Title of Paper: Modern Woman/Modern Novel: Dixon’s The Story of a Modern Woman and Late-Victorian/Modernist Thematics

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Abstract:

In the “Editor’s Introduction” of an issue of Modernism/Modernity, Cassandra Laity writes: “While, individually, modernist and Victorian studies vigorously pursue new cultural, theoretical, and social ‘modernities,’ less scholarly attention is given to cross-over research, both Anglo/American and trans-national as well as across periods” (427). What is most interesting in Laity’s comment is the notion of the border between Victorian studies and studies of 20th-century literature. Indeed, it is this border, the movement from Victorian realism on the one hand, to 20th-century novels of form and modernity on the other, that is most interesting. To that extent, the fact that certain late Victorian novels begin to flirt with the border between the late-Victorian and early-Modern ages—the fin de siècle—suggests that certain works are worth noting for their cross-border/cross-century characteristics.

With this border in mind, it is interesting to look at Ella Hepworth Dixon’s short novel The Story of a Modern Woman (1894) as a novel that borders the 19th- and 20th-centuries. Of particular note is how the novel straddles the fin de siècle. On the one hand, the novel exhibits the hallmarks of Victorian realism, while at the same time embracing Flaubertian notions of “form” which Modernists such as Ezra Pound praise as the methodology of all modernist literature. This paper will explore how the main character, Mary Erle, in bucking the “traditional” role of the Victorian women in novels (the traditional notions of marriage and domestic life included) works instead to develop herself as a woman of the “modern” times, going to work for herself as writer. Indeed, one sees a crossing of a border occur in this novel, with characters such as Lady Jane focusing on old Victorian values, and Mary Erle existing as a new modern woman, ready to jump past the fin de siècle and march into the new century as an independent woman.

Thus, this paper will examine two distinct properties of Victorian and Modernist borders. First, it will focus on the change in the form of the novel is represented in Dixon’s work. Her novel, though written in the 19th-century, looks suspiciously like the kind of novels that appear in post-Victorian England. And, secondly, this paper will examine how the protagonist, Mary Erle, bridges the border...
between the “traditional” Victorian woman character and the new, independent and mobile female character of the 20th-century. The hope is to suggest that Dixon’s novel represents a borderline between Victorian novel characteristics and early-20th-century notions of artistic form and female independence.

Keywords: aesthetics, cross-period, Dixon, Flaubert, fin de siècle, modern, novel, post-Victorian, Pound, woman

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The Victorian

In the “Editor’s Introduction” to a 2008 issue of Modernism/Modernity, Cassandra Laity suggests that, “[w]hile, individually, modernist and Victorian studies vigorously pursue new cultural, theoretical, and social ‘modernities,’ less scholarly attention is given to cross-over research, both Anglo-American and trans-national as well as across periods” (427). Indeed, Laity points to one of the defining differences between modern and Victorian studies that serves to define the lack of cross-over study:

Further, discouraged perhaps by Decadent Aestheticism’s alleged detachment from socio-political reality, new modernist studies of visual and commodity culture repeatedly gesture toward Baudelaire’s ‘kaleidoscope equipped with consciousness’ scanning the techno/urban ‘spectacle.’ Meanwhile, research into Decadence/Aestheticism’s proto-cinematic visualities and nuanced interrogations of material culture, race, or gender remain largely period-based in Victorian studies. (428)

The result of this divide, and the accompanying focus of this particular issue of Modernism/Modernity, is that a rather fertile field of scholarship avails itself to both the Victorian and modern scholar for crossing the divide of the fin de siecle, examining aesthetic, cultural, and political continuities that exhibit themselves in the literature of the late-19th and early-20th centuries.

**Dixon, Modern Women, and Flaubertian Form**

One place to start such cross-over examinations is in notions of the “modern woman.” Of particular interest is the short novel of Ella Hepworth Dixon, *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894), in which the central character, Mary Erle, exhibits a female life that bucks the assumed Victorian mores of refinement, domesticity, and marriage, and attempts a life one might suppose to be typical of a woman of the early-20th century. Artistic ideals, economic gain, personal ambition and independence, tempered by still-lingering Victorian ideals, come to define Mary Erle and serve to demonstrate a kind of looking-forward to a modern woman more recognizable in, perhaps, the 1920s than in 1894.

