unhealthy natures breed disease even from good food. But sensible girls know that the ideal is not a region quite apart from the real, but an elevation to which the real may easily be made to reach . . . but because a more ideal view of life, strengthened by the exercise of the imagination and familiarity with higher models than perhaps the associations of real life afford, has made them show that they are duties to themselves, as well as to others, necessary to that elevation of character which they desire to possess, and which their reading has taught them is possible to human nature, without endangering any of the necessary conditions of their individual and social position. (182)⁶³

Though conceding to the expected social “necessary conditions” of young Victorian women—a duty to themselves and others—Beeton’s book offers a broader viewpoint

⁶³ Husband and wife, Samuel Orchart Beeton, and Isabella Mary Beeton, were a publishing and writing team, known for *Mrs Beeton’s Book of Household Management* (1861). The book quoted above *Beeton’s Young Englishwoman* (1875), does not specify the Christian name of the author.

than general contemporary opinion, and thus enables personal autonomy. The text affirms some readers will “lose all sense of reality” and live within the pages of a novel and that is their inclination even with “good food” or appropriate reading material. It also acknowledges place for the imagination. It is not a space for censure but rather the concept of reality is taught through reading and “strengthened by the exercise of the imagination” resulting in an “elevation of character”. Defining young women as “sensible” versus those who are “weak” or “unhealthy” professes a negative presumption; it could alternatively be read as an opportunity for individual autonomy, a choice in how reading is approached, time is spent, or even how thinking is employed. This contrasts with the deterioration often mooted as consequence of both novel reading and using imagination, and is, I propose, the position of Christy. However, viewing Christy’s reading and thinking as precursor to elevating her character depends on how her subsequent actions are perceived. Christy’s evaluation resultant from thinking lies in the realisation men’s reading practice initiates “something to do” whereas for women “there’s nothing to come of it”; as a prize-winning student she could not see how to expend her talents: ““I was clever at school, but I never mean to be so again. Then I had something to work for, but here I don’t know what to do with myself.”” (Laffan *Christy Carew* 1:21). She later frustratingly exclaims, “What is there ever for any girl like me to do?” confirming the situation young intelligent women ostensibly found themselves (1:199). Laffan’s biographer Helena Kelleher Kahn notes this element of Christy’s personality, stating that Christy holds “fantasies of escape to a more stimulating life” (150).

Three years prior to the publishing of *Christy Carew*, Yonge’s opening words in *Womankind* stated, “to think is in the present day almost equivalent to express”, thus aligning thinking with speaking, literally speaking one’s thoughts, a form of personal

autonomy (1). E. K., referenced earlier offers a sardonic take on thinking, again via the fictional Maud who soliloquises:

How well I employ my time; it is really surprising how industrious I am. I find a difficulty about my thinking time. The children and servants fully understand now that I am not to be disturbed when they see me busy, but when they look and find me apparently doing nothing they begin to talk and ask questions, and will not understand that I am thinking. I must try to find a retired place, not my bed-room—for I share it with Bertha and she, of course, will come in at any time. I should have intruders in the summer-house. The only place I can think of is the closet where Betsy keeps her brushes and dust-pan; there is space enough there for a stool, and I can go there when all the things are stowed away for the day. I will try it to-morrow. (89).

This reflects the notion of some that thinking was idle, but also implies an allowable time, again allotted, for thinking. Such time affords an individual to contemplate personal autonomy, even though finding a literal space to think has been satirised. Thinking led Laffan's Christy Carew to express through dialogue the dissatisfaction of her situation as a woman. Yonge considered Christy's age as "a very pleasant and instructive period of life" which however potentially holds the "great danger" of "desultoriness" thus must be accompanied by "growth" to "to mature the powers" (*Womankind* 80). Thinking or rumination, constructive or otherwise, fed daydream dismay. Ungoverned, daydreaming was a space of one's own which allowed for analysis of self and society. Such thinking, it was believed, lead to disruptive actions and the potential dismantling of a seemingly stable society. Christy is not shown to be disruptive, but she has considered the position of women in society and found it wanting. Had Christy read Yonge's *Womankind*, she may have discovered a snippet of

advice to her liking. Aware some young women are not ambitious for marriage Yonge suggests the Cambridge Examination, especially as it offers the experience “of being stimulated to work for an object” which Christy has noted is absent in her current situation (84). Explained via a sketch written by Anne Mercier in *The Girl’s Own Paper*, the Cambridge examination would have suited Christy. It would provide “practical utility . . . monetary value . . . moral and intellectual discipline” (115). Christy is eighteen and though she is living in Dublin, it could be studied as distance learning. A disadvantage includes “self-denial when a charming new book comes from the library” because of the time necessary to commit to the work (Mercier 115). This option would assuage even the strictest of Victorian dictates. Not only did it accommodate time for “home duties” and “social duties” but also, if selected from subject options, allowed “study which alone can elevate the soul” through religious knowledge (115). History and English Literature were mandatory and along with arithmetic could be the initial focus, with additional subjects studied within an accumulative format if needed. Requiring a high standard of scholarly work, the resultant scholarships and continuing study would allow Christy to exercise her high achieving academic skills. As Yonge notes regarding woman’s intellect and learning, “as to paths in life and education, womanhood is no obstacle to our being as highly educated as our brains will allow” (*Womankind* 236). Christy’s education and reading practice has informed her and she recognises the capacity for choice, even if she is dismayed at the lack of it for women or that there are obstacles to overcome.

Returning to Christy’s tendency for “thinkin’ constant”, rather than equating her daydreaming with idleness, I would argue Christy’s daydreaming stimulates her thoughts. Christy is advised by an acquaintance, Mr Sugrue, not to allow “strange ideas a place in your thoughts. Depend on it, sooner or later, the images we keep before our mind’s eye end in actual deed” (1:208). A clear connection is made between thoughts

and action. Attempting to divert Christy's daydreaming disposition, he outlines an alternative to time spent thinking which is to "find an occupation" (208). Contemplating this grounded advice, Christy decides to teach, albeit in a circumscribed way, in a Sunday school. This is conversant with the idea ventilated in magazines that ideally intelligent women through a process of thinking leading to action would engage in work which championed "intellectual activity" (Youngkin 102). It could be argued Christy's decision came from the suggestion given by a man. However, Christy is doing the thinking and translating the thought into action. She listened to Sugrue's advice to focus on an "occupation" and took on a teaching responsibility, but also her personal choice is to continue with her daydreaming, unperturbed by the warning of an "actual deed" resulting from "strange ideas".

As Laffan's novel progresses, there is a sense Christy shifts in her daydreaming habit. Purposeful thinking has revealed dissatisfying realities as a young woman. I suggest her continuation of daydreaming is a small rebellion, an opportunity for personal autonomy in response to societal construct of control and order. At one point in the text, Christy returns from her reverie (not attached to reading or a book) which is described as "a minute and a half of dumb enjoyment" (Laffan *Christy Carew* 1:299). This interpretation of reverie clearly implies escapism. Christy "chose" to "spend hours" in daydreams. Rather than attend a dinner party she "fancied that to sit . . . and muse for hours would be enjoyment enough" (2:129). During such musings Christy would "[dispatch] her attention abroad on more congenial excursions" such as "Spain, to watch the building of some favourite chateau she possessed there", a notion likely rooted in a book (2:109). Removed from attempts at improving in a conventional sense, Christy's reading and daydreaming excursions suggest aesthetic pleasure. Notably, "literary texts provoke the reader into a more creative frame of mind which allows him to realize imaginatively many of the possibilities repressed by the structures and norms of

conventional society-structures and norms which the literary text defamiliarizes and liberates the reader from by making them mere possibilities among other possibilities” (O’Hara 89). The travel of thoughts beyond her domain of reality to dreaming of literally building an alternative life, bespeaks the spirit of fin de siècle desire for the “new” which was soon to infiltrate societal narrative. Christy is aware of the time she spends daydreaming and the perception of it as a waste of time, as her “conscience smote her a little when she thought of the hours spent dreaming in the wicker armchair in her bedroom window” and she adds it to a list of resolutions of improvement (Laffan *Christy Carew* 2:61). However, intention does not presume action and refraining from daydreaming is unlikely to be a serious contender for change, as is noted of her endeavours, “a sum total which remained nevertheless almost invariable, for as one nail drives out another nail, each newly added resolve caused a predecessor to drop off into oblivion” (61).

Max Nordau, cognisant of fin de siècle influences, invades the conventional narrative with a diatribe on reading and daydreaming, contributing to the “generative and degenerative brands of intense reverie” noted by Ford (83). Nordau presents daydreaming or reverie as a characteristic of the degenerate:

The degenerate is not in a condition to fix his attention long, or indeed at all, on any subject, and is equally incapable of correctly grasping, ordering, or elaborating into ideas and judgments the impressions of the external world conveyed to his distracted consciousness by his defectively operating senses. It is easier and more convenient for him to allow his brain-centres to produce semi-lucid, nebulously blurred ideas and inchoate embryonic thoughts, and to surrender himself to the perpetual obfuscation of a boundless, aimless, and shoreless stream of fugitive ideas; and he rarely rouses himself to the painful

attempt to check or counteract the capricious, and, as a rule, purely mechanical associations of ideas and succession of images, and bring under discipline the disorderly tumult of his fluid presentations. (21)

Nordau elucidates elements symptomatic of daydreaming aligned with the “unfocused, floating frame of mind, or reverie” which had defined early ideas of the state (Ford 83). However, where originally this had been a scientific perception, Nordau has adopted it as a cultural one. When defining reverie in the book’s index, Nordau elucidates it as “[R]everie, predilection of degenerates” (565). His assertion of “boundless, aimless, and shoreless stream of fugitive ideas” and “disorderly tumult” disrupts the idea of daydreaming as a vehicle to constructive personal choice. Nordau assigns apparent loss of mental faculties however brief to possessors of “new tendencies” concomitant to the fin de siècle including those with a “purely literary mind” (15). Literary-minded George Egerton is well positioned to address Nordau’s claims. Rather than distracted and defective daydreaming, I argue the representation of “associations of ideas and succession of images” which follow extracted from Egerton’s work refute Nordau’s claims of obstreperousness and cling to the assertion that daydreaming is beneficial for consciousness and a productive process of awareness.

Egerton’s first story in *Keynotes* (1893), “A Cross Line”, begins with a woman who is sitting outside, on a felled tree, amongst “a wilderness of trees”, beside a small river and

[h]er mind is nothing if not picturesque; her busy brain, with all its capabilities choked by thousand vagrant fancies, is always producing pictures and finding associations between the most unlikely objects. She has been reading a little sketch written in the daintiest language of a fountain scene in Tanagra, and her vivid imagination has made it real to her. (3)

In a seemingly private space, her “busy brain” is thinking, and this thinking has been triggered by “a little sketch” she has read. A clear connection between reading and thinking is defined. The “thousand vagrant fancies” and a “vivid imagination” similarly connect reading to the daydreaming state. The scene she dreams of “graceful maids grouped” around a fountain in Greece is interrupted by an approaching male, singing, and her dream is blurred (3). Her daydream is devoid of men, and this opening daydream in the first story of *Keynotes* arguably foregrounds the final story, the creation of a women’s commune. Reading, however brief or “little” has, as stories proceed and progress, led to action. The “inchoate embryonic thoughts” asserted by Nordau as accompanying daydreaming have developed. Rather than resulting in the “disorderly tumult” propounded by Nordau, Egerton has feasibly led the thinking and daydreaming of a female character to an effective, active conclusion even if it is channelled through another female character.

Further on in “A Cross Line”, husband and wife (she of the above excerpt) are at home, each reading a book. The wife has finished reading a book “that makes one think” and is watching her husband “reading quietly, without moving his eyes quickly from side to side of the page as she does when she reads” (Egerton “A Cross Line” 6). Moving on from observing him, she sets to thinking: “One speculation chases the other in her quick brain; odd questions as to race arise; she dives into theories as to the why and wherefore of their distinctive natures, and holds a mental debate in which she takes both sides of the question impartially” (7). Her cohesive thoughts are in contrast with Nordau’s claim that a degenerate is “incapable of correctly grasping, ordering, or elaborating into ideas and judgments the impressions of the external world” (21). Egerton’s provision of insight is intentional, procuring a mind of intellect and

intentional thought which offers contrast with the following dialogue on her husband's daydream:

He has finished his pipe, laid down his book, and is gazing dreamily, with his eyes darkened by their long lashes, and a look of tender melancholy in their clear depth, into space.

"What are you thinking of?" There is a look of expectation in her quivering nervous little face.

[. . .]

"I was wondering if lob-worms would do for—"

He stops. A strange look of disappointment flits across her face and is lost in an hysterical peal of laughter. ("A Cross Line" 7)

Conventionally for men daydreaming was viewed as an additional proof of intellect.⁶⁴ Egerton confronts this convention and switches gendered assumptions. Her thoughts have been the intellectual stimulants. Her husband's daydream in contrast is domestically inclined. Additionally, we are made aware of the content of his daydream. While not necessarily suggesting women may be daydreaming about quotidian domestic matters, it certainly questions the assumption of daydreaming embodying musings considered dangerous. It is far from the "disorderly tumult" implicated by Nordau which it was believed would seep into the psyche of the nation. There is no fantasy implied here with propensity for deterioration or potential to fell the Empire. The subject of daydreaming is practical—lob-worms, bait for fishing. Adding to Egerton's role reversal, we can assume from the woman's thoughts the book she had been reading was not a book of moral guidance. Perhaps supposed danger lies in reading rather than

⁶⁴ See Natalie Mera Ford's chapter, "The Interpretation of Daydreams: Reverie as Site of Conflict in Early Victorian Psychology".

daydreaming. Or rather, it suggests women also can employ intellectual thoughts in the thinking space which have the potential to inform their choices. Throughout this short story, for a time the wife “busies herself with questioning” and digresses to explore her “complex nature” with another man (9). By the end she has conceded convention, continued in her marriage, and embraced motherhood (9). Danger to her and to society is thus disregarded. Egerton signals divergence can exist within conventional construction and through the fictional wife shows autonomy is possible and permissible. Woman “as herself” chooses the outcome of her meanderings.

Consequences from reading and daydreaming continue in the second story of *Keynotes*, “Now Spring Has Come”. The female protagonist recalls herself “lying flat on her stomach on the floor, resting her elbows at each side of a book she is reading” (Egerton “Now Spring Has Come” 45). Twenty years on, a book is pivotal in her story. Having discovered a “bad book” on the shelves of a bookshop, her curiosity is piqued to the point she cannot stop thinking about the brief acquaintance with it, for “the words I read kept dancing before me . . . they were impressed on my brain in vivid colour” (47). Her persistent thinking led to purchasing the book, reading it, and responding to its narrative with decisive action. Daydreaming afforded by the book’s contents incite the reader to want to meet the author, not having considered as she notes that the contents “might only be an extraordinary clever intuitive analysis of a possible experience” (48). Taking the contents as a literal pouring out of the authors very being, she explains in retrospect that her subsequent response enabled consciousness, an opportunity “to teach one self-knowledge, to give one a glimpse into the contradictory issues of one’s individual nature. Study yourself, and what will you find?” (50). Tracing and meeting the author “on literary grounds” allows for a dialogue wherein she “told him all about [her]self, turned [her]self inside out . . . hid nothing” (54, 55). As an expression of self-awareness, it was without boundaries. The “common interest” was that “we had found

ourselves” (56). She fell in love with a “word-artist” and her initial daydream of meeting “what my soul has been waiting for” turned sour; it was not real (69, 52, 53). What she read, thought of, spoke of, and acted on led to a “grand burial” of her “dreams and foolish wishes and sweet hopes”, but also it led to self-knowledge (75). Though she deems her wishes foolish, there can be consolation perhaps in that she initiated her decisions and acted on personal choice. Nordau would likely assign acting on “literary grounds” and pursuing an author for a relationship an instance of “defectively operating senses” which brought to fruition the “meandering of [her] own reveries” (118, 21). Egerton’s protagonist would have avoided feeling foolish had she availed of advice available in the same year *Keynotes* was published that “books should give you nice ideas. You have got the making of your own mind and character in your own hands, and you are responsible for the books on which you choose to feed yourself, for each one of them alters you for good or bad” (Soulsby *Stray Thoughts* 37). The “bad book” had actually given Egerton’s protagonist “nice ideas” from one perspective, that of “helping” the author with his angst. It could be argued that she was altered for good, learning from foolishness (her words) to beware of acting on notions built from the content of a book. Writing on another daydream prompted by reading and leading to action, Egerton extracts the advantages of content. In “The Regeneration of Two”, we read:

The long French windows of a villa overlooking it are thrown wide open. The lace curtains hang limply, for there is not a breath of wind. It is a pretty room, with evidences of taste and wealth. Its only occupant is stretched in a weary attitude in a low rocking-chair; she is swaying slowly to and fro. A book lies on the carpet near her as if thrown there, her slippers are kicked aside, she has taken off her rings, and they are glittering on her lap; and as she rocks from shade to light, and light to shade, the sun strikes gold and ruby, emerald and diamond and

sapphire flashes. She yawns wearily, and stretches up her arms behind her head, then clasps her long hands. (Egerton 163)

Fruen is further described as having the “irritable weariness of a disillusioned woman of the world” (163). We get the sense of her attitude, her state of mind: a thrown book accompanying kicked slippers and removed rings. Her servant, on terms of companion, enters, having served her a refreshing drink in response to her state, a conversation ensues:

“Can’t Fruen read?”

“No, my head aches; I feel much more as if I want to scream. Don’t you ever?”

(165)

Nipping the scream in the bud the nurse suggests the conventional approach to agitation and time spent thinking—keeping busy. She offers a list: “sew for poor children for the missionary fund . . . suffrage, social reformation, politics . . . society . . . theatres, balls” (166, 167). Such suggestions, appropriate for the societally proper Victorian woman, leave no room for digression which does not appease Fruen who responds to each: missionary work is “Bah, bah! I don’t believe in that . . .”; suffrage and politics are considered “all sorts of fatiguing things”, and Society results in “making me say things utterly unlike myself” (166, 167). Fruen arrives at saying “I want something for myself!” (167). A connection is clearly implied; reading and the throwing of the book to spend time in one’s mind has led to consciousness. Resisting core Victorian protocols her thoughts have turned to self. Seemingly, Fruen’s reading has led to dissatisfaction with the prescribed role for women or offered a more appealing alternative. Can we know this? In context of her ensuing actions, it is feasible. She frustratingly exclaims, “the men have the best of it. If a man is bored he puts on his hat and goes out, and looks for a man or a woman to help him to get rid of himself. Why can’t we do the same? I

wish I knew what to do with myself!” and decides to go out (167). Book in pocket, Fruen takes public transport and proceeds on an adventure. Ultimately, a thrown book and thinking lead her into the arms of a poet:

She is conscious of a wonderful sudden change in herself; her depression is melting away; she only feels a ridiculous kind of buoyant reaction against it, a sense of rest after disturbance, the quiet after a rain-gust. She hardly knows why she remains standing there, looking down at the sleeping man; she tells herself the proper thing to do is to go . . . She sinks on one knee: it is not an easy manoeuvre encumbered as she is with a parasol and a book; however, she accomplishes it successfully, with one foot under her. (176).

Egerton establishes time spent thinking leads to life changing action. In contrast to Nordau’s claim that “inchoate embryonic thoughts” do not develop and mature, Fruen has proven otherwise. It takes more than this initial meeting to reap the consequences; there are a chain of events. Fruen finds books the poet has written and through these she is able to “find [her]self”, having read beyond the writ of “churches and social law” which encumber a woman’s choice (240, 242). Consequently, she decides she “will live as I choose, seek joy as I choose, carve the way of my life as I will” (241). Egerton clearly delineates between convention and autonomy; Fruen notes she has ignored the etiquette of “formal introduction” to a man, and rather than “taken the man’s feelings into consideration” has “dwelt on her own as of primary importance” decidedly flouting Victorian beliefs of woman subservient to man (185). When she cares for the sick poet, it is on her terms. She has rescued him from illness and neglect, making sure too there are “lots of books” at his disposal while convalescing (236). Avoiding the “old-fashioned bondage” of marriage, she proposes they love each other but remain “free” as an expression of her “right to dispose of myself as I will, to choose” (252). In her own

words Fruen has found “a new standard of woman’s worth” (241). From a thrown book and frustrated thinking at the beginning of the story, through actively taking steps to initiate a change in her life that satisfies her needs, she ignores “the proper thing to do” aware of discovering “a new side to herself” (183).

Conclusion

The texts I have examined portray reading as a means of acquiring information which could influence individual choice. Despite the directive of disciplined reading issuing from cultural commentators, the capacity for autonomy in how, when, and why to read is demonstrated in the practice of the fictional female reader. This extends to how a book accompanied time to think and daydream which at the fin de siècle was viewed as an advantage to conscious thought, enabling autonomy.

What became evident as I moved through my analysis is how the instruction on reading and books was religiously motivated. The next chapter will discuss this pervading influence in more depth. I will argue that the fictional female reader portrays how autonomy could be employed; whether to comply with, compromise or avoid this prominent force which dominated advice and recommendations on reading and books.

Chapter 2: “The Most Improving Sort”: Religion, Reading, and Books

We beseech the young to ask in regard to any book they propose to read, Will it add to my stock of useful knowledge? Will it have an elevating and purifying influence on my mind? Will it help, rather than hinder, a taste for substantial reading? And if these questions cannot be answered affirmatively, leave the book alone. (“Leave the Book Alone” 179)

Continuing my analysis of fictional female characters and their reading experience, this chapter will focus on the capacity for small behaviours—as explained previously, a term to denote small acts expressed through gestures, thoughts, and actions as demonstrations of personal autonomy—in response to religious influence as depicted in the fiction of Laffan, Tynan, and Egerton. Small behaviours or acts of autonomy are not necessarily subversive; of paramount importance is the individual’s potential for personal choice. These experiences of female readers are situated within the domestic space but also in the confines of convent life. Catholicism is the core faith addressed in this analysis, though not exclusively, as it pertains to the experience of the fictional female readers in the works of Laffan, Tynan, and Egerton. Religious faith was a dominant force directing the lives of people during and toward the end of the Victorian era. Easily accessible, “the Bible or the New Testament . . . were printed in their tens of millions during Victoria’s reign” (S. Eliot 57). Compliance to Christian command was a societal expectation and “religious attitudes saturated Victorian thinking about private life, and profoundly shaped the daily rituals and roles of the family” (Kucich 216). Despite the prominence of faith and the means to acquire it, compared with the past one hundred years religion was “not that cheerful and optimistic” in its outlook (Laqueur 23). There is a sense of this when analysing the fictional relationship of readers, reading and religion in the chosen texts. Sydney Cox in 1868 espouses the notion of “personal

religion” explaining to her readers, “those whose personal religion is the most real are usually those who obtrude it least upon others and keep their opinions on the subject chiefly to themselves. It is to them a kind of inner life, and a species of daily sacrifice” (*Friendly Counsel for Girls* 295). Adherence to Christianity is mainly expressed through actions noticeable to others. In comparison, holding a personal religion is an “inner” experience whereby thoughts and opinions are kept “chiefly to themselves” allowing room for individual manoeuvre. Cox was not advocating this, but her words could be interpreted as such if the person reading them had an inclination for personal autonomy demonstrated through small behaviours; the notion of personal religion suggests an individual response to instruction and what they read, a guiding force which can be applied strictly or adapted or adopted as desired; the individual can decide the “species of daily sacrifice” they wish to enact. Autonomy in the private space makes open compliance with religious authority more palatable if an individual chooses this compromise.

In this period, reading as an aspect of religious belief took various forms; reading the Bible, reading books pertaining to faith, reading prayers, and significantly, continual instruction in media on reading content to avoid. Unsurprisingly then, religion often accompanied, and potentially impeded, the reading experience of the fictional female reader. Kate Flint explains how novel reading could “reinforce religious . . . norms” (“The Victorian Novel and Its Readers” 34). Conversely, reading fiction allowed scope for exploration, for “trying out new thoughts, new possibilities” in the privacy of one’s own space (34). However, even when experimenting with or adopting new ideas “traditional modes of conduct could sometimes be ignored, but rarely escaped from entirely” which becomes evident in this analysis (Knight 13). Like a palimpsest, the old idea remains, difficult to eliminate, and the new idea becomes an additional layer. Thus, in the theatre of religious ideology, the stage was set for the personal

reading experience to affirm, defend, question, or lead to a rejection of one's belief. Clerical power is visible in public society, but to what extent is it present within the private space? As will be seen, influence within the private sphere is explored in fiction. For the girl or woman traversing the societally-imposed coupling of reading and religion, the hurdles are embedded in tradition and convention. In addition to the experience of convent inculcation, female reading encounters are persistently dominated by what is expected of them by the clerical hierarchy.

For the purposes of this chapter, I base my understanding of Victorian meanings of "religion" on Ilana M. Blumberg's assessment. During the Victorian era, alternative ideas emerged of what the word religion meant. In my analysis, it makes sense to retain the "old" idea, "the 'religion' that refers to doctrine, ritual, traditions, worship, a relation between the supernatural and the natural, the divine and the human, that orders personal and collective history" (Blumberg 841). However, I acknowledge new "cultural" definitions of the time as relevant; indeed, George Egerton's fiction explores religion as "a word itself in transformation, at times referring backward to an established social and spiritual order of Christian practice and belief while, more often, projecting toward a future order of moral and psychological orientation still in the making" (Blumberg 840).

John Kucich explains that "representations of official religion in Victorian fiction, in one way or another, always show a sense of strain—an uncertainty about religion's value, or about exactly what aspects of religious institutions need correction—even if that strain rarely proceeds to an open confrontation with faith itself" (215). This idea of covert or subtle addressing of unsatisfactory areas rather than "open confrontation with faith itself" becomes evident as I analyse texts by Laffan, Tynan, and Egerton demonstrating an autonomous reading experience. I argue that in fictional representation, a person's small behaviours indicate a preference for enacting a

“personal religion” and this presence of autonomy implies an individual “confrontation with faith itself”.

“Good Books”: Religious Reasons for Reading

MOST of us feel that it requires more or less of, courage to read the life of a saint. It is a thing that we set ourselves to do for half an hour or so at a time, and then we lay aside the book with some complacency, feeling that we have accomplished our “pious reading” for the day, and are, therefore, at liberty to pursue lighter and more congenial occupations. And yet we devour eagerly, not merely the ordinary run of novels and poetry, but also the lives (many of them very ignoble ones) of authors and actors, and famous men generally, and never think of begrudging the time we bestow on them.

Why should this be, I wonder? Why should we find so wearisome the contemplation of the perfections of God’s servants, while perhaps we fall into raptures over a fancy sketch of imaginary goodness, or a little bit of sentiment, in which, if we only took the trouble to look more closely, we should detect so easily the hollow ring? (M. B. 744)

As discussed in Chapter One, a considerable amount of publishing was predicated upon how and what girls and women were expected to read. Religious discourse underlined disseminated advice on reading and reading material in most periodicals. The above extract illustrates the ongoing conflict betwixt religious and so-called frivolous reading in the late-Victorian era: piety, perfection, and accomplishment competed with fancy, imagination, and sentiment. According to the quote, in a chain of choices the individual reader fulfils societal expectations and satisfies their own preferences. Although it is expected of them, an individual still chooses to make time for “pious reading”. In a further choice, because it infringes on time they would rather spend on “lighter and

more congenial” reading, they limit it to thirty minutes or so. This decision enables self-satisfaction at fulfilling an obligation and piety remains intact. Being excited at “a fancy sketch of imaginary goodness, or a little bit of sentiment” is responding to personal choice in reading. This preference to read from an “ordinary run of novels” provided relief from the pursuit of “perfection” intended by religiously themed reading. May Laffan’s character Juliet D’Arcy understood this; she “was reading a book of devotion . . . It was one of her good days; her head felt clearer than usual” (*Ismay’s Children* 269). Piety takes effort and must be reserved for an amenable day. Demonstrating autonomy, Julia read devotional work on her “good days” implying on non-good days for “relief” she may have preferred reading that was “lighter and more congenial”, perhaps a novel. This enabled what one contributor to the periodical *Nineteenth Century* (1893) recognised as “mental relaxation” and indeed the preference of “amusement to exact information” (Maxwell “Craving for Fiction” 1048, 1056). Feasibly, Juliet chose relaxing and amusing reading, offering a respite for her head which did not always feel clear and able to absorb “exact information”.

May Laffan addresses the impact of imposed reading about the “saints”. The thoughts of protagonist Christy Carew reveals a disdain for recommended reading of “those early saints, whose lives, as admirable biographers have penned them, are still proposed as edifying reading to those of the faithful as may be of literary inclination, and whose very names Miss Carew detested with all her heart” (Laffan *Christy Carew* 301). Laffan has evoked the familiar discourse such as quoted above in the *Irish Monthly*. The “early saints” are “proposed as edifying reading” for “the faithful”, a time for “contemplation”. Christy’s view of this practice has moved beyond “complacency”, even beyond “wearisome”, and a sense of accomplishment from “pious reading” is long absent. It appears continuous propelling of the saints into the reading lives of those with “literary inclination” has repelled Christy to the point she detests their names “with all

her heart”. This heartfelt hate spills into her response to conversations on reading material. Given the chance, Christy avoids prescribed reading, as illustrated in the following episode. Her choice of poet is enquired of by a potential suitor, Mr Dawson. In a small behaviour she opts for Lord Byron⁶⁵, because he is “disapproved” of as reading material for “the faithful”:

Mr. Dawson had on the occasion of his last visit asked her in a serious tone, and apropos of nothing at all, which was her favourite poet. Miss Carew, who cared not for any poet, and who had read Byron simply and solely because that author is disapproved by the ecclesiastical lord chamberlain whose office it is to dispense literary licence to the faithful, had replied at random, “Tennyson”, and thought no more about it. (Laffan *Christy Carew* 2:282, 283)⁶⁶

Opting for Byron, Christy indicates her decision not to be among “the faithful” at least in reading matter. Byron has not been officially “licensed” as approved reading by the “ecclesiastical” powers, so he will do for Christy’s exercise of autonomy. However, this choice of Byron is private, remaining in Christy’s mind. Her autonomy at this moment is internal and personal. It is for her own satisfaction. We are given an indication of Christy’s thoughts and, I suggest, the challenge involved in displaying autonomy to others. Christy is aware of what is expected of her, and though piety does not appeal, her response indicates moving beyond these boundaries is a gradual process. Her reply to Mr Dawson “at random” is “Tennyson”. We read later that Mrs Carew owns a “very nice” Tennyson, which suggests Christy’s reply is drawn from what she has assimilated as acceptable from her stepmother (2:85). Christy is selective, deciding how she

⁶⁵ George Gordon Byron (1788-1824) known as Lord Byron, perceived as one of the great English poets of the Romantic period. Though “inclined toward Catholicism”, his reputation was of one who was “mad, bad and dangerous to know” (Hopps 2,1).

⁶⁶ Popular poet Lord Alfred Tennyson (1809-1892) was poet Laureate for 42 years of Queen Victoria’s reign.

exercises her autonomy. Attending her parish priest for Catholic confession, Christy notes “some items of her confession were not as new to him as they should have been” (1:132). She realises her stepmother is pre-empting her “items”, and so “removed her spiritual custom elsewhere” (132). Later, interrupting a Lenten snack, Mrs O’Neil tells Christy that she and Esther can go and have a proper lunch; they are not obligated by age to join in the Lenten ritual.⁶⁷ We read that Christy “winced a little. She hated to be reminded of such things as Lent—she thought it bad form” (165). These gestures do not mean Christy has rejected her faith but is making small choices as to when she will comply and when she will exercise choice, including in the matter of reading.

Delivering an overview of the book *Christy Carew*, Helen Kelleher Kahn interprets Christy’s behaviour as perverse:

We can see already how very different this novel is from the conventional “family story” of the time, which upheld values of obedience to parents, self-sacrifice and patience under adversity, with the prospect that virtue would be rewarded in this life as well as in the next. In *Christy Carew* Esther, the angelic, good and obedient daughter, dies a tragic death. Christy, on the other hand, succeeds in her aims not because she is “good” in Victorian terms, but because she is disobedient, selfish and rebellious. (150)

This appraisal illustrates a fine line between certain characteristics and the capacity to respond to knowledge with autonomy. However, self-sacrifice, patience under adversity, and rewards are “Victorian terms”. Christy is intentionally not “good”. She is exercising autonomy in resisting stifling religious influence including endorsed reading

⁶⁷ Beginning on Ash Wednesday, Lent is “the period of forty days in which the Church prepares for Holy Week and Easter. Since the fourth century, it has been observed as a time of penance and renewal for the whole Church, with fasting and abstinence” (“What is Lent?”).

dispensed and expected in her social and religious circle, thus enacting her own “literary license” (Laffan 283). Within the context of Victorian ideology surrounding the behaviour of women, appropriation of choice was deemed rebellious, but this does not mean it was. Applying choice was considered to be “disobedient” and “selfish” in a society that assumed women to be sacrificial bearers of familial and national responsibility. James Murphy explains “fiction writing by Catholics tended to become the preserve of those who were keen to vindicate the Victorian respectability of Ireland” and Kahn’s treatment of Christy’s character compliments this notion (“Catholics and Fiction” 104). However, supporting Kahn’s observation that family portrayals in Laffan’s *Christy Carew* balk conventional values, analysis thus far strongly indicates Laffan would likely have rejected the notion of her position as vindicating “the Victorian respectability of Ireland”. Murphy clarifies this noting, “May Laffan derided Catholic pretensions to respectability” (104). In Ireland when Laffan was writing her fiction, her biographer Kahn notes “religion and social class were inextricably connected” thus “class division tended to be on religious lines”; unavoidably, religion extended beyond spirituality which would perhaps make it difficult to detach oneself openly from its grasp (29, 41). The Laffan’s “saw their religion as an essential part of their identity, which they had no desire to alter” (Kahn 13). May Laffan herself, markedly anti-clerical in much of what she wrote, “remained a Catholic until the end of her life, though a non-practising one” (28). Threading this experience through her writing, such as in her character Christy Carew, demonstrates how an individual can be selective in how they do or do not practise religion.

Accompanying pious and good reading was the notion of reading inducing personal improvement. That this was accepted and assimilated into ordinary conversation is revealed in the following dialogue between Christy Carew and her friend Esther O’Neil:

“What is this you are reading?” asked the visitor, taking up the book her friend had let drop. ““Essays”! Oh, my dear, you are improving your mind, I see. Did Father Caffrey recommend you that?”

Christy gave a short, amused laugh.

“Very likely! Do you suppose he chooses my books for me? I should have a limited choice of reading, in that case. No, indeed; it was Mr. Sugrue.”

“Mr. Sugrue! Oh, but he is a Protestant.”

