

# **“In Endless Repetition”: An Existence Decorated in Oppression in Ella Hepworth Dixon’s *The Story of a Modern Woman***

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**Abstract:** In Ella Hepworth Dixon’s *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894), decor is a metaphorical vehicle for what critic Heather Kirk Thomas calls the “physiological and emotional womb-to-tomb domestic restriction of nineteenth-century women” (1). Using a series of close readings and a parallel examination of the wallpaper in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story “The Yellow Wallpaper,” this essay explores how elements of the domestic spaces of Mary Erle, the novel’s protagonist, serve as metaphors for the oppression faced by women in a world that constricts them to subordinate roles under men.

At the time of *The Story of a Modern Woman*’s 1894 serial publication in *The Lady’s Pictorial*, the discussion of the “New Woman” was well underway (Fehlbaum and Hill). *The Story of a Modern Woman* was one of many texts that examined the role of women in society and “the idea that women, trapped by a society that offers up marriage as the only option, are eventually forced to barter away their emotional and intellectual well-being” (Farmer 22). This public consideration of women’s social roles, which preceded but culminated in debates about the “New Woman,” was known more broadly as the “Woman Question” (Dixon 82). In chapter nine of *The Story of a Modern Woman*, the narrator establishes protagonist Mary Erle’s domestic world. Following the death of her father, economic circumstances force Mary to move herself and Jimmy, her young brother,

into a working-class apartment on Bulstrode Street, which Dixon describes as “grimy” and “starved-looking” (96). The walls of her room are papered with “dingy yellow [apples] ... sprawled, in endless repetition, on a dull green ground” (96) while the floor is carpeted with “faded true-lovers’ knots ... meander[ing] with foolish reiteration” (118). This room and its contents embody the endless repetition of domestic expectations in a Victorian woman’s life, which Mary finds to be devoid of the opportunities given to men. Furthermore, she is unable to free herself from the marriage plot into which she has been ensnared. This paper argues that the room’s decor—its wallpaper and carpet in particular—is a metaphor for what critic Heather Kirk Thomas calls the “physiological and emotional womb-to-tomb domestic restriction of nineteenth-century women” (1), a group that includes Mary. I will examine the significance of the decor in Mary Erle’s room by conducting a close reading of the descriptions of the wallpaper and carpet and their relation to scenes that take place in Mary’s Bulstrode Street lodgings. In particular, the scenes in which Mary is waiting for her lover, Vincent Hemming, provide important exemplifications of the existential stagnation that Vincent causes in Mary. This paper will also examine the novel’s repeated imagery of Dr. Strange’s discarded lover—a woman known only as Number 27—and his fiancée, Mary’s friend Alison Ives. Neither woman makes it out of their courtships with Dr. Strange alive, making their narratives pertinent to the discussion of women mired in an endless cycle of waiting for men who will never arrive. Finally, I will compare the significance of Mary’s wallpaper to secondary feminist criticism of the wallpaper in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper.” Although it is unlikely that Dixon ever read “The Yellow Wallpaper” (it was never published in the United Kingdom and American writer Gilman did not visit England until 1896), the similarity of social commentary between the two stories is unmistakable. The criticism that analyzes the wallpaper in Gilman’s story is thus useful in considering the wallpaper’s role in *The Story of a Modern Woman*.

In the novel, the characteristics of Mary Erle's wallpaper illustrate how it becomes a metaphor for her domestic restrictions. Mary Erle's wallpaper and her experiences of oppression as a woman are unrelated at face value but share salient characteristics that bind them together in a common meaning. Dixon describes the wallpaper in question as a pattern of endlessly repeating "dingy" apples on a "dull green ground" (96). For the apples, endless repetition means an inability to pursue other opportunities or detach from their predetermined path. In the same way, Mary feels the oppression of being a woman in her inability to move on from her engagement to Vincent Hemming, even when he himself leaves it to pursue his own opportunities. "Cornered by the cant of tradition and prevented at every turn from achieving even the most modest gains" (Farmer 23), Mary is unable to detach herself from the inexorable, predetermined path of women destined to be subjected to the whims of men. Steve Farmer remarks in his introduction to the novel that "Dixon uses the word 'inexorable' seven times over the course of the novel, further emphasizing the inflexibility of Mary's life" (35). This observation supports the claim that Mary, like the wallpaper's apples, is trapped and unable to move forward. Dixon contrasts Mary's lack of freedom with Vincent Hemming's excess of freedom: he spends the majority of his life on detours from his commitments to Mary, his work as a politician, and his wife while Mary is unable to achieve upward economic mobility or even move away from her Bulstrode Street apartment.