Representations of women in literature from the 19th-century are abundant, but particular examples are more admired by modernists than others. For instance, Gustave Flaubert holds particular significance among modernists. Ezra Pound praises Flaubert’s prose capabilities in *A Memoir of Gaudier-Brzeska*, arguing, “Flaubert and De Maupassant lifted prose to the rank of a finer art” (83). Certainly, Pound’s reflection looks to *Madame Bovary*, considered the crowning achievement of Realism, as well as, in many ways, the first gesture of the modern literary movement. However, Dixon’s novel, or more particularly Dixon’s Mary, resembles another of Flaubert’s female creations, Félicité of *A Simple Heart*. Félicité, the faithful servant of Madame Aubain, “had had her love-story like another” (8). Her lover, Theodore, married another for political reasons. Theodore, afraid of conscription into the army, married the wealthy Madame Lehoussais in an effort to avoid joining the military. In Dixon’s *The Story of a Modern Woman*, Mary’s love, Vincent Hemming, marries a wealthy woman as well, but for a different kind of political advantage. Hemming, hoping for a parliamentary career, marries the daughter of Mr. Higgins in an effort to establish capital for his eventual political push. Thus, both Félicité and Mary are abandoned by the men they love for women of considerable wealth and power, two
women who can establish society lives for the men they marry. Broken-hearted, both Félicité and Mary relegate themselves to the solitary life, working instead for self-advancement and acting as caregivers to others.

Setting self-advancement aside for the moment, both independent women focus their efforts on the behalves of others. Félicité turns to the care of Virginie and Paul, the two children of Madame Aubain. Likewise, the independent Mary turns her attention to the care of the ailing Alison, who, suffering from bronchitis, rests in bed until her death, with Mary at her side. Mary’s independence, it might be said, is what “settled that Mary should remain all night at the bedside” (166). Neither Mary nor Félicité having husbands to tend to, both are able to turn the focus of their domesticity to others.

Yet, it is not enough to say that the lack of marriage, consequential independence, and caregiving signal the advent of the modern woman. However, what the similarities between Mary and Félicité suggest is that Dixon’s modern woman finds her parallel in the work of the man whom the 20th-century modernists admire for prose composition—Gustave Flaubert. One need not make much of such a small similarity, but what such a correlation shows is that even in the very early murmurings of modernism in 1870s France, independent (or unmarried) women, who in their independence are able to act in service to others, exist as one of the foci for modern literary movements.

Furthermore, the project of “the novel” as a place of experimentation and not only a sentimental pastime finds its origins in Flaubert’s narrative projects. Neferti Xina M. Tadiar states this boldly, arguing that “it is with Flaubert that the novel is transformed from a representation to an experiment” (147). Citing Michel de Certeau, Tadiar examines how literature, transformed under the Flaubertian model, serves to exhibit the systemized sciences of psychology, sociology, and history, “in nonscientific discourse” (147). “As Flaubert’s novels prove,” writes Tadiar, “[the recognition of everyone’s micro-stories] comes easily only when these particulars have already been made into everyone’s and everyday” (147, emphasis in original). Furthermore, Tadiar reinforces the idea that the modern novel depends most importantly on forms—“forms of desire, value, relations, and so on” (147).