“All the better, too—I mean for choosing books. Come, Esther, I’ll have no preaching. He recommends me nothing but the dullest and driest; in fact, the most *improving* sort, and what worse can be said of a book than that?”. (Laffan

Christy Carew 1:20, 21)

Voices of religious influence, Catholic Father Caffrey and Protestant Mr Sugrue govern this dialogue on reading. Helen Kelleher Kahn notes Laffan “did not give down right approval to one side or the other of the social and religious divide, but weighed both and often found both wanting” (43). Both “sides” believe the idea of books as “improving” a person. Esther assumed the recommendation came from a Catholic priest. On hearing Sugrue is the source of the book she is disconcerted. Her response is to define his religious bent, implying he is not up to the task of book recommendation. However, Sugrue’s undertaking is as expected of the diligent Protestant. The reviewer in this extract indicates “public” and “individual” Protestants were more “active” in sharing reading material, rather than relying on clerics to disseminate appropriate reading:

Our Catholic public, and Catholic individuals, are not nearly so zealous or so generous as they ought to be in promoting religion and piety and other good causes by means of literature of various kinds. They do very little for themselves

in this respect, and they do nothing for others—nothing like what is done by the active members of many Protestant sects. (“New Books” 43)

Catholic individuals are expected to promote their religion through books and these books promote “piety and other good causes”. Sugrue appears to be a good Protestant in recommending the “most *improving* sort” of books. He is also aware of autonomy. As noted in Chapter One, when Christy is despairing the career possibilities for women he tells her, “the only way of making it better lies within your reach”, and encourages her to find ways to help herself (Laffan *Christy Carew* 1:208). It appears he supports his advice by lending Christy books. On Esther’s arrival, Christy is reading but “let drop” the book. Possibly Christy knows if she is seen with an “improving” book, assumptions will be made which do not align with her own motivation in reading the book. Esther’s questions confirm the book is of dull, dry “essays”. Esther’s jibe, “Oh my dear, you are improving your mind” reflects conventional narrative of purposeful reading. Christy says, “I’ll have no preaching” which she expects from Esther, because “people like the O’Neils were eternally obtruding their religion—‘religiosity,’ Mrs. Carew once called it—and all its minutiae” (3:165). Esther and Christy’s awareness that appropriate books offer a “limited choice of reading” indicates any reading beyond these boundaries as exercising autonomy. Christy informs Esther she will not take book choices from Father Caffrey, thus deciding whose recommendations she will accept. Christy’s subversive streak resists Esther’s learnt narrative and reframes Sugrue’s recommendation as “the most *improving* sort” to her own advantage. Her response that Sugrue’s choice is “all the better, too”, implies she will improve her reading practice, not for her mind, but for attention from and to please a potential suitor. This is borne out in a later episode when she expressed intent to impress Sugrue with her reading, telling him,

“I read every book you named in that list you gave, and I want you to give me another.”

“Shan’t,” returned he with composure; “you had books enough for any reasonable person for a whole year. Read them over again.”

“Very well, I will” she said submissively. (1:131)

Christy ensures she will appeal to Sugrue through her reading, whether she actually reads the books or not.

Turning to another episode in *Christy Carew*, reading “good books” is associated with religious approbation. Christy’s “good and obedient” Catholic friend Esther O’Neil is punished for loving a Protestant, a punishment initially meted out through so-called correct(ive) reading. Feeling “broken-hearted” she asks Father Macklin to assist and find a way for the potential mixed marriage to work. On religious grounds, he refuses dispensation and in compensation and comfort offers books to read:

“Tell me, do you be reading good books.”

“I don’t know—yes.” This was said at random.

“Have you this? He held a book in his hand which he had taken off the mantelpiece. It was a well-thumbed copy of the ‘Imitation’”.⁶⁸ (*Christy Carew* 3:160)

The implication is “reading good books” would not have led Esther to consider a mixed marriage, a state judged a “danger and a snare” (157). Further, her reply of “I don’t know—yes” said “at random” suggests a similar conundrum Christy faced in how she exhibited autonomy to others. Outwardly, Esther is acquiescing, demonstrating by her

⁶⁸ The full title of *Imitation* is *The Imitation of Christ* (c.1418-1427), by Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471). A devotional classic, it addresses challenges a believer faces, and contains counsel, directives, and consolation focusing on the individual.

reply she knows “reading good books” is what is expected, yet this incompatible with how she feels. Faced with the loss of love perhaps she is wondering what exactly defined a “good” book, questioning how she has arrived in this painful situation if she has read “good books”. Ultimately, Esther’s choice is forbidden love, or religion and its lessons of “Imitation”; she had hoped for a loophole allowing her love, but she is learning that to avoid adverse consequences requires compliancy with religious mores. Additionally, her father is “too good a Catholic” to consider or acquiesce to his daughter’s wishes (162, 157). On leaving the priest, Esther randomly opens the book she has been given, only to read what she perceives as a relevant, perhaps inspired message: *“Love feels no burden, thinks nothing of trouble, attempts what is above its strength, pleads no excuse of impossibility: for it thinks all things lawful for itself, and all things possible”* (163). Love should not be the burden it has become for Esther as she battles to preserve and advance it. Rather than “possible” as far as mixed-marriage and Catholicism goes, it is “trouble” and impossible. Love according to the book has its own law which transcends all. In real life this is not the case. However, Esther adapts this unyielding circumstance as an opportunity for autonomy. Esther has read love thinks “all things possible” which holds hope for her. She does not stop with appealing to Father Macklin but approaches her friend Father Considine; he also will not help her, explaining “the law of the Church cannot be evaded—cannot be Broken” (207). Again, a book that has entered their conversation previously is insisted as “comfort”, imbued with personal meaning and great personal sacrifice from the “bibliomaniac” Father Considine:

[T]ell me, dear, would it not comfort you to have a book? “Oh yes!” he cried aloud, as if a sudden inspiration had come to him. Without waiting for her answer he moved quickly across the room; in an instant the little step-ladder was in its place—he had mounted it, had flung to the right

and left the books which formed the bulwark and the sanctuary of his treasure, and seizing the precious volume, the treatise on the Immaculate Conception, he advanced to her and pressed it into her hands. “Take it, my child. I had intended never to part with it, but you will find the comfort of such a book, and—and to you only could I sacrifice”. (208)

In contrast to Esther’s apparently revelatory discovery of an appealing description of love, the priest’s “inspiration” leads not to possibilities, but the treatise on the Immaculate Conception. The language adopted emphasises Esther has sought appropriate counsel. Drawn from the “sanctuary”, this “treasure” is a “precious volume” lent with “sacrifice”. The twice-mentioned “comfort” implies religious succour will answer Esther’s dilemma in contrast to the love she has connected with “all things possible”. Esther refuses the book, and consequently godly correction, and leaves, a distinct small behaviour with no endeavour to please or conform even to the direction of a cleric and established friend of her family. She has the chance to run away with Nevil Jocelyn, her love, but decides not to. Possibly, both the recommendations of *Imitation* and a treatise on the Immaculate Conception has pricked her conscience; as well, she does not ultimately want to be disowned by her family. When her “wickedness” is revealed, she feels “condemned” but “resigned” to her fate—she is shipped to London (214, 210). Even though she does not follow her heart, Esther ultimately dies, a suitably religious retribution for she who dares to consider following an alternative path. Until her deathbed back in Ireland, Esther shuns the religion that denied her what she wanted. Her stance is noted by Father Macklin who remarks, “she’s terribly changed, indeed. She has turned against her religious practices” (303). He puts it down to “curious fancies” resulting from the “disease” (303). The story does not define Esther’s illness but indicates it is of the mind and a result of her inappropriate love, rephrasing the Friar in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, “these violent delights have violent ends” as “mere

violent desires have violent ends” (Shakespeare 2.6.9; 369). Esther tells Christy, “I haven’t any hope or care in this world—or in the next either. I never went near the sacraments—never I and at mass I can’t even follow the prayers” (302). Her loss of hope and care could be the consequences of regret. However, her abstinence from the rituals of sacraments and mass is a manifestation of personal choice, an active and decisive response to the religion that disallowed her heart’s desire. In her final moments, Esther calls for a priest, but this too is her choice and the resistance until this point on her terms. No so-called comforting reading motivated Esther to continue with her religion. Despite being “good and obedient” and reading “good” books, Esther is denied a satisfactory outcome. She becomes disillusioned with what her faith required and did not find solace in her religion or its books. However, she found the strength to make decisions and choose her own way of being.

Turning to Laffan’s first novel, *The Honorable Miss Ferrard* (1878), we find Mrs Julia Perry, and her four daughters who span the undefined range of girlhood. The Perrys have no qualms in voicing their opinions unless their father is present. They forge their own path in the matter of reading; in contrast to “good books” they choose light reading. The pursuit of piety is not their goal, nor is saintly reading. A visitor to the Perry household, Mr Satterthwaite, has initiated a conversation on reading with the daughters:

“How are you off for books? You have a library in the town?”

“No,” replied she, “there is no library. The nuns have a few religious books and story-books, and they lend them out at a penny a week.”

“Why don’t you form a book-club, and get down books from Dublin? In England people do that. How do you live without reading?”

“Oh, we don’t mind,” returned the young lady in a languid, careless drawl. “We borrow a book now and again. We don’t care for reading.”

“Do you know the *London Journal*?” said the youngest, Miss Eily, looking up pertly at him.”

“Eily! If you ever bring the *London Journal* from the kitchen again I’ll tell Father Quaide on you,” her mamma spoke in peevish, scolding tones, “and I won’t allow Julia to bring it into this house. You know he doesn’t approve of light reading.” (Laffan *Miss Ferrard* 142, 143)

Each of the Perry women in this dialogue have exercised choice. Julia explains they “don’t mind” about limited access to books, and “don’t care for reading”. The words “languid” and “careless” convey a nonchalant approach to reading which is not troubled by the lack of a library and borrowing “a book now and again” suffices. The girls have chosen to take little advantage of the convent facilities. They can “live without reading”; borrowing a book does not mean they read it. The Perry girls’ blatant dodging of reading implies freedom from conventional commentary surrounding reading practice for young women. Introducing the *London Journal* to the conversation, Eily looks “up pertly” suggesting she is aware of the ruction this will create and is confident in raising the fractious issue of light reading. The best-selling *London Journal* was a penny fiction weekly described by Alva Ellegard who compiled a directory of periodicals in 1957 as “trashy in contents” (22). In an article, “What the Working Classes Read”, Edward G. Salmon describes stories in the *London Journal* as “frequently the veriest trash” (112). Andrew King explains how the print and type of the magazine identified it as “modern”; it could be perceived as “radical” though not overtly political. He also concludes this periodical offered “some interpretative freedom . . . through the offer of implied meanings” which the reader is “free to supply or not” (91). The *London Journal* was one of the periodicals Katharine Tynan’s mother believed to be “worse than novels”

(*Twenty-Five* 42). This makes it an interesting inclusion in Laffan's story in the context of autonomy. Mrs Perry seems irked at the turn this conversation takes. Her irritation is possibly at being ousted as a mother who has seemingly neglected her duty; her daughters have disregarded appropriate reading, ignoring any advice their mother may have conveyed on reading. Responsibility for raising daughters as conventional, useful citizens rested with the mother. Reminders appeared in columns of periodicals. The *Irish Monthly* of May 1880 exhorts mothers as to the "sacred obligation" that "weighs" on them who wear the "traditional halo of motherhood" because lest they forget, "the mother of to-day rules the world of tomorrow." ("On Mothers" 280). Even after she is gone, "the memory of a holy and devoted mother is a strengthener of faith and many other virtues" (280, 281). An additional reminder that "as the mother is, so are her sons and daughters", adds to the pressure of responsibility I suggest Mrs Perry is weary of (280). In 1878, Charlotte Mary Yonge in her book *Womankind* championed the mother's role as the "centre" of duty and advice, within the family and community a "greater power for good, not only to her own children, but all who come in contact with her" (293). Some years previously, Sarah Stickney Ellis, an established voice at the time of Laffan's fiction, acknowledges this responsibility in her advice book *The Mothers of England: Their Influence and Responsibility* (1843), writing that "with the mother, then, rests the practical duty of exhibiting by her own self-denying conduct, her supreme regard for religion, both in her heart, and her household" (370). She notes it is not always easy, saying of the mother,

she can expect her religious influence to be of much benefit to her children.

There is also a grudging; and reluctant manner of giving to the duties of religion their due share of regard, which has a very injurious effect upon the minds of children, for they are quick to observe, not only what is done, but in what spirit we act. (Ellis 369)

It is not sufficient to impart religion through instruction and example; in “what spirit” this influence is conveyed can be beneficial or damaging. Tynan lends credence to this undertaking in recalling the attempted influence of her own mother as issuing from a religious basis:

I was forbidden all but good-book reading that Lent, and very little of the good-book reading, since my mother, no sooner did she see me looking upon printed matter, cried out that the child would destroy her eyes. This argument against my reading went side by side with the other, e.g. that all novel-reading was a thing to be abhorred by good Catholics. (39)

Tynan explicitly informs her audience the “argument against my reading” is a result ultimately of the Catholic abhorrence of “all novel-reading” which her mother supported with remonstrations. She also felt Tynan’s “prayers should be a satisfactory substitute for my reading” (*Twenty-Years* 39). Likewise, Mrs Perry is aware of motherly responsibility but does not convey to her daughters the solid argument of Tynan’s mother. In contrast, she elicits the “reluctant manner” Stickney Ellis talks of. The “supreme regard for religion” mothers were supposed to exhibit seems diluted in Mrs Perry, though the threat of priestly reprimand takes precedence over any potential “injurious effect” on her children’s minds. Mrs Perry is not shown promoting “good-book reading” for her daughters or suggesting a “substitute” as Tynan’s mother did. She only intervenes when her daughters reveal the presence of the *London Journal* to a visitor as the “printed matter” read in the Perry household. Sally Mitchell writes the *London Journal* provided an outlet for women at home, explaining “the most blatantly romantic and aristocratic serials often supplied a personal vehicle for the escapist by featuring a character she could identify with” (*Fallen Angel* 3). This could be Mrs Perry’s inclination, but her intention at his moment in the dialogue is to please the

Priest, who “doesn’t approve of light reading” and she affirms her role by indicating she decides what to “allow” into the house. Stickney Ellis contended the “spirit” accompanying the mother’s actions influences her daughters and this is evident. I suggest Mrs Perry is a subversive reader. Her daughters’ “don’t care”, “don’t mind” attitude to reading reflects her own peevishness at having to manage the situation. She herself identifies the journal as “light reading”. She rebukes Julia for bringing the journal home but there is a sense of complicity. Her response is consequence of discovery rather than the reading habits of her household. Her disapprobation is occasioned by Eily’s removal of the journal “from the kitchen”. Her own preference for the *London Journal* is exposed. The offending “light reading” entered a space where visitors become privy to what was a private experience. Mrs Perry attempts to curb interest in such reading in the presence of a visitor and the overarching shadow of Father Quaide, thus her remonstrating is extended to the journal not “entering” the house “again”. Her “scolding tones” uphold learnt opinion from the Church, and her threats of “if you ever”, and “I’ll tell Father Quaide on you” bear this out, though their childish intonation lacks conviction. Her peevish stance further suggests the fettered position to priestly opinion is wearisome to her. The convent library ensures correct reading is available to the reading public, yet Mrs Perry does not chastise her daughter’s decision to avail of this lending facility only “now and again”. If she is reading the *London Journal* in the kitchen, her daughters will also follow their preferences.

Despite it being frowned upon, the Perry women have chosen to restrict themselves at most to light reading. An alternate narrative says consuming intelligent reading content was also considered unsatisfactory. An article in the *Irish Monthly* of December 1882 entitled “Everyday Thoughts on Clever Women” written by a woman Mrs Frank Pentrill, may on first glance anticipate a detour from religious responsibility if you were intellectually inclined. However, the reader quickly discovers that “learned

words” from the mouth of a young girl send an “uncomfortable sensation” through Mrs Pentrill (749). She proceeds to acknowledge mothers as “good women, who rule their lives by a simple, straight-forward faith, make their homes happy, and bring up their children to fear God and act aright” but further extols a holy preference for unmarried women who have learnt the “sweet womanly instincts” of sympathy and tolerance, inherited from Biblical first woman, “thy mother Eve” and learnt from God, “her Divine Master” (749, 752, 751). Temporarily side-lining a birth mother’s efforts, Mrs Pentrill implies if a woman can avoid influences such as the “modern cramming of young brains” and minds “overloaded” with “undigested theories”—no doubt acquired in part through intelligent reading of books—and procure learning from the Divine Master, she is the epitome of “perfection” (752, 751). A narrative such as this within periodicals sent a perceptible message. Mrs Pentrill audaciously references George Eliot, suggesting her “great talent” failed the ultimate ambition of contentment under the “fatherly mercies” of God (750). Thus, she is implying an intellectual mind is deficient but to own the qualities of religious “goodness and usefulness” should be the foremost goal of women whatever their station in life (750, 752). This would appear to quash any capacity for small behaviours, but those who value personal autonomy over societal acceptance will find ways to exercise choice.

“Read Without Danger”: The Matter of Morality

The cultural commentary surrounding reading embodied certain characteristics beyond what was “good” whether as proponents of Victorian morality or Catholic constancy. Reviewers in periodicals expected readers to “look more closely” at content to confirm its appropriateness (M. B. 744). Writing as late in the century as 1897, contributor Timothy Brosnahan remonstrates in “Thoughts on Reading” in the *Irish Monthly*:

our duty as Catholics is to leaven the social and intellectual life of those we live among with the eternal principles of right-thinking and right-living. Besides the advantage of intelligence and education possessed by them, we possess the incomparable advantage of having fixed, stable and certain principles to guide us. (96)

The need for “right-thinking” and adherence to “certain principles” continued to be determinedly circulated. Brosnahan further encourages his audience when considering whether to read certain literature to “examine it in the light of faith and the native instincts of morality implanted in every soul”. (98). The column “Notes on New Books” assessed books, frequently written by Catholic authors, as to whether they were “safe for our lending libraries”, reiterating “caterers for Catholic libraries may add these to their stores as being safe and edifying without being silly” (55, 54). The word “safe” appeared often in this context. At times, if books were not new to the market but were considered “excellent Catholic novels” they would be integrated into the column (54). If a reader singled out the *Irish Monthly* as their book reading opinion of choice, they would find literary content reflecting a perspective of contributors who Declan O’Keefe notes “strove to become more Victorian than the Victorians themselves”⁶⁹ (170). The columnist referenced above in the *Irish Monthly* later mentioned how “we once ventured in this Magazine to give a pretty long list of “Harmless Novels”, and we have frequently been asked to continue our catalogue” thus indicating an ongoing religious basis of recommended reading (“Notes on New Books” 390). Consistently, readers are reminded of the apparent thought behind recommending reading which is “really clever and interesting and, at the same time, harmless, and better than harmless novels are the

⁶⁹ Founded in 1873 by Matthew Russell, the *Irish Monthly* ran until 1954. It was a literary journal with a strong Catholic ethos. Contributors included Katharine Tynan, W. B. Yeats, and Oscar Wilde. The background of the *Irish Monthly* is discussed in Declan O’Keefe’s article, “A Beacon in the Twilight: Matthew Russell, S.J. and the ‘*Irish Monthly*’”.

great desideratum of lending libraries” (167). Listings of books were usually for the furtherance of personal spiritual growth and religious stability in society. Often fictional works would appear alongside Devotional literature,⁷⁰ all with the same intent, to be satisfactorily suitable and unobjectionable:

We have examined these volumes that we might be able to pronounce on their suitability for Catholic children and they have stood the test very satisfactorily; there is nothing in them objectionable on the subject of religion, and they are all, each in its own way, very interesting in the style that is attractive to juvenile minds. (“Books for Children” 242)

It was important that “nothing in them objectionable” pertained to the “subject of religion” which was always to be presented in a positive light. It was offensive to offer an opinion which suggested a negative slant of religion. In the same periodical, one book on maintaining perseverance in its many forms of servitude is “readily” recommended:

To Catholic young men and women, who often wish for a good and instructive book to read, we can readily recommend this second volume; it is complete in itself, and its perusal will help them to habits of useful thought and increase their appreciation of the beauties of their religion. (“Notices of Books” 469)⁷¹

It is assumed readers “often wish for” religious reading material, though it is doubtful the wish for “good and instructive reading” entailed over eight hundred pages. The intended outcome of reading leading to “habits of useful thought” and a positive perspective of religion is a sustained echo of admonition via periodicals. This is

⁷⁰ For a discussion on Devotional literature see Krista Lysack’s chapter, “‘Found in Every Room’: Victorian Devotional Literature.” in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Religion*.

⁷¹*The Catechism of Perseverance*, by Monsignore Gaume.

confirmed by a request to The Present Writer in the *Irish Monthly* 1886 related in an article titled “Harmless Novels”. It indicates the concern surrounding reading material which is unobjectionable:

Would you be so good as to give me the names of a few Catholic novelists whose books are readable . . . The reason of my inquiry just now is, that I am trying to put a library together for our Catholic Institute, and I feel rather *squeamish* about the books I set in circulation. (207)

It is assumed receiving a recommendation will quell a personal feeling of squeamishness which suggests a sense of nausea resulting from the worry of shocking the readership with a wrong choice. The Present Writer understands this motive commenting, “readable” may mean “sufficiently moral to be read without danger”, further highlighting the importance placed on the presumed effect of reading (208). Some periodicals of the time suggest Catholic dictum on reading was not as strict as often perceived; while morality was a dominant thread, reading was more likely to be considered unsuitable, rather than harmful. Saturated with both visible and subliminal religious guidance, and contributions by clergy, Catholic journals such as the *Irish Quarterly Review*, *Dublin Review*, and the *Irish Monthly* promulgated subtle warnings on reading.⁷² It was preferred that fiction “put forward a religious purpose” through its story, enabling “light and comfort” for those “buffeted about” by alternative worldviews on religious matters (“New Books” 108). The tone was often decidedly positive as opposed to emphasis on retribution as this review reveals:

⁷² *The Irish Quarterly Review* was published in Dublin from 1851-1860. The *Dublin Review* was a Catholic periodical which ran from 1836-1969. Published in London, its name was chosen as Dublin was the centre of Catholicism. For an overview of periodicals connected to Ireland, see William Grattan-Flood, “Periodical Literature—Ireland.”

It would be very hard to get a book more suitable for wholesale distribution among the simple faithful than a cheap, well-packed, but well-printed, well-arranged, and easily read little book by the Rev. Thomas Murphy, P. P., of Mountmellick, entitled “How to Live Piously: a Little Book of Simple Instructions, Exhortations, and Prayers, designed chiefly for the use of the Flock entrusted to his care” (Dublin: James Duffy & Sons). It is thoroughly practical, evidently dictated by great zeal and experience, and it is full of very striking and apposite sayings of the saints. We hope it is or will soon be as well known to our good people as it ought to be. (“New Books” 402)

Sandwiched between serials of novels in the “New Books” section, suggesting a balance in reading rhetoric, this review offers an accessible religious book: “cheap, well-packed, but well-printed, well-arranged, and easily read” suggests little effort is involved on the part of the reader. It is further described as practical, composed with zeal and experience and “full of very striking and apposite sayings of the saints”. Having appealed to consumers on the merits of this book, the reviewer further flatters the readers as “our good people”. The title’s directive of “How to Live Piously”, is a continuation of learnt behaviour encouraged in convent education whose aim was unashamedly that of “forming youth to the practice of solid piety” (26). The inclusion of “Simple Instructions, Exhortations, and Prayers” has potential to enable the most remiss of society to be among the “good people”.

Examples of book titles encouraged and reviewed in periodicals in the 1880s when May Laffan was writing include *The Life of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God*, by Sister Mary Francis Clare; *The Girl’s Spiritual Calendar* by Josephine M. Black, which, it is proposed, “will find favour with convents and their pupils”; *God in His Works: A Series of Reading Books for Me Children of the Church*, By the Sisters of

Mercy of The Kinsale Community (“New Books”, 675, 676). Published in Dublin, Ireland, these titles are considered religious reading, though occasionally topics were embraced such as “plants and flowers, of sun and stars and seasons”, and “many different departments of literature, histories of places and persons, fiction, music, ascetic theology, &c” (675, 676). Over a decade later when Katharine Tynan and George Egerton were writing in the 1890s, recommendations by periodicals continued in a similar vein. “A Real Ghost, and Other Christmas Stories” by May Dearn is implied as borderline with the reassurance, “we should like . . . more of humdrum life in the plot—though ‘The Real Ghost’, indeed, is expressly said to be founded on fact” (“Notes on New Books” 54). A “very pretty volume of three hundred pages, ‘The Black Lady and Other Tales’ by Canon Schmid”, has an additional note that the name “guarantees the little stories as innocent and pleasant” (54). A further title within the “stock of harmless fiction” includes “A Sevenfold Treasure” by a Miss Dobree, and “A Mother’s Sacrifice” by Miss Clarke. They are “recent publications of the Catholic Truth Society” containing “several pleasant and edifying stories” (167).⁷³ Novels in general were not always encouraged. The *Irish Monthly* infrequently reviewed novels, as one reviewer explains:

The reading of novels is for the majority of rational beings a somewhat laborious amusement. We do not envy the gentlemen who review the “novels of the week” in the *Athenaeum* and the *Academy*, for they seem actually to read a good deal of the books they criticize. Three or four good novels per annum would be a fair allowance. (“New Books” 108)

Even if books were not specifically of the Devotional genre mentioned earlier, they

⁷³ The Catholic Truth Society (CTS) was founded in 1868. It prints and publishes Catholic literature.

were clearly marked as harmless with a religious grounding; writers were integrating religious creed into their works. This integration could include questioning belief as do Laffan and Egerton. Tynan in contrast contributed essays to the *Irish Monthly* and was highly regarded and referenced as among those contributing to the “Catholicity” in poetry—this Catholicity, as will be seen, is evident when her fiction is reviewed also (Carton 169). Her name readily appears in the same sentence as “Catholic” within periodical pages. Tynan also contributed “very good and pleasant stories” to the “Catholic Annual” (“Notes on New Books” 663)⁷⁴. At the back of her book *Her Father’s Daughter* (1901), fourteen pages are dedicated to listing appropriate Catholic reading material under the title “Standard Catholic Books”, incorporating headings such as “Doctrine, Instruction, Devotion”, “Novels and Stories” and “Theology, Liturgy, Sermons, Science and Philosophy”. The heading “Miscellaneous” includes titles such as “Catechism of Familiar Things” and “Select Recitations for Catholic Schools and Academies” (“Standard Catholic Books” 1-14). In the public domain, Tynan is clearly affiliated with the Catholic ethos. This evident commitment to her religion surely offers some explanation for the absence within her fiction of questioning religion through the choices and decisions of her characters. By way of comparison, in the *Irish Monthly* of 1898 we read, “*The Priest in the Family*, by Miss Bridges (London; R. Washbourne). We are sorry that we can only admire the publisher’s part in this story. The binding is pretty, and the printing is good”; the content, it appears, was not (“Notes on New Books” 277). At the fin de siècle where it appears progressive options inform reading experience, opinion in the *Irish Monthly* remains consistent, with a swipe at novel-readers: “we plead guilty to utter inability to relish some stories that get considerable vogue here at home among the general novel-reading world” (“Notes on New Books”

⁷⁴ Tynan contributed to several periodicals including among others the *Catholic Monthly*, the *Dublin University Review*, *Hibernia*, the *Irish Monthly*, and *The Pall Mall Gazette*. Periodicals she contributed to which are highlighted in my discussion are relevant to the current theme.

333). They clearly were not going to digress from “wholesome” recommendations which “may safely be added to the most carefully guarded library, and ought certainly to be mentioned emphatically in any continuation of those articles on ‘Harmless Novels’ which have at long intervals appeared in our pages” (336). Columnist M. R. reminds readers of the stance of their magazine, continuing the narrative in 1899 that

it is long since our ideas of the value of time have obliged us to abstain from all novel-reading, except on compulsion; namely, when it becomes our duty to form an opinion of the moral and literary merits of certain books submitted to our judgment (“Sketches in Irish Biography” 13).

There is no doubt as to the intention of the *Irish Monthly*, as was the case with numerous periodicals, to be selective and discuss novels which predominantly embraced moral and religious content. Clearly, Victorian morality⁷⁵ underpins a faultless reading experience. This stance of dutiful opinion in warning readers attempted to stifle the representation of female agency in fiction which could be read about and assimilated and forestall individual agency in deciding what book to read. This does not mean they were successful in this ambition. I argue autonomy is markedly present in fictional reading episodes.

Returning to May Laffan’s *Christy Carew* (1880), I extract the dialogue between Hannah the nurse and Christy to underline the correlation of religion to reading:

“You’re looking dull, Miss Christy,” . . . “I wonder at you. You ought to go out and run about an’ amuse yourself, you that has nothing else to do. Anyway, I think it is you do be reading too much.”

“Reading too much?” repeated the young lady.

⁷⁵ Appropriate societal norms (including religion) guiding peoples conduct.

. . .

“You could do nothing’ worse than readin’ a priest tol’ me—‘tis a sin—‘unless it is thinkin’; an’ T see you thinkin’ constant, Miss Christy. An’ don’ you know thinkin’ is able to damn you.”

“Thinking?” Miss Carew . . . looked up.

“Yes” continued Hannah, who was looking at herself in the glass, “I have it from a priest—a missioner down in the country. “Reading is bad,” sez he, “but thinkin’—thinkin’,” sez he, “is able to damn you”. (295, 296)

The idea of reading as “bad” and thinking causing damnation can be viewed variously. Katharine Tynan recalls her mother shared the consensus that “novel-reading was a thing to be abhorred by good Catholics” (*Twenty-Years* 39). In the same year *Christy Carew* is published, an article in *Blackwood’s Magazine* discusses suicide in depth and it is notable that research at that point determined

the inhabitants of countries in which everyone can read are precisely those who kill themselves the most. Now this supplies another indication that people do not always make a good use of reading. We knew that fact already, it is true, but we scarcely expected that additional proof of it would be supplied in this strange form. That reading conduces to suicide is a new view of reading, but it is incontestably an exact one—within limits. (“Suicide” 727)

Blackwood’s highlighted issues in Ireland, including the position of education, holding debates on education as a dominant feature of articles, a subject which garnered Laffan’s attention (Roberts 3). For someone interested in education and in turn, reading, the article associating suicide with reading could have feasibly caught her eye. Laffan’s uncle, Gerald Fitzgibbon wrote a collection of essays *Ireland in 1868: The Battle-Field for English Party Strife; Its Grievances, Real and Factitious; Remedies, Abortive or*

Mischievous” (1868) whose focus on religious discord conceivably influenced Laffan’s own religious apprehensions⁷⁶. Reasonably, Laffan had contentious and current knowledge at her disposal that could influence her fictional depictions of reading. The *Blackwood’s* article identifies “a new view of reading” asserting “additional proof” that readers are the most likely demographic to commit suicide. From a Catholic perspective, suicide is considered a sin, and is offensive to God⁷⁷. It is not far-fetched to believe Laffan had read this article and considered a veiled connection. In the Catholic context of Hannah’s dialogue, she could have been drawing on this “new view” of reading leading to suicide. The priest had apparently told Hannah that reading “tis a sin” and equated thinking with damnation. Reading and thinking are allied. That people “do not always make a good use of reading” implies reading initiates thinking leading the reader down an alternate path from religious piety to potential damnation, a process which augments the notion that “reading conduces to suicide”.

Alternatively, I suggest the conversation between Hannah and Christy infers a Quaker⁷⁸ influence rather than a Catholic stance on reading. Laffan’s fictional challenges on religion suggests her openness to alternate ways of thinking and being. The forementioned *Blackwood’s* article differentiates reading per se from the “good use of reading” which speaks to the stance of advice through periodicals. Further, the article notes the consequences from reading can be addressed “by directing reading rather than by attacking it” (734). The idea of directing rather than attacking reading is a perceptive take on a relevant issue. Direction suggests guidance. Attacking implies criticism. Both

⁷⁶ Despite the title of his collection, Fitzgibbon asserted this was not a political book but addressed religious dissonance of the time.