Day to day, Mary's life is filled with mind-numbing repetition. When she embarks on her career as an artist, the Royal Academy of Art requires that she spend months painting dots on a canvas in her attempt to gain entrance to the school. After her stippled Laocoön is not accepted by the panel, she is forced to find work as a writer. Meanwhile, her male colleague Perry Jackson goes on to become a wealthy artist by selling paintings of female stereotypes. The irony in this turn of events illustrates the way in which the oppression represented by the wallpaper affects the women characters of the novel markedly more than the male char-

acters. Even when Mary becomes a writer, her male editors assign her to write the same society articles month after month and novels that follow a predictable path along the “old lines”: “a dying man in ... the first volume; a ball and a picnic in the second” and the fulfillment of a marriage plot in the last (Dixon 130). Mary’s life becomes a cruel copy of the novels she is forced to write, marked by an endless inexorability that will stifle any taste of “the intoxication of achievement” (189).

Mary’s professional stagnation serves as a parallel to her personal and romantic stagnation, as exemplified by the repetition of scenes in which Mary is left hanging, so to speak, by Vincent Hemming. Vincent is Mary’s primary love interest for the majority of the novel and demonstrates much of the pain that men cause women in patriarchal societies. From the moment that he spontaneously proposes to her following her father’s death, Mary recognizes that she has “tasted for the first time ... the helplessness of woman, the inborn feeling of subjection to a stronger will, inherited through generations of submissive feminine intelligences” (Dixon 28). In the span of a few hastily spoken words and two hands clamped around her wrists “like iron links,” he signs Mary up for a lifetime of subjection to the marriage plot that he will never fulfill (28). Vincent’s negative effects on Mary are manifested by his habit of keeping Mary waiting—waiting for him as he travels the world; waiting for him to come visit her when he returns home; waiting for him as he explores the opportunities that will never be available to her because she is a woman.

In chapter twelve, aptly titled “The Woman Waits,” Dixon describes Mary avidly anticipating Vincent’s return from his journey to document the Woman Question in various foreign countries. She gives her brother, Jimmy, nearly all of her available money so he will vacate the house and anxiously arranges and rearranges her domestic domain, “waiting, waiting, and waiting” for Vincent to arrive (Dixon 121). At one point, Mary hears an “agitated ring of the bell, and someone hurrying up the stairs” (118). Mary stands up and clasps her hands together, “looking vaguely down

at the faded true-lovers' knots which meandered with foolish reiteration over the carpet" (118). It is only Jimmy, and Vincent never arrives. Surrounded by endlessly repeating apples on the walls and ironically reiterated true-lovers' knots on the floor, Mary is in tragic harmony with her surroundings. Similar to the wallpaper being a metaphor for Mary's oppression, the true-lovers' knots are an unrelated item that shares tragically common qualities with Mary's relationship with Vincent. Like the knots, Vincent's love has become faded and unreliable, causing Mary to meander through her life as an author and would-be artist, toiling endlessly. While the text focalizes through Mary's judgment of the knots as "foolish," (118) Mary comes to realize her own foolishness as she waits for a man who is not coming.

In line with Dixon's desire for a union between women, Mary is not the only woman who is left waiting. Shortly before Vincent's return to England, Mary visits Regent's Park. There she sees a young shop-girl sitting in the park. Mary will later find out that this is the former lover of Dr. Strange, whom she will only know as Number 27. The text's focalization through Number 27 foreshadows Mary's own disappointment at the hands of a lover who will fail to show up: "he had not come, and in her glittering eyes one read the fact that in all human probability he never would" (Dixon 116). This scene repeats the image of women waiting for men. Men who, unlike Mary, Number 27, and Alison Ives, have the privilege of being able to walk away unscathed after "ruining the lives of ... women" (MacDonald 43). Mary's love life "will all be a blank" (303) after the disappointment of Vincent; Number 27 will die from the consequences of an attempted suicide; and Alison Ives will die of consumption linked to Dr. Strange and her discovery of his relationship with Number 27.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, Dr. Strange will go on to become a "smooth, smug, [and] successful" doctor (Dixon 44). Even Vincent Hemming, who will interrupt Mary's waiting to beg her to run away with him, will eventually return to the marital security of his wife and child. The privilege of choice afforded to these men illustrates the level to which they are spared from—and complicit in—the oppression of women in