The notion form as the mode of modern representation as drawn from Flaubert is precisely what Georgia Johnston refers to when she writes of Gertrude Stein’s novel project. Her analysis of Stein’s The Making of Americans (1925) and its reliance on Flaubert’s Trois Contes (1877) reinforce the modernist trend of following in the footsteps of Flaubert. “By recycling the structure of Flaubert’s text,” argues Johnston, “Stein shows that texts, as well, rely on and repeat elements of texts that precede them. Structure, content, and language may all show influence” (33). These notions of form, structure, and repetition, found in Flaubert, represented by Stein, and analyzed by Tadiar and Johnston, are all found, to some degree, in The Story of a Modern Woman. And, as one reads The Story of a Modern Woman, these characteristics become quite clear. As we will see, the formal characteristics Flaubert institutes, for lack of a better term, find their way into Dixon’s novel in a number of ways.
The Story of the Modern Woman and the Fin de Siècle

The idea of modernity figures significantly into The Story of a Modern Woman not only because it appears in the title. Rather, the approaching end of the 19th-century that faces both Dixon and her central character, and the advent of a new age presents itself in the 1890s more than ever. Walter Benjamin articulates the notion of modernity as a consciousness of a new age in The Arcades Project:

There has never been an epoch that did not feel itself to be “modern” in the sense of eccentric, and did not believe itself to be standing directly before an abyss. The desperately clear consciousness of being in the middle of a crisis is something chronic in humanity. Every age unavoidably seems to itself a new age. The “modern,” however, is as varied in its meaning as the different aspects of one and the same kaleidoscope. (545)

There is, indeed, evidence of the kind of eccentricity and impending abyss that Benjamin describes in The Story of a Modern Woman. Consistently throughout the novel, characters regularly refer to the eccentricities of the late-Victorian period. For example, when Mary visits Dr. Danby, she is told as he writes a prescription, “I should like to have all you young ladies living a healthy, out-of-door life, happily married, and with no mental worries. There is something wrong somewhere [. . .] with our boasted civilisation. It’s all unnatural. Not fit, not fit for girls” (144). Danby’s assertion that “there is something wrong [. . .] with our boasted civilisation” suggests a time of eccentricity, when the normative social establishment of high Victorian society has waned and made way for progressive societal changes that many see as the undoing of civilization (144).

Nowhere in Dixon’s novel is such “old-fashioned” Victorian society exhibited than in the character of Lady Jane. Lady Jane, mother to the ill-fated Alison, wishes for an established social life for her daughter, complete with a dignified husband, to which she herself was accustomed to earlier in the 19th-century. So distraught by Alison’s free-spirit in the age of decadence, Lady Jane worries over what she sees as Alison’s Victorian social failure. She says to the Irish Viceroy at her dinner party, “It is my own child [. . .] who keeps me waiting for my dinner. Would you believe that that girl of mine spends half her time in a workman’s flat, or poking about those horrible smelly streets in Whitechapel” (155-6). Lady Jane certainly exists in a time other than the present. Dixon writes that

[s]he had been a wit and a beauty in her youth, and with the garrulity of old age, she liked to talk of her triumphs; of her flirtation with Bulwer Lytton, whose waistcoats and whose romances were just then turning the heads of all the women; of the occasion when she snatched a celebrity from Lady Palmerston; that season—nearly a century ago now—she had interrupted a diplomatic love affair of Princess Lieven’s, and, above all, of Disraeli, who, up to the last, had continued to scintillate at her dinner parties. (153-4)

Yet, now Lady Jane is faced with a different time. The high society of dinner parties to which Lady Jane seems most accustomed has made way for an age of mechanical reproduction (to use Benjamin’s term), one in which Mary, for instance, is able to
walk into a publisher on Fleet Street that “proved to be a little world in itself, [a] vast bee-hive, for the printing, publishing, and editing of some dozen magazines and journals” (110). It is a place where “[t]here was a deafening whirr of machinery which reminded [her] vaguely of international exhibitions” (110). Indeed, much of the world of The Story of a Modern Woman is mechanized. Publishing houses notwithstanding, omnibuses crowd the streets, hospital wards soaked with the smell of patent disinfectants offer exhibitions of modern medicine, telephones enable communication between departments of businesses, and telegraphs relay messages across distances. Dixon’s London is no longer Dickens’s London, and the High Victorian society Lady Jane once enjoyed now stood at the edge of a Benjaminian abyss. The fin de siècle has come, and modernity sounds in the streets of London.