⁷⁷ See “Respect for Human Life” in the Catechism of the Catholic Church at: https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P7Z.HTM#:~:text=2283%20

⁷⁸ According to the Official website, *Quakers in Ireland*, the name Quakers is a “nickname” (that has stuck), for The Religious Society of Friends. Founded in 1652, the Bible is central to their beliefs. Belief in Jesus Christ informs daily life. As a group meeting together, they commune with God. Focus on the individual and their interpretation is important. They believe in “the equality of men and women” (Jacobs).

can inform personal autonomy, but one suggests a response of choice to heed the guidance whereas the other suggests response from a position of defence. Catholicly influenced periodicals tended to opt for a directive approach, evident in the language utilised. It was noted previously the reading of a religious book potentially “help[s]” individuals to gain “habits of useful thought and increase their appreciation of the beauties of their religion” (“Notices of Books” 469). A positive tone is employed when offering directives on reading. In contrast, the Quaker journal *The Friend: A Religious and Literary Journal* (1882-4) arguably adopts an unequivocal and unambiguous approach, often expounding on the potential harm from reading. Headings such as “Hurtful Reading”; “Evil Literature”; “Leave the Book Alone”; and “A Gigantic Danger” were not unusual and align with Hannah’s narrative “from a priest—a missionary down in the country” (191; 299; 179; 227). According to Hannah this “missioner” determined reading “tis a sin” and “you could nothin’ worse than readin’” and finally, “reading is bad” (Laffan 296). The quote at the beginning of this chapter recommends if a book “hinders” rather than “help” and is not “substantial” then leave it alone. Reiterating the narrative of both safe and pious reading, this example appears under the heading “The Books We Read”:

A young woman . . . who, being tempted to read a work of fiction, made a beginning thereunto. But a little progress in the perusal convinced her, that it was not a safe book for her to read, neither one she could modestly confess to having read, if questioned. she sent the book away unread; and thus, while promoting her own growth in piety and virtue, at the same time set a noble example to all those who are similarly exposed to temptation. (13)

When it came to fiction, readers were expected to ascertain quickly whether a book is “safe”. As with Catholic based periodicals, Quaker commentators emphasised the need

for safe, pious, and virtuous reading. This stance is reiterated by James W. Hood, who discusses public “denouncements of fiction” by Quakers in the mid-nineteenth century (4). Hood notes this was an open opinion which clearly contributes to the warning that pervaded contemporary media of the century around novel reading; Quakers also believed reading should be of the improving sort, a means of solidifying religious belief and appropriate actions (4). Novel reading was included in pursuits that were deemed “worldly, false and frivolous” from the founding of Quakerism and a strong part of their identity (6, 7). An article in *The Friend* of 1883 relates the life of Quaker Sarah B. Upton. She was born in the late eighteenth century, but her example is revived for readers in the 1880s. Known as a “book-worm” and a “walking encyclopaedia”, the article records “her father kept abreast of the times in which he lived, and the only restriction put upon her selection of reading matter, it would appear, was his remark that if she would read no novels until thirty years of age, she might *then* read all she chose” (“The Sketch of the Life of Sarah B. Upton” 153). This advice was felt by Sarah B. Upton to be valuable as even when an adult she was “uncloyed by the unrealities and glamour of fiction” she “could relish the good and the beautiful in the wide realm of the True” (153). By the end of the century a more relaxed approach was emerging. Quakers were adapting to the “knowledge explosion” of the era disseminated through reading material and in private inclined to experiment more with reading “imaginative literature” (Hood 5, 6). However, at the time Laffan wrote her novels, Quaker commentary on reading was still maintaining novels as a corrupting influence or as Hannah conveyed, “bad”. There were “slight exceptions” at this time, but predominantly novels retained their danger and were to be avoided (Hood 7, 18). In 1881, the Quaker pamphlet no. 134, *On Fiction Reading*, detailed concern that novels “familiarise the reader with wickedness” whether overtly or covertly, and to “dissipate . . . religious conviction” are among the “tendencies and results” from reading novels (2,

3). Headings in the pamphlet include “Criminal Effects of Novel Reading” wherein “cases” make the connection of novel reading to suicide and violent acts, and “The Mental Effects of Novel Reading” accompanied by “cases” of “moral insanity” which it suggests the consequences are “more or less owing to indulgence in fictitious reading” (2, 3). Excluding alternative possibilities for such situations, “*the reading of novels*” is undoubtedly considered as “poisonous literature” which resulted in both criminality and illness (4, 5). One girl, it is attested, became “insane—incurably insane—from reading novels” (3). It seems a person did not even need to engage with a book because “periodicals full of the fascination of fiction” performed an adequate function of destruction as well (5). Opinions included in the pamphlet to convince of the perils of novel reading include Hannah More who elucidates:

The constant familiarity with works of fiction, even with such as are not exceptional in themselves, relaxes the mind, that wants hardening; dissolves the heart, that wants fortifying; stirs the imagination, which wants quieting; irritates the passions, which want calming; and, above all, disciplines and disqualifies for active virtues and spiritual exercises. The habitual indulgence in such reading is a silent, mining, mischief. (8)

The clear implication is familiarity with fiction through “habitual indulgence” disrupts religiously appropriate functions of heart, mind, imagination, and passions. Hindering “active virtues and spiritual exercises”, novels have the capacity to affect a person deeply, “mining mischief”. Pamphlet no. 135 entitled *Demoralising Literature and Art*, specifies “upon the female mind especially does the habit of novel reading lead to most injurious results” (6). Words used through the pamphlet accompanying reading fiction echo titles mentioned earlier: “hurtful”, “injurious”, “unholy”, “subversive”, “corrupt”, “evil”, and “seeds of vice” (5, 6). Such was the discourse disseminated through

pamphlets and periodicals. Viewed in this context, Hannah, and the priest's resolute attitude to reading was a conceivable protection against the disruption, or indeed contamination of faith or religious belief. Certainly, this is the stance of the conventional Quaker belief, but it permeated discourse on literature disseminated among believers. This position was more apparent in American Quakerism than British, both of which could feasibly influence attitudes in Ireland.⁷⁹ Such warnings indicate Quaker awareness of external influences on their flock in the final decades of the nineteenth century⁸⁰. Thus, I argue, it was not anomalous for Laffan to place Quakerism beside Catholicism in her fictional narrative.⁸¹ Both her awareness of the Quaker community in the locales familiar to her, such as when "Juliet D'Arcy was sitting by herself in the window of the Quaker's house" and the prevalence of Quaker instruction in media of the time facilitated a knowledge which could be integrated in her work (*Ismay's Children* 269). Whichever religious stance is propelled through Laffan's dialogue, upholding morality sits at its heart.

Katharine Tynan demonstrated herself to be a clear proponent of moral correctness, though this is more evident in her fiction than her own life at the fin de siècle. As a person, she exhibited small behaviours of choice against what was societally expected.⁸² Her fictional female characters, in contrast to Laffan and Egerton's, are more inclined to maintain religious protocol. Enveloped in religious

⁷⁹ Quakers originating from both America and Britain settled in Ireland. See Wigham, Maurice J. *The Irish Quakers: A Short History of the Religious Society of Friends in Ireland*. 2nd edition. Dublin: Historical Committee of the Religious Society of Friends in Ireland, 2003.

⁸⁰ Hood offers a limited but relevant insight into the reading material that Quakers were reading and acquiring for their libraries in Britain.

⁸¹ Laffan's father was from Tipperary and Quaker beliefs could feasibly have infiltrated Laffan's thinking, as "from those parts of her novels that describe life in rural Ireland it is clear that Laffan often visited relatives in County Tipperary and got to know the way of life there from the inside" (Kahn 22). Her knowledge of "the way of life" in Tipperary could stretch to an awareness of other beliefs in the vicinity, including those of the Quakers or Friends.

⁸² In Chapter One, I discussed how following the example of her father, Tynan read what she liked without discernment; she escaped to hiding places so she could read; on leaving convent education she was either "endlessly idle" or "endlessly busy" suggesting her time was her own (*Twenty-Five* 62). It will be seen further in this chapter that she "resorted to subterfuges" (39).

import, we read of “Aline, who, like a certain royal saint, goes splendidly to honour her husband’s position, but directs the eyes of her most meek spirit ever towards the Kingdom of Heaven” (Tynan *Handsome* 384). Mrs McNelis is found wanting because she is not whole-souled in her devotion, for “she missed out all the love that is the heart of religion . . . as a Catholic she was out of place, for the Catholic religion is one that insists more than any other on the Love of God” (“A Spoilt Priest” 155, 156). “Deep religious convictions” and “dearest faiths” are regarded as paramount to a successful marriage (*Way of a Maid* 282). Though Tynan’s fictional work during the 1880s and 1890s does not give prominence to religion, its influence is apparent. The response of critics to her stories garner evidence of praiseworthy moral intent, as demonstrated in the *Irish Monthly*, where we are told regarding Tynan in 1903:

God has used her to excite good thoughts and right feelings in many of the hearts that He has made. She has employed to good purpose the gifts she received from God; and her literary influence has been nothing less than salutary and sanctifying. (“Poets I have Known” 267)

In the eyes of the adjudicating religious, Tynan’s writing has been “employed to good purpose” garnering praise for engendering “good thoughts and right feelings” in the “hearts” of others. Her “literary influence” is “nothing less than salutary and sanctifying”, which is the very fiction promoted in periodicals. Perhaps these “gifts from God” were spawned as she attended church. In a chat recorded in *The Sketch* we learn the possession of

a quaint prayer-book, in which the “Katie” of fifteen years ago jotted down her thoughts in church, when the service seemed to her too long or uninteresting-sentences written in a bold, childish hand, which show that there was not a little

of the “old Adam” left, notwithstanding all the good nuns could do. (“A chat with Katharine Tynan” 348).

Exercising autonomy as a child Tynan used the boring time in church to record “her thoughts” thus “a little of the “old Adam”, or tendencies of disobedience reminiscent of the original Adam in the Bible, exist in her character.⁸³ Tynan’s “old Adam” attitude is accepted as an amusing anecdote yet consistently periodicals reminded readers the importance of adhering to standards which were imposed on reading. It seems intermittently her heart dictated an authentic response. Here, she openly reveals her dissatisfaction with what she expects of a personal religious experience:

About the poem for St. Joseph, I will try it if you wish, though I don’t know that I will be successful. I would not have my heart in it much; because one time I prayed very hard to him to avert a trouble from me, and he did not hear, or hearing turned away) and I had to bear my trouble. But perhaps he will get me something else instead someday. (“Poets I have Known” 255)

This idea of bartering her writing of religious poetry with how she perceives God to have responded or not to her wishes is itself an autonomous act. Holding on to the fact she “prayed very hard” but “had to bear [her] trouble” because the prayer was not answered she is choosing not to put her heart into her writing, therefore it will not be successful. Tynan’s personal adherence was selective and perhaps her vocalisations of these personal choices via letters, periodical articles, and her biographical accounts reflects confidence in her literary position as a prolific and respected writer.⁸⁴

Responding to restriction on reading due to the forementioned puritan cleansing of rural

⁸³ For the passage of scripture outlining Adam’s disobedience, see Gen.3.1-24, in *Douay-Rheims Bible Online* at <https://www.drbo.org/>

⁸⁴ Tynan penned her own biographies in five titles: *Twenty-five Years: Reminiscences* (1913), *The Middle Years* (1917), *The Years of the Shadow* (1919), *The Wandering Years* (1922), and *Memories* (1924).

activities, Tynan says she “resorted to subterfuges in order to gratify what was a vital necessity” (*Twenty-Five* 39). She further explains, “It was the prohibition of the novel which affected me; and I found my way to wriggle out of that” (39). It is disappointing to me that, in the period I am analysing, Tynan’s fictional works do not incorporate a female reader who read incessantly, “resorted to subterfuges”, and “wriggled out of” novel prohibitions. If Tynan had passed on her wriggling achievements to her fictional characters, she may have encouraged her readers likewise to free themselves from constrictions surrounding reading and books. Perhaps, in maintaining the Catholic ethos, that is what she wanted to avoid. Omitting small behaviours on reading in her fiction avoided disturbing her readership who expected stories promoting appropriate behaviour. Indeed, her poetry was “Marian” and devotional; for example, she contributed to a formidable and esteemed collection of poems on the Mother of God, *Carmina Mariana*, the first (1893) and second (1902) series.⁸⁵

Books and reading are directly and indirectly linked to the actions and responses of female characters whom George Egerton uses to circumnavigate the fin de siècle quandaries of morality and change encircling religion. Though there was a surge in conversion to Catholicism, particularly among the artistic and literary cohort, Egerton was questioning its core values, especially morality, via reading and small behaviours adopted by female characters.⁸⁶ Her protagonist in *The Wheel of God* (1898), Mary, encompasses the religious transitions apparent at this time. Using a book as an analogy in explaining her own “book of life” she “was turning over a great many pages . . . and readjusting moral values” (Egerton *Wheel of God* 103). Egerton’s attitude to morals can be traced in Mary’s retrospective account of her childhood when regaling the familiarity

⁸⁵ *Carmina Mariana: An English Anthology in Verse* (1893).

⁸⁶ For a discussion on conversion to Catholicism amongst literary people during the fin de siècle see the chapter “‘Damnably Aestheticism’ and the Catholic Conversion at the Fin de Siècle”, by Frances Knight, and Claire Masurel-Murray’s article, “Conversions to Catholicism among Fin de Siècle Writers: A Spiritual and Literary Genealogy”.

with the bookshelves in “the old nursery” (3). However, when it came to books in the drawing-room, they were found wanting. A cabinet contained “books with morals at the end of each tale; how she detested ‘moral!’ what was moral? It spoiled a story anyway, and she always skipped it” (5). While as a child she does not appear to understand the concept of “moral”, she is aware it is an imposition, an expectation, and she makes the decision to digress through the small behaviour of skipping the moral ending of a story. In a politely defiant act of autonomy, the child Mary would say “thank you [to the books] . . . and steal away to the shelves and chests in the old nursery” where she “revelled in the books” which held titles of which she was both “curious” and “fascinated” (5, 6). Clearly, Mary made choices of her reading material, aware of a moral aspect and ignoring it. This is not to say she felt free from religious grips:

A sampler hung on the wall, worked in gold and silver beads: “lost, a golden hour, set with 60 silver minutes,”—she never read more; that was enough to make pangs of conscience in her breast, when she lifted glowing eyes to it from tales of adventures and gallantry, certainly unfitted to her tender years. (7)

Religion intrudes and yet in another small behaviour Mary stops reading, aware of “enough”. Though the sampler’s message pricks her conscience, it does not appear to stop her from reading content “unfitted to her tender years”. However, these “hidden influences” as Egerton describes them, do not hold full control over Mary all of the time; she would be “strutting on the boards of the old nursery in the role of a hundred heroines” (7, 6). The stories influenced her perception of herself, at least in her imagination. Her mind is busy counteracting perfunctory religious rituals with heterodox inclinations. She “beat her breast” in personal retribution for the “daring, sceptical fancies that had a trick of darting through her perfunctory prayers” (8). Fancies stretched to times when “things talked and suggested things to her; then she got

frightened, and prayed Jesus, Mary, and Joseph to take the thoughts away” (9). She feeds her guardian angel “the nicest bit of tart, and the most tempting blob of cream” and gives him space in her bed (8). She “loved Jesus at Christmas-time” when he was powerless “little, and pink, and dimpled” but not when he is older and could have been “a glorious king” to “make the whole world happy” (8). Her ruminations indicate a reading child who thinks about what she is reading. Entwined with Catholic beliefs, “a thousand speculations chased one another through her busy child-brain” and she pondered creation, eternity, death (8, 9). Mary’s thoughts demonstrate autonomy. She analyses what she reads and asks questions. For example, “it puzzled her sorely to know why God let her have these thoughts when He had the entire arrangement in His own hands” and though the nuns would respond with explanations, she was not convinced (9, 10). Though she is disdainful of books with morals, and questions religious rhetoric, her “busy child-brain” has assimilated what she read (9). As an adult, she chooses to draw on her knowledge rather than ignore it; on hearing an incorrect “quote” from the Bible by another woman, “Mary pointed out that the quotation was not Biblical” (111). Exercising autonomy, Mary is selective in how her religious upbringing influences her life, drawing on it in here in an intellectual capacity.

“Silent Trusted Allies”: Reading and the Religious

When discussing female reading experiences in fictional works, frequently a priest is hovering within the pages. Their presence serves as an ongoing reminder of their influence on the reading practices of women and girls in particular and at times they are plucked from their isolated lives to reiterate the pervading viewpoint on books and reading at this time. Interestingly, their personal experience with reading is frequently experienced, like girls and women, within the private space of their home. Frequently in Laffan’s works when books are numerous in quantity or under discussion a priest is in

the vicinity. Like some of Laffan's female characters, priests are often seen to prioritise books and reading over religious interests. In *Christy Carew*, while visiting Father Macklin, Christy

noted to herself that there was not a single image of any sort in the room. A huge reliquary standing on a shelf of the bookcase, in a space left between the books, was, if some of the engravings be excepted, the only religious emblem in the place. (2:78)

The lack of expected images in the clerical home and where the “only religious emblem” is housed between books, suggests books have taken precedence over religion. As if to emphasise this divergence it is noticed by Christy whom we learn from her own mouth is “not religious: it was left out of me” (57). Father Considine is “always miserable away from his books”, and his passion grants him “individuality” (1:150). Moreover, “he’s behind the world entirely among those books of his” and “he took too little heed of current events” (3:142, 143). Indeed, his sentiments place what he reads above aspects of religiously conventional importance. He explains:

[B]ooks are the most precious gifts God has given us. Riches, friends, health, I value as nothing compared to these silent trusted allies. Who can be lonely with all these to speak to him? and their speech is not the mere babble of the day—fleeting and meaningless as the wind, but the voices of wise men, centuries dead and gone, whose messages these volumes hold as precious treasure for those who choose to converse with them. (1:185)

Father Considine's indulgent conversing with content of books is to the detriment of conversation with the living leading to societal isolation and personal neglect. He has “spent heaps of money—a whole fortune—on books” as well as neglecting friends and

health for books (151). Books have impinged on the “most precious gifts God has given us” of Christ or life itself (*Douay-Rheims Bible Online*, John 3.16; Eccl. 5.19). Father Considine’s reading and collecting habit is decidedly obsessive. Taking a bite of food at house, Christy “fancied the bread and jam had a bookish taste”, a further confirmation the station of books has seeped beyond their papally proper place (184). Father Considine’s housekeeper perceives his passion as “a sin”, though in the same breath she asks “God forgive” her speaking against books (178). Laffan’s depiction suggests a less fettered approach to the act of reading that belies the oft offered guidance through cultural commentary which connects reading to “habits of useful thought” and the goal of personal improvement, especially for women and girls (“Notices of Books” 469). In contrast, a priest can “converse” with books to the neglect of “riches, friends, health”; “habits of useful thought” have been replaced by an unhealthy, potentially detrimental habit. Constant reminders are sounded to the public to avoid bad reading, yet the priest’s reading is evidently bad for him. Laffan’s representation undermines the religious dictate on reading, and any observer, such as Christy or Esther, could adopt his habits as a precedent in her own argument for autonomous reading practice.

Katharine Tynan draws on her own experience to enforce the impact of clerical directives on reading. Referencing what she terms the “puritan wave” of the 1870s she highlights the part priests played in her reading practice:

I will give my impressions of the Irish priests elsewhere, only saying here, lest I should be misunderstood, that I have the greatest admiration for their devotion, self-sacrifice, and nobility of character. Whatever they did in the direction of sweeping away rural gaieties was done, one is sure, with the highest motives. My own personal knowledge of that Puritan wave was chiefly concerned with

the limitation of my reading.⁸⁷ I remember when my mother took away from me *Aurora Floyd* and locked it in a perpetually locked bookcase, leaving only an impression which lasts to this day of a golden-haired lady in whose fortunes I had so passionate an interest that it was a cruel fate indeed to have my following of them cut short. (*Twenty-Five* 38, 39)⁸⁸

Prior to relating the fate to befall her own reading experience, as seems to be Tynan's style she praises the devotion, sacrifice, and nobility of priests. She cites "the highest motives" in the dutiful cleansing away of certain cultural activities but views the personal ordeal of the removal of *Aurora Floyd* as "a cruel fate indeed" wherein her reading is "cut short" and the book "perpetually" imprisoned in the bookcase. Vestiges of the puritan wave continued beyond the 1870s as she explains, "the priest was sacrosanct. There was no criticism of his actions any more than there might be of the will of Heaven" (40). Tynan is careful to convey her response as fraught rather than criticise the priests' actions. Tynan carried this into her fiction where the words and actions of priests as representatives within Catholicism are not doubted, or questioned as Laffan and Egerton are wont to do, but quietly revered. Even their novel reading is defended and accepted even if recognised—usually by women and girls—as straying from religiously imposed expectations.

Though not specifically a female reading experience, a meeting of "young ladies" with a young priest serves to reaffirm the connection which prevailed between reading and religion. In Tynan's short story, "A Village Priest", the room which the

⁸⁷ Tynan's explains the Puritan Wave as the time "that the priests began to wage war on the . . . gaieties of Irish rural life" with "the desire for the moral good of his flock" (*Twenty-Five* 38).

⁸⁸ *Aurora Floyd* (1863) is a sensation novel by popular writer Mary Elizabeth Braddon (1835-1915). It follows the dramatic and emotionally fraught love life of Aurora. It is a sequel to Braddon's popular novel, *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862). Sensation fiction depicted intense emotion and scandal and was frequently warned against by cultural commentators as dangerous if readers became immersed in the drama; Tynan's "passionate" interest was therefore halted.

“young ladies” enter contains “a bookcase of theological works, most unprofitable to the lay person” and in a corner some “a few ordinary books, novels, and the like” (235). The novels briefly but significantly in the context of this discussion become the focus when the priest “apologized for his novels with a deprecatory smile—the follies of his student days, he said, but we noticed that they were dog’s-eared and thumbed far more than Suarez⁸⁹ and Liguori”⁹⁰ (Tynan “A Village Priest” 235). Both the priest and the young ladies indicate an awareness of contention surrounding novels; the priest apologises for their presence, apparently a past folly, and the young ladies used to the censoring of their reading material notice the state of the books and make a comparison of well-thumbed novels to eminent religious scholar Suarez, and Saint Alphonsus Liguori. Regardless of how he explains it away, the priest has been found out; the observers know the signs of regular indulgence in novels:

“These good friends keep me from madness,” he said, pointing to the books, “in the winter when the sea is roaring with a thunder that fills all the Glen, and the Heads shut out the grey sky.” He beamed at the shabby covers. “I don’t get tired of them,” he said, “as you young ladies, living in the world, might imagine. They are such good books, and full of information as well as amusement.” This last with an innocently apologetic air. (Tynan “A Village Priest” 238, 239)

The language Tynan employs is redolent of words used when regulating female reading: “good books” containing “information” but also “amusement”; Tynan describes the priest’s air when describing his books as “innocently apologetic”, possibly suggesting he is aware amusement is not a conventionally appropriate sentiment on reading content but is engaging with it anyway. His books keep him from “madness”. If it is assumed

⁸⁹ Likely Francisco Suárez, (5 January 1548 – 25 September 1617)

⁹⁰ Likely Alphonsus Liguori (27 September 1696 – 1 August 1787)

Tynan is taking the dominant narrative on madness at this period, this is to suggest again a similarity to female experience, as women were considered prone to madness⁹¹ claimed to be sometimes due to isolation, sometimes due to reading, both pertinent to the life of a solitary priest (Showalter *Female Malady* 174). Having conversed with the priest the young ladies determine “he was like the nuns in a convent school I well knew, some of whom had not read a newspaper since they came into the convent, and who believed that the world had since stood still” again conferring upon him a female, here “nuns”, experience of reading. However, also like female readers, this priest has exercised autonomy. He is choosing his reading material which includes novels. Arguably, Tynan is conveying a veiled message for female readers within this analogy.

While a strict regime of reading was applied to the pupils of convents, fictional accounts indicate small behaviours were enacted by individual nuns when it came to reading. Though, as noted previously, representations of reading and religion is scarce in Katharine Tynan’s fiction, she provides an insight into reading habit and autonomous experience of a nun in a biographical work *A Nun, Her Friends, and Her Order* (1891). Mother Mary Xaveria Fallon was recognised for being “very anxious to hear suggestions from all” (128). Her generous fostering of individual opinion enabled “wholesome liberty” in novices whose quirks informed their servitude to the church (110). For example, one “novice found she couldn’t meditate, and the Mother supplied her with a book to be read; quietly during meditation, which no doubt did her far more good” (Tynan, *A Nun, Her Friends and Her Order*, 110).

Previously it was noted how the village priest somewhat apologised for using books for amusement. Similarly, Mother Xaveria aware her time is limited adopts a

⁹¹ For additional discussion on madness see Elaine Showalter’s book, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980*, and Joan Busfield’s article “The Female Malady? Men, Women and Madness in Nineteenth Century Britain.”

virtuous attitude, assuring she is found to be adhering to the religiously imposed rules of reading rather than found liking an amusing book:

When she was allowed to sit up for a short time, a Sister brought her an amusing book, which she took with a grateful smile; but when asked afterwards if she liked it, she said, “Dear child, I can only read for a few minutes at a time, and then it must be something to help me on my road to heaven”. (180)

Evidently, amusing books were available within the walls of a convent, as well as reading material which would help on the “road to heaven”. Mother Xaveria is pleased to receive “an amusing book” responding with “a grateful smile”. It could be she did not realise what type of book it was. However, considering her kindness in facilitating reading for others, and her actions in the extracts to follow, I suggest her response to whether she liked the amusing book is to protect her chances of getting to heaven. In another act of removing evidence of roguish reading when Mother Xaveria was in bed dying

she sent for a sister, and drawing out a book from under the coverlet, with a kind of secret delight, she said, closing the nun’s hand upon it, “There, take this, dear child. I was delighted to get it, for it is just what you would like. Run away with it now, and don’t let anyone see it”. (165)

This extract explicitly demonstrates autonomy. Literally an undercover operation, Mother Xaveria has a book hidden under her “coverlet”, ready to pass on furtively to a new recipient whom she knew would “like” the book. Perhaps the book was an “amusing book” rather than a spiritual one. Not only is she willing to pass on a mystery book she is also aware of who would read it and enjoy it. The aspect of secrecy, a covert exchange of a book which no one else should see is conveyed as an aspect of “delight”,

a pleasure at a small behaviour which she can own. The language of “run away” adds to the excitement she gains from secretly passing on a book which no one else is to see. As well, this gift enables the recipient to enjoy her personal choice in reading. The reading desires of others, albeit spiritual—this is after all convent life—was an ongoing practice Mother Xaveria facilitated:

When one of her flock desired a spiritual book which she thought helpful, it should be procured at any cost. Once when the Mother Procuratrix grumbled, she said, “You would not refuse her food or clothing. Is the spirit to be less considered than the body?” Her own mental diet was very simple—the “Imitation of Christ”, which she always carried in her pocket, and her Rule-book, which she was often seen perusing with the fervour of a young novice; these made her spiritual library pretty well. (176)

Mother Xaveria held the power to exercise autonomy both in her own reading and that of others. She would procure “at any cost” a “desired” book. She equates the desire for a book with the necessities of life—food and clothing—recognising the “spirit” needs to be satisfied. Contented she possessed her own choice of reading, which she kept with her, “always carried in her pocket”, she wanted others to experience this contentment also. Considering Mother Xaveria’s experiences of reading from the above excerpts, it is possible to imagine she was “perusing with the fervour of a young novice” her Rule-book to see if there were any regulations she could quietly adjust with autonomous intent.

Tynan, like Mother Xaveria, prepared herself, and others, for the absence of reading material during her convent education, having “sucked up enough stories to keep myself and others going when the bookless desert was upon me of schooldays in a convent: at least it was a bookless desert as far as stories were concerned” (*Twenty-Five*

43). Fictional accounts seem to imply Nuns also found living in the “bookless desert” a challenge, and like Mother Xaveria, adopted a mode of secrecy in their relationship with books and reading. In Laffan’s *Hogan, M. P.*, Mother Assumption loves both her reading material and the secrecy enclosing the experience:

“How are you getting on, John?” asked she. “It was very thoughtful of you to send me the paper with that report of your speech in it. I never see a paper, you know, unless some one sends one with something in it of interest to the community.” Mother Assumption loved a newspaper in secret. (131)

Mother Assumption is paving the way for receiving more reading. The provider of the newspaper is revered as “thoughtful”, for it is only this thoughtfulness which can facilitate her reading of a newspaper. She cannot get material herself, so can only indulge if “someone sends one”. In explaining content as of “interest to the community” she focuses on an appropriate reason to be in the possession of a newspaper, diverting the attention away from her own desire of “a newspaper in secret”. Secrecy is needed as established “rules and codes” do not update with the times in convent life (131). Mother Assumption recognises a loophole in this oversight which works to her advantage:

Those modern luxuries are not generally allowed in convents. However, as they were not known at the periods when Saints Dominic, Bernard, Francis, Teresa, and other founders of communities, flourished and drew up their respective rules and codes of observances, they escaped being placed on the index of forbidden indulgences. And consequently, if somewhat irregular, it is not an absolutely sinful relaxation for a nun to read one. (131)

There is a sense Laffan is amused by this circumnavigation of “forbidden indulgences”. She takes the opportunity to highlight the church’s omission when assessing reading

material, a process stuck in archaic decrees. Newspapers as “modern luxuries” which did not exist when the rules were enacted, have “escaped” being examined with consideration to ancient founders and their “rules and codes”, thus are not vetoed. Therefore, an individual aware of this, as is Mother Assumption, can initiate small behaviours to their advantage. Being aware of the minutiae of rules and administrative laxity informs autonomy. Though “irregular”, nuns had the potential to read what they choose without being “absolutely sinful”. Mother Assumption utilises a flawed list. Like Laffan, Tynan drew on nuns and newspapers to illustrate ignorance of the world outside the boundaries of clerical life. The narrator in “A Village Priest” relates that a priest who held “aspirations after literature” fulfilled this wish reading newspapers, and in doing so “was like the nuns in a convent school I well knew, some of whom had not read a newspaper since they came into the convent, and who believed that the world had since stood still” (238, 236). In another story, Tynan’s character St Edmund Hilliard describes a nun’s thirst for news like a “gracious woman of the world, who had been travelling in regions inaccessible to newspapers” (*Way of a Maid* 158). This fictional account mirrors Tynan’s own experience she wrote concerning the nuns she knew as a convent pupil. She relates how “no newspapers were allowed to disturb the convent atmosphere, no magazines; nothing of what was happening outside in the world unless it came by word of mouth” (Tynan *Twenty-Years* 49). This is to suggest a life oppressed by limitations and a lack of autonomy in reading choices which as we have seen is not necessarily the case. Newspapers had literary columns which a discerning nun could avail of. One nun is noted as being “right glad” to hear “how things wagged” in literature, and despite her confinement, was aware of what was happening in the “world” regarding books:

Mother St. Vincent, like every nun, was right glad to catch echoes from the world she had left. She only read just so much as was necessary, but she was

very glad when anyone came her way who could tell her of the movements of the best part of the world which she had once adorned, of how things wagged in art and literature, politics and science. (Tynan *Way of a Maid* 158)

This is an autonomous act, especially when the context is considered. News from outside could be avoided if adhering to the practicable “rigid piety” expected of convent behaviour. Or it could be embraced as keeping abreast of current progress and aspects she misses, the “movements of the . . . world which she had once adorned”. Whatever supports her choice, Mother St Vincent is “very glad” to hear of it (48, 49).

Returning to Laffan’s Mother Assumption, her penchant for reading is not confined to a tryst with a newspaper. Continuing her conversation with John Hogan, we learn how she obtains additional reading material through clever small acts of autonomy:

“I must send you a Graphic, ma’am,” returned the barrister. “Indeed, I ought to have done so before.”

“Ah! yes, now, for the Christmas holidays. The children will be so glad of the pictures.”

Her Reverence did not add that she would be so glad of the stories which usually go with the said pictures. But her cousin was aware of her proclivities, and good-naturedly promised a stock of the usual Christmas effusions. (*Hogan, M. P.* 132)

Mother Assumption utilises the children’s need for pictures, aware and “so glad” the stories “which usually go with said pictures” would contribute to her reading needs and no rules are broken. She uses the opportunity of John Hogan’s visit to expand her options for reading within the confines of the convent:

“Now, you promised to select a list of books for the library for me, John.

There’s not a day but what I have girls here asking me, may they read this book or that book? and how am I to know what to recommend them? And of course, except the mistress of the schools, and she has no time, there’s nobody in the house knows anything about books but myself.”

“I’m sure, reverend Mother, I sent you a bundle not long ago. It seems to me you read them up like winking.”

“Read them, John! I am astonished at you! I only skim through them, just to see if they’ll do for the children.”

“Of course, Mother Assumption,” answered the barrister, in the gravest of tones, nevertheless with a noticeable compression of his lips. “Well now, let us see,” proceeding to jot down in his pocket-book. “Let’s see: you have the first, second, and third of ‘Middlemarch.’ “How do you like that for the children?” Mother Assumption paused.

“It’s a lovely book oh, most lovely! But somehow the religious part doesn’t come out clear enough; an’ still, I don’t know there’s many a worse and a more foolish book.”

“Well, yes,” agreed Hogan drily; “I should say so. All the same, ma’am, I suppose I must send you the fourth volume?”

“Oh yes, John, if you please;” and the Abbess looked as if she would be pleased very much. “See, here’s a list I’ve been given; you might send those round at your convenience.” (131, 132)⁹²

⁹² *Middlemarch* (1871/72) by George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans 1819-1880) questions women’s role in society, their value, and their place and potential or wasted life in the public and private realm. See Mădălina Elena Mandici’s recent article, “Female Lives Fit into Procrustean Beds in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*: Paltry Female Instruction and Parochial Littleness”.

In a chain of small behaviours, Mother Assumption arranges her reading preferences despite the constrictions of the convent. The convent library needs books. Concealing her own reading habit, the children are employed as the proper focus of reading requirements, for without her reading them, how will she “know what to recommend them?” Conveniently, Mother Assumption is the only one who knows about books. She need not share this task with anyone else thus her covert acquisition of personal preference in reading is safe. Hogan understands her manoeuvres and notes “a bundle of books” has been read rather rapidly “like winking”. Wanting to appear compliant to convent protocol Mother Assumption affects dismay at any notions of naughtiness, feigning “astonished” at any implication of deviation from protocol. She “only skim[s]” the content to check appropriateness for the pupils. Hogan plays her game, determining “in the gravest of tones” with “compression of his lips” titles she would like. She in turn confirms appropriate reading requires a certain tone. Her reply of the story as “lovely . . . oh, most lovely” reveals her pleasure, but asserting righteousness she adds that “somehow the religious part doesn’t come out clear enough”. However, it is part of a series, and she concedes—befittingly—that there are worse and more foolish books than this one. She clearly wants to continue the story and receive the fourth volume. Once she has procured her choice of the desired fourth volume, and she is “pleased very much”. Notably, there are two lists. The first mentioned is “a list of books” that John Hogan “select[s]” at her behest, an emboldened acquisition of her own preference in reading matter. A second list appears, one can imagine from the folds of her habit, indicating appropriate books for the convent library and pupils have been predetermined. As if to affirm Mother Assumption’s digressive small behaviour of personal choice in books, Laffan invokes a Bishop who has not heard of *Middlemarch*, and assumes its author is male:

“What’s ‘Middlemarch’, eh?” asked the Bishop of Secunderabad, who was sipping his glass and warming his feet at the fire. “Eh! Who’s it by?”

“George Eliot, sir,” replied Hogan.

“Hah!” said the Bishop, as if the name were quite familiar to him. “I don’t know any of his works.”

“Is it true the Prime Minister of England is going to be ‘received’?” asked the Prioress, changing the subject adroitly. (132)

An intrusion into Mother Assumption’s preference in books is avoided by the interjection of the Prioress who changes “the subject adroitly” to politics, thus facilitating Mother Assumption’s autonomy. One woman enables the reading choice of another. Mother Assumption’s clandestine procurement of books for personal reading remains intact.

“A Matter for Confession”: Convent Pupils’ Reading

The portrayals of priests and nuns explored suggest a subversive inclination despite the discipline and constrictions of religious life. If they wanted to read books obsessively or secretly, they found a way. Regardless of their own reading habits, priests exerted control over the reading practice of others. Katharine Tynan’s own experience affirms this endeavour to control girls and women especially, and particularly during the convent years and beyond. She writes in *Twenty-five Years: Reminiscences* (1913):

Before I left I signed the convent pledge, which had nothing to do with strong drink. I do not mean that I signed a document, but all the nuns’ pupils were willing to undertake that in the perilous world they would not dance “fast dances”; they would not go to a theatre; they would not read novels. They did not ask a pledge against writing them. (59)

Clearly, perilous novel reading—as opposed to virtuous book reading—merited a pledge of abstinence. However, Tynan deduces writing novels is not breaking an oath—providing, of course, they were of the correct sort—and chooses the writer’s path. While mostly not connecting the reading experience with religion in her fiction, Tynan was vocal on her own experiences of reading in the convent setting. She writes:

Whatever honey was to be got out of the convent library I sucked and sucked dry, and began over again. These “worldly” volumes were, by the way, reserved for holidays and feasts. On ordinary days if we had a book it was of the spiritual kind. One sucked what honey one could out of a prettily written History of England and out of the hour or half-hour’s reading of a story-book at night before prayers. A nun read aloud and we clustered about her with our fancy work to listen. We had the *Heir of Redclyffe* in this way and the other romances. I don’t think they were ever added to, so when the list was exhausted it began all over again. (Tynan *Twenty-Five* 46, 47)⁹³

Despite being restricted to spiritual books on “ordinary days”, Tynan adopted a positive viewpoint extracting the best she could from both the convent library. When there was a “prettily written” book or a “story-book” she made the most of it. She viewed this as an opportunity to refine her reading habits borne from childhood and her father’s liberal sharing of reading content. She writes, “the strict convent regimen as regarded reading matter was a clarifying process for me. I was reading too much that was not literature” (47). This “strict convent regimen” itself had the capacity to stretch its supposed limits within the choice of books. Tynan notes the list supplied indicated “the nuns were not

⁹³ *Heir of Redclyffe* (1853) is a romantic novel by Charlotte Mary Yonge, who is quoted throughout this thesis from her advice manuals. It was a popular novel, following the experience of love and contrition of two cousins. It has a strong moral and religious tone.

illiberal, since there are two Protestant authors to four Catholic in this little list” (46). During school vacation, pupils who remained at the convent had the freedom to “sit about the grounds with the nuns, doing such things as pleased us, talking or reading if we would”, thus reading was facilitated, and the pupils were enabled with choice (46).