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<sup>1</sup> For more analysis on the insinuated complicity of Dr. Strange in Alison Ives's death, see Anthony Camara's "'Germ Theories': Bacteriology in Ella Hepworth Dixon's *The Story of a Modern Woman*."

a world of “laws made for man’s convenience and pleasure” (189). While Mary and Vincent are both represented in the metaphor of the faded true-lovers’ knots, Mary is the one who has to see it—and the one who suffers most from their relationship.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman creates a similar metaphor between domestic decoration and the oppression of women in her short story “The Yellow Wallpaper,” which makes her short story a useful comparison to *The Story of a Modern Woman*. In “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the protagonist and narrator is a new mother who descends into insanity as a result of her husband’s attempts to cure her postpartum depression with confinement and rest in a room bedecked with sickeningly yellow wallpaper. Repeatedly exposed to the wallpaper’s delirious repetitions, the narrator “gradually becomes convinced not only that her husband has entrapped her in the attic but also that the wallpaper contains other trapped women whom she must rescue” (Thomas 7).<sup>2</sup> This reasoning leads her to manically rip the paper off the wall in an attempt at freedom. As a result, the wallpaper can be seen to metaphorically represent the protagonist’s confinement at the hands of her husband and social constructs at large. The wallpaper in *The Story of a Modern Woman* also metaphorically represents Mary’s experience of being trapped in economic and romantic imprisonment, although the wallpaper’s effect on her is much less intense than on the protagonist in Gilman’s story.

Interestingly, critics have also pointed to the short story’s implication of wallpaper “as a potential mental health hazard for women, children, and convalescents in restricted environments” (Thomas 2). Wallpaper in the Victorian era was often made using arsenic, with especially high concentrations in yellow and green varieties (Hawksley 1); notably, “The Yellow Wallpaper” and *The Story of a Modern Woman* both contain yellow and green wallpaper. In the case of “The

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<sup>2</sup> The camaraderie between oppressed women in “The Yellow Wallpaper” echoes Alison Ives’s plea for women to come together and be united in the fight for their survival. Both Dixon and Gilman advocate for a “social trades-unionism between women” (Stead 71).

Yellow Wallpaper,” the narrator experiences hallucinations that could very well be caused by arsenic poisoning, and while Mary’s symptoms of ill health are less surely pointed towards arsenic poisoning, she has a generally poor bill of health by the end of the novel, with Vincent describing her as “ill [and] anemic” (Dixon 296). The harm caused by domestic confinement in these texts thus goes beyond the mental into the physical, with wallpaper serving as the literal and metaphorical symbols of the harm caused by female domestic oppression. The elements of Mary’s domestic spaces in *The Story of a Modern Woman*—her wallpaper and carpet in particular—serve as metaphors for the oppression faced by women in a world that constricts them to subordinate roles under men, causing the stagnation of any trajectories beyond the domestic. Against the backdrop of the metaphorical decor of her apartment, Mary will join the other women of the novel in their physical and mental degeneration at the hands of gendered oppression. Dixon leaves readers with the fact that Mary will never gain meaningful professional success nor the full commitment of any lover as she slips further into ill health—a grim and powerful argument in the author’s fight against the domestic confinements of her time and the times to come. Yet *The Story of a Modern Woman*’s themes of oppression and subjugation are interestingly shown to apply to both women and men, albeit disproportionately. Mary and Vincent are both trapped by the social constructs of matrimony and domesticity in the late nineteenth century and unable to triumph over the fear of civilization’s judgment. In illustrating the anguish that marriage—either would-be or consummated—causes both men and women, Dixon buttresses her argument against nineteenth-century domestic expectations by showing the range of their victims.

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