Mary, Perry, and the Royal Academy

In his examination of aesthetic movements in Arts for Art’s Sake and Literary Life, Gene H. Bell-Villada argues that what is called “Modernism” finds “itsforegrounding of the medium of a work of art, its heightening of form, style, and technique over ‘content,’ even at the expense of viewer accessibility” (127). He claims also that “‘Modernism’ is at best a bit of highly simplifying shorthand, a retrospective sign evoking an entire process of development and decay” (126). Additionally, Bell-Villada lists many of the technological advances considered key to the modern period, including “the internal combustion engine (1859), dynamite (1866), [. . .] the machine gun (1882), the electric street car (ca. 1883),” and so on (130). All of these (sans particular technological innovations) are present in Dixon’s novel, and of particular interest is the “foregrounding of the medium of a work of art,” which one finds in the artwork of Perry Jackson, the writing of Mary Erle, and indeed even in the Dixon’s authoring of The Story of a Modern Woman itself (127).

To begin with, the artistic endeavors of Perry Jackson are a rather pointed example of the kind of modernist tendencies that become commonplace by the early 20th-century. Dixon describes the artwork in the galleries of the Society of United Artists as “the obvious, the threadbare, the banal” (126, emphasis in original). She goes on to say that “everywhere there was a frank appeal to the Philistinism of the picture-buying public” (126). Certainly, Dixon’s reference to Philistinism directly references critics such as Matthew Arnold, who writes, “the people who believe most that our greatness and welfare are proved by our being very rich, and who most give their lives and thoughts to becoming rich, are just the very people whom we call Philistines” (par. 13). In Culture and Anarchy (1882), Arnold argues against a society that single-handedly pursues wealth, and instead offers an example of a Victorian via media. Arnold rejects a notion of human (and therefore artistic) perfection as the pursuit of one noble cause. He writes, too, of health and vigor: “The moment we disjoin them from the idea of a perfect spiritual condition, and pursue them, as we do pursue them, for their own sake and as ends in themselves, our worship of them becomes as mere worship of machinery, as our worship of wealth or population, and as unintelligent and vulgarising a worship as that is” (par. 15). Arnold appears to reject notions of anything for anything’s sake, and thus art for art’s sake must follow. Philistine art, however, is what Mr. Jackson sells at the Academy. Upon
congratulating his induction to the Royal Academy, Mary is met with a rather economic answer by the now-famous artist:

“Oh, it don’t mean much—except in the £s.d. line, you know,” said Perry, apologetically. “But I told you I’d do it, didn’t I? You remember ‘The Time of the Roses”? That was what did the trick, the girls and the roses. Agnew bought it, sold thousands of engravings—especially in Australia. Australia, you know, is like England—only more so. And in America, too. I’m told in America they give away an autogravure of that picture with every pound of Scourer’s Soap and every bottle of Parkins’ Pain-killer.” (127-8)

He continues in the same economic fashion:

“Oh, of course,” continued Perry, “you’ve seen my big picture in the Academy. Sold for two thousand pounds, at the Private View. That’s what got me my election,” continued the new Associate confidentially, “all rot about encouraging talent what fetches the public is the long price. I hope,” he added wistfully, “that you’ll come and see my studio. I’m down Kensington way now—all among the Royal Academicians.” (128)

Perry sells to the Philistine public, the public who can afford to buy works of art of supposed fine taste, the works of art with long prices that exhibit, rather than any necessary artistic unity, simply what one can buy with expendable income.

More critical to the underlying modernist tone of Dixon’s novel, however, is the mechanical reproduction that Perry’s art undergoes, and the pride with which he greets such mimesis. His painting, which he had imagined long before in art school, has now become a staple of everyday life across the seas. In fact, it has, in a sense, become a modern work of art, in the Benjaminian sense. ‘The Time of the Roses’ has gone from a position of ritual (having been viewed and stored in a gallery) to a position of economic-politics, in which the painting itself has become an object of commodity and a sign of wealth. As Benjamin writes,

To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility. From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the “authentic” print makes no sense. But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics. (224)