Autonomous thinking was also evident in the pupils in their instructive care, despite what behaviour was expected. In addition to adorning convent libraries, books were often recommended as prizes gifted to pupils in convents as part of their “moral formation”. (Hatfield “Emotional Regulation” 373, 368). Laffan’s novel *Hogan, M. P.* opens with “Breaking-up day” at the end of the school year, an “event of no small importance” in St Swithin’s Convent (1). We learn “a table on which were piled the prize books, occupied the central and most conspicuous position” (2). Shortly, “the Bishop . . . handed books to the girls, as they came up in order of merit to receive them” the receipt of which resulted in parochial apoplexy in the observing rows (18)⁹⁴. The recipient is Mary Brangan, mentioned previously. Due to her lack of “merit”, the disconsolate audience are scandalised that Mary has received the prizes. Aware she is not deserving of the “three gaudy red and yellow bound books tightly tucked under her arm”, Mary Brangan goes on to have a conversation with her “favourite nun” (19, 20). The gaudy books given as her prize would have been chosen as appropriate, but as a final reminder Sister Paul pleads with Mary to avoid “light reading” and reminds her of the importance of her choice in reading:

“Now remember, Mary, it’s matter of confession if you read anything but what Father McQuaide approves.”

⁹⁴ The religious “superiors” deem Mary Brangan’s prizes necessary due to her wealthy societal status her father had donated generously to “the convent Exchequer”—and as “evidence of either talent or culture” from her eight years at the convent (19).

“Oh! now, Mother, do you *think* I’d do such a thing!” Mary was positively indignant.” (Laffan *Hogan M. P.* 22, 24)

The threat of confession for naughty reading is not a viable deterrent for Mary; the inflection in her reply suggests she has no intention of changing her personal choice in books or sharing any digressions from approved books in the confessional. Again, this is a reminder of the clout priests had when it came to reading material, but also the choice the individual had in complying or not. Ultimately, these departing words are so that Mary can “be a good, pious, Catholic girl, and do St. Swithin credit, and [her] religion” (23). The books Mary receives would not lead her to the confessional for unapproved reading. Having listed ten books, one review concludes some books

will serve admirably for small prizes to children of almost any age, as they are both simply told, and yet carry morals that suit the needs of men and women. Respect for our holy religion, for some one of its sacraments or observances, horror of vice, or love of virtue, is the aim of each story. (“Notices of Books” 503)

Unsurprisingly, books as prizes were believed to “suit the needs” of church and society. Intended as a vehicle of continuing religious knowledge and advice, they furthered preparation in becoming “men and women” as future holders of the religious standard. That each story would emphasise the “horror of vice, or the love of virtue” confirms the importance of fiction as a conveyor of morality. Having identified titles which will “serve admirably” to maintain the moral standard of “children of almost any age” as they progress to adulthood, the reviewer further highlights specific themes:

“The Martyr’s Children,” in the first volume, is an episode in the massacre of Christians by the Druses in the Lebanon in 1860. “Now is the Accepted Time” is

a true incident in a priest's "sick calls," showing the danger of delaying the last sacraments; whilst "Marry in Haste and Repent at Leisure," under the same cover, is calculated to warn young people of the evil of selfishness, more effectually than a sermon. "What a Child Can Do" is a pathetic little episode from the home of a drunkard, converted by his child's Hail Mary's. "The Two Hosts" is another incident in a priest's sick visits, and a warning against a too frequent occasion of sin to poor girls. These little stories would brighten the half-hour's visit at the bed-sides of the suffering poor; the manner in which they are told attracts and pleases. The tales are not made pins for long moralizing: the incident is vividly put and left to work its own good effect. Much the same recommendation maybe given of the other stories, though "The Golden Thought of Queen Beryl" is a legend for children. "Nellie Gordon" is the story—very touchingly told—of the death-bed of a magdalen, saved by the prayers of her little brother, whom she has shielded from harm in the midst of her own misery and misfortune ("Notices of Books" 503).

From massacres to marrying, converted drunkards to deathbeds, this overview of content recommended "admirably for small prizes to children of almost any age" offers defined themes as appropriate. Distributed books will "show the danger" of no sacraments on the deathbed and are "calculated to warn" against selfishness. Such books affirm the intended motivation of "being saved" and "shielded from harm". In one story it is assured the moral is quickly understood as "a warning against a too frequent occasion of sin to poor girls". The overarching tenor of fear, priests and punishment provides some indication as to why some pupils, such as Mary Brangan, favoured "light reading". Pupils who did not desire a book of "misery and misfortune", even if it could "work its own good effect" on the reader, may well have opted for alternative reading material, or like Mary discarded reading on leaving the convent.

In her final book, *Ismay's Children* (1887), Laffan addresses books and reading in the convent setting through the character Mary Cadogan. Mary claims convents and books do not mix, concluding books must be sacrificed on entering convent life: "I could not go into a convent. I could not be a nun . . . I do not wish to renounce the world, and above all, books. I could give up anything but reading" (415). The notion that books would have to be renounced on entering a convent could be regarded as a silly overstated comment. The context of the dialogue explains, "Mary Cadogan's head, although she had more instruction than most of the other inhabitants of Barrettstown was as wrong as that of anybody else" and "ignorance was something marvellous" among these inhabitants (415). However, the narrator says Mary is "somewhat better" (415). Mary's understanding of convent discipline has led her to presume books are associated with "the world" and as such, must be renounced. Even if slightly skewed, she has considered her options and made choices. Practising small behaviours, Mary reads books found beyond convent walls:

She read Carlyle, her brother procured her the books from a student of Queen's College; whether she understood them or not is matter of conjecture; but she was proud of her singularity in reading such books. She was good and religious, but she believed rather in evil than in good. (415)

Mary takes advantage of her brother's access to books withheld in female education. The implication is "reading such books", significantly those issuing from a university, has allowed alternative thoughts to enter Mary's head, and twisted religious thought. She may not have "understood them", but the reading of them has facilitated choice as to what "she believed" (415). The inclusion of Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) is a

provocative choice.⁹⁵ Carlyle offered alternative, often controversial opinions, including a “desire[d] to separate religion from its churches” thus his inclusion as an author read by Mary Cadogan is noteworthy in the context of autonomy (Kaplan 67). Mary may not have understood all that she is reading, but the implication is she has read enough to be able to consider her beliefs. In an exercise of choice, Mary shifts the accepted conventional prioritising of good over evil, to evil as the predominant belief; she still considers herself “good and religious” indicating small behaviours are exactly that—small—and for the satisfaction of the individual, rather than a public manifestation. Mary has previously referenced Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), reflecting, “[I]t was Goethe who thanked God for making the world so beautiful. He need not, I think, for were it not beautiful who could endure it? We should thank Goethe for his books. They are beautiful. (415).⁹⁶ Mary has elevated a passion for books above God. Her stance is to thank Goethe for his “beautiful” books, rather than God for his creation—which had to be beautiful or would be unendurable—thus usurping God as the expected recipient of gratitude. Mary’s notion of sacrifice is not religious but elevates books and reading, thus reducing the authority of religion. Her gratitude focuses on books, not a life of servitude in a convent. Laffan’s insertion of Goethe introduces the idea of freethinking, counteracting Victorian-centric religious opinion. Frederick Smith writes in 1869 that Goethe’s religion “was not that of orthodox Christians. He disliked and discountenanced popular Christianity. Certain things, customs and persons that were commonly revered, he abhorred . . . Goethe believed every man must form his own philosophy and religion” (76). Likewise, Mary Cadogan has appraised the “commonly revered” vocation as a nun and found it wanting. Though

⁹⁵ Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) historian and writer, questioned social, religious, political, and economic structures and beliefs. For an extensive discussion on Carlyle see: Kaplan, Fred. *Thomas Carlyle: A Biography*, Open Road Integrated Media, Inc., 1983.

⁹⁶ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) was a novelist and critic among other endeavours. His works were influential on his contemporaries and through time. Some works courted controversy. See Thomas Carlyle’s *Goethe* (1881) for a viewpoint from one of his acquaintances.

faulty in reasoning, she has formed her “own philosophy”. Where the inhabitants of her town are “uniformed”, Mary has attempted to inform herself. Her dialogue implies she is forming her own views on religion. She has considered her next step in life and at this point has chosen reading over the convent.

Egerton reinforces the influence of religious institutions on the reading female. Broaching reading in convents, she likely draws on her own experience of being reared as a Catholic⁹⁷. Her protagonist Mary Desmond in *The Wheel of God* recalls responses by the nuns regarding her engagement with both reading and subject matter in books, which apparently made her “difficult to direct”, directing being one of the purposes of religion:

She had books, schoolbooks, on botany and zoology; and yet it was a sin to think of quite natural things if they touched on men and women. Once she had asked Sister Aloysius, a big sister, with funny, twinkling eyes, and a very long, flexible upper lip. Who had manufactured all the things that were sins? Did not she think the old Fathers of the Church had rather nasty minds? She had heard Sister Aloysius say to the Reverend Mother, “That child is difficult to direct; she won’t take anything on trust”. (*Wheel of God* 51)

Like Mary Cadogan, Mary Desmond questions what she is expected to believe. Certain books and themes are considered “a sin”. As conveyed in book lists, material for reading in convents was clearly defined. Mary evaluates what she is taught with what is withheld or removed from her and asks questions. She was allowed to read about zoology and botany—because they were school text-books—which incorporated sexual acts but when such “natural things” in novels “touched on men and women” it was

⁹⁷ See Egerton’s letters compiled by Terence de Vere White in *Leaf from a Yellow Book*.

deemed inappropriate reading. However, she has determined the act is not wrong, but the “nasty minds” of the “old Fathers” which decide good from bad. In her mind, when reading she had not found “any bad thing” and she has worked out that “[E]ven if she had, one never need remember horrid things! She used to shut her eyes and leave them outside, and say: “Jesus, make me forget it!” (30). Exhibiting small behaviours, Mary has decided for herself what is “horrid” and if she reads something “horrid” she has worked out how to remove it. Rather than “take anything on trust” Mary is forging her own way of managing reading content. Mary is dismissing the old established thoughts of the Fathers and embracing an alternative view—her own—on reading.

“Seeing Eyes”: Distinctly Fin de Siècle

Fiction potentially fosters alternative belief and action. At the fin de siècle fresh ideas were afoot and appealed to those desiring change. This prompted a simultaneous looking forward and backward conundrum whereby individuals attempted to merge “older ideas and fresh new ones” or fathom the dilemma of “one foot in the modern world, and one in the Victorian age” (Knight 15, 14). Reflecting reality, fictional characters were more definably following their preferences in books and reading. George Egerton’s writing indicates no qualms with challenging religious orthodoxy and exploring “fresh new” ideas and adopts books and reading as one element of challenge.

The unnamed academic in “The Spell of the White Elf” relates her own experience of looking forward and backward:

I had given up all belief myself, except the belief in a Creator who is working out some system that is too infinite for our finite minds to grasp. If one looks round with seeing eyes, one can’t help thinking that after a run of eighteen

hundred and ninety-three years Christianity is not very consoling in its results.

(Egerton 94)

After more than three centuries, a substantial “run” of time to improve, Christianity has proven to be a disappointment in her eyes. Looking back at historical evidence and then forward to the results “is not very consoling”. Observing with “seeing eyes” has allowed a broader perspective on Christianity. The academic has assessed what is of value to her personally. She has relinquished “all belief” that does not suit but retains belief in a Creator. She continues her conversation with the narrator, explaining an experience which demonstrates how ingrained belief is difficult to give up:

But at that moment, kneeling next the cradle, I felt a strange, solemn feeling stealing over me: one is conscious of the same effect in a grand cathedral filled with the peal of organ music and soaring voices. It was as if all the old, sweet, untroubled child-belief came back for a spell, and I wondered if far back in the Nazarene village Mary ever knelt and watched the Christ-child sleep; and the legend of how he was often seen to weep but never to smile came back to me, and I think the sorrow I felt as I thought was an act of contrition and faith.

(Egerton “Spell” 94, 95)

Having initially explained the rejection of her faith, “for a spell” it returns, and she has a religious experience, “a strange, solemn feeling” whereby the “old, sweet, untroubled child-belief” is revisited. She recalls Bible stories of the “Christ-child” and considers the experience of his mother, Mary, wondering how she felt. She asserts her feelings to be “an act of contrition and faith”. Whether or not she continued with a renewed belief we are not privy to, but this demonstrates even with the introduction of fresh ideas the familiar belief remains under the palimpsest of the new. Egerton does not condemn holding on to or rousing ingrained beliefs, however fleeting the experience is. The

academic demonstrates compatibility of beliefs, explaining how she and her husband complement each other. Their “positions are reversed” but still tradition and “now-a-days” work together (88). She explains, “I have more brains, or at least more intellectuality, than my husband”, while he “stays at home, and grows good things to eat and pretty things to look at” (95, 88). Adopting the “seeing eyes” of new ideas, she has not disregarded “old” beliefs. By merging past and present beliefs and introducing un-Victorian role reversals, Egerton indicates established models of the past can work with emerging new ideas, be it religion or domesticity, there can be “one foot in the modern world, and one in the Victorian age” (Knight 15).

Egerton revisits her character Fruen in several short stories spanning experiences in her life. In the short story “Under Northern Sky: III ‘An Ebb Tide’”, past and present beliefs are evoked in a death-bed scenario. Reading is a prevailing discourse as Fruen’s husband lays dying. The priest “reads the prayers for the dying” to her husband and leaves (166). Awaiting his final moments Fruen is aware of choice; she can evoke the past, knowing she “ought to read prayers”, or in keeping with her rejection of faith do what she would choose in the same situation. Small behaviours can be adapted to the advantage of others, and the sense here is she is not betraying her own preference because she exerts personal autonomy:

“Have you said your prayers? Shall I read you any?”

...

Her question was a concession to a past religious conscience; she feels as she puts it that as for herself, if she would die as she sits there, she would not trouble to pray; it would be well to drift out. (Egerton “Under Northern Sky: III” 178)

Fruen is willing to read the prayers if her husband desires them. However, her own choice reflects her capacity to change belief. She herself would reject established

custom surrounding death and discard prayer reading in favour of drifting away⁹⁸. This episode reflects the dilemma at the fin de siècle of yo-yoing forward and backwards between the established old and the emerging new. Max Nordau conceived this time as “a practical emancipation from traditional discipline, which theoretically is still in force” which feasibly encompasses the discord surrounding religious feeling (5). Fruen’s “past religious conscience” is rooted in how she was reared with religion; her choice to drift is a personal emancipation from that tradition. I return briefly to Fruen’s childhood in the story “A Psychological Moment”.⁹⁹ As a child, she carries on a battle in her mind about the book she is secretly reading and what she understands as inappropriate reading. The language is clearly religious. She reprimands herself, remonstrating that if she continues reading the book she is “weak” and unable to obey God; to reject the book would be a “sacrifice”, she would be “brave” and “strong” (2). The child’s response to the book is rooted in morality—she is aware of the difference between right and wrong and what it expected of her. Strength to “shut the book” especially when it is getting “exciting” is linked with sacrifice; continuing to read the book is connected to a weakness which does not please God. She stops reading but a fear remains. Physically, she puts the book as far away as possible, “high up on a shelf”, ostensibly to avoid reading it (2). “Fearsomely looking around her”, she checks no-one can call her out for her deed of reading or hiding the book from where likely she will withdraw it and continue “tomorrow evening”, when perhaps time passed by is sufficient to ignore her conscience (2). She further calls on her “‘Guardian angel, O dear guardian angel! take care of me!’ leaving a space for the angel on the side next the door” to protect her from harm resulting from her secret tryst with a bad book (2). Fruen’s religiously trained conscience as a child governs her thoughts and actions. Yet

⁹⁸ Customs in Christianity includes saying prayers for the dying. See Jeremy Taylor’s *Holy Living and Dying: With Prayers Containing the Whole Duty of a Christian*, (1650/2007).

⁹⁹ Introduced in Chapter One.

despite this inculcation, small behaviours are practised enabling her to read what she wants to read.

Considering the above episode, it is unsurprising the conscience of Egerton's Fruen interplays with her decisions as an adult. However, time has enabled autonomy without the internal narrative of weakness and sacrifice imposing on her thoughts. Returning to "Under Northern Sky", as Fruen's husband lays dying, she sits with him. Below stairs, the "second housemaid" speaks with Fruen's housekeeper, relaying a persistent request:

"[T]he Bible reader, Morten Ring, wants to know if he may read for a while, now that the Popish priest has gone and left the dying sinner without any one to direct his thoughts heavenward."

There is an imitative note in her voice, and a mocking gleam shoots from her eyes.

"Uf! is he here again? That's the third time. Mistress told him no before, and strong enough too; I should think that ought to have been more than enough for him."

"Yes, but he says the whole village thinks it shocking, and he is like sent up, and that you might put it to her!"

"Indeed, then I won't! When I did last time, she told me to tell him to go down to the weighing place on the wharf and ring a bell, and call the population together, and read out to them all the places in the Bible that refer to hypocrisy, lying, and scandal, the sins of adultery, fornication, and the begetting of bastards; that she'd be willing to pay him treble his fee for the charity of it, they need it so much. It might teach them to begin at home and let other folks alone."

(Egerton "Under Northern Sky: III" 173, 174)

Egerton infuses her knowledge of the Bible to question religious practice, challenge dissatisfaction with religion, and expose hypocrisy via her fictional characters. Fruen clearly identifies the “population” as disconnected from the Bible by the way they live and treat others. She highlights how they have digressed in what they practise. In a manner which reflects public biblical denouncing, Fruen wishes reader Morten Ring would “call the population together and read out to them all the places in the Bible” that condemns their sinful actions (173).¹⁰⁰ The hypocrisy she has noted extends from those with authority to teach by reading to the people. Morten Ring wants to read to her dying husband, but she clearly explains it is the errant populace he needs to read to. His reading will guide the sinner (or dying husband) according to custom so Fruen’s autonomous refusal to allow Morten Ring to read to her husband is “shocking” to others. No doubt the “whole village” would be shocked to know not only has she “told him no before, and strong enough too” but that “Mistress is reading herself” (174). Fruen has observed reading has not guided those who should practise unhyprocritical faith which should “begin at home”. Reading could potentially both inform them of their lack and correct it. By the time Egerton is exploring morality in her fiction, Max Nordau has penned his tome *Degeneration* (1892). The notion of shocking the community and Fruen’s denunciation of community hypocrisy speaks to Nordau’s concept of degeneration. He believes degenerates display “irregularity” in their mental state, sweepingly describing degenerates as lacking “the sense of morality of right and wrong” (Nordau 18). He continues, “for them there exists no law, no decency, no modesty” and applies this to the “originators” of “art and literature” (18, 17). In her fictional account, Egerton identifies the “population” of average citizens as owning these traits (18, 17). I suggest Egerton questions, who really are the degenerates? She

explicitly exposes the hypocritical, lying, scandalous sinners as those conventionally following church lead, rather than people who have diverted their minds to alternative ideas. Moral deterioration is rampant in the community, not confined or assigned to those Nordau defines as having the “*fin-de-siècle* frame of mind” (20). Defying Nordau’s assumptions, rather than degeneration defining the artistic section of society, members of Fruen’s local community are described as morally degenerate through their “hypocrisy, lying, and scandal, the sins of adultery, and the begetting of bastards”. While the public condemnation Egerton’s Fruen desired was not enacted, the small behaviour of wishing it is of value as she has circulated an alternative way of thinking to her coterie of housemaids. Fruen’s influence is evident in the actions of her household. The housekeeper gives the answer to be conveyed to Morten Ring that Fruen will read to her husband. The second housemaid’s language of “Popish priest”, “imitative tone” and “mocking gleam” in her eyes when conveying the unwelcome request of Morten Ring could well have been enabled and encouraged by Fruen’s opinions. The housemaid

who is consumptive, and who stays for the little mistress’s sake, her own days in the land being numbered, has taken her Bible up to the lookout in the wood, and laid it open on the stone table. She is crushing the Linnae, as she kneels, into a fragrant incense, rocking to and fro to the somber rhythm of the last book of Ecclesiastes. (Egerton “Under Northern Sky: I” 140)

Autonomously, this maid has adapted a “stone table” for an altar and placed her Bible open upon it. She has created incense from scratch, “crushing the Linnae”, and “rocking to and fro” attends to her reading from Ecclesiastes, simulating the rhythmic traditions associated with her faith. In contrast to the insincerity of the community exposed by Egerton, the maid performs her own small behaviour, a heartfelt religious ritual for

herself. Though choosing an alternative manner of rite, the maid is neither morally wrong, indecent, or immodest, characteristics Nordau assumed for those he described as degenerate.

As well as challenging Nordau's presumptions, Egerton questions conventionally accepted assumptions surrounding religious practice. In a bookshop, the protagonist of "Now Spring Has Come" finds a book that inspires her to meet the author. Because the book "was condemned by the orthodox" making it hard to trace its provenance, the protagonist questions belief and customs:

Isn't it dreadful to think what slaves we are to custom? I wonder shall we ever be able to tell the truth, ever be able to live fearlessly according to our own light, to believe that what is right for us must be right? It seems as if all the religions, all the advancement, all the culture of the past, has only been a forging of chains to cripple posterity, a laborious building up of moral and legal prisons based on false conceptions of sin and shame, to cramp men's minds and hearts and souls, not to speak of women's. (Egerton "Now Spring Has Come" 48, 49)

Egerton's narrator questions the position of customs in society and how their sources have quashed personal freedom, to the point of feeling imprisoned. She aligns religion with the oppression of slaves using words "forging of chains", "laborious", "cramp" to enforce the burden of religion which does not fulfil "what is right for us". In contrast, a belief which fulfilled an individual's needs are equated with the words, "truth", "fearlessly" and "light". While she says the impact is on "men's minds and hearts and souls", she is aware of the additional burden for women. The narrator realises societal changes do not happen quickly and goes on to demonstrate how on a personal level small behaviours allow individual autonomy. She finds the author of the unorthodox book and proceeds with an equally unorthodox relationship. The journey to meeting the

author becomes an instance of contemplation on religion. Again, the predicament of combining past and present beliefs arises, triggered by a bevy of girls carrying their psalm-books. She explains:

I had not troubled with church-going of late years. Why? Oh, speculation, weariness of soul that found no drop of consolation in religious observance,— maybe that might be the reason. But all those honest, simple folk in their Sunday bravery, fair- haired girls with their psalm-books wrapped up in their only silk kerchief, the ring of laughter echoing across the water, the magic of sun and sky, mountain and fjord, made me feel that I too was church-going, and I felt strangely happy. It is the off moments that we do not count as playing any part in our lives that are, after all, the best we have. I am afraid it would be impossible to make you see things as I felt them. (Egerton “Now Spring Has Come” 51, 52)

The vision of “fair-haired girls with their psalm-books wrapped up in their only silk kerchief” is clearly a hark to the past, a nostalgic response, which as she tries to explain can impact an individual more than they realise. By dint of proximity, she includes herself in this religiously saturated scene which “made me feel that I too was church-going” and so “felt strangely happy”. There is contentment in the familiarity of this “off moment” in contrast with the ongoing questioning accompanying her immediate thoughts. The “speculation”, “weariness” and disconsolation which had thwarted her religious routine are diminished in the feeling this moment has given her. This stance is an act of autonomy—the protagonist has decided there are aspects of the past she holds dear and wishes to retain. Alternative ways of believing appeal too. She does not have to explain, even if she hides this decision in revealing to the reader, “it would be

impossible to make you see things as I felt them". She has made a choice which suits her as an individual.

In Egerton's story "A Psychological Moment at Three Periods: The Woman", two women who went to school together, the mistress and the "big woman" years later meet again. Inferences to the influence of books and reading pepper their conversation and ultimately contribute to the outcome and future of each woman. Through dialogue, it is conveyed that men have devised a "form of religion" which does not necessarily reflect a Biblical stance (Egerton "Psychological Moment: Woman" 57). The mistress distinguishes between the Bible as she read and understood it and religious books or the "religious codes devised by the imagination of men" ("Psychological Moment III: The Woman" 64). In relating the treatment of the so-called sinning woman, "the big woman" differentiates between the Biblical version of forgiveness and the "earthly" version of her own experience, explaining:

[B]elieve me, the Magdalen at Christ's feet had an easy road to repentance. But think of the poor soul who tells her sins to His vicar on earth or his wife. Think of the dismal platitudes tinctured with the world's opinions, the exhortations to repentance pointed with a hint to keep her place as a sinner. (Egerton "A Psychological Moment: Woman" 60)

As noted earlier in this chapter, the Bible, the apparent basis of religious thought, is frequently moved aside for books about belief or learned lives of the saints. Egerton presents an alternative, a fellow woman; the "big woman" explains, "I am glad I came to you. I was hungry for some word stronger and warmer to my heart than I get out of books, that bothered me with the virtues and woes of dead saints and never touched the living woman within" (65). The kind words of a "sister woman" have more impact than books on "virtues and woes of dead saints" intended as lessons, and it appears her

realisation of hypocrisy has come from a knowledge of Christ's response to Mary Magdalene's sins, in contrast to "dismal platitudes" and "the world's opinions" of the religion she knows. The "big woman" has come to her conclusions through reading, reading which was not acquired from a family upbringing "scrupulous in the performance of religion" or a convent education, but later through autonomy in response to reading not oriented on one belief system (55). The "big Woman" conveys a dissatisfaction specifically with Catholicism. Aged twenty, she met a man she loved. As he was Protestant, her father "fetched" her; she was "bundled back" and sent to a convent "as if [she] were a girl of twelve" (55). Her parents "and the priests" later arranged her marriage to a Catholic man she detested (56). She inherits money which allows her autonomy thus she decides what she will spend it on. In telling her story, she acknowledges the influence of reading on her current decisions, relaying "I had not read or thought then as I have since" (56). Rejecting religious reading material for liberal content enables her to make choices even within the confines of an unhappy marriage which she cannot escape from. Where some women "find their consolation in piety", she has found hers in making choices when she can (57). As regards the mistress, she shares the advice she has recently received saturated with religious intent. One correspondent, Mary O'Mahoney, offers the mistress "an introduction to a convent" in order "to indulge in genteel contrition" (53). Mary's advice, though she "meant it kindly" is disregarded, in part because she "never reads a book except under the direction of her father confessor", thus she has "no knowledge of life" beyond established religious directives (53). Referencing the Biblical choice of two roads, one of which leads "to destruction", Egerton presents an alternative: the mistress will "take neither" but will "stand by [her] own action" and embark on her personal version of "new life's journey" (*Douay-Rheims Bible*, Matt. 7.13; 92, 94). Her choice is arguably more dramatic than the small behaviour of the "big woman", but both signify autonomy.

Both women realise societal constrictions on their lives, but within these burdensome boundaries they exchange solace that they have made decisions of their own where and when they can.

Rather than delineating her characters' religious beliefs into old and new or eliminating them because of dissatisfaction, Egerton illustrates they can co-exist. For example, as explored above, Fruen dismisses the Bible reader, Morten Ring, and reveals the hypocritical community and their undesirable actions but respects her husband's faith; the consumptive maid performs her own religious rituals absent of clerics; and after consideration, the character in "The Spell of the White Elf" accepts a Creator but rejects other beliefs. Not only would her approach not have met the approval of reviewers in periodicals espousing the authority of religion, Max Nordau also states such an approach is an impediment to "rational information":

Those obscure or superficially verbose works which pretend to offer solutions for the serious questions of our times, or, at least, to prepare the way thereto, are even impediments and causes of delay, because they bewilder weak or unschooled brains, suggest to them erroneous views, and make them either more inaccessible to rational information or altogether closed to it. (44)

Egerton addresses the "serious questions" of the time and through her fiction, if not solutions then suggestions are perceptible. She indicates the preference of wider scope of belief beyond one religious view. One "preparation", to adopt the language of Nordau, is exposure to a variety of beliefs should ideally start young; childhood should be "a time of storage, a laying-by of all sort of seeds of association for ingathering in the years to come"; undoubtedly this included various "seeds" of religious belief (*Rosa Amorosa* 205). Egerton offers one "solution" by again indicating seemingly disparate beliefs can co-exist. In "Under Northern Sky I: How Marie Larson Exorcised a Demon"

she employs the character of a God-fearing woman with ability for “doing battle” and expel demons, which she does by regaling the details of a bazaar and methodically repeating a sermon (140). Getting louder and louder, and repetitive, and continuing rhythmically to relate the event, she ultimately “exorcised the devil this time” (147). Yet, Egerton has united what Nordau refers to as a “dark power” with worshipping God (45). She describes Jomfru Marie Larson’s house as that of a deeply religious person:

[I]f you went inside it was very respectable, and you could not fail to notice the large brass-bound Bible on a crochet-square on top of the mahogany chest of drawers, with a sprig of palm marking the gospel of the previous Sunday. And no one answered the responses more loudly, or confessed more openly at revival times, or quoted Scripture more aptly to the confusion of a neighbour than Jomfru Marie Larsen. (Egerton “Under Northern Sky: I” 142)

Jomfru Marie Larson’s evidence of religious devotion is visible, a visitor “could not fail to notice” the presence of the “large brass-bound Bible”. This is not a small, easily undiscernible copy of the Bible. Additionally, it is on a “crochet-square”, designated its own special place. She has a “sprig of palm” as a bookmark which is a connection to Jesus and the Biblical event of him identifying himself as a king (John 12.13). Egerton is not hiding Marie Larsen’s religious element of her personality. She is sending a clear message they can be compatible and work together. Larson’s depth of commitment is exhibited through her actions. She “responses more loudly”. She “confessed more openly” clearly implying there is nothing to hide. She “quoted Scripture more aptly” showing she knows her bible and the context. She surely lacks hypocrisy in contrast to Fruen’s community discussed earlier. The mention of the “previous Sunday” suggests consistent attendance. However, it appears she has a gift and in exercising autonomy chooses to practise it, and because she has not hidden herself or her gift away, it results

in “confusion” to others. In depicting an alternative belief system as adjunct to conventional religious belief, ostensibly Egerton is echoing the idea of cultural critic Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) who believed religion should be “not a having and a resting, but a growing and a becoming” therefore open to ideas (*Culture and Anarchy* 12). Max Nordau was less tolerant of alternative ideas, including those who were “inexplicable” and “mysteries” (45). Nordau views mysticism as “a principal characteristic of degeneration” (45). He offers a broad definition of mysticism:

What is really to be understood by this somewhat vague term “mysticism”? The word describes a state of mind in which the subject imagines that he perceives or divines un-known and inexplicable relations amongst phenomena, discerns in things hints at mysteries, and regards them as symbols, by which a dark power seeks to unveil or, at least, to indicate all sorts of marvels which he endeavours to guess, though generally in vain. (Nordau 45)

Up to this point, Nordau has explicated the idea of mysticism reasonably well.

However, he then labels a person practising mysticism as someone insane who “hears and sees as real, things which for the sane man are non-existent” (46). Egerton’s Marie Larson, despite indications of understanding “non-existent” things, is not depicted as insane. To the contrary, she is considered publicly to be a brilliant cook, “No one in the district can make such a supreme of fish as Marie; no one can beat her at roasting a capercaillie and serving it with sour cream sauce, or brew such caudles and possets for a lying-in, or bake such meats for a funeral feast” (Egerton “Under Northern Sky: I” 141). Offering an alternative to orthodox belief and assumptions Egerton presents Marie as both domesticated and religious yet practising a form of mysticism.

As well as introducing a hybrid form of faith, George Egerton notes how absence of religious influence, which is generally learnt through reading, is perceptible.

In “At the Heart of the Apple”, when character Einar Stang meets Eivir his first impressions are based on her lack of religion or indeed its hybrid form:

He grew more and more amazed as he discovered that she was ignorant of the simplest relationships in life, or of religion except of the curious, half-superstitious, half-pagan form of it that Peter had evolved in his solitude or picked up in his wanderings, or half Biblical, such as she had gleaned from listening as Sigrid read aloud to herself on Sundays. (169)

Religion is here placed on par with relationships indicating its dominance in society. Eivir has been adopted by Peter and Sigrid. Her “religion” is an unconventional hybrid assimilation of Peter’s superstition and paganism and Sigrid’s regular Bible readings. When observed, it is obvious Eivir has matured to a “child woman” with an “unspoiled nature, all her basic instincts intact” (206). Her seemingly ideal personality contains “all her apperceptions unconfused by the scrapment system of modern education” which would have included religious doctrine and morality (207). Her “basic instincts” forge an unconventional path, a pregnancy and birth without marriage, yet a fulfilling role unfettered by “interference” from conventional religious morality conveyed through books (206, 217). Eivir’s path reflects what historian Walter Laqueur calls the “new impulses” which include a “general decline of family ties, the deterioration of morals” symptomatic of the fin de siècle (6). Egerton creates a situation perceived as a degenerate route resultant when a person is separated from society and presents it as a decision rooted in personal autonomy. Returning to Mary in *The Wheel of God*, we see that in a single sentence, Egerton can invoke a new belief:

Uncle Hiram always shared his particular “bake” of Boston beans with Mary on Sunday mornings, and gave her the reversion of his paper—a wonderful Sunday

edition, with a specially written Sunday sermon, an odd mixture of Rabelaisian reporting and family advice. (Egerton 55)

Repetition of the word “Sunday” emphasises religious intent. Uncle Hiram is not in the habit of attending church on Sundays as would be expected but has his own routine into which Mary is invited. Absence from church does not mean they are devoid of religious interest. The Sunday paper is a “wonderful” edition. The sermon Mary reads is “a specially written Sunday sermon”, but not a conventional choice. In conjuring “a mixture of Rabelaisian reporting” Egerton is appealing to nonconformity and controversy.¹⁰¹ Again, she expands the boundaries of what religion and reading meant at the fin de siècle, encouraging alternative ways of being and championing autonomous actions.