Thus, Perry’s artwork takes on a degree of modernity. Functioning not as a museum-piece, but as a reproducible commodity for the marketplace (the place of economic-politics), Perry’s painting indeed conforms to modern terms of artistic representation. In fact, Perry’s criticism of his elder, Mr. Madder, whom he chides for painting ‘The Last Appeal of Monmouth,’ art that does not sell to the public, suggests a complete divorce from even the aesthetic endeavors of the Impressionists (128). Monet, for instance, in the Water Lilies series, “created a self-contained world purely for personal and artistic purposes” (Janson 386). What matters to Perry is the support of the Philistine public and the salability of his work.
Turning to Mary's writing career, the gestures toward modernism become even more evident. When Mary visits the editor of The Fan, the kind of writing expected of her remains faithful to the superficial tabloid literature perhaps expected of women writers of the time, despite the editor's claims to the contrary: "'The only thing I really think of starting,' he announced, standing on the heart rug and twisting a neat moustache, 'is a really good society article. Only about smart people, don't you know. [. . .] Now, I should have liked a smartly written account of Lady Jane Ives's party the other day'" (111-2). On the other hand, Mary would like to be a more serious writer. In fact, she wishes to write a more artistic piece, but her idea is turned down. She says to Perry Jackson,

No. It was too sad, "too painful," all the publishers said. It wouldn't have pleased the British public. But I have been given a commission to do a three-volume novel on the old lines—a dying man in a hospital and a forged will in the first volume; a ball and a picnic in the second; and an elopement, which must, of course, be prevented at the last moment by the opportune death of the wife, or the husband—I forget which it is to be—in the last. (130)

Mary's skills as a writer are not dismissed out-of-hand, but her editors and publishers certainly do not think she is capable of writing serious literature. The novel, by now a serious art form, is no longer the idle pleasure that one finds it represented as in Austen's Northanger Abbey. Serious writing is to be left to men—serious realist writing, that is. Mary's writing should be formulaic, according to her publishers. Mary is, by all accounts, analogous to the Dorothy Osbourne that Virginia Woolf describes in A Room of One's Own. "And so," writes Woolf, since no woman of sense and modesty could write books, Dorothy, who was sensitive and melancholy [. . .] wrote nothing. Letters did not count. A woman might write letters while she was sitting by her father's sick-bed [. . .]. The strange thing is, I thought, turning over the pages of Dorothy's letters, what a gift that untaught and solitary girl had for the framing of a sentence, for the fashioning of a scene. (62)

Thus, Mary is asked to write a woman's novel, with an obvious plot, easily salable to the British public. When Mary turns in her drafts, she is told that the novel "won't do at all" (146). The editor tells Mary, "you've put the most extraordinary things in this last chapter. Why, there's a young man making love to his friend's wife. I can't print that sort of thing in my paper. The public won't stand for it, my dear girl. They want thoroughly healthy reading" (146). Mary, perplexed by the criticism, stands stunned by the editor's claims about British readers. He continues, "novels are—er—well—novels. The British public doesn't expect them to be like life. And if you take my advice, Miss Erle, and cultivate your talents in the right way, you will be able to make a—a—comfortable income" (147).

Yet, what her publisher tells her stands in direct contradiction to the literature she read as a child. During her teens, Mary read The Ancient Mariner, Wuthering Heights, Villette, Emile: ou, de l'Education, and Le Contrat Social. Schooled thereby in the thickest concrete of the 19th-century canon, Mary has a hard time accepting the unimaginative novel-writing expected of her. Mary wants to be an artistic writer.
When she meets Jackson Perry to put the finishing touches on her article about him and his artwork, she says to the artist, “What I want to-day are just the last touches for my article—something to make the thing literary, with meaning, you see” (134-5).

The seeds of Anglo modernism are mentioned by Dixon in reference to Mary’s writing. Her publisher mentions that her novel should have a happy ending, claiming “[t]he public like happy endings. The novelists are getting so morbid. It’s all these French and Russian writers that have done it” (147). The publisher certainly has in mind figures such as Flaubert, whose Emma Bovary dies by suicide, and Chekov, whose early use of stream-of-consciousness became a major influence for modernist writers. Mary finds such pandering to the public’s literary sense to be the only way to make a living as a writer, even though her ambition is to be an artist (indeed, a creator of “meaning”). “The banal,” she thinks to herself, “the pretty-pretty, the obvious! This is what she was to write—if she wanted to make any money to keep her head above water” (148).

At play in Mary’s troubles as a novelist is the clash of new and old aesthetic concerns at the end of the 19th-century. With figures such as Oscar Wilde claiming that “There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all,” the disjuncture between what is commercially profitable and ripe for public consumption, and what is an artistic object, with its own internal set of aesthetic logic, becomes increasingly tenuous (3). To be clear, however, the aesthetic movement at the end of the 19th-century is not the practice of High Modernism or Imagism, at least in Pound’s terms. Pound, who likely defines the modernist movement with the most finesse, claims that symbolism is the degradation of “the symbol to the status of a word,” and that Impressionism is perhaps the negative definition of Imagism (84). Both movements, Symbolism and Impressionism, are representative of the aesthetic movement of which Mary Erle is a part, a reaction against Philistinism and a pretense of art for art’s sake, so often associated with Wilde. Yet, the determination of Mary to elevate her novel writing to the realm of art and not of trite fiction represents steps toward a modernist aesthetic, such as the one Flaubert espouses in his 1852 articulation regarding his authoring of Madame Bovary, stylistic innovations in which the internal integrity of the novel, not external prescriptive forces, determine its aesthetic power:

What seems beautiful to me, what I should like to write, is a book about nothing, a book dependent on nothing external, which would be held together by the strength of its style, just as the earth, suspended in the void, depends on nothing external for its support; a book which would have almost no subject, or at least in which the subject would be almost invisible, if such a thing is possible. The finest works are those that contain the least matter; the closer the expression comes to thought, the closer language comes to coinciding and merging with it, the finer the result. I believe that the future of Art lies in this direction. (309-10)

In the meat of this letter by Flaubert, one finds perhaps a clue to the most modernist of all the gestures in Dixon’s novel. The Story of a Modern Woman is a novel much different from other late-19th-century novels. Turning back to Wilde, Dorian Gray stands out as the defining novel of the 1890s, yet its efforts at the kind of aesthetic...
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independence Flaubert espouses nearly forty years earlier are questionable. As Joyce Carol Oates suggests, “The value of Wilde’s allegory lies in the questions it asks rather than in the experience it transcribes. For Dorian gives us hardly any experience at all—it is all surface and symbol, and too tidily constructed” (431). These are not the aesthetics of Flaubert, nor are they the aesthetics of Pound, who finds symbolism “mushy” at best. Instead, Wilde’s novel fails at the task of “expression [becoming] thought,” and instead obeys the didactic qualities of symbolic representation (310). On the other hand, Dixon’s novel may just achieve a kind of modernist aesthetic wished for by Flaubert and required by Pound. This is not to say that The Story of a Modern Woman is a fully realized modernist novel. Too much of it reads like a Victorian text. Yet, something about the stagnation in the novel—Mary’s failure to marry, create the career she had hoped, and the mundane quality of her life in London—suggests that it is, in some sense, Flaubert’s novel in which nothing happens.

One can examine, for instance, the trajectory of the novel and appreciate its “lack of event.” The novel begins much as one might expect a Victorian novel with a rather picturesque description of a London house, complicated by the stagnation of death:

Glaring spring sunshine and a piercing east wind rioted out of doors, and here and there overflowing flower-baskets made startling patches of colour against the vague blue-grey of the streets, but indoors, in the tall London house, there was only a sickly, yellow twilight, for the orange-toned blinds were scrupulously drawn down. [. . .] Friends calling to inquire had left [wreaths and flowers] there, but they had not yet been taken up—up to that awful room where a marble figure, a figure which was strangely unlike Professor Erle—lay stretched, in an enduring silence, on the bed. (43)

Dixon’s novel begins with stillness—the stillness of death. This deathly stillness initiates and seems to maintain the tone and action throughout the novel. Such stillness, punctuated by exotic flowers as ornament, remains the novel’s constant image. Mary struggles to break free of this stillness and maidenhood, only to fail, trying ambitiously to become an artistic writer, only to be told she should not try. She watches a friend die of suffocation, unable to help the suffering woman, and in the end remains much as she was in the beginning, alone with only her father’s tombstone to keep her company.