Conclusion

The influence of conventional religion on reading was indisputable. However, it was another element of conventional Victorian life which individual female readers with an autonomous bent could adapt and reconcile to their own viewpoint. In their own minds or individual space, girls and women were experimenting and making choices in response to what they perceived as the confines of religious thought and tradition. By making choices on what they read or whether they read material advocated, they exercised autonomy. They understood what religious belief required and at times chose small ways of resisting what they found constrictive or did not like, through their reading practice. They adopted a “personal religion”.

¹⁰¹ Rabelaisian writing is “relating to, characteristic of, or resembling Rabelais or his satirical writings, which are noted for their earthy humour, their parody of medieval learning and literature, and their affirmation of humanist values; bawdy, vulgar”, therefore, not remotely complying with Victorian religious orthodoxy (*OED Online*). François Rabelais (1494-1553) became famous for satire and comic works, notably the series (and ultimately novel) *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532-1564). Walter Besant summarises him as “the possessor of a name which made priests and monks writhe, and all other men applaud; a great physician, a great botanist, a great anatomist, and a great linguist” (46).

Laffan and Egerton's work reflects an ambivalence surrounding religion which they owned as individuals. In contrast, Tynan's religious beliefs appear solid. It seems her capacity for autonomy in her own reading experience does not extend to encouraging it in others. Laffan and Egerton more than compensate for this lack offering narratives of uncertainty, dissatisfaction, and assertive decision relevant to the atmosphere of fin de siècle changes in belief. However, Tynan's recorded observations of religious impact on reading, books, and convent life are rich with experience offering a valuable context in conversation with her own, Laffan's, and Egerton's fictional work.

Small behaviours are not only evident in the reading experience within a religious context. What fictional girls and women were reading and the incorporation of ancillary works within fiction is explored in the following final chapter. I will argue how small behaviours are evident in the fictional female character's choice of book title, what content they were choosing to read and what this indicated, how the book is used, and its position in the domestic space.

Chapter 3: “Loving Books”: Choosing and Using the Book.

“Books form in us habits of thought which shall live forever with us.” (Julia McNair Wright 203)

“She has found life a hard battle, but there have been beautiful books . . . to worthen it.” (George Egerton “Psychological Moment: Woman” 24)

This final chapter will focus on how small behaviours—gestures or actions demonstrating personal autonomy—are evident through choosing and using books. Within the texts I explore, choice is indicated by which titles or authors were chosen or ignored, through dialogue, how the book is employed in interactions with others, and by how an individual interacts with or uses a book.¹⁰² Context will be provided through an analysis of relevant articles in periodicals, pamphlets, advice manuals, and contemporary texts of the late-Victorian era. My examination will show that despite directives which targeted mainly girls and women, fictional accounts portray autonomy in relation to books as possible and practised. Writers May Laffan, Katharine Tynan, and George Egerton each present fictional experiences of personal agency through small behaviours exhibited by their female characters. Opinions abounded which could have stymied book choice, but I argue non-compliance or chosen compromise is evident in the private space which however small is not insignificant but facilitates a sense of selfhood.

The late-nineteenth century saw a proliferation of books which shifted the focus of cultural commentary acquiring books to pre-empting undesirable choices. In his essay, “The Craving for Fiction” (1895), essayist Herbert Maxwell acknowledges this

¹⁰² Regarding titles and authors, the scope of this paper does not allow an in-depth discussion. I will offer observations on titles and authors which relate to the context of female autonomy.

new challenge stating, “[T]he difficulty now is not to get books, but to decide on a choice from the overwhelming multitude that pour from the press” (1046).¹⁰³ The ability to make appropriate book choices was impressed at an early age. Writer Edward G. Salmon (1865-1955) penned several articles on reading material in the *Nineteenth Century* periodical, focusing on the specific audience of young children.¹⁰⁴ He makes a recommendation for long-lasting effect, interestingly not confined to a specific gender:

[I]f the mother and father were to watch the feelings aroused in a child by the different sorts of books first placed in its hands, they would be able to give it literature of a kind which would help to mould its mind into a graceful whole and give strength to its weaker parts. (Salmon “Literature for the Little Ones” 580)

Parents are directed to circumvent a child’s choice in books in order to “mould its mind” to be societally acceptable. By observing the “feelings aroused”, they can determine the effect of the book’s contents on the child and take corrective action.

Salmon continues:

Let a child read stories of whatever character it likes. If experience shows that a particular kind of fiction is calculated to do harm, do not fly to its antithesis for a remedy. Compromise the matter by giving the little one a story similar in subject matter, but so modified in tone as to prove innocuous. Parents may take it for certain that, if they adopt proper measures at the outset, they will deprive reading of the great danger which it possesses for the young . . . The period of

¹⁰³ Full name, though not signed off in article, Herbert Eustace Maxwell. Scottish essayist and politician.

¹⁰⁴ The *Nineteenth Century* was a successful monthly British Literary magazine. Founded in 1877, it had two name changes and ceased publication in 1968.

adolescence has its risks, but these risks will be small or great in proportion as their source is wisely or unwisely dealt with. (580)

In the context of autonomy, it is notable that the child's choice of subject is not promptly dismissed. Rather, parental intervention involves risk aversion, introducing a "modified" version of the child's choice in book and subject, thus avoiding the supposed pitfalls associated with reading. Such intervention will, it is hoped, ensure the future adolescent chooses less risky reading material. Initially the child is choosing their reading material even if it is subsequently, unbeknown to the child, adjusted. The child is led to believe they are choosing their subject, which surely encourages autonomy. It is accepted the grown child will make its own decision on books. Notably, the future consequence is dictated by how "wisely or unwisely" the parents "dealt" with the child's choice, not the choice itself. Such advice indicates autonomy may inform the child's decisions in their future.

However reasonable this approach seems, the conventional consensus on books erred on the side of clear, universal directives rather than personalised tweaking. Cultural commentary on books frequently focused on the female reader. This included what books were appropriate. In "About Fiction", an article in *The Contemporary Review* in 1890, Rider Haggard observes, "[T]he present writer is bound to admit that, speaking personally and with humility, he thinks it a little hard that all fiction should be judged by the test as to whether or no it is suitable reading for a girl of sixteen" (177). The girlhood phase is adopted as the gauge of appropriate books. Authors of advice manuals and columnists in periodicals generously dispersed advice on what sort of books to read which extended to divulging appropriate titles that would enable a healthy reading habit. Writer Phillis Browne (Sarah Sharp Hamer 1839-1927) places the onus on the reader saying, "[I]f only a girl would take a little trouble to enter into the spirit of

one or two good books, so that she could really enjoy them, she would lose all patience with trash, and this would be a great advantage to her” (252).¹⁰⁵ To this end, numerous advice books were available addressed specifically to girls. Browne addresses choice, influence, and content of books in her advice book, *What Girls Can Do: A Book for Mothers and Daughters* (1885). Of a girl left to her own devices she writes, “if she chooses to read good books she will get to like good books, if she forms a habit of reading foolish books she will lose the power of reading better ones” (Browne 253). As noted in the previous chapters, narrative surrounding female reading content frequently adopted a “good” book versus “bad” book rhetoric. Rather than choosing the first book they alight on or an attractive title, it was desirable for the female reader to be discerning in her choice. Charlotte Mary Yonge explains, “[T]he danger chiefly lies in young people not knowing what to choose, and so taking the first that comes in their way, or at most that of which the title seems most attractive” (“A Few Words” 241). Choices impacted on the female’s future role as an effective citizen. It was assumed once good books were discerned and devoured, there would be no diversion. Because books held the power to inform autonomy, societally imposed notion of what content, as Phillis Browne phrases it, was “suited to the capacity of a girl” was disseminated with warnings (105). Such advice ignores an individual’s want of selfhood through personal autonomy. The question is, were these warnings complied with? How far did the individual “girl” stretch her “capacity”?

Julia McNair Wright (1840-1903) in her manual *The Complete Home* (1879)¹⁰⁶ states “A home without books argues at once a lack of educative influences” (192). This

¹⁰⁵ Phillis Browne (Sarah Sharp Hamer 1839-1927) lived throughout her life in London, and wrote in several genres including children’s books, advice books and books on housekeeping.

¹⁰⁶ Full title: *The Complete Home: An Encyclopaedia of Domestic Life and Affairs. The Household in its Foundation, Order, Economy, Beauty, Healthfulness, Emergencies, Methods, Children, Literature, Amusements, Religion, Friendships, Manners, Hospitality, Servants, Industry, money, and History*

is a pertinent premise on which to consider personal autonomy. In the texts I analyse, the fictional girls and women interacting with books do not necessarily have access to them in their home. Yet, as will be seen, this is not an obstacle to “educative influences”; what is relevant is whether when the opportunity presents itself, they engage with books, and what kind of education this engagement imparts. Books were often companions. This too, McNair Wright addresses, instructing, “[D]on’t make friends with the whole throng of light literature specimens” (201). Friendship with books is predicated on appropriate content but ultimately this was the choice of the reader. It was not simply content which promoted books as “friends”. In a nonreading capacity, books were placed on shelves or tables, their presence in the private space intentionally arranged to enhance the personal environment as an extension of the individual. Katharine Tynan when furnishing her own room, goes to an auction where her father bought her “a second book-case to flank [her] first” and she purchases “some books beautifully bound” (*Twenty-Five* 182). There is evidence in the fiction I explore that woman particularly, when it comes to space “have their own way of loving books” (Humphreys 46). Egerton’s narrator in *Rosa Amorosa* says “books are like friends”, yet as Egerton’s stories reveal, this can be as much about them as an attractive object as it is their content; the protagonist in “A Psychological Moment at Three Periods: The Woman” notes that “beautiful books” make life worthwhile (140; 24). The dominating narrative comprising the good, the bad, and the potential of books was relentless. However, as portrayed in the following fictional accounts, female readers of all ages exercised autonomy in both their choice of books and how they used books.

“Their Wants Were Satisfied”: Choosing Books

Traversing the seas from Australia, an example of female autonomy in book choice appeared in the *Irish Monthly* in 1888 in an article titled “A Word About Novels”. The

setting is a bookshop. A “young lady” is overheard asking “aloud” for “one of the worst novels of an infamous French author” (W. Hughes 59). Apparently, when the bookseller, aware of the type of book she requested “tried to put her off with some production of not so rank a flavour”, she “insisted” on this book of “vileness” (59). The eavesdropper decides “she must be a confirmed novel reader” who “having heard some talk of the book she was but thoughtlessly yielding to a dangerous curiosity” (59). When he “turned to look at her, as one in a zoological garden may look at a tiger or hyena, to see what a kind of monster she was” he finds “the gentle and refined look of a modest girl” (59). This horrified eavesdropper has witnessed personal autonomy in action; regardless of conventional direction, the “modest girl” is making her own choice in reading content. Writer Phillis Browne, quoted previously, shares her own experience as an example of autonomy. While staying with a friend, it comes to Browne’s attention that novels have been “stored away in a box in a garret” (104). On discovering these novels of “questionable character” (hence the removal to a garret), Browne “was at once in clover”, and each day she would go to the garret and “read all day long books of all kinds” (104). When her parents realised this situation, “she had to promise not to read any book that [her] parents had not sanctioned” and for want of reading she yielded (105). Her father gave her “Christian Philosopher” to read.¹⁰⁷ At Browne’s entreaty, her mother “rescued” her and gave her a novel which was more palatable, and “suited to the capacity of a girl” whilst containing a “good moral lesson” (105). Her initial autonomous act of reading “books of all kinds” is (eventually) thwarted. However, seeking an alternative book for readjustment via her mother is a further small behaviour on Browne’s own behalf.

¹⁰⁷ Likely *The Christian Philosopher, or, The Connection of Science and Philosophy With Religion: Illustrated With Engravings* (1824) by Thomas Dick (1774-1857).

Reading an alternative book is the choice of Sister de Sales in Laffan's *Hogan, M. P.* The book opens with "Breaking-up day", an "an event of no small importance" attended by parents, guests, and the convent community (1). Pupils are in the final throes of preparation, rehearsing Molière's *Avare*, or badly reading extracts of German and Italian content. Within this "utter confusion" Sister de Sales, a teaching nun, has chosen another book to read, namely, French poetry:

In the corner inside the door, a scene from Molière's *Avare* was being rehearsed by a set of girls. "Maitre Jacques", with her fingers stuffed in her ears, was shouting her part to the teacher, who, with a book of "Elegant Extracts" from French literature open in her hand, was listening with intense anxiety, and correcting whenever her ear caught a mistake. (Laffan *Hogan, M. P.* 2, 3)

Amidst the rumpus, Sister de Sales has exercised autonomy in her choice of reading. Her book of "Elegant Extracts" is likely Charles Picot's popular anthology of French poetry, *Fleurs Du Parnasse Français: Or, Elegant Extracts from the Most Approved Productions of the Best French Poets [...]* (1845) intended, appropriately, for educational purposes. Though in the French language, this collection was intended for an American audience, hence according to the author the poems selected "carefully avoided the introduction of sentiments; or expressions which might appear, even to the most fastidious, objectionable either in a moral or religious point of view" which compliments the teaching ethos in an Irish convent (Picot iv). Picot further assures his selection "contains some of the best and purest effusions of . . . almost all the poets of whom France has so much reason to be proud" (iii). However, Sister de Sales is not reading it, but holding it "open in her hand" while listening to students practising scenes from Molière's *Avare*. This small behaviour could be an attempt at escapism or an attempt to alleviate the anxiety the shouting and mistakes are triggering. Perhaps it is a

reminder amongst the shouting and incorrect pronunciations that the French language is appealing, its familiarity as “French literature” reassuring Sister de Sales. Either way, she has chosen to hold this book. Laffan has juxtaposed the “best and purest effusions” of “Elegant Extracts” with *L’Avare (The Miser)*, Molière’s 1668 comedy about the choice of women to marry for love or money. Situating this comedy as she does on the last day of school, Laffan is indicating the pupils who are leaving will soon be making decisions on love and their future.

Turning our focus to pupil Mary Brangan, her role in the above proceedings “was reading or rather muttering something out of a book” ostensibly in Italian. One teacher thinks she is reading French; Hogan sitting in the audience remarks to his neighbour “That is an Italian recitation, or supposed to be, is it not?” (Laffan *Hogan, M. P.* 15). It is not surprising she is “muttering”; Italian is not her favourite subject. In a distinct act of autonomy Mary has chosen in advance exactly where her Italian books will be going: “[S]he had already fixed on a receptacle in the lumber room for her school books, and beheld in her mind’s eye, with intense satisfaction, Silvio Pellico and Veneroni’s grammar reposing in undisturbed peace at the bottom of it” (23, 24). Whilst these were staple texts for convent education, they are interesting inclusions in the context of autonomy. Silvio Pellico, a writer mainly of tragedies, was involved in publishing and editing a magazine *Il Conciliatore*, “a journal purely literary” which in the spirit of fiction, intended “to look through literature to the life that it expresses, and so help towards the better future of his country” (H. M. 3, 4). This publication was censored, and later Pellico was imprisoned for ten years (4).¹⁰⁸ During this time he received books from a priest and was assured access to “the entire library of the

¹⁰⁸ See John R. Rath, “The Carbonari: Their Origins, Initiation Rites, and Aims.”

convent” (Pellico 236).¹⁰⁹ Considered “a precious fragment of mental and moral autobiography”, Pellico’s resultant work, *Le Mie Prigioni (My Prisons (1832))* and his Christian suffering would suit convent reading and was likely the book owned by Mary Brangan (v). In her own autonomous act of defiance, Mary has consigned him to prison again “at the bottom” of a “receptacle” in a room used to store items not being used. Perhaps this was Laffan’s own expression conveyed through “literature” of how the young girl felt about the obligation imposed on lengthy “mental and moral” reading in Italian. As well, Mary’s copy was accompanied by the 424 pages *Veneroni’s Complete Italian Grammar*, or to give the twentieth edition in 1846 its full title:

Veneroni’s Complete Italian Grammar: Containing the Best and Easiest Rules; To Which Are Added, An Introduction to Italian Versification; Extracts from The Italian Poets; &C. &C. The Whole Accented on A New Plan, Tending to Facilitate the Pronunciation of Learners.

This work was “justly considered as far surpassing all other introductions to that elegant language” but unsurprisingly readily shed and buried by Mary, in her mind never to be needed (iiv). As character John Hogan, attending the “Breaking up day” event mentioned earlier, remarks, “Dear me! . . . why, this is astonishing learning! What in the wide world? Whoever expected young ladies like these to know such things?” (17). Such “astonishing learning” through convent education was not a matter of choice. The knowing of “such things” could potentially alert an autonomous girl to alternative choices for her future.¹¹⁰ However, for some it was unnecessary learning leading only to a future in the convent.

¹⁰⁹ Pellico emerged apparently “prepared to be a moral teacher” and recorded his experiences; see Pellico, Silivo, *My Prisons: Memoirs of Silvio Pellico (1832)*.

¹¹⁰ As discussed in Chapter One, correspondent courses for furthering education and career chances were available at this time.

Marion, one of the children in Laffan's *Ismay's Children* (1887), ponders the question of study and its purpose. Having left school but experiencing the energy previously spent in studying, she spends the morning in "fits of vicarious piano-practice, writing Italian exercises, or reading over the stanza or two of 'Jerusalem Delivered' for the old nun who gave her an Italian lesson twice a week" (Laffan *Ismay's* 42). Having fulfilled these activities, plus "ten minutes of Brinley Richards", she asks herself, "what was it all for? What was the use?" (42).¹¹¹ These episodes suggest echoes of Laffan's concerns around the purpose of convent education addressed in her non-fiction article, "Convent Boarding-School for Young Ladies" (1874) published in *Fraser's Magazine*. Marion's questions reflect Laffan's argument that the convent curriculum did not prepare pupils for life beyond a future calling to convent life. Laffan criticises what she terms "monastic ideals" cultivated in convent life and held out as the preferred path for girls (783). To support her argument, she incorporates the recollection by an ex-pupil of the reading list on a convent curriculum:

I know that in some convents the *Heir of Redclyffe* and the other works of its author were in the library of—Convent. But we were allowed no books beyond the *Lives of the Saints*, *Tales of the Sacraments*, and such like. We had plenty of such things as the *Apostleship of Prayer*, *Annals of the Propagation of the Faith*, &c. (Laffan "Convent Boarding-Schools" 782)

Laffan argues that even the societally expected role of marriage was not facilitated in the reading agenda. Convent reading material ignores the potential of intelligent conversation between spouses. Even Charlotte Mary Yonge's prescribed ideal wife was required "to be an intelligent agreeable companion to the husband . . . to have some real and rational opinion" (242). Within convents, the "ignorance of . . . higher class

¹¹¹ Welshman Brinley Richards (1887-1885), composer and poet.

literature” Laffan explains, “render minds inert and unproductive” (86). Having investigated the reading material of a successful non-convent institution, Laffan concludes, “neither do we believe that the books are liable to any objection”, highlighting a distinct but unnecessary lack in convent book lists (86).¹¹² Laffan wrote this article in 1874; her fiction over four years later was still drawing attention to restrictive Convent reading material.

Beyond the apparent protection of convent walls, the choice of novels available was unavoidable, therefore appropriate choosing was of paramount concern. An unnamed contributor to the *Irish Monthly* 1878 explains, “since it must needs be that novels come—and come they certainly do with a vengeance—it is well that there should be novels which are harmless in principle, and even high-principled” (“New Books” 239). Regardless of whether there is an availability of “harmless” and high-principled” novels, girls and women make choices. Repeated instructions on choosing books could not avert small behaviours expressing autonomy. In Laffan’s *The Honorable Miss Ferrard* (1878), Mrs Really is explaining the situation of women readers with Mr Satterthwaite:

“In Carmody’s little crockery-shop we passed a few minutes ago is a girl of twenty who has a better and more thorough acquaintance with English literature than many a professor. It’s a fact, I think she has Shakespeare at her fingers’ ends, and every one of the dramatists since.”

“Nonsense! where does she get the books?”

“Buys all that can be had cheap; and she has brothers and cousins in the Queen’s University in Cork—these colleges, by the way, are doing a great deal of good—and gets from the library there all that she requires. I can tell you that she is not

¹¹² Alexandria College, Dublin

the only girl here that reads . . . There is a dress-maker who sits up all night reading Carlyle and other books. I believe, indeed, she borrows them from Mary Carmody. They both know history thoroughly". (206)

Autonomy in action is the thrust of this dialogue. Not only do these two girls read—and it has become a topic for conversation—they have also found a way to acquire books that extend beyond the usual remit for female readers. Ignoring prohibitions, the “girl of twenty” gets books by buying cheaply, and via the boys who have access to the University library; she then shares the books with the dressmaker thus enables the autonomy of another girl. As a result, both are well-informed readers. As noted in Chapter Two, when Thomas Carlyle is mentioned, it implies the reader, here the dressmaker, is choosing to inform herself of progressive and controversial thought. Circumstance and time do not hinder the endeavours of these two girls; one appears to be working in retail and the other is a dressmaker who though she works, chooses to sit “up all night reading”. Night reading “allowed individuals to select their own reading matter and read it clandestinely” (Ferguson 25). Though we are privy to the dress-maker reading Carlyle, we do not know what the “other books” are—their titles remain in the clandestine space. As well, I believe it was not simply a need for secrecy. Because she is working during the day, the dressmaker is using night reading in order to gain more knowledge. In response to Mrs Really’s observation, Mr Satterthwaite, laughing, remarks “I have no doubt that the fact of this reading being prohibited is its special charm in their eyes” (206). This may be so, but they are still choosing what books to read.

Not everyone responded to another’s autonomy with the insight and humour of Mr Satterthwaite; the capacity of girls and women to choose their books was more likely to incite displeasure. In her advice book *What Girls Can Do: A Book for Mothers*

and Daughters (1885), Phillis Browne relates an experience of book choosing which “grieved” her:

I was very much grieved the other day in going into a large circulating library, where a number of young ladies were choosing books to read, to find that not one of them asked for anything but the most miserable trash, with no thought of anything better. When their wants were satisfied, the girls compared notes rather loudly of the books they had read, and it was pitiable to find their taste lay exclusively in the direction of literature unreal, unhealthy, sensational and false.
(253)

Browne’s disappointment in the book choices of these girls she observed is palpable. However, this is also to question their right to choose what they read. Whether they choose “trash” or “literature”, this is a mutual exercise in autonomy within a peer group. They knew what kind of book they wanted having “compared notes” on previous books. As a group in this public space perhaps individual choice was informed by the peer group. However, the assumption that “not one of them” had “no thought of anything better” is an unfair judgement. We are not to know if privately they broadened their individual reading habits. Edward G. Salmon, in his article of 1886 “What Girls Read”, wrote “if girls were to choose their own books . . . they would make a choice for themselves very different from that which their elders make for them”, regardless of whether these “elders” are parents or advisers in periodicals (529). Seven years later in the *Irish Monthly* of 1893, Salmon’s quote is revisited with some collated data from a publisher who set a question. The response of a thousand schoolgirls asked, “Who is your favourite author?” reveals that “[H]ardly one of the recognized writers for girls is

mentioned” (“Pigeonhole Paragraphs” 26).¹¹³ It is surmised that books by authors promoted as specifically for girls are bought by their parents; the list identifies the authors the girls choose themselves. If parental choice of books is the ideal, reality shows girls were autonomously choosing their own reading material; notably, the list contains solely “good” books. While observing the girls in the library, Browne had noted “good books were there, but they never thought of opening them” (253). This is to assume they avoided “good” books, yet the books they picked on this occasion are not necessarily their sole interest; at times, they may well choose a “good book” to read. Whatever the case may be, they were choosing their reading material, thus autonomous. Consequently, “their wants were satisfied”, suggesting a firm progression toward selfhood.

Readers of the periodical the *Monthly Packet* were unlikely to be among Browne’s boisterous bevy choosing “literature unreal, unhealthy, sensational and false” in the library. From the outset, as original editor of the *Monthly Packet*, Charlotte Mary Yonge defined what she perceived as good reading practice. She encouraged her readers that “perhaps the most prudent course would be to read no book without some previous knowledge of it, either from reviews, or from some person on whose judgement you can rely” (“A Few Words on the Choice of Books of Amusement” 243). Yonge also devotes a book, *What Books to Lend and What to Give* (1887) to the listing of books appropriate for reading. Chapters include “Drawing Room Stories”; Novelettes and Novels”; and “Improving Books”, clearly with the intention of sifting appropriate books from those available. However, she did choose to avoid titles which give “a sense of preaching instead of amusing” (13). Phillis Browne likewise conveyed employing other opinions stating, “if there is the slightest doubt about a book, it is best some judicious person

¹¹³ The list of authors can be viewed in the column “Pigeonhole Paragraphs” on p. 26 of the *Irish Monthly* of 1893.

should read it beforehand, and pronounce it good before it is placed in the hands of a young girl” (104). While this advice may appear to inhibit personal choice, each person still has the choice to seek guidance or ignore it and choose her own reading material and, indeed, motive. Browne continued her counsel with a warning for the “judicious friend not to be too particular and precise in deciding against a book, but to allow for a girl’s taste in literature” (104). The choice of book could be made within the remit of “taste”, thus personalising the experience.

Clearly, books have the propensity to steer personal choice. In Laffan’s *Ismay’s Children*, Mrs Ahearn wishes her daughter to marry, but Mary Ahearn wants to join a convent. Her mother attributes this decision to the appeal of “good books” supplied by the nuns: “And then, you see, not a thing will she do but read those good books the nuns gave her, and no, she she will not take Harry Capel she won’t” (Laffan *Ismay’s* 254). Too, Mary Aherne’s parents had kept her “so long at the convent school” that it became a more appealing option to their daughter than marriage (254). Mary has exercised autonomy in following her own idea of her future. Books are a visible indication of her choices in life. Her bedroom is “a naked queer kind of bedroom” with a “bleak uninhabited look, as if no one lived in it” (259). However, the piece of Mary’s character which is evident is “a little pile of religious books in one corner”, no doubt some or all of the “good books” given her by the nuns (260).

Not all female readers were inclined toward religious books. In Katharine Tynan’s *Three Fair Maids* (1895), we learn of Delia who here is in dialogue with character Betty who highlights Delia is

“. . . always reading, but she’s an un-educated little thing. Aren’t you, Delia?

You haven’t a single accomplishment.”

Delia’s large eyes suddenly filled with tears.

“Dearest Betty,” she cried, “don’t ask me to go to Paris, quite away from you all, among strangers. I should die of the loneliness, and the strange faces. Let me stay. I will do anything you like. I will practise every day. I won’t read any poetry or story books till I have quite learnt my lessons for Margaret”. (10, 11)

Delia’s preference for poems and story books are implied as impacting her lack of education to the point she has not “a single accomplishment” and are now being used as leverage—if she abstains from poetry she will learn her lessons, remain at home, and not be sent to Paris. Poetry and story books have been allied and both are implied as distracting Delia from her “lessons”. Phillis Browne in *What Girls Can Do* acknowledged a tendency to dismiss story books existed, saying that some parents “stop [their children] instantly, and tell them to read something that will improve their minds” (102). Further, she notes “in this way they too often destroy the love for reading” adding “it is not reasonable to expect that young people will read very heavy, solid literature, however excellent it may be; and there is no necessity for them to be tortured into making the attempt” (102). Browne allows there are story books which are “healthy in tone, teach a good moral lesson, and yet are exceedingly interesting”, and are preferable to “milk-and-watery novels” which do not enable “intellectual conversation” (102). Poetry is not deemed educational in the same way Victorian writing is. Thus, Delia is viewed as “un-educated” and not owning societally approved “accomplishments”. This does not mean she has no knowledge; indeed her small behaviour of choosing her preferred reading material benefits her at a later date, when “Delia, who is the shyest of the shy, became very friendly with her new acquaintance, and told him about . . . the books she liked best, and the poetry she was reading, till we all looked at each other in wonder” (56). Her interest and passion for poetry, and story books, enables her to hold conversation with a “new acquaintance” which caused her audience to “wonder”. It appears she is more educated than Betty assumed. Delia’s pleasure in story books has

fuelled a love of reading. Ostensibly, as Browne observes, story books were to be viewed as “a means to an end, that end the formation of the habit of reading” for essentially, she believes, “the taste for story books will pass away, the taste for reading will not” (106, 103).

Delia is not alone in her preference for non-improving books. In the following episode from Laffan’s *Hogan, M. P.*, the reader is not female. However, we are following the perspective of Dicky Davoren’s sister which reveals the effects of absorbing the predominant commentary on books. Trinity College student Dicky Davoren “threw his books into a corner, and selected the most enticing of a collection of novels”; by “the second page of his romance” he is distracted (Laffan *Hogan, M. P.* 178). Aware of his choice of novels over academic literature, his sister Nellie comments “if you were to see the story-books he buys! I assure you he reads those ‘penny awfuls’, and novels that one would imagine a servant, and a servant alone, could care about.” (347). Nellie articulates the conventional view. She is aware books are for a purpose and suited to certain readership; servants would be reading the novels such as her brother is consuming.¹¹⁴ Penny fiction was the reading of choice for the masses but not recommended by the cultural critics. Charlotte Mary Yonge explains she can only offer “a few suggestions of extracts for penny readings, but it is not easy to collect enough that do not verge on buffoonery, or that have no element of vulgarity” (*What Books to Lend* 14). The “new juvenile mass market” was the target audience for the popular penny dreadfuls (Springhall “‘Penny Dreadful’ Panic” 38). Both working-class and middle-class “boys and girls” expressed “an urge to read for excitement and entertainment” and publishers fed this temptation prolifically (45). It seems Dicky is

¹¹⁴ Compiling her list of books which can be lent or given to child readers, Charlotte Mary Yonge, talking about penny books warns it is “advisable to inspect thoroughly everything offered by volunteers”; servants with limited income would likely be part of this demographic receiving free books (*What Books to Lend and What to Give* 14).

either continuing a book choice begun in childhood or is making up for not reading for “excitement and entertainment” until now. Either way, neglecting his studies Dicky has thrown his academic books “into the corner” in preference for the more “enticing” romances and penny fiction (Laffan *Hogan M. P.* 178). In her instructions, Yonge pinpoints the appeal of these cheap books explaining:

[T]he foremost counsel to be given to those commencing Penny Readings is to beware of exciting an expectation that all readings and recitations shall be comic. It is probable that a considerable proportion of the audience will enjoy what is adventurous or pathetic. (111)

The penny book with its propensity for adventure is more appealing to Dicky than academic content. Nellie blames university for Dicky becoming “independent” whereby he “he won’t tell a thing about himself, or answer a question; he is utterly changed”, yet the “perpetual amusement” of penny novels in which he is immersed potentially has the same effect (Laffan 347). In the same way digressive reading does not lead to good outcome for the female reader in conventional narrative, in Laffan’s story neither does it for Dicky. He runs away due to “heedless selfishness . . . the callous indifference with which he had pursued his own ends” resulting societally in “disgrace” and apparent “wretched fate” and ends up living in Cape of Good Hope (452). Edward G. Salmon explains the influence of penny fiction in his article saying boys “may be driven to sea by what they read” (“What Girls Read” 523). He also notes consequence for the female reader “is almost exclusively domestic” and “more invidious and subtle” (523). Seemingly cognisant of this idea, Laffan’s story does not end with Dicky’s disgrace. As is wont in fiction fostering Victorian morality, a woman suffers, and it is Dicky’s mother who consequentially exits the story in “a highly dangerous state” (452). Having taken Dicky down the path of deterioration often reserved for female readers of

dastardly fiction, Laffan has him banished though he does not ultimately die, and his destination suggests his future is Hope(ful). His sister Nellie appropriately and “exclusively domestic” gets married.

In her career, George Egerton rejected societal commentary which dictated appropriate content, forging her own reputation as a writer speaking to elements of change and progress. She takes the approach of what Rider Haggard calls “life as life is, and men and women as they are” (“About Fiction” 178). Assigning specific authors as the reading material of women characters, Egerton portrays reading content as a woman’s personal choice rather than conforming to accepted and expected content. The consequences of such a choice for the protagonist in her short story “Now Spring Has Come” sits in contrast to George Moore’s claim that “no unfortunate results are the consequence of the reading”, despite affinity with Moore’s “school” of realism (*Literature at Nurse* 22).¹¹⁵ The unnamed protagonist is perusing the shelves in a bookshop. Finding a book, she is drawn by the name of the author, and then by a line in the book. She is drawn down an unexpected path:

They sent their messenger to me in the guise of a paper-backed novel with a taking name. I was waiting in a shop for some papers I had ordered, when it struck me. I took it up. The author was unknown to me. I opened it at haphazard, and a line caught me. I read on. I was roused by the bookseller’s suave voice,—
“That is a very bad book. Madam. One of the modern realistic school, a *tendenz roman*. I would not advise Madam to read it.”

“A-ah, indeed!”

¹¹⁵ Realism: writers rejecting Romanticism and writing life as it really is. See Stephen Arata’s chapter, “Realism” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle*, and Petra Dierkes-Thrun’s chapter “Realism” in *The Fin-De-Siècle World*.