To achieve this effect, Dixon employs two methods to help suggest a modern stagnation. First, she places in the face of every situation of progress a corresponding tug of regression. Most obvious is Mary’s anxiety over her novel writing, in which she attempts to write in a progressive, realist mode, only to be told by her publisher to follow the formulaic storytelling familiar to mid-century Victorians. Furthermore, while Dixon’s novel is a short, tight narrative, Mary’s novel is to be a bulky three-volume tour de force, reminiscent of Thackeray, Dickens, and Eliot. Mary’s life is captured in under two-hundred pages by Dixon, but even Mary explains the the realistic novel she intends would have “twenty-seven years of actual experience in it,” indicating a lengthy narrative, unlike the one in which she actually occupies (130). Dixon employs here a meta-fictional binary of sorts. Her short novel, in which she
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captures the life of Mary in a scant one-volume, stands in contrast with her character’s literary ambition of a three-volume Victorian narrative in which she will chronicle twenty-seven years of life.

A second variant on stagnation presented by Dixon appears late in the novel, as once again Mary is coupled with the death of her father. Standing on the hill in the cemetery, under which her father rests in death, Mary glances about at the renewal of spring:

All around her was the joyous activity of springtime. Nature, who never ceases, who never rests, was once again at her work of recreation. Once again the lilac trees were burgeoning with waxen blossoms. Once again a thrush, somewhere among that great city of sleepers, was swelling its brown throat with an amorous song. The air was loaded with the perfume of may; a pair of swifts were circling and swooping against the evening sky.1 (191-2)

Dixon represents springtime not simply as a rebirthing of nature, but as a cyclic pattern, determined and regular as any pattern, perhaps even more boring than beautiful. Springtime may be joyous, but that gaiety is marked by Dixon with repetitive “once again,” suggesting more than anything a state of spinning wheels. The fully awake and singing thrush contrasted against the “city of sleepers” is met by swifts who very obviously circle in the air above Mary. While it proves difficult to assert whether or not the circling of the swifts represents the circular nature of the novel, one cannot mistake the fact that the novel begins much the same way it began. As it was in the beginning, Mary finds herself in spring, in the twilight. Just as in the beginning, when overflowing flower-baskets and exotic flowers ornamented the scene, in the end waxen lilacs ornament the hill upon which Mary stands. And, as mentioned already, the story ends as it began, with Mary and her dead father, in London, alone, with little action at all except for Mary’s contemplation.

Perhaps the only difference is that now Mary stands over a London that appears much like Benjamin’s abyss. The blue-grey streets of London in the first chapter, broken by brilliant floral baskets, are now replaced with a much more modern, a much more ominous London:

At her feet, beyond the foreground of spreading trees, lay stretched out a vast ocean of houses, softened, made vague with a silvery veil of smoke, and pricked by endless spires. Here and there a blurred block, a monster hotel, a railway station, rose out of the great sea of dwellings. It was London that lay stretched out at her feet; majestic, awe-inspiring, inexorable, triumphant London. (192)

What lay in front of Mary was not only the twilight of a spring night, but also the twilight of the 19th-century. The end of the century has come, and still Mary is in the same place she has always been.

Any claim that The Story of a Modern Woman represents all the aesthetic practices of High Modernism is out of place. Yet, there is evidence in Dixon’s text that point to her novel as a very authentic anticipation of what would come from the pens of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. In many ways she develops the trope of the modern woman that flourishes in the 1920s. Her critiques and representation of artistic endeavor are both critical of her period and suggest advances yet to come.
And, most importantly, her narrative arc itself presents a notion of unity and form that modernist writers will aspire toward far into the 20th-century. *The Story of a Modern