I laid it down and left the shop. But the words I had read kept dancing before me; I saw them written across the blue of the sky, in the sun streaks on the pavement, and the luminous delicacy of the Norwegian summer nights; they were impressed on my brain in vivid color, glowing, blushing with ardor as they were. Weeks passed; one afternoon, time hung heavily on my hands, and I sent for the book. I read all that afternoon; let the telling words, the passionate pain, the hungry yearning, all the tragedy of a man's soul-strife with evil and destiny, sorrow and sin, bite into my sentient being. When the book was finished, I was consumed with a desire to see and know the author . . . and as the book was condemned by the orthodox, I had to feel my way cautiously". (Egerton "Now Spring Has Come" 47, 48)¹¹⁶

This book was "a very bad book" distinctly "condemned by the orthodox". She cannot forget what she has read in those moments in the bookshop. Choosing to ignore the advice of the bookseller, she finds a way of surreptitiously acquiring the book by sending for it. Its contents consume her thoughts; she feels his pain, his yearnings, his strife. The author has penned a book identified as "one of the modern realistic school, a *tendenz roman*". Specifying a "*tendenz roman*", a story which serves a purpose, speaks to the how the story proceeds. The protagonist follows her heart and meets the author. They embark on a relationship which is intense but ultimately brief, and results in disappointment. Disregarding warnings dispensed in advice books and periodicals, the protagonist has been influenced by a novel and it does not turn out well; she metaphorically "dug a deep grave, and laid all my dreams and foolish wishes and sweet hopes in it" (75). Egerton depicts "life as life is" sending a warning that personal choice

¹¹⁶ It is accepted by critics that this story is a fictionalised account of Egerton's affair with Knut Hamsun. Sally Ledger notes, "the tense, unfulfilled relationship" she had with Norwegian author Knut Hamsun, is "painfully evoked in 'Now Spring Has Come'" (x). Egerton translated Hamsun's book *Hunger* (1899), and dedicated *Keynotes* to him.

influenced by a novel has consequences. Her character concludes that a fuller sense of autonomy, not dictated by societal expectations or a compelling find in a bookstore, will emerge “[W]hen we shall live larger and freer lives we shall be better balanced than we are now” (65). However, the titles Egerton inserts into this story reveal her character’s autonomy in the books she is familiar with. The protagonist’s interaction with the novelist reveals a shared interest in certain authors, as she relates, “[D]id we not talk about anything? Of course we did,—Tolstoi and his doctrine of celibacy; Ibsen’s Hedda; Strindberg’s view of the female animal,—and agreed that Friedrich Nietzsche appealed to us immensely” (71). Egerton’s inclusion of these authors in her fiction aligns her with a demographic which incite furore; like the book she had discovered in the bookshop, works by these authors were “condemned by the orthodox”. Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906), Leo Tolstoi (1828-1910)¹¹⁷, and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)¹¹⁸ are among those critic Max Nordau (1849-1923) declared his version of degenerates (451, 507). Nordau dedicates a chapter of *Degeneration* to Ibsen. In the context of this paper, Nordau explicates that Ibsen implies in his fiction that a person “should obey every one of his caprices”, which is what Egerton’s protagonist did in literally seeking out the unorthodox author she felt was speaking to her (370). Nordau explains what he calls “Ibsen’s doctrine” as what “is agreeable to himself regardless of morals and law”, a stance which Egerton introduces in this story when her protagonist meets up and has a brief liaison with the author (371). He further interprets that “Ibsen, in his lucid moments, feels that there may be something of danger in ‘obeying one’s law’”, which the ending of Egerton’s story implies, as she says “good-by” and subsequently holds a “grand burial” for this affair (Nordau 370; Egerton 74, 75).¹¹⁹ Nordau sums up Ibsen’s

¹¹⁷ Tolstoi is interchangeable with the more familiar Tolstoy. Full name Count Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy.

¹¹⁸ Spelt Nietzsche by Max Nordau and Nietzsche by George Egerton.

¹¹⁹ Interestingly, Nordau’s close reading of Ibsen’s work identifies and discusses areas of choice and autonomy. There is not space to discuss this in this paper.

philosophy as “the glorification . . . of the person who ‘wills’, is ‘free’ and ‘wholly himself” (415, 416). Chapter four of *Degeneration* is titled “Tolstoism”. Pursuing his analysis of “degenerate Tolstoi”, Nordau summarises in part Tolstoi’s belief that the “individual is nothing; the species is everything; the individual lives in order to do his fellow-creatures good” based on the Biblically adopted principal of “neighbourly love” (162, 148, 160). This idea too converses with Egerton’s story as, when rejected, the protagonist takes responsibility for her feelings and choices, relating she “would have told a little lie to spare a man’s feelings” and deciding she had “made an idiot of one’s self”, and did “not wish to hurt him” (68, 71, 72). Friedrich Nietzsche, also receiving his own chapter in Nordau’s book, is accused of “spouting forth deafening bombast” (416). Within the context of autonomy, Nordau’s opinion on Nietzsche’s concept of individualism describes “the individual, for whom he demands perfect freedom . . . not of knowledge and judgment” but to satisfy base instincts (471). Egerton’s protagonist endeavours to explain to the author she meets about “instinctive truths and cultivated lies” that generate conflict within a person’s “individual nature”, which I suggest, impacts on how personal agency is acted out, and surely incites discussion on Nietzsche (“Now Spring Has Come” 49, 50). Egerton explores how this “individual nature” has been “crushed” via her fictional women which speaks to the challenge of personal autonomy (49). Another of the four philosophers the protagonist recalls in her conversation with the heterodox author is Johan August Strindberg (1849-1912) and explicitly, his “view of the female animal” which accords with Egerton’s rhetoric (49).¹²⁰ In Nordau’s tirade at philosophers, Strindberg gets one mention as “devoid . . . of real originality” (507). With these authors as forces for discussion with the author of the “bad book”, it is unsurprising the protagonist questions matters which challenge the path of female autonomy. Indeed, on initially reading the “bad book” the protagonist

¹²⁰ Egerton speaks of the “experience of the female animal” (“A Cross Line” 11).

reflects, “I wonder shall we ever be able to tell the truth, ever be able to live fearlessly according to our own light, to believe that what is right for us must be right!” (48). Responding to her own desire to explore this issue she relates, “I have a will of my own, so I set to work to find him” (48). Thus, she initiates a determined act of autonomy to explore her subject further, and perhaps find some resolution (48).

Nordau’s *Degeneration* is in part a retort to such authors who epitomise the “spirit of the times” and contribute to the “feeling of stir and upheaval” at the fin de siècle (14, 7). Those which express this spirit elicit “contempt for traditional views of custom and morality” (5). Egerton is overt in fostering, through fiction, books which reflect the “spirit of the times”, and which encourage scrutiny of society or self. A brief conversation between the man and wife in “A Cross Line” indicates this:

“Finished your book?”

...

“Yes, it is a book makes one think. It would be a greater book if he were not an Englishman; he’s afraid of shocking the big middle class. You wouldn’t care about it”. (19)

The woman has chosen “a book that makes one think” but considers it limiting. The author is afraid of upsetting the stalwarts of conventional Victorian society. Such a comment indicates dissatisfaction at a missed opportunity; the presence of reticence has prevented it being truly subversive. The assumption her husband “wouldn’t care about it” suggests it follows a similar narrative to what the protagonist in “Now Spring Has Come” was ruminating on; women should have more autonomy and live by what they feel is “truth” and “what is right for [them]” (48). Books that make one think are present in her short story “The Spell of the White Elf”. The academic woman we meet in this

story speaks to Nordau's notions of an alternative spirit when explaining how with the presence of a child in the home, she must rearrange the books on her shelves:

I never saw such an inquisitive mite. I had to rearrange all my bookshelves, change "Le Nu de Rabelais" (after Garnier, you know) and several others from the lower shelves to the top ones. One can't be so Bohemian when there is a little white soul like that playing about, can one? (Egerton "Spell" 96)

Clearly her collection suggests an individual who exerts autonomy and views herself as Bohemian. Max Nordau launches into a tirade on those prescribing to "new tendencies", lambasting the minority who wish to express non-conformity through how they look, live, and how they perceive art and literature (7, 43). The academic realises the influence her book choices could have on her child. She decides to "rearrange all [her] bookshelves" on account of the elf; an unnecessary move as the child is still so young, perhaps, but a recognition the child will later make their own choices in books rather than assimilate their mother's choice from what they see on the shelves. The academic's inclusion of *Le Nu de Rabelais D'après Jules Garnier* (1892) by Armand Silvestre (1837-1901) on her shelves indicates an autonomous approach to books, rather than following conventional recommendations. This book composed of descriptions and images in various art forms of naked women, thus scandalous, is a nod to the spirit of the fin de siècle which Nordau speaks of. Surprisingly, Nordau does not mention Rabelais or Silvestre; Egerton in contrast has willingly defined and incorporated a book of controversy, asserting her own small behaviour via her fiction. She does this also in dialogue between the academic and the narrator, mentioning that "Larry Moore of the 'Vulture,' . . . is a worshipper of the decadent school of verse; quotes Verlaine, you know" (Egerton "Spell" 96).¹²¹ Egerton clearly establishes a connection to the

¹²¹ Both Larry Moore and the *Vulture* appear to be fictional.

controversial Decadent movement berated by Nordau. French poet Paul Verlaine (1844-1896) is regarded as epitomising the fin de siècle, and thus linked to degeneration by Nordau:

In this man we find, in astonishing completeness, all the physical and mental marks of degeneration, and no author known to me answers so exactly, trait for trait, to the descriptions of the degenerate . . . his personal appearance, the history of his life, his intellect, his world of ideas and modes of expression.
(119)

Invoking Verlaine is a provocative choice by Egerton, firmly situating her work in Nordau's vitriolic path. However, in her own words Egerton approached her writing as she did her life, autonomously in her "own fashioning" (*Ten Contemporaries* 58). Reflecting this, the academic offers an opinion remarking, "*fin de siècle* (don't you detest that word?)", thus implying a chosen distance from all this "word" has come to mean ("Spell" 96, 97). Despite the content of her bookshelves being markedly representative of Nordau's speculation on degenerate authors, the academic chooses not to ally herself with this contemporaneous assessment of "fin de siècle".

Another of Egerton's characters employs a specific book in exercising autonomy. I return to the housemaid in "Under Northern Sky" who has chosen to take some time to herself while the husband of her mistress (Fruen) is dying. As explored in Chapter Two, she carries out a religious ritual of burning incense and reading the Bible. Of interest now is her choice of reading: "the last book of Ecclesiastes" (Egerton "Under Northern Sky: I" 140). The final book of Ecclesiastes is focused on the conclusion of life.¹²² Egerton's inclusion of "Ecclesiastes" associated with comfort and

¹²² See Ecclesiastes 12: in the *Douay-Rheims Bible*.

death is of interest in the context of the fin de siècle. Writer and Minister Samuel Cox (1826-1893) in the preface of his book, *The Book of Ecclesiastes: A New Translation* (1890) notes it “seems, in especial, to adapt itself to the conditions and wants of the present age” (ix). Interestingly Cox also notes that “Ecclesiastes” was not addressed “to the wealthy and peaceful citizens whose king held his court in Jerusalem, but to their degenerate and enfeebled descendants”, an aspect which he returns to several times in his writing, and which reflects Nordau’s concept (19, 20). He later states the writer of “Ecclesiastes” “has dealt with the common facts of life such as they were in his time, such as they remain in ours: for now, as then, men are restless and craving” (329). Nordau wrote that “men look with longing for whatever new things are at hand, without presage whence they will come or what they will be” (4). Egerton’s fiction gives evidence of an interest in the Bible; it is likely she could have read Cox’s book and appreciated the meaning as relevant to the time she is writing. She gives “Ecclesiastes” to a housemaid who chooses to use it and read it in her own ritual of comfort, as circumstances change in the house she works, and as she too faces the ultimate “fact[s] of life”, “her own days in the land being numbered” (Egerton “Under Northern Sky: I” 140).

“An Armful of Books”: Libraries and Choice

The capacity for choosing books came to the fore with the use of libraries. I discussed earlier Browne’s dismay at a group of girls choosing their preference in books. In Laffan’s *Christy Carew*, Christy is talking about family acquaintance Grace Callan. Christy relates that “[J]ust now [Grace] thinks it is the thing to read. Lanty met her in the library with an armful of novels” (1:60). Grace desires to keep up with “the thing to read”. This era was indeed the “palmy days of booming fiction” as Guinevere L. Griest terms it (118). Grace has left with “an armful” of books, specifically novels. Christy

continues relating that her brother Lanty heard Grace “scolding the man for not giving her nicer books to read, and desired him to find her some stories not so stupid this time. Imagine leaving the choice of one’s books to him!” (Laffan *Christy Carew* 2:60).

Christy’s comments appear intended to deride Grace Callan: initially that Grace is influenced by a trend in reading, but also that Grace cannot decide for herself but has entrusted her selection of books to the librarian. However, this experience highlights how Grace has exercised small behaviours. According to Christy, using the library means Grace is “leaving the choice of one’s books to him”, the librarian, rather than choosing her own, yet libraries offered an accessibility to books which addressed the costly and often prohibitive price of buying them. Grace wants to read and has found access to books. She then addresses the subject of the novels she wishes to read.

Initially it seems she was missing out on her reading preference hence she was “scolding” the librarian. She is asserting autonomy the best she can. Grace is aware there is more than one kind of novel, but she wants to choose. She does not want to read “stupid” novels; stupid in her eyes perhaps because they are not her choice, or the current craze, but also possibly she felt “stupid” novels were assumed to be of interest to the female reader, thus encroaching upon female autonomy. She wants “nicer books” to read, perhaps one of the predictable romances mentioned earlier. Alternatively, perhaps in wanting “nicer” books, Grace is deciding against the “trash” chosen by the girls whom Browne observed earlier in the circulating library. Either perspective indicates control through choice. In composing Grace Callan’s episode in the library, Laffan may have been referring to an issue rumbling in the book world regarding the role of librarians, which reached its peak two years later in 1883/4 with Irish novelist George Moore at the helm. Moore would have agreed with Christy’s appraisal of who chose the books as in 1885 in a pamphlet dedicated to his grievance he wrote, “the literary battle of our time” is not so much about types of fiction but how “literature is

now rocked to an ignoble rest in the motherly arms of the librarian”, who is “dictating” what is “proper and improper” reading material (18). In drawing attention to their influence, he scathingly remonstrates:

[T]he librarian rules the roost; he crows, and every chancleer pitches his note in the same key. He, not the ladies and gentlemen who place their names on the title-pages, is the author of modern English fiction. He models it, fashions it to suit his purpose. (Moore 20)

Moore argued the existence of the librarian removed the capacity for autonomy. His comments, however, are propelled by a very personal niggle, the rebuttal of his own book, *A Mummer's Wife* (1885), because it was viewed as immoral.¹²³ Libraries saw their function as protecting their clients particularly girls and women, from “works of fiction, that might corrupt the reader” (Eliot 131). Simon Eliot in *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel* goes on to explain that circulating libraries in particular “needed a large subscriber base, and anything that might have made their collections less suitable to females (commonly regarded as the more vulnerable) would have seriously reduced the size of the market” (131). Corroborating this, Moore notes librarians respond with, “I cater for the masses, and the masses are young unmarried women who are supposed to know but one side of life. I cannot therefore take your book.” (21). This perspective shows an alignment with the cultural commentary of what young women should know about life and how books can disturb and disrupt an understanding of societal expectations. Moore’s argument implies all librarians are the same. A decade on from Moore’s wrangle, the *Irish Monthly* in 1893, affirms in the column “Notes on New Books” that “[R]eally clever and interesting and,

¹²³ *A Mummer's Wife* (1885) is the story of a love affair between a married woman and a theatrical actor. It juxtaposes morality with bohemianism.

at the same time, harmless, and better than harmless novels are the great desideratum of lending libraries” (167). It may have been the “greatest desideratum” to stock “harmless novels”, but the ideal library was not so restrictive. L. M. H. C., a librarian writing in the *Monthly Packet* in 1892 describes the ideal library, saying, “the ideal library embraces all literature, the thoughts and imaginations of the best minds of all ages; and well-selected libraries . . . should be as fair a representation of literature that can be procured” (42). It is thus implied that so-called undesirable works would also grace the stacks. This said, at the bottom of the page containing this quote there is a note: “The Editors do not necessarily *recommend* everything described in this series of papers”, suggesting the ideal and the actual were still at odds with each other (42). This friction around fiction impacted on individual choice. Female readers could only select from what was available.

Katharine Tynan appreciated the value of choice in library books. In her memoir she relates how she discovered a shop which sold “butter, eggs, bread, and sugar-sticks”, and

a crowning delight to me was the circulating library which sat round about the shelves at that side of the shop. What a heaven it was! Even now I can feel the ecstasy of touching those green and scarlet and blue backs of books and knowing that I might read what I would. (*Twenty-Five* 42)

Ever aware of seeking out new opportunities for loaning books, Tynan “discovered a treasure of a library”, the old Mechanics’ Institute in Dublin where “[T]here was an accommodating librarian who let me roam the shelves at will and take away all I could carry” (68). The opportunity to “roam” shelves and “take away” books appears in her fiction. In her story “A Book-Lover”, the man given the moniker book-lover “loved books with an intensity of devotion, but it was because they were books . . . It was to

carry them home, to hold them, to feel them, to climb the ladder and add them to the congested shelves; that made the delight" (52). The "youngsters" however, autonomously adopted his collection as their own circulating library. They were choosing to read his books, even though they discerned he was not reading them:

As for us youngsters he was our Mudie. From his shelves we carried off the stories of the thirties, Mrs. Gore's novels, and Mrs. Trollope's, Miss Sewell's, and Miss Ferrier's. G. W. M. Reynolds we devoured in "The Coral Island", a big tome of horrors; and there was Eugene Sue's "Mysteries of Paris" in three big volumes, with a picture to every two inches of letterpress. Side by side with such coarse food for young imaginations we had Miss Wetherall in "Say and Seal" and "The Wide, Wide World" and had the good taste to prefer her. We were omnivorous readers, and were little in fear of check, as our reading-room was an overgrown orchard, where it was easy to elude pursuit or capture, and where we were wicked enough to lie low till voices were tired of calling us, and we were left in peace till the owls began to hoot and the moon swung into the delicate green and rosy sky, and the long, long, delicious day was over. (53, 54)

...

there were two he held perpetually before us as a fee if we brought back the long-missing members of batches, as a threat of their being withheld from us if we did not supply the same omissions. I think, myself, they were apocryphal, for I hunted the shelves from end to end and never caught a glimpse of them.

...

There was Miss Edgeworth too. I think we knew "Belinda" and "Ennui" and the "Absentee" from cover to cover. Odd volumes of Swift he had too. We liked "Gulliver's Travels", but turned away from the uninvitingness of "A Tale of a Tub". Our indiscriminate reading, after all, did us but little harm . . . Those were

good days for the book-lover, and for us, his clients. (Tynan “A Book-Lover” 54, 55)

They defined the book-lover’s collection as “our Mudie”.¹²⁴ The language Tynan uses invokes libraries: “reading-room”; two books as “a fee” to be given for unreturned books described as “the long-missing members of batches”; “hunted the shelves from end to end”; “restore” the missing books”; “us, his clients”; they look back to “selecting our tale of books” (58). Unlike Mudie’s, there was no censorship on what they read, and they were “in little fear of check”. The censorship of Mudie which riled George Moore did not impose on the collection of the book-lover “Mudie”: all books were “equally delightful” to him as a collector. This personal Mudie supported small behaviours of choice and enabled “the youngsters” to devour “indiscriminate reading” including a “big tome of horrors”, and “coarse food”. Their “reading-room” enabled escape, for in words that suggest adventurous content of books, they were able to “elude pursuit or capture” and were “wicked enough to lie low”. Initially, they read works by Mrs Gore, Mrs Trollope, Miss Sewell, and Miss Ferrier which variously offered fiction of religious duty and/or social commentary, books one can imagine filled Tynan’s days.¹²⁵ Tynan’s influence is further evident as their small but subversive foray into Reynold’s “big tome of horrors” and Sue’s mysteries is corrected. Her listing returns to a sample of books invoking a lesson to be learned around appropriate reading. Elizabeth Wetherall’s (Susan Warner (1818-1885)) books steeped in religious fortitude are their preferred choice indicating “good taste”. The addition of Maria Edgeworth (1768–1849) and Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) who both addressed relevant political issues through their fiction, is to include popular Anglo-Irish authors and staple of Victorian bookshelves in

¹²⁴ Mudie was a lending library known as Mudie’s Select Library after the man who founded it, Charles Edward Mudie. Based in London, it ran from 1842, closing in 1937.

¹²⁵ As these were “stories of the Thirties” we can surmise the authors are most likely Catherine Gore (1798-1861), Frances Milton Trollope (1779-1863), Elizabeth Missing Sewell (1815-1906), and Susan Ferrier (1782-1854).

this informed list. Indeed, their choices indicate their capacity to understand the existence of a hierarchy of books. Ultimately, Tynan steers these “youngsters” and their enthusiastic consumption of “omnivorous” or all kinds of books toward the correct perspective of book choice.

“Strewn, Piled, or Placed”: Books in the Home

Books furnished the private space. How they were arranged or accommodated indicated personal choice, be they a small pile of titles arranged on a table or books filling large extensive shelving. It was expected that a woman’s room or personal space had a place for her books. Writer and Historian Arthur Lee Humphreys (1865-1946) in his book *The Private Library: What We Do Know, What We Don’t Know, What We Ought to Know About Our Books* (1897) notes under the heading “Boudoir Books” how “a woman likes to have her own books, and she likes, too, to have them separate from her husband’s or her brothers” (46). A boudoir could be a private room of her own or her bedroom. In Egerton’s “A Cross Line”, the potential lover creates a picture of the ideal space for the female protagonist: “Grant that I could, I would hang your cabin with your own colours, fill it with books, all those I have heard you say you care for” (34). May Laffan’s character, Hester Dalrymple, moves to a new position as a governess; when shown her bedroom, she sat and “looked about her new domicile”, noting “a tiny book-shelf above the old mahogany drawers” (42). Hester later filled “the meagre bookshelves” with the “nicely-bound books” she had bought with her (57). In Tynan’s *The Handsome Brandons* (1899), Hilda Brandon shown a room ready for a young girl declares, “a girl would adore it”; the room “would be all her own. Her little bed would be made, soft and white, and her books would be in the book-shelf” (140). Tynan fashions a similar scene for the “old ladies” in *Her Father’s Daughter* (1901), wherein the bedroom comprises “the photographs, the books, the bits of china and needlework

with which ladyhood loves to surround itself” (119). Mary Desmond in Egerton’s *The Wheel of God* relates with nostalgia and yearning for the books inhabiting her grandmother’s home, a significant space from her childhood:

There were books too (in after years how she regretted the books, that she learned were almost unpurchasable!). First editions of all the coming classics, quaintly coloured almanacks and primers. Some she liked merely for the pictures, such as a Sandford and Merton, in pantalettes and tasselled caps, flying kites in a blue meadow, with quaint, long SS in the letter-press. She revelled in the books in the old nursery. There were books in the drawing-room, too, in the tulip-wood cabinet, with the red silk curtains; gift-books, with gold scrollwork on their bindings, and dedications in delicate Italian writing on the title-pages.

(5)

Both “the old nursery” and the “drawing-room” contained books which had been chosen, as much for their aesthetic value as their content. As a child Mary Desmond was choosing to use and visually enjoy them; she “revelled” in them and recalls those she knew in retrospect were collectable—the “almost unpurchasable” and the “[F]irst editions”, as well as beautiful books, those intricately bound. In contrast, in Tynan’s *The Dear Irish Girl*, stepping through the door of Eleanor Bingham’s room at the top of a block of “workmen’s dwellings” the visitor found “a low room, bare except for a few books and one or two pictures, with furniture of a monastic plainness and simplicity” (292). A spartan space does not prevent the possession of books. Sometimes, having no books is the personal choice. In the same novel, Tynan’s character Mrs Sotheran’s “private room” is devoid of books:

“There was not a footstool nor a cushion, visible; there was no litter of books or papers. A gas-fire burned in the grate, and Mrs. Sotheran’s writing-table looked

rather like a judge's desk. Entrenched behind it, she had indeed put fear into the heart of many an offender" (*Dear Irish Girl* 217).

The absence of books gives an air, along with an absence of supplementary furniture, of a strict and disciplined person, which is affirmed by the comment that Mrs Sotheran in this setting had "put fear into the heart" of people. Whatever of the impression this exuded, this tidiness and the lack of books is the choice of the inhabitant. In May Laffan's *Ismay's Children*, Mary Ahearne's parent's abode is noticeably devoid of books: "There was not a single book to be seen, except Moore's Melodies, which lay in their bright green binding on top of the piano" (76). Privy to this, it is not surprising, as noted previously, that Mary Ahearne wanted to be a nun; with no books at home, the books she has in "a little pile" in her own room are borrowed from the convent (260). Also in *Ismay's Children*, books have been consigned to what appears as an unimportant status amongst a messy heap in an untidy cupboard. Miss D'Arcy, unperturbed

unlocked the press beside her; then she took out her tea-caddy. As the door swung open it disclosed a motley store ranged upon the two shelves, papers of sugar, flour, starch, jostled bars of soap and strings of candles. A large bowl of eggs flanked a piece of bacon. A quantity of papers, books, and parcels were jumbled together in a heap with these. No one was ever allowed to go near this museum of treasures, over which its proprietress kept watch and ward all day (*Laffan Ismay's Children* 83)

The swinging door revealed a medley of items vying for space. Books are "jumbled together" with food and household accoutrements; each "jostled" with the other, bound in "a heap". However, what appears to the onlooker as "a motley store" was to its owner, Miss D'Arcy, a "museum of treasures". In a further act of autonomy, books are

situated in a place which holds value to its owner. They are company with the basics of life, food and means of light. Here she can keep “watch and ward” over them, perhaps lest anyone dismisses their value and removes them along with what is perceived as detritus. In the same story, Lady Blanche is lounging in her drawing room:

It was a large square room, heavily and gorgeously decorated; but the gilding had the subdued look that comes of damp, and the books in the long low shelves that ran round the room had a mouldy smell when opened, and their pages were all speckled with mildew (126).

This room is “gorgeously decorated” but exudes weariness; the damp has infringed on its belongings as is noted by the books with “a mouldy smell when opened”, the pages of which were “all speckled with mildew”. However, Lady Blanche has chosen to leave these as is, focusing care on the books she values, for on returning to the house after an absence, “[T]he maids had unpacked and spread about Lady Blanche’s pretty things, her ormolu and silver writing things, her favourite books, cushions, and photo-cases” (130). Her “favourite books” not only travel with her but are given a special place, surrounding her with her other “pretty things”, rather than languishing damply on neglected shelves. In a small behaviour of deciding upon her favourite books and keeping them close, she has also chosen to protect them.

Not everyone was so particular about caring for their books. The Perry Family in Laffan’s *The Honorable Miss Ferrard* have books, but they are not important. The family “don’t care for reading” and the lack of a local library does not bother them (142, 143). This is reflected in how they choose to utilise their bookshelves:

“[O]ne side of the wall was occupied by bookshelves, which in their turn were occupied by a great many things besides books. A large green-covered table,

strewn with books, paper, maps, and all sorts of litter, filled the whole centre of the room” (146).

Books were on bookshelves, but also “strewn” across a table mingled with “all sorts of litter”. The shelves intended for books were “occupied by a great many things besides books” clearly conveying the chosen lack of status books held in the household.

Marion, a character in Laffan’s *Ismay’s Children*, appears unconcerned about the condition of books; in her bedroom, “a couple of very ancient books lay upon the sill of the window, which was open”, thus exposed to the same elements causing damp and destruction in Lady Blanche’s home (46). It was Marion who earlier in this discussion having spent the morning reading, wondered ““what was it all for?””, so perhaps in a personal space, her bedroom, the books on the windowsill reflect her sense of pointlessness. This has not always been the case. At the opening of *Ismay’s Children* Marion is “seated in the window with an open book in her lap” and is further described as “the student in the window-seat” who “laid down her book and rose obediently” to eat dinner (4, 5). It seems her time as a student has led to disillusion about books having a worthwhile purpose.

Nonreading and Use of the Book

Autonomy is evident in fictional representations of how a book is adapted for a purpose which is not reading. Laffan, Tynan, and Egerton employ the book as a prop. I discussed at length in Chapter One how books facilitated daydreaming. Books are used to escape or manage a situation. It seems as the story progresses that though Marion, mentioned just now, does not explicitly read books, she does use them autonomously. At one point in the novel, having comforted her distressed Aunt, Marion “withdrew into the window-seat, and letting herself fall softly into her own favourite corner, picked up the book that lay open there, and seemed as if she read” (*Ismay’s Children* 379). Marion

procures a book to appear to be reading thus buys some moments for herself. She has “her own favourite corner” within a busy household, allowing herself to escape there and pretend to read. The book is a conduit of personal space and time. Later in the story Marion hears openly that Chichele, a young man she secretly fancied, has gone away. Again, for privacy she turns to use a book: “[S]he lifted up her book again, opened it, and bent her head over its pages. Not one word could she see or know for the blinding mist of tears that obscured her eyes” (383). The book has enabled Marion, though surrounded by others, to weep, while giving the impression of reading. Later, on seeing Chichele again, Marion “stood as though petrified. Every vestige of colour faded from her face. Her eyes seemed to darken, and her little book fell to the ground” (459). Her falling book is not intentional, but a response to an unexpected situation. This is a moment of instant reaction rather than choice. Her choice was reading “her little book” up to this moment. By contrast, Marion’s sister Gertrude tosses and drops books unceremoniously, depicting a different behaviour toward them; she “tossed her music folio and bag of books into a corner” (38). She does not display the same commitment to books as her sister either: Gertrude’s books share their space with another activity, as when she “was knitting in the window-sill with her lesson books” (397). Though contrasting in their attitude to books, each girl displays personal autonomy. In an instance of escape, Mary Desmond, the protagonist of Egerton’s *The Wheel of God*, “learned two fresh languages, sought forgetfulness in many a book” (210). In another of Egerton’s stories, books are a connection between an Irish woman feeling unwell and a stranger who offers hospitality; perhaps the familiar feel of a book enables her to feel comfortable as she “dropped off to sleep with a book in her lap” (“A Nocturne” 101). Tynan’s character Hester preparing to travel “had a book in her pocket with which to occupy herself, some knitting in case it were too hot to read, and a fan if neither were practicable” (*A Singers Story* 119). For Egerton’s protagonist Fruen in “Regeneration of

Two” the book is an encumbrance. Introduced to Fruen sitting at home, we are told “a book lies on the carpet near her, as if thrown there”, visual evidence of her “weary attitude” (162). Deciding to go out, she regrets bringing a book with her when she discovers an attractive man whom she wishes to sit and watch, as “[S]he sinks on one knee; it is not an easy manoeuvre, encumbered as she is with a parasol and a book” (176). Despite this frustrating beginning, I will highlight at the end of this chapter how the combination of book and man is life-changing for Fruen.

Books upon a table where a person could peruse are potentially revealing. They invite exploration and discovery which is sometimes carried out in a surreptitious manner. Egerton, particularly, integrates books when people meet, maintain relationships, and nurture love. The narrator in “Spell of the White Elf” is intrigued by a fellow guest, the academic, at the house she is staying at, and checks out a pile of books to find information. On entering a room, she “turn[s] over some books on the table, in Russian, I think. I feel sure they are hers” (84). The letter writer in *Rosa Amorosa* recalls of her correspondent, “then you looked round and read the names on my books, took up the little things that were on my table, examined everything” (*Rosa Amorosa* 65). Books enable a person to express individuality and convey their interests. In tandem, the presence of books allowed a person to procure information, get to know another person, and build a relationship. The protagonist in Egerton’s “Her Share” literally chooses to invade the home space of someone who intrigues her, while he is absent. She enters the house which until now she has watched him from her own window. She is aware books hold the power to reveal, be it “the name on the fly-leaf”, or the titles and authors possessed:

A long row of books was arranged on the chest of drawers; I felt guilty as I opened them and read the name on the fly-leaf; it had a Slav ending; I copied it

later on into my note-book. I remember the odd thrill of pleasure I felt as I read such of the titles as I could make out. My uncle was a good linguist, and had given me a smattering of foreign languages, at that time enough to give me a reputation as a blue-stocking. There was an old edition of Shakespeare, another of Spenser, several volumes of Heine, Max Stirner, “Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum, 1844”—I got it since in the British Museum—and some German metaphysics, and several volumes of poetry in a Slav tongue. (Egerton “Her Share” 75, 76)

This chosen act of intrusion leads to further small behaviours: opening a book to find a name, copying the name into her notebook, drawing on a “smattering” of knowledge previously acquired to experience an “odd thrill of pleasure” at understanding the titles in another language, and later, acquiring one of the titles for herself. This autonomous imposition does not end here. She chooses to continue her invasions, revealing, “I often stole in there after that until I knew the names of the books by heart” (“Her Share” 77). The books listed suggest someone interested in classics and philosophy, having an open mind.¹²⁶ Clearly, the books were viewed as vehicle to knowing the man she was otherwise observing from afar. Ultimately, her trail of small behaviours leads to heartbreak. She relates that before he leaves for good, “[H]e had left a parcel for me—a box carved as a book”, a carving that she believes is the story of her (“Her Share” 80). She is left with dreams, and looking back, states her “life has been as the empty wooden box”, and that she will think of him on her deathbed (80). Choosing to intrude, however compelling it was to check out his books, did not end happily ever after.

Conversely, the book is used to avoid an intrusion or interruption by another

¹²⁶ Edmund Spenser (1552-1599) is considered one of the great English poets; Christian Johann Heinrich Heine (1797-1856) was a radical German poet and writer; Max Stirner (Johann Kaspar Schmidt 1806-1856), was an influential German philosopher.

person. In Egerton's "Gone Under", despite the confinement dictated by a boat journey, Mrs Grey averts an intrusion attempted through an enquiry into her well-being:

The girl is sitting in her favourite corner, and presently the woman, Mrs Grey on the passenger-list, comes out with a novel and seats herself near her. In reply to the girl's shy query she flushes a little, says she is well, and begins to read; her eyelids are pink and swollen, her whole face is puffed as with much weeping.

(93)

Clearly, Mrs Grey in a small act has prepared herself for a potential breach of privacy by "coming out with a novel" onto the deck. She is aware she will not occupy a private space, but she does not want to engage with other passengers, however well-meaning, and employs a book as a protective prop. Despite her state of distress, when approached she "begins to read", sending a message of eschewing concern from others. Even as "the girl" determines to continue her advance, "[T]he woman winces, the girl has winced more; she moves nearer and speaks to her, but the woman makes no reply; keeps her eyes on her book, and tries to brave it out" (93). Eventually her attempts are frustrated, but not before determined efforts to "keep her eyes on her book". Conversely, using a book to intrude upon another person could take other more subtle forms. In Tynan's *The Dear Irish Girl*, Mrs Montagne wants her carer Biddy O'Connor to update her on a recent marriage proposal, one which she feels is right for Biddy. It is a difficult subject to broach because Biddy is not sharing her feelings on it, resulting in contention between the women. Hoping that looking busy reading will encourage disclosure, Mrs Montague adopts a book as a prop:

They had a bright fire in their sitting-room, and Mrs. Montague sat before it, cosily warm in a fur-trimmed tea-gown, and fingered the pages of a novel.

Perhaps she was not much engrossed in it. The story that was unfolding itself before her eyes was so much more interesting; the crisis of the heart she guessed at in Bidy was something to make her own heart ache more than the troubles of any fictitious heroine. (Tynan *Dear Irish Girl* 286)

This stance would not have been unusual. Bidy was staying with Mrs Montague as her companion. Previously, they had gone on holiday together, staying in a cottage and “had brought no resource against the loneliness except a box of novels from Mudie’s; and there was absolutely nothing to do, but to dream all day in the sun, with an open book upon the knee” (267, 268). Though a “box of novels from Mudie’s” implies voracious reading requiring a stash from the library, it appears Mrs Montague is adept at using a book for purposes other than actual reading. Seated with “an open book upon the knee”, she is able to “dream all day”. Now at home and eager for information, Mrs Montague has chosen to simply “finger the pages of a novel”. Even the narrator observes that “perhaps” she “was not much engrossed in it”. Her “cosily warm” position adds to the impression of someone settled to read. However, this tactic does not work and Bidy, asserting her choice not to share information, leaves the room and goes for a walk.

Mrs Montague is not the only character choosing to use a book to procure information. In Laffan’s story *Ismay’s Children*, Ida Courthope facilitates reading material to intrude on her brother Chichele’s life and glean information. First, she chooses to employ a book:

“Chichele dear, would you hand me my book, that one in the wicker chair, the third volume?”

He moved towards the chair indicated, selected the book, and handed it to her.

She turned its pages over aimlessly for a minute or two, then broke forth,

“Chichele, really, dear, after what you were told about this parish priest the other night, do you think you ought to go to dinner, dear?” (Laffan *Ismay's* 196).

Ida is specific with her requirement; she has requested the third volume suggesting she is picking up a story where she has left off reading. However, once in her possession, she “turned its pages over aimlessly for a minute or two”. She is giving the impression she is relaxed and absorbed in finding her place in the book. This is her intention; she had considered her options moments previously and “knew how far she might go, and for a moment debated within herself what course to take” (196). She soon “broke forth” from “reading” revealing her real intention to correct a decision by her brother that she disapproves. He ignores her intervening. Reliance on reading material as a crutch appears habitual for Ida Courthope. Again, she wishes to distract Chichele who is becoming acquainted with a family she terms “wonderful rustics” much to his displeasure (268). In preparation to amend this and suggest a visit that afternoon to appropriate people, “she moved indolently towards the table loaded with newspapers and books . . . and took up a periodical” (268). Her languid demeanour is accompanied by taking up a periodical as if to imply a nonchalance in her comment to Chichele, “I know you would like to see them; Lady Fredbury asks so often for you” (268). Taking up the periodical is a small behaviour employed as a means to an end, to lead Chichele to her preferred company. As well as being used to extract information from someone known, books are utilised to make connections with strangers. Egerton’s protagonist in *Rosa Amorosa* staying in an unfamiliar place, is desperate for human interaction and books facilitate her choice to connect:

In desperation I began to talk to the waiter. He knew every book I knew in his own tongue, and many I did not. He brought me a beautiful edition of Heine and two books of his own favourite writer, a South German Jeffries, who wrote

exquisite studies of life and love in the Austrian Tyrol: his name I have forgotten, and his books I have never seen since. He begged to be permitted to make the *gnädiges Fräulein*¹²⁷ comfortable. So he closed the shutters, filled the stove with fire- wood, put a footstool under my feet, and lent me not alone his books, but his reading lamp. I gave him, when I left, the only book I had in my bag, a little leather-bound early Keats. (151)

This small behaviour of reaching out and talking with the waiter is fulfilling. He was familiar with literature and willing to not only recommend books but share and lend “a beautiful edition of Heine and two books of his own favourite writer”.¹²⁸ The narrator is aware of book editions. She had previously recalled how she “can look back with delight to books I read as a child-girl, and can remember how I used to save up to buy some especially coveted volume” (141). She had also described during her narration how “some fascinating society woman” had a “collection of books in her special room. Beautiful editions of beautiful books, first editions and autograph volumes, and others specially bound with her own device on the cover” (146). Her awareness of the composition of books lends a generosity to the waiter’s gesture. Additionally, he made Fräulein comfortable; a contrast to the disciplined posture expected of reading in Victorian conduct. He made up the fire to give continual warmth, “put a footstool under [her] feet” and lent “his reading lamp”. These actions would likely please Fräulein and enabled an opportunity to undertake her choice of reading style: “I always tear the heart out of a book first, then go back and read it all over again and dwell on it in places” (140). She reciprocated this benevolent action, giving him, on leaving, the sole book she had with her, a valuable sounding “little leather-bound early Keats”.¹²⁹ Her choice to

¹²⁷ Lady, Madam.

¹²⁸ Christian Johann Heinrich Heine (1797-1856), German writer and poet.

¹²⁹ John Keats (1795-1821), Romantic poet.

initiate a conversation—on books—led to the care and compassion she needed, and books are the focal point; she finally chooses to use her own book as a means of expressing appreciation. Small behaviours included choosing to share books with others, both lending and giving, thus they become instrumental in forming connections and rapport.

Fictional portrayals show books were chosen as companions. May Laffan inserts an extract from a poem by Methodist minister John William Fletcher (1729-1785) as an epigraph at the beginning of chapter four in her novel, *Christy Carew*: “The place that does contain / My books, the best companions, is to me / A glorious court” (143).¹³⁰ The preference for books over people is often projected onto Egerton’s characters, surely a reflection of her own passion for books; the narrator in *Rosa Amorosa* declares, “books are like friends” (140). The protagonist of “A Psychological Moment” reflects on her relationship with the books surrounding her in the reading room of the British Museum which she is leaving for what appears the final time:

She takes up two books, mounts the stepladder and replaces them reluctantly on the top shelf; puts on her hat, takes her gloves and some copy-books, and walks slowly out of the great room. When she reaches the door she turns and stands there, an unconsciously pathetic figure. She takes a long look—why? She does not know herself. She looks up at the great dome, at the tiers of books circling one above the other, the strange medley of men and women, and the skull-capped head of her favourite official. She has a kind of affectionate feeling for the great room; it has been her oasis in a vast desert. There she has forgotten the cravings of physical hunger and soul thirst; struggles, weariness, almost despair.

¹³⁰ John William Fletcher (1729-1785) was a methodist theologian of Huguenot origin, who moved to England and held clerical roles in the Church of England. He was devoted to his religious beliefs.

She has found strong meat and perennial springs from which to draw nourishment; has mixed with a right goodly company of the wittiest and best of dead men and women. She has laughed over poor Dick Steele's letters to his dear Prue; envied Rahel the rare charm that held her young husband a lover always; visited Heine with La Mouche—forgotten her lack of living acquaintances in the richer companionship of her dead friends. ("Psychological Moment: Woman" 22)

This impressive room with an abundance of books is held in affection; it has been her place of refreshment, an "oasis". In an autonomous act she found a place where she can forget the difficulties of reality. The references Egerton has inserted are of those circumventing convention. Anglo-Irish Richard Steele (1672-1729) writer and founder of various periodicals had a reputation for [im]morality; his first book *The Christian Hero* (1701) extolling the virtue of morals belied his own actions of debauchery. His approach resonates with the experimental attitude at the fin de siècle which Max Nordau criticised in *Degeneration*. It is not chance that Egerton's protagonist is choosing to read and laugh at Steele's letters. Steele was infamous for short notes he wrote to his wife, intended privately but ultimately preserved publicly, their intimacy and affection juxtaposed with his public persona as roguish; this duality likely appealed to Egerton who herself was conveying conventional mores alongside alternatives through her fiction.¹³¹ Rahel is likely German writer Rahel Antonie Friederike Varnhagen (1771-1833) who married Karl August Varnhagen von Ense (1785-1858). Egerton was likely aware of Rahel's reputation as an intelligent woman who held salons for the intellectuals of the time but has featured her envy at the devotion of a younger husband,

¹³¹ Poet and Essayist Alice Meynell (1848-1922), a contemporary of Egerton, offers an insight and argument on their relationship in her essay on "Prue", "Dick Steele's" wife, under "Women and Books" in her book *Essays* (1914).

using this to highlight a distaste of convention.¹³² She finally “visited Heine with La Mouche”, a reference to German writer Christian Johann Heinrich Heine (1797-1856), a radical, and his literary led relationship in his dying years with a young woman, Camille Seldon.¹³³ Again courting controversy, Egerton has referenced an assumed relationship which flouted Victorian mores. To fill a void, Egerton’s protagonist chooses to be with the “richer companionship” of authors and their books who not only invite debate but are dead. The woman has “reluctantly” returned her books to their shelves (“Psychological Moment: Woman” 22). On leaving the reading room of the British Museum, she takes time to drink in the beauty of the domed room and appreciate its meaning for her. In contrast, the woman goes “through the King’s Library” and becoming more unhappy as she leaves the space she loves, “she never glances at the quaint books of the Virgin in the cases, nor the rare samples of the forgotten art of binding” (23). How she is feeling is reflected in her choices. Rather than even glance at the usually familiar books, she “walks on with drooping head”, choosing to avoid books she would usually appreciate for their rarity and binding (23). Her choices around books in the Museum are her last for a while as “Kismet” or destiny determines her next move to marriage (31).

Egerton’s fictional portrayals indicate how a relationship with books can change or may need to be adjusted. In “The Spell of the White Elf”, the arrival of a baby infers new choices and shifts the priority of books; attention is diverted and the place of books in their owner’s affection is reassessed. Explaining this change, the mother, an academic woman, is relating to her companion the time when “a valuable book—indeed, it is really a case of Mss., and almost unique—I had borrowed for reference, with some

¹³² See https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/sophsupp_gallery/42/ regarding Rahel Antonie Friederike Varnhagen.

¹³³ Interestingly, the nature of their relationship is addressed by Egerton’s own literary friend Richard Le Gallienne in his short story, “Heine and Mathilde” (1904).

trouble, could not be found, and my husband roared with laughter when it turned up in the cradle” (“Spell” 92). Unheard of for the academic, a precious book which had been difficult to borrow is lost. Its discovery in “the cradle” indicates priorities have adjusted. The academic explains she is more nervous about parenting than presenting a paper on literary research:

You should have seen me going home. I was so nervous,—I was not half as nervous when I read my paper (it was rather a celebrated paper, perhaps you heard of it) to the Royal Geographical Society; it was on Esquimaux marriage songs, and the analogy between them and the Song of Solomon. (Egerton “Spell” 92)

Her focus for exercising choice has changed. It is no longer about what she wants. However, she can still choose what and how she shares with the elf. She explains how material collated for a book of nursery rhymes is unlikely to become a published book—thus a financial loss, loss of possible kudos, and loss to potential readers—but how she has chosen to “say them to the elf now” (91). However unexpected this shift of focus is, the elf has enhanced their lives and this new relationship is another opportunity for autonomy. Drawing to the close of her life story thus far, the academic tells the narrator, “[S]he rules us all with a touch of her little hands, and I fancy we are all the better for it” (97).

On occasion in the fiction I have analysed, books are more than a container for a story. They are chosen and appreciated as an object of beauty. In Egerton’s story “A Nocturne”, books connect strangers and allow for mutual exchange of appreciation for them. An Irish woman is invited to take shelter in the narrator’s home. The narrator later recalls:

We talked of a good many things during the next hour. I noticed that her eyes wandered wistfully to my books. I rather pride myself on some of my specimens of rare binding—two little shelves represent a good many years' income.

“Do you like books?” I asked. She caught what I meant at once, and her face lit up. I gave her my only heirloom, an, from me at least, unpurchasable, Aldine classic. She positively handled it lovingly.

The more I think of that woman, the more I am persuaded of her rarity; one is almost afraid to give one of one's book pets into most women's hands. She knew it at once—didn't say anything banal or gushing, only, “I love the peculiar olive colour of the leather.”

“Have you ever seen any of Le Gaston's work? Look how well the lines of gold dot-work tell upon the scarlet of the morocco. How it has kept its colour.

Machinery and cloth have played the deuce with the art of it.”

“If I were a rich woman I'd have any book I cared to keep especially bound for myself”. (Egerton “A Nocturne” 100, 101)

This woman has chosen to understand the appeal of the physical book. Her eyes had “wandered wistfully” to her companion's bookshelves. She chooses to treat a valuable “heirloom” with care.¹³⁴ She is aware “dot-work”, colour, and the type of leather, “morocco”—the “best; more durable”—are all details relevant to making books beautiful items (Humphreys 53). Arthur Lee Humphreys extols these aspects in *The Private Library: What We Do Know, What We Don't Know, What We Ought to Know About Our Books* (1897), feasibly a book Egerton perused.¹³⁵ As well, regarding his companion, the narrator in the above dialogue was “persuaded of her rarity” due to how

¹³⁴ The Aldine classic refers to a printing press founded in 1494 by Aldus Manutius. It produced “two innovations on type and on format” (Brown 48). See *The Venetian Printing Press: An Historical Study Based Upon Documents for the Most Part Hitherto Unpublished* (1891).

¹³⁵ Book editions and bindings are a fascinating area of study which this thesis does not have space to expand upon.

she handled a book; similarly, Humphries notes, “I have rarely found any woman who cared sufficiently for her books to really fondly tend them” (17). Though not financially wealthy she appreciates the value of bindings, and given the chance, would elect to “have any book [she] cared to keep especially bound for [her]self”. It would seem from her companion’s comments her approach to books is a personal choice, rather than a conventionally accepted one. It is a pity the woman in “A Nocturne” could not transmit to Laffan’s novel *Christy Carew*. Laffan’s young protagonist Christy Carew receives an unexpected parcel, and opens it:

At last the contents of the parcel appeared: a green leather-covered book-box, containing a lovely edition of the Laureate’s works, bound in Russian leather, and smelling of the same most odorously.

Mrs. Carew was lost in admiration.

“What taste!” she cried; “what judgment! This is truly an *édition de luxe*! Ah, my dear, how often I have longed for such a Cadeau! It is Tennyson as he ought to be. Ah—‘Locksley Hall!’”

She held one volume open, with her nose buried among the pages, as if the poetry had gained by the perfumed binding.

“I think yours a very nice one,” returned Christy. “However, I will allow this is really beautiful—as I wish it to remain so, Minna, keep your fingers off!”

“Can’t you allow the child to look?” snapped Mrs. Carew, crossly, laying down the volume she held on the table. “Oh yes,” answered Miss Carew, in a measured tone. “Look as much as you like; but don’t touch.”

Thereupon she put the little green books all back in their case, closed it, papered and corded it exactly as it was before, and then, embracing it in both arms, carried it up to her own room, and locked it away safely in her wardrobe.

(*Christy Carew* 2: 285, 286).

Katherine Tynan comments on Tennyson's popularity, noting, "Everyone read Tennyson in those days" and again explaining, "[E]ven in non-reading Dublin in the most unexpected places, you would find a Tennyson". (*Twenty-Five* 66, 87). Tennyson aside, Christy acknowledges the value of the gift, that it is "really beautiful". This "édition de luxe" is appreciated more so by her stepmother, Mrs Carew who immerses her face in the pages, breathing in the "perfumed binding". However, this book is unlikely to be read. Repacked as it was before opened, it is consigned to a wardrobe, the door locked. Mr Dawson the unwanted suitor is the sender. Despite his generous and beautiful gift, he does not gain Christy's love. The placing of the book under lock may keep it safe, but it also suggests it is not easily accessible: she has not chosen to place it somewhere special where the scent of perfume and beautiful binding can be enjoyed.

Examples in Episodes

For the final section of this chapter, I will look at specific episodes of female characters who demonstrate an evolving autonomous relationship with books. Through small behaviours and informed choices, they assert the opportunity for personal agency in how they interact with books as an ongoing and progressive experience. Their experiences illustrate elements analysed thus far in this chapter.

Miss Hilda Brandon

The protagonist and narrator of Katharine Tynan's *The Handsome Brandons* (1899) is bookish. As a child, Hilda Brandon had a "love of the book" and "sat on her little creepy-stool readin' the paper to her dolls" (Tynan *Handsome* 188, 187). As an adult, arranging bookshelves in a private library she knows to place Athenian poets Eschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides together, and Roman poets Horace, Catullus, and Pindar side by side. Yet, the family library of Hilda's childhood leaves much to be desired:

I had always been rather starved for reading. The Brandons could never have been very bookish folk, and it is not possible to find any but very dry provender in the mouldering volumes bound in calf and gold which line the library. Why, a whole side of it is taken up by *Transactions of the Irish Parliament*, wherein many Brandons sat; and many of the later volumes are records of learned societies and such things. The little amount of literary bread to this vast deal of sack I had devoured long ago. (Tynan *Handsome* 181)

Julia McNair Wright in *The Complete Home* states emphatically, “the Home well supplied with books has inmates whose leisure is well occupied”; this, however, is not the case with Hilda Brandon (216). On appearance this is an impressive library. Yet, “a whole side” is given over to *Transactions of the Irish Parliament*. Other volumes are societal records and suchlike. There are “volumes” which are “mouldering”, neglected although “bound in gold and calf”. Despite this array of books, there is nothing literary to satisfy Hilda: she feels literally “starved for reading”. The Brandon library is “well supplied” but not with books for leisure or childhood learning. Dissatisfied and unfulfilled by books in her family home, when the opportunity arises, Hilda embraces her ideal library.

As the dynamics of Hilda Brandon’s family changed with her sister leaving home, and already an orphan, she “gave myself up more and more to the companionship of my books and papers” (Tynan *Handsome* 141). Moving ahead, a neighbouring house, of “a considerable size” and a romantically tragic past, is “opened up” after long neglect, to be inhabited by a General MacNeill (184;181). Hearing it is being renovated, Hilda chooses to visit. This is a pivotal act of autonomy. The library at Rose Hill “was in comparative order. Like all the rooms in the house, it was light, and the bookshelves

had been painted white, which I thought very gay” (186). In stark contrast to the library Hilda was reared with, this room and its contents is a bookish utopia:

Tea was set out on a table, with strawberries in their own green leaves, and honey, fresh from the hive, with many other good things; but it was not the eatables that made me draw a long breath of rapture. It was what seemed to me the endless number of books—books of every kind I saw at a glance, grave and gay, ancient and modern, poetry, novels, biography, art, in all manner of bindings, from purple morocco to the humble paper yellowback.

They were piled high on the floor, and in boxes, some opened, some still unopened. Rows of the books were hastily set on the shelves, to be out of the way, I felt sure, for they were higgledy-piggledy, upside down, long and short, and most incongruous neighbours.

...

I simply stood and sniffed at the books, inhaling the smell of them with rapture.

For the moment I did not ask to touch; to gape at them was enough. (186, 187)

Not only is does this library hold “books of every kind”, Hilda’s awe takes in “all manner of bindings”. This library is not defined by boundaries of taste; it contains both expensive “purple morocco” bound books and cheap “paper yellowback[s]”. Hilda has observed these details, and the books are not even arranged on shelves. She sniffs and inhales “with rapture”, a chosen act of intimacy with the books.¹³⁶ This space belongs to a stranger, and though initially “to gape at them was enough”, after having something to eat she returns to the library:

¹³⁶ Bibliosmia is the act or art of sniffing books. See *The Smell of Books: A Cultural-Historical Study of Olfactory Perception in Literature* by Hans J. Rindisbacher.

The library was deliciously quiet, and I wandered about from one heap to another, picking off a book and looking into it, and then drawn by the embarrassment of my riches to another one. I felt as if I should be a long time in that library before I could settle down to read. I should have to look into every single book first. There were delightful little ladders by which to reach the upper shelves. I looked at the chaos of books up there. (189)

Exhibiting small behaviours, she wanders, picks, and looks in a book, then in another. Noticing “delightful little ladders” leads her eye to the “chaos” of books on the top shelves. Delight in her surroundings leads to an epiphany:

“Hilda Brandon,” said I, “you were born to be a librarian!”

And indeed it seemed to me at the moment as though the earth could hold no fairer plot of peace than this cool place . . . and all those books waiting to be handled and dusted and loved. (189)

On leaving Rose Hill, Hilda is offered a “very urgent invitation to come and read all the books [she] liked” which she chooses to do, ignoring any convention which might suggest this was inappropriate: “I did not stop overlong to examine my scruples about invading General MacNeill’s domain” (190, 191). The following day Hilda was back in the library at Rose Hill. Having taken time to read the books, Hilda makes a further choice and immerses herself in arranging the books on the shelves:

I really set out to arrange them for the sheer pleasure the task gave me. It was slow work, but it was quite delightful when one had got a comely shelf-full of them together, to sit down and survey one’s handiwork, and enjoy a well-earned rest and recreation. (194)

Hilda made choices which “changed all the face of [her] daily life” (192). Her chosen task is carried out with pleasure, and she feels fulfilled observing her “handiwork”. She justifies her intrusion into someone else’s library unbeknown to them as “a quid pro quo for reading his books” (194). She could have complied with appropriate behaviour and met the owner and received his permission, but she chose what pleased her. Hilda’s choices and small behaviours paid off. Having met General MacNeill, she is recognised as having a knowledge of literature, leading to further responsibility which she is happy about: “I was quite proud of the immense compliment he paid me when he left me so much to my own guidance among them” (205). She is given “a key to the garden entrance of the library . . . to come and go”, freedom indeed in someone else’s home, which “did add to my happiness” (204). Not only did she arrange the books, she “catalogued” them too (309). This story ends conventionally correct. Hilda marries the “long-lost” then found son of General MacNeill, the very son who had “rescued” her as a child. The choices Hilda made for herself enabled her to enter a house with the library of her dreams, have a job she enjoyed, and marry well.

Miss Helena Ferrard

In May Laffan’s *The Honorable Miss Ferrard* (1878) the protagonist, sixteen-year-old Helena Ferrard from “people of title” is motherless, and as the story begins is living with her father Lord Darraghmore, brothers, and nurse Cawth (192). Not allowed out by herself, Helena “felt moped and spiritless for want of employment. She had read all the books, too, and wished the first of October was come that they might buy a new store at the book-stalls” (Laffan *Miss Ferrard* 27). She appears to be a voracious reader, though of a certain type of book. Purchased in bulk, it appears, from “bookstalls” suggests cheap reading such as available at railway stations. Providing for commuters, “a choice specimen of penny fiction” including serials in periodicals as well as novelettes could

be bought for the journey (Replier 209). For Helena Ferrard the cheaper book option fulfilled her need to read. The “book-stalls” was perhaps Helena’s sole option of acquiring books in the vicinity she lived, and we are made aware later in her story that she was familiar with railways. Her brothers “sometimes guided their cross-country expeditions” by railway maps, and she would often join them on these expeditions (Laffan *Miss Ferrard* 95). As well, Cawth, the nurse, would take her shopping which likely included a visit to the bookstalls. On these bookstalls “piles of juvenile literature” were available for the young reader (Salmon “What Girls Read” 515). Helena’s accessibility to penny books is further confirmed when we learn more about Helena’s reading habits. She receives an invitation to live in Bath, England with relatives. Considering the invite, she revives ideas from books to comprehend what this change of circumstances might entail:

She had some notion of a different style of living gathered chiefly from her books, and she pictured to herself surroundings of velvet—which it may be doubted if she would recognize on seeing—silk, lace, and mirrors; the last a questionable boon, considering the figure of herself with which any she had encountered presented her—scowling, overhanging brows, tangled hair, and a yellow skin. Helena was painfully conscious of her own deficiencies as contrasted with the elegant ladies of her penny-awful romances. She turned almost angrily from their trailing robes and furbelows to the chaste simplicity of the Indian heroines of the backwoods. She felt far more akin with them, and almost emulated their accomplishments. (Laffan *Miss Ferrard* 32)

Despite her father's peerage, Helena is poor. An idea of a "different style of living", has been acquired from books, namely, penny fiction.¹³⁷ "Penny-awful" books were popular, with "millions" sold in the mid to late Victorian era (Repplier 227). This popularity publicly disturbed some. Inserting the word "awful" Laffan appears to be alluding to the slang word "dreadful" applied to penny books popular with juveniles (Springhall "Disseminating Impure Literature" 569). The application of this word as explained by J. Springhall was "constructed largely by middle-class journalist to amplify social anxiety or 'moral panic' over the latest commercial innovation directed at the young" thus clearly feeding into the central Victorian fear of bad influence on good morals (568). The fear of bad influence is palpable in advice. Edward Salmon notes the penny dreadful supplies content "generally of the lowest and most vicious character" (523). He does not hold back in surmising novelettes: "We come next to the penny novelettes. Some of these are positively vicious; others are foolish. All may be characterised as cheap and nasty. They are utterly contemptible in literary execution" (Salmon "What the Working Class Reads" 112). William Hughes is in part referring to penny fiction when he writes in the *Irish Monthly* of 1888, how "bad novels" will "silently and effectually corrupt the young by prematurely exciting the passions"; "the young" he continues, "will also learn to copy those types, and sooner or later to rival them in loathsomeness" (59, 60). This anxiety continued unabated as the years passed. Walter Besant writing in *The Contemporary Review* in 1894 affirms penny tales are "a great flood of rubbish" and still "a cheap and accessible form of recreation" filling the minds of the young with time on their hands (134). However, an objective inspection

¹³⁷ Penny fiction was a term applied to popular fiction sold for one penny. See Springhall, John Springhall's article, "'Penny Dreadful' Panic (I): Their Readers, Publishing and Content", and Basdeo Stephen and Rebecca Nesvet's 2022 article "Reappraising Penny Fiction: Introduction."

suggests these narratives were somewhat disproportionate. Agnes Repplier in her essay of 1891 reviewing the impact of penny fiction as she perceived it in “the course of [her] researches” comments on the romances which appear to appeal to Helena (225). Her findings led her to surmise “the seductive titles . . . which form the *tours de force* of penny fiction bear but a feeble affinity to the tales themselves, which are like vials of skimmed milk, labeled absinthe, but warranted to be wholly without flavour” (211). She further notes “the wonderful dullness of penny fiction is not really due to the absence of incidents, of vice, or even of dramatic situations, but the placidity with which these incidents or situations are presented and received” (213). In reality, she says, “everything is taken with such wonderful calm that not a ripple of excitement breaks over the smooth surface of the tale” (214). Despite stories containing a heroine who could face villains, abductions, imprisonments, dungeons, “convenient accident[s]” and death, the fictional characters do not respond with surprise or horror, swooning at the digression from moral behaviour so neither does the reader (214).

In her current choice while still at home, and regardless of what cultural commentators imply, Helena focuses on what she chooses as salient in her books: domestic surroundings and the physical appearance of the female characters (215). As she considers her invitation to Bath and the aunts, she draws on what she has read to conjure a picture of this different life. Initially she imagines a “different style of living”, picturing to herself “surroundings of velvet . . . silk, lace, and mirrors”. This is the stuff of imagination—any previous encounters with mirrors revealed her appearance as “scowling, overhanging brows, tangled hair, and a yellow skin”, so strong a contrast to literary representations that she becomes “conscious of her own deficiencies”. Rather than “trailing robes and furbelows” Helena recognises she is “more akin” to “chaste

simplicity". Having weighed up the portrayals of girls and women in her books, she has "turned" from the unattainable "elegant ladies", opting for the more recognisable "Indian heroines of the backwoods". She has "almost emulated" these heroines, which suggests she has maintained an element of herself, and feasibly does not see the need to completely become another way of being. This conflict is later reflected when Helena is buying a hat for her journey to England. Dismissing "fashionable" hats for a "comfortable looking" one, she also admires the "magnificence" of some dresses, and a humming-bird pin, while onlookers observe the "contradiction" of class shown in Helena's attire (37).

Helena moves from Ireland to England to stay with her father's aunts.¹³⁸ The impressions acquired from novels are manifest in this new life. The aunts wear silk, lace, and cashmere and their bookcase attests to their taste: "a long, low book-shelf ran along one side of the room, and the old calf and morocco-bound volumes looked dingy and well worn. On the table stood a writing-case; open books lay about, the *Standard* and *Guardian*" (56). The scene suggests the two aunts are regular readers, the volumes are "well worn" and "open books lay about". The bindings of "old calf and morocco" indicate quality of materials. The *Standard* and *Guardian* newspapers suggest they are liberal in persuasion.¹³⁹ It is not long before the contents of the bookcase are revealed indicating learned folk owning books which align with the sort of books advocated by John Ruskin in his polemic *Sesame and Lilies* (1865). To avert "girl[s]" from choosing and reading novels, Ruskin recommended, "if she can have access to a good library of old and classical books, there need be no choosing at all. Keep the modern magazine

¹³⁸ This analysis of Helena's experiences can also be read as a conversation on British colonisation, which this thesis does not have the space to discuss.

¹³⁹ The *Standard* (also the *Evening Standard*), "focused on the social narrative of and for the man on the street" which is perhaps the reason the aunts' chose this newspaper for Helena to read from (*London Evening Standard*). Founded as the *Manchester Guardian* in 1821, it focused on "liberal interest" ("History of the *Guardian*").

and novel out of your girl's way; turn her loose into the old library every wet day, and let her alone" (82, 83). Helena is let "loose into the old library", one that equates with Ruskin's recommendation:

Helena looked up and down the street vainly in search of something interesting; then, disappointed, she went to the book-cases, and took down one of the faded volumes and opened it to see the name. She could not read the gilt' lettering on the back: "Gibbon's Decline and Fall." She wondered what that could be about; there were no pictures to illumine her, and the long, unbroken pages did not look promising. She poked it back into its place, upside down; then tried the next row — "Blair's Rhetoric," Macaulay, Hume; then a whole row of white and gold Italian authors. Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth she found in one corner, and left them there.

At last an illustrated edition of "Gulliver's Travels" came to hand. She was attracted by the title and carried it off. Had she tried the bottom shelf she would have discovered the English dramatists, beginning with Shakespeare in the right-hand corner, and going on from Jonson in a direct line down to her brilliant countryman Sheridan. As it was she missed them, and having curled herself comfortably in the window, began her book. (Laffan *Miss Ferrard* 71, 72)

This bookcase is furnished to impress, filled with "old and classical books", reading material assumed of an educated middle-class household. It offers a stark contrast to Helena's repetitious reading to date of "penny-awful romances" (32). Irish writer Stopford Augustus Brooke (1832–1916), in his book *English Literature* (1880) recommends titles which grace the aunts' shelves. Egerton corroborates this sentiment, expressing her opinion of a bookcase filled thus so via the letter writer in *Rosa Amorosa* (1901):

The great bulk of the moneyed middle class . . . if they have any books in their houses, they will either be well-bound editions of such authors as have become classics by the suffrage of time, and which they have never read or probably forgotten; or such books as are in vogue in Mudie's, or are having a boom in the papers. (145)

Likely, the aunts' collection concedes to this appraisal. The history books Laffan lists are among those "raised into the rank of literature" according to Brookes (131). Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* is saturated with detail and described "as accurate and exhaustive as a scientific treatise" supporting Helena's view of "long, unbroken pages" as "unpromising" or inaccessible to her (132). Helena "poked it back into its place, upside down", a metaphorical decline and fall of culturally promoted reading material rejected in a small behaviour, though more Laffan's response than Helena's (Laffan *Miss Ferrard* 132). Brooke describes David Hume's *History of England* as "a philosophic whole", the "first literary history", again very comprehensive (150). Lord McCaulay's work demonstrates his "vast knowledge of details" (133). Hugh Blair's (1718-1800) *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1788) sandwiched between historical volumes, speaks to the core of Victorian morality, explaining how through language "whether in poetry or prose, almost every one rises with some good impressions left on his mind"; in turn these impressions are the means of "disposing the heart to virtue" (Blair 17). The "exercise of taste" is important to Blair and his inclusion in the bookcase invokes the aunts' taste which, as noted earlier, initially appealed to Helena prior to her stay with them, but which she ultimately chooses to reject (17). Even when in front of her eyes, the popular dramatists including the ubiquitous Shakespeare are "missed" as is her "brilliant countryman Sheridan". Shakespeare consistently graces lists of the time. He is recommended in Yonge's *What Books to*

Lend and What to Give and is the fifth choice of author on the survey Salmon refers to in his article “What Girls Read”. Blair, mentioned above on the bookshelf, edited *The Works of Shakespear*¹⁴⁰ (1753), in part to fulfil “the great demand for his works among the learned and polite”, particularly his fellow Scottish citizens (i). He also intended his edition to be accessible, “acceptable and engaging” to readers of “all tastes” (xii). A person perusing the aunt’s shelves would note Shakespeare among titles identifying them as belonging to the “learned and polite” of society and assumedly morally upright. Over one hundred years later from Blair’s edition, Victorian commentators were placing Shakespeare on par with God. Author D. M. Craik writing in the *Nineteenth Century* (1886), pinpoints the rationale behind Shakespeare’s popularity. She explains, “Shakespeare, though often coarse in language, as was the fashion of his time, is always pure at heart—pure as the Bible itself, which is perhaps the plainest-spoken book of that date now admitted into general reading” which undoubtedly suited the Victorian ethos (419). C. Alphonso Smith writes in 1902:

[T]o realise the influence of Shakespeare in the direction of conduct and in the formation of character one needs only to remember that as an English classic Shakespeare ranks next to the Bible, Shakespeare and the Bible having long since become a current phrase” (2).

Shakespeare will feature further in Helena’s life. The content of these shelves contrasts starkly with the so-called “trash” familiar to Helena.

Succeeding the God and Shakespeare alliance, listing prolific poet and dramatist Benjamin Jonson (1572-1637) is to include a writer whose writing was ranked the best

¹⁴⁰ Full title: *The works of Shakespear: In which the beauties observed by Pope, Warburton, and Dodd, are pointed out Together with the author's life; a glossary; copious indexes; and, a list of the various readings.*

next to Shakespeare. Jonson leads a “direct line” which finishes with Irish “brilliant countryman”, Sheridan, whose grandfather knew Swift, the author Helena picks for the book’s cover. Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751-1816), though born in Dublin, Ireland, spent most of his life in England, including some time in Bath where the aunts’ lived. A successful playwright, and politician, his inclusion reflects the cultural impression this bookcase exhibits. Despite the “errors and imprudences” Thomas Moore records in his memoir of Sheridan, of all the authors listed, Laffan allows Sheridan the adjective of “brilliant”, a nod perhaps to her own heritage (2; 492).¹⁴¹ Unlike the poets, he has not been confined to “one corner”. Existence of works by specific poets indicates Laffan was aware of popular poets which graced informed bookcases.¹⁴² John Campbell Shairp (1819-1885), onetime Professor of Poetry at University of Oxford, dedicates two essays of his tome *Studies in Poetry and Philosophy* (1868) to Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) and William Wordsworth (1770-1850), whose thought he deems “is of such worth, that too much cannot be done to commend it to those unacquainted with it. They deserve to be known for this, if for nothing else, that they two were the men of most original genius . . . beneficent genius . . . Whatever is best, deepest, most spiritual in the thinking and feeling of the last thirty years, is either their product or akin to it” (vi). At a time, Shairp notes, when “[A]n uneasy, restless searching after something larger and more satisfying is no doubt visible on the surface both of books and of society” Wordsworth and Coleridge were lauded for searching for truth and finding it in Christianity, thus pleasing the Victorian spirit (vii). As well as pleasing Victorian religious sensibilities, “restless searching” was advancing as the era wore on, and the poets, despite their confined corner position continued to be relevant. John Keats (1795-

¹⁴¹ For the full memoir, see *Memoirs of the Life of the Right Honourable Richard Brinsley Sheridan* (1825) by Thomas Moore.

¹⁴² The listed poets, Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822), John Keats (1795-1821), and William Wordsworth (1770-1850), were all associated with the Romantic movement.

1821) offers evidence of contemporaneous tastes in the 1880s. Several collections of Keats' poetry were published at this time. The review of an 1884 edition writes:

It will be a boon to all book-lovers . . . to the ardent admirers of Keats who are every year on the increase—a testimony at once to Keats' high place in poetry and to the growing sensitiveness and perception for the noble and truly musical in poetry in spite of quaintness and occasional eccentricity of style. (“Belles Lettres, Poetry and Fiction” 207).

Regarding Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822), Edward Dowden's *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (1886) was published one year prior to Laffan's novel. Writing over a decade later on this biography, Matthew Arnold is clearly horrified to discover a different Shelley to one he was familiar with. Apparently, the “ideal Shelley, the angelic Shelley” “subsists” beneath an “unattractive” real Shelley, who is “extremely flammable” when it comes to morals (Arnold “Shelley” 36). Likely, the aunts included Shelley's poetry without interest in any biography. Over two decades after Laffan is writing her bookcase listing, in “Shelley: A Centenary Study” Arthur D. Innes refers to the sense of Shelley as “magic” despite some of his work being “hardly proper”, explaining:

People become as it were intoxicated with Shelley: they are possessed by him as no other poet has possessed men—and yet to the public at large he remains the author of two pretty poems about a cloud and a skylark, and a number of pieces which it is hardly proper to read. (145)

Laffan could have read Dowden's biography and in a small behaviour of her own contribution to controversy, added Shelley to the posse of poets placed “in one corner” of the aunts' bookcase, inserting the poetry with “scar and stain” between the worthy

Coleridge, Keats, and Wordsworth. (Laffan 72; Arnold “Shelley” 25). It appears the aunts were aware of what was popular, or perhaps wanted to seem that way as Tynan notes reminiscing on the year 1886, “Poetry was being read by anybody who had pretensions to taste”. (*Twenty-Five* 87). Returning to Helena Ferrard, even if Helena noted the corner collaboration, it is unlikely she would have picked a poet. Of those listed on the aunts’ shelves, only Macaulay and Shakespeare are listed in the compilation of books from the preference of “the thousand young ladies” who shared their favourite author and favourite writer of fiction (Salmon 527, 528).

What is Helena’s response to this array of books? We are not privy to Helena’s formal education up to this point, if it existed at all; there is no mention of school or convent learning. Pondering the shelves, she had “wondered what [Gibbons’ *Decline and Fall*] could be about” because there “were no pictures to illumine her”, though this is not to assume she cannot read (72). At home in Ireland, she had exhausted what reading material was at her disposal. Helena’s method of choosing—an appealing title and the fact it is illustrated—has led to a book by Anglo-Irish author Jonathan Swift (1667-1745).¹⁴³ Lady Mary Wortley Montagu wrote of *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), “[H]ere is a book come out, that all our people of taste run mad about”, indicating taste and an appropriate display of “old and classical” influences the aunts’ collection (276). Helena is soon “curled up” in a chair, and “buried in her book”. Though we are not given her opinion on the book, it is an interesting choice in her circumstances. Through *Gulliver’s Travels*, Swift exposes ideas such as “things are seldom what they seem”; he encourages a “look beneath the surface”; he questions, “What is a human being?”; he explains that “voyaging through imaginary worlds, we try to find ourselves” (“Jonathan Swift” 2488). Further, it is notable that “Swift does not set out to satisfy our minds but

¹⁴³ Sources vary between Jonathan Swift as Irish and Anglo-Irish.

to vex and unsettle them” (2488). The book Helena picked evokes her own situation. She had notions of other people’s lives from books, yet the reality of inhabiting the world of her aunts is not what she envisaged. Her mind is not satisfied, and her vexation leads to an autonomous response as we shall soon see. Helena’s perusal of the shelves and her choice of book signals a shift, wherefrom she confirms for herself that “things are seldom what they seem”.

Having procured a book to read, Helena’s comfortable sitting position draws the attention of an aunt. It is likely she also notes Helena’s choice of book, as when she is requested to read aloud, she is given the *Standard* newspaper and told to “take the leading article” (Laffan *Miss Ferrard* 73). Her attempt to “read loud and distinctly” is a grammatical horror to her audience of aunts—a “little scream” was “uttered”—and a governess procured (73). Helena is described as reading “utterly unintelligibly. Every word was mispronounced or wrongly accented and the punctuation totally ignored” (73).¹⁴⁴ It seems to me that the unfamiliar newspaper format and the language therein was at the root of her difficulties. Though her performance is determined deficient, for Helena reading has, until this moment, served the purpose she needed it for—to engross herself in and race through her penny fiction. She had decided what she liked reading and grasped the vocabulary she needed in order to enjoy a storyline. We are told when she perused the bookshelves Helena “missed” books, including Sheridan. At sixteen years old it is expected she would have some knowledge of literature, but this is a “missed” part of her upbringing; her “mode of reading” displayed to the aunts was perceived as indicative of “neglect”, a description which likely extended to unavailable literature (73). Helena’s reading history has been explored and, in this context, found

¹⁴⁴ This could also be read as a comment on Hiberno-English; references to language, accents, and punctuation were seen as literary devices. As well, “the use of language reflects the historical situation of Ireland” and spoke to questions of Irish identity (Zingg 20). See Gisela Zingg’s book, *Is there Hiberno-English on them?: Hiberno-English in Modern Irish Literature: The Use of Dialect in Joyce, O’Brien, Shaw and Friel* (2013).

wanting. Her preference for penny fiction is to the exclusion of other genres which were likely not an available option. However, as Laffan wrote in her non-fiction article referred to earlier in this chapter, reading in the convent education of a girl was restricted to books which would be useful and preparatory for religious life, so had Helena engaged in conventional convent education, it was no guarantee she would be familiar with or “see” the literature on the aunts’ shelves. Laffan is offering a representation of conventional reading recommendations and showing it can be refused or overlooked; a person does not have to comply with prevailing endorsements.

Soon after Helena’s surveillance of her aunts’ shelves, her education is committed to a governess. Helena, having “pored over” a spelling book did quite well; “she had read a good deal and could remember the words that she had seen before” (84). Considering her brief experience of literary learning she imagines “if every day was to be like this! She shuddered with repulsion at the idea” (85). In part, this has been the undoing of the governess focused on the “stimulus” of making money from commission on schoolbooks-because “Miss Ferrard would have bought Helena a book at a time just as she wanted them, whereas Miss Babcock generously supplied her with a round dozen” (99).¹⁴⁵ The books appearing from the governess’s bag is described as a “disgorging process” resulting in a “pile of books on the table” which overwhelmed Helena (85). Forgotten is her previous desire when “she had had a dull time of it. She had read and re-read until she was tired of all her books, and now, out of pure weariness of spirit, longed for a change” (32). Whether change of books or change of her original circumstances, she now knows neither is what she wants. This exposure to literature and learning is short-lived. Helena has been given an opportunity to experience “the notion of a different style of living” she had read of in books and to address the “deficiencies”

¹⁴⁵ The Governess’ “share of the spoil was to amount to about fifteen shillings” (Laffan 83, 84).

she felt these same books had exposed (32). She had felt more like the “Indian heroines” and as time passes and because of her experiences, she likely feels these heroines are the ones she really does relate to. Helena has discerned the effort required to become the velvet-clad girl or woman of a novel, which includes reading a lot of books, and choosing her own path rejects this opportunity. However, it is a book which provides her with a series of small behaviours leading to her escape. Helena is feeling tired and

she cast around for a book. A large-sized volume came to hand first. She opened it: a history of Somersetshire. She turned it over, looking at the views of the various show-places with which it was enriched, and found a map of the city of Bath amongst the illustrations . . . Then it suddenly flashed on her that she might discover the railway station and the route to it. (95)

Perusing an Atlas has offered a ray of hope for escape via a train. A second book, *Guide to Bath and its Environs*, secure the times trains run which will enable her to arrive at the Irish Sea and take a crossing to Ireland. In an unmistakable act of autonomy, Helena runs away from the aunts and returns home. Helena’s brief excursion to the aunts in England could be considered a consequence of her passion for penny fiction. Edward G. Salmon observes:

We do not often see an account of a girl committing any very serious fault through her reading. But let us go into the houses of the poor, and try to discover what is the effect on the maiden mind of the trash which maidens buy. If we were to trace the matter to its source, we should probably find that the high-flown conceits and pretensions of the poorer girls of the period, their dislike of manual work and love of freedom, spring largely from notions imbibed in the course of a perusal of their penny fictions. (“What Girls Read” 523)

Helena embodies the kind of “maiden” Salmon is interrogating; she was “poor” and bought books considered “trash”. She had conceived “notions” and imagined a different life based on her penny books, which Salmon would likely regard as “pretensions”, but which became reality staying at her aunts. As the story unfolds, this alternative way of life does not appeal, and she exchanges her aunt’s lifestyle for a “love of freedom”. However, what may be considered a “serious fault” stemming from her childhood reading can be interpreted as choice. Helena is informed through her experiences which enable choice and in turn she makes decisions which contribute to her selfhood.

It appears her sojourn to England and the subsequent introduction to learned books was not in vain. Despite rejecting life in England and access to her aunts’ shelves, Helena’s early exposure to books enables her, as Phillis Browne believed, to retain a “taste for reading” (103). Subsequent small behaviours indicate a commitment to reading. One evening sitting with her brother, she is “lounging with a book” while he is “idly throwing bits of mortar and loose pebbles into the stream” (Laffan *Miss Ferrard* 157). Unlike her brother, this is no idle whiling away of time: “the student seemed engrossed in her book, and the boy equally intent on hitting a bit of dead wood that had got tangled in a tuft of rushes” (157). On being interrupted by her brother with a question, she remains intent on reading: ““I don’t know,” replied the girl, without taking her eyes from her book”” (157). She does not allow his persistence at conversation to impinge on her efforts, but offering a brief reply is “drawing back impatiently . . . keeping one finger close pressed to the line where she was reading” (157). Her finger “close pressed to the line” assures she will not lose her place. Books, possibly from the pile that overwhelmed, are sent from England and are now in her own room: “on a shelf over the fireplace were piled her books, all of them bearing traces of use” (161). Her autonomous actions allowed her to escape a place she found suffocating, but also

enabled her to study and learn. Her books are shown to have been read but at her own pace in her own space. She had after all appreciated the value of books.

The content on the bookshelves at the aunts' home was alien to Helena. However, meeting Mr Satterthwaite enables Helena an alternative perspective of bookcases displaying refined and cultivated reading. He tells her "I wanted to show you some books . . . and if you would choose some that you would care to read, I could then have them sent down to you. I have a quantity—do come in and look at them" (234). She refuses to choose but while visiting his house, she observes "here and there a glimpse of rows of well-bound books shining in the half-dark of the shaded rooms. Vague reminiscences of the house in Bath rose in her mind" (233). However, rather than the restrained and oppressive feeling the aunts' bookcase engendered, this browsing is pleasant, and she is able to associate a positive feeling with an attractive display of books that she can "admire and almost covet" (234). Books become a bond between Mr Satterthwaite and Helena, though she ends up emigrating with family friend Jim Devereux. Attempting to engage Helena, Mr Satterthwaite initiates a book themed conversation:

"What do you like best—walking or riding?"

"I love riding; but I think I like best of all, after that, reading."

He almost started, then he dipped in his pocket and fetched out a little thick book—a pocket 'Shakespeare'—in beautifully-clear diamond type, and handed it to her.

She opened it. Use had almost obliterated the name on the back.

"Yes, we have that; but it's a great big, old, torn one." (231)

Evidently, reading has continued as a focus in Helena's life. Contrary to the consequence often conveyed in media, her preference for penny-awful fiction did not

damage her ability to choose and read books. It is an activity she “like[s] best of all” after riding, and she recognises Shakespeare which she did not previously on her aunts’ shelves. When asked her preferred play, she honestly replies that “she can’t understand them” but she liked “the one about fairies” best (231). In one of many small behaviours in this story, Helena has chosen to acquaint herself with Shakespeare even though it baffles her. Later, “Satterthwaite held out the tiny Shakespeare” for Helena to take and after hesitating she chooses to accept it (234). Shakespeare mediates but not ultimately how Satterthwaite hopes. Helena does not choose a life of velvety luxury, but aware of it she chooses to hold on to a connection to it: “she had his book too that he had given her up-stairs . . . it was carefully laid aside among her most valued possessions” (307). She would hold on to this reminder of an alternative life first introduced via her penny books and then experienced in her aunts’ way of life. Finally, though she rejects Satterthwaite, the book he gave her holds value seen when she, “opening the drawer of a queer little old escritoire, took out of it Satterthwaite’s pocket Shakespeare. She looked at it and laid it back again. Helena intended to keep that book always” (313). Helena makes a choice in keeping the book, treasuring it as something very special.

Mary Desmond

The trajectory of protagonist Mary Desmond, in Egerton’s *The Wheel of God*, allows us to follow a life in books from childhood, through girlhood and womanhood. Her life is woven with books facilitating autonomous expressions of selfhood. We see examples of book collections, titles, and the books as both a companion and a bond between individuals. From an early age, books suffused Mary’s consciousness. The book opens, as discussed in Chapter One, with Mary as a child discreetly reading Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* in bed by candlelight. She “revelled in the books in the old nursery” at her granny’s home, regretting in later years that they were lost to her (5). Collecting

sketches from her father who is in prison, she is given something to eat by the inhabitant of a room noted as “well furnished, lined with books” (22). While walking through Dublin streets, she dreams of “odd numbers of the Dublin Penny Magazine or old books skimmed at the bookstalls in Drury Court” (13). At some point in her childhood, Aunt Frances had “taken one of Aphra Behn’s plays from her, and told her she must not read such things—they were unfit for her; and Tristram Shandy too; she had thought Uncle Toby entertaining” (50).¹⁴⁶ In referencing Aphra Behn (1640-1689), and *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-1767) by Laurence Sterne (1713-1768), Egerton again jumps the boundaries of what would suit Victorian ethos and includes writers who were scandalous and digressive in their writing. Sterne, influenced by Rabelais mentioned previously, was bawdy and comic. Behn was writing for money as a woman in the seventeenth century, itself a deviation of convention, and, as writer Virginia Woolf acknowledged, earned women “the right to speak their minds”, an outright act of autonomy (*A Room of One’s Own* 85). Perhaps brief immersion in these texts before they were swiped did encourage Mary Desmond in her own agency as she recalls her “dear O’Hara” the “disreputable” Captain whom she “used to go about with” told her “tales of brave deeds, and recited beautiful poems of tender women and the magic of love” (*Egerton Wheel* 51, 53).

Through her life, Mary Desmond lives in various houses; her personal space is often a room, and that room is inevitably furnished with books. If Mary is not furnishing her own space, she is noticing the books in the spaces of others. In a room in her father’s house, one her father’s cronies, Dr Rick, the “wildest of army surgeons, reputed

¹⁴⁶ English writer Aphra Behn (1640-1689) wrote on issues of slavery, race, and gender. *Tristram Shandy*, full title *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759) written by Irish born Laurence Sterne (1713-1768), was experimental in subject and literary techniques. Sterne is recognised as a forerunner of psychological fiction.

misogynist” has noted Mary as dissimilar to those creating the environment of drink and merriment around him. He takes “up a pile of books on a rickety little side-table,— Fouqué’s *Undine* with translation notes, a German grammar, *Silvio Pellico* in French, Carlyle’s *Hero Worship*” (60).¹⁴⁷ Turning to Mary he asks if they are hers and converses with “her efforts at culture” (60). It may be a “rickety little side-table” in a rundown house, but Mary has graced it with books redolent of a scholarly intelligence and interest beyond novels. Too, these are books which define a convent syllabus, which in an earlier episode, Laffan’s Mary Branagan was going to discard never to be retrieved; this suggests Mary in another act of agency was teaching herself what she had missed, having been denied a formal convent education. This attempt to educate herself continues as time passes. Moving to New York, Mary found where she could get books, and when work was quiet turned to books: “[S]he used to get books from the Apprentices’ Library, and, when not too tired, wrap a shawl round her shoulders and sit with her feet on the register and read” (88). On Christmas day, Mary chose how to spend it: “She had chosen a book of Norwegian peasant tales, by a man with an unpronounceable name, at the library, and snuggled down in bed to read them” (98). Though living in a different country, she had found the library and was able to prepare her day; immersed in her story of “a magic world of soul and witchery and marvelous, impossible peasants” she “forgot everything” unpleasant and was “away in the fjords” (22, 61, 99). Escaping the noise and business of the boarding house where she lived,

¹⁴⁷ German writer Friedrich, Baron de la Motte Fouqué (1777-1843), wrote within the Romantic literary genre. *Undine* is a fairytale about a water sprite who marries a human in order to gain a soul. As the story unfolds her husband loves someone else and ultimately ends up dead. Charlotte Mary Yonge wrote that the story explores how “the grosser human nature is unable to appreciate what is absolutely pure and unearthly” (Introduction). See the chapter, “8. Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué: *Undine* and *Sintram*.” in *Telling Tales: The Impact of Germany on English Children’s Books 1780-1918*, by David Blamires. Italian writer and poet, Silivo Pellico (1789-1854), found fame with his book *My Prisons: Memoirs of Silvio Pellico* (1832).

Scottish essayist Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) was a prominent writer of the Victorian era. *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, & the Heroic in History* (1841) was the result of a series of lectures on the concept of heroism. See *Carlyle’s Theory of The Hero: Its Sources, Development, History, And Influence on Carlyle’s Work; A Study of Nineteenth Century Idea* (1928), by B. H. Lehman.

“she read and dozed all through the afternoon” (100). Her time to herself was an autonomous act; she enabled reading and comfort in a space of her own, despite the limitations of her situation.

Mary Desmond often connects with people through books, or at least she notices people for whom books are part of their life. At her workplace in New York, Mary meets Septima (Sep). Sep has chosen to personalise her home space as Mary notes at the entrance to her rooms, “[T]here was a large, square, carpeted lobby, with white porcelain German stove, a deck-chair with cushions, a wicker rocker, and a little Japanese table with books, which gave it the air of a tiny sitting-room” (93). Inside, Sep invites Mary to choose something to read from “the new mags on the table” (94). Tragically, sometime later Sep takes her own life. Soon after, returning to her digs, Mary is informed, “[Z]is package was on ze table; it is directed to Mademoiselle.” “A book,” Mary said” (133). Later, “she opened the package—Sep’s Dante, with her name in full, Septima Evangeline, and, underneath, Mary’s own name, with ‘from Sep’” (135). A book has been chosen as a final bond between two friends; Sep’s book by Italian writer and poet Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), could have been his famous epic poem “Divine Comedy” (1472). This epic of a journey through hell, purgatory and paradise, possibly reflects the “hell” Sep experienced while alive, a pendulum between “wild spirits” and “despondent fits”, connected as her final lines convey to her love for “a man married to another woman” (108, 126, 120). Mary’s final act leaving New York is giving a book as a gift: “[H]er only farewells were made to New York City from the top of the roof, and to Jimmy the elevator boy. She gave him her Shakspeare” (140). Living in London in a boarding house for women, Mary is assigned her own “cubicle” in a dormitory. She enters the sitting room of her boarding house noticing

a girl . . . was reading stolidly through the din. Sometimes, as a common word or vulgar jest floated out, she would look up with a curious, wondering look, and then go on with her reading. Mary sat down on a stool near her feet, and looked up at the title on the back of the book, *Dante: for Beginners* (156).

Two women and two small behaviours; Mary sits down “near her feet” to catch the title of the book the other girl is reading which tells her something about the girl, while the girl has decided to learn about Dante, and to instigate this has found a copy of *Dante: For Beginners*. Another girl in the boarding house makes bows, sewing them while she learns a language from a “German phrase-book” which is “propped up” against her sewing box”; she “moved her lips as she learned each new word, and shifted a slip of paper every now and then over the German column to test her memory” (157). The bow-maker “had the cubicle with half the window” and uses this to hold a bookshelf: “she was able to fasten a hanging book-shelf to the woodwork” thus she enables herself to have her books easily accessible and visually available (163). Visiting the cubicle, Mary “read down the titles of some of the books—Shakspeare, the Bible, Carlyle, Stuart Mill, Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, Marcus Aurelius, a Latin *Principia*, a German grammar” (163, 164). The bow-maker owns well-known books, “Shakspeare, the Bible”, but her shelf suggests she chooses to extend beyond conventional thought; indeed she says to Mary as Mary reads the titles, “knowledge is power” (164). The presence of John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) particularly suggests an openness, regarded as he was as eclectic in beliefs with a desire to combine old and new ideas, which reflected the times.¹⁴⁸ Mentioned previously, Thomas Carlyle, a friend of Mill, in similar vein wrote a book *Past and Present* (1843) in which he endeavoured to integrate fables and situations from the distant past with relevant issues as a way of addressing them. The

¹⁴⁸ See the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* online for an overview of John Stuart Mill.

inclusion of Charles Darwin (1809-1882) and Marcus Aurelius Antonius (121-180 AD) suggests her own desire to peer in to the past and integrate ancient but influential ideas with new ideas emerging in the present.¹⁴⁹ This selection, accessible to anyone visiting her cubicle, would suggest her having a scholarly, curious, and open mind willing to explore new ideas, some which would incite debate. Clearly the bow-maker is choosing what she reads, and innovatively displaying her books. The bow-maker looks out for Mary; on a Sunday when most of the women are going out and she was staying behind, the bow-maker “lent her a book” to read (Egerton *Wheel* 172). This small behaviour is choosing to acknowledge the circumstance of another woman and respond to it. Mary Desmond lives amongst a “panorama of working-womanhood”, but the ones she chooses to further a relationship are those who connect with books (168).

As mentioned previously, through her life Mary inhabits various homes. At this point in life, Mary, “never knew how it came about, but found herself engaged to Cecil Marriott” a doctor (236). Once married, as his fortunes deteriorate, so do hers. However, in this dire circumstance she exercises autonomy, expressively through her books. Her first marital home “was cozy, with the warm red-and-blue of the carpet, and the glow in the mahogany, and the books behind the glass” (259). When she must move house, without her books the once familiar room “looked strange already” (288). The first impressions of her next house were not favourable. The

whole house was indescribably filthy. The sitting-room below was papered in an imitation of stamped velvet, with raised flowers of beetroot and orange hue; a large mirror, framed in dingy gilding, with a corpulent cupid upsetting a

¹⁴⁹ Charles Darwin (1809-1882) and *On the Origin of Species* (1859) challenged the beginning of life on earth and in promoting evolutionary theory contrasted with religious thought. To include Roman Emperor and Philosopher Marcus Aurelius Antonius (121-180 AD), is to return to the roots of philosophical thought. Known for the book, *The Meditations of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antonius* (167 AD).

cornucopia of roses astride on top, and the suite was mahogany and horsehair.
(310).

However, among the filth, and chaos of colours, Mary notices the “little room at the back had an old-fashioned table and good bookcase with some volumes in calf” (301). Wielding choice in this unappealing space, “[S]he decided to make her own of that” (301). Once she had made the room her own, it “was a cosy little room” and how her books looked played a pivotal and appealing part: “the firelight danced over the bright covers of the books on the shelves at each side of the fireplace, and flicked the gold lettering and devices on their backs” (303). In turn, her books drew others. One day, a journalist calls to the house for medicine. Though unwell, books become the focus:

“May I look at your books? I so want to.” She left her cup on the mantel-board as she asked, and ran along the titles, talked enthusiastically of some of them with a sincere note in her quick gushes of enthusiasm. “Oh, there’s the new *Contemporary*. I so wanted to see it.”

“You can take it out, when you have had your tea and eaten something. Only send it back when you’ve done with it.”

“May I? How good of you! But it’s unpardonable of me, an utter stranger. I come and ring at a dispensary door for a draught, and you ask me to tea, and lend me your book, without knowing anything about me”. (309, 310)

Mary chooses to share her books to facilitate the reading of others but also chooses her terms and requests the return of the book when “done with”. She is also choosing to keep up to date with newly published books. The new book is likely *The Contemporary Review*, a liberal periodical founded in 1866 addressing social and political issues as well as literary stories, suggesting a well-informed and progressive reader. Egerton distinctly depicts small behaviours in women who find ways to engage with books,

make choices which will enhance their personal life, or build bonds with others and enable their interaction with books.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I draw on the experience of Fruen in George Egerton's final story in her *Discords* collection, "The Regeneration of Two". The role of books in exercising autonomy cannot be underestimated. As discussed, this is expressed in small behaviours: access to a filled bookcase, a choice of title, a personal arrangement of books, a lent book. Ultimately, these are expressions which assert individuality, however seemingly small, within the private space. In constricted circumstances such as the environments depicted in this chapter, the book was instrumental. Fruen articulates this in the dialogue between herself and the poet whom she literally rescues (even Egerton cannot disregard a romantic finale). Yes, Egerton has employed a male character to inform Fruen's selfhood, and she does fall in love, but on her own terms, having come to know herself. The poet has "helped" her, but it is through reading his books that she reaches an autonomous place of being herself. She explains:

"I know your books and all about you this long time. I read a good deal, you see. Once you helped me. Nothing I have done for you would ever begin to discharge my debt."

"Helped you, Fruen, *I* helped *you*—I don't understand—"

"Yes, you helped me to find myself!"

...

"You stung me to analyse myself, to see what was under the form into which custom had fashioned me, of what pith I was made, what spirit, if any, lay under the outer woman."

“In teaching me to find myself, you taught me more than you thought, and what you taught me I am trying to teach to others. A feminine ‘Umwerthung aller Werthe,’ a new standard of woman’s worth” (Egerton “Regeneration” 240, 241)

Borrowing from Nietzsche, “Umwerthung aller Werthe,” [The revaluation or transvaluation of all values] she explains what she has learned how to look at things in a different way. This may be a full sense of autonomy acquired over time now reaching its climax of clarity. Like the characters analysed throughout this chapter, choices and decisions expressed in small behaviours led her to this point. It involved assimilating the content of books and personal analysis. Despite how “custom had fashioned” or tries to fashion women from a young age, books have the capacity to facilitate an autonomous journey to selfhood, “a new standard of woman’s worth”. Thinking of the women around her, she is “trying to teach to others” what she has learned aiding other women to understand and know themselves. A quote at the beginning of this chapter by Julia McNair Wright notes, “[B]ooks form in us habits of thought which shall live forever with us.” (203). As this analysis has shown, these habits formed by books which continue through life include the capacity for personal autonomy.

Conclusion

This thesis offers a very specific and rigorous contribution to the field of Irish writing and the study of reading and books in the period 1880-1900. Reviving writing by May Laffan, and offering a different analysis on writings of Katharine Tynan, and George Egerton, I analyse the capacity and experience of personal autonomy in the fictional female reader in relation to reading and using books. These portrayals demonstrate that personal autonomy for the individual girl or woman is achievable. This is due in no small part to the diligence of the writers who understood they could convey this message through fiction. Reading allied with autonomy is not a new concept. Kate Flint reminds us how research shows “the activity of reading was often the vehicle through which an individual’s sense of identity was achieved or confirmed” (14). When embedded in the context of the Victorian fin-de-siècle, a time of flux and potential change, invariably scholars emphasise how autonomy leads to public activism. I contend that autonomy has value as a private experience, and this is apparent in my analysis of the fictional reader. It is evident that small behaviours are practised by readers within the space of the home or convent. As relayed in the texts, reading was a culturally imposed occupation in the lives of girls and women. Periodicals and advice manuals contained thorough instructions on how, when, why, and what to read. Such detailed information provided a variety of opportunities for the reader to respond autonomously. For the girl or woman wanting to develop her individuality, reading and books was a valuable medium for expressing autonomy. This thesis shows that the fictional female reader chose how and when they read, what titles to read, how to respond to what they read, and how they used the book. These accomplishments potentially set individual girls and women on a path to achieving selfhood.

An autonomous reading experience and the use of books was (and still is) an opportunity to comply with or challenge established conventions and assert oneself in some small way; this strand of thought binds the chapters of this thesis. Essayist W. R. Greg notes in 1873, that fiction “for good or evil, for a while or for long, always produce[s] *some* impression” (87). The refrain of “good books” competed with “trash”, and the discourse of “improving” competed with “harmful”. As Greg states, and as my analysis shows, the impact could be fleeting or lasting, but something remained. I examine episodes of thought, dialogue, and action to determine manifestations of personal autonomy. Initially, in Chapter One, I focused on the act of reading. I examine the cultural narrative which determined acceptable reading as disseminated through periodicals and advice manuals. I present this narrative alongside fictional representations to ascertain how characters were responding to what they were being told. In the period this study focuses on, reading was viewed as a duty with the purpose of self-improvement, a task which was to be carried out correctly. Reading and thinking, as May Laffan’s character Christy Carew was reminded, were considered dangerous, with the power to remove a female’s thoughts and intentions away from the assumed conventional role of domesticity. In their writing, Laffan, Tynan, and Egerton present a variety of outcomes for their characters, some happy, some not. Nonetheless they had the satisfaction of performing small behaviours and experiencing personal autonomy. This examination shows that in fiction, the fictional female reader was presented with representations of autonomous opportunities in the books they were reading. Though they may not necessarily emulate the thoughts and actions of characters—though as has been proven, some did—at least what they were reading made them think and consider their own capacity for autonomy. In portrayals of childhood, it is evident young readers were aware of what was considered appropriate reading and found discreet ways of reading what they wanted. Fictional depictions

reflect the focus on girlhood accorded them as the primary audience for instruction. Frequently this was illustrated by the responses of fictional girls and women to stories of love and marriage, indicating that their expected societal roles were often at the core of fictional content. Messages conveyed through stories held the capacity to inform autonomy. The second part of Chapter One illuminates the connection between reading, the book, and daydreaming as a means of realising autonomy. By the late nineteenth century, daydreaming was recognised as a productive space, ideally a time for the female reader, book in hand, to reflect on how they could improve themselves. I argued that this is a space of one's own, thus a space for thinking for and about oneself. For social critic Max Nordau, daydreaming is a facet of degeneration. Egerton especially, writing alongside Nordau's assertions, deflates this idea and clearly depicts daydreaming as useful and enlightening. Egerton's *Fruen*, does a lot of reading and thinking which eventually leads to her "to choose" how she handles the bigger decisions in life ("Regeneration" 169). Reading leading to thinking and autonomy is a significant process.

In Chapter Two, I turn my attention to the role of religion in the reading experience, I examine how the fictional reader responded to this dominating presence. Female readers are shown to engage with priests, religious books, and questions of faith. The advocacy of "good books" becomes more prominent in my analysis. I question how the reading experience of the fictional female reader compared with the ongoing advice on reading disseminated in media rooted in religious conviction. Did the presence of faith raise an obstacle to autonomy? I argue that the depictions of reading in the texts I analyse indicate it did not. The potential for autonomy takes on an additional meaning: would the fictional reader obey or disobey the authority of the prominent religious voice? Episodes analysed show that they obeyed, compromised, and disobeyed, sometimes obviously, sometimes subtly. As well as exploring the female

reader in the home, this chapter took us to the convent where it is revealed nuns found ways of practising autonomy to facilitate their choice in reading novels. This discussion offered an interesting juxtaposition of convent constraints and domestic limitations. Girls and women in both circumstances were bound by convention, and the additional weight of church authority meant they were supposed to behave a certain way towards reading and novels but found ways to circumnavigate these obstacles that was personally rewarding.

The thread of challenging appropriate reading continues through Chapter Three, where I focus on fictional portrayals of choosing titles and the use of the book. The proliferation of books evident in the late-Victorian era meant there were plenty of options available in genre and subject matter. Lists were compiled and disseminated through advice manuals and periodicals facilitated book reviews which emphasised suitable books. As is evident in my analysis, book titles were incorporated into fiction, conveying a clear depiction of what books were being read, ignored, or furnishing shelves. As demonstrated in my examination, there is a distinct conversation between the discourse of media and the content of fiction. This conflict impresses the efforts of autonomy evident in the fictional female reader. In examining the fictional reader, I contend how the book was used was an expression of autonomy. My analysis shows that women and girls chose how to treat their books be it with care or an attitude of dismissal. How and where a book or books were placed are shown to be manifestations of personal agency. Books are shown to facilitate communication in relationships. The opportunity in the second section of Chapter Three to closely examine three specific case studies of lifelong engagement with reading and books allows an extended exposition on autonomous acts. These experiences demonstrate the capacity for individual choice as life progresses and clearly communicate the merit of ongoing small behaviours.

I believe that there is much scope to expand and develop further research on this thesis. I have focused on reading and books as a means of expressing autonomy. This thesis provides a basis to introduce additional lenses through which to explore the fictional female reading experience. Time and space did not allow a focus on the impact of nationality on reading, though its presence is tangible. This omission in the context of this thesis speaks to the complex position of fictional content in the late nineteenth century. Susan Cahill notes how “the popular novel in Ireland reveals the complex ways in which nationality and popular fiction intertwined in the period, not always articulating clear distinctions between Englishness and Irishness” (217). Relatedly, class status is a relevant force in fiction of the late-Victorian era. May Laffan is particularly cognizant of the impact of class; it is evident in her fiction and as such invites further analysis. I have analysed reading and book use of women and girls in fiction but believe there is scope to explore representations of autonomy in the fictional male reader which would offer a comparison of gendered experience. Initially I conceived of examining in detail each book title included in all the texts under analysis. However, this was not realistic in the constraints of this thesis, and my discussion was determined by how a title included in the text impacted on autonomy. This suggests a possible in-depth examination of ancillary titles and authors to ascertain if there is significance to their inclusion in the texts. During my research I discovered numerous stories in periodicals which it was tempting to incorporate into my thesis. As well as space constraints, I realised this would detract from focusing on my three chosen writers. There is potential to compare how reading, use of books, and autonomy is portrayed particularly through short stories appearing in periodicals.

Contemporary media has recently had reason to focus on reading and books. The current controversies in the lending library sector in Ireland as well as the UK and the

United States demonstrate the capacity for personal autonomy is as relevant now as in the so-called strict Victorian era. The storming of Cork City Library is one recent example where books were targeted—both for their content, and literally when they were torn up—in a protest ignited by gender issues. This attack on reading and books is rooted in religious conviction as was the Victorian-centred narrative of instruction and direction. Again, individuals believe they can decide for others what is regarded as appropriate reading content. The current debate on what books libraries should or should not facilitate raise a question around the capacity for individual autonomy and its potential in the private space; who decides what a person can borrow, take home, and read? Access to books of individual choice has reemerged as an area of controversy, concern, and cultural commentary.

My thesis has shown the private space provides a valuable opportunity to foster small behaviours of autonomy. This analysis established a positive stance on the autonomy of individual girls and women who were not active or vocal in the public space. In times of uncertainty and change, be it the *fin de siècle* or now, the capacity for autonomy invites an individual to consider what they can control. I firmly believe that reading and using books, which are seemingly ordinary activities in a familiar space, can be adopted and adapted as an opportunity for the individual to enact small behaviours and experience personal autonomy. Ultimately, it is hoped they achieve selfhood.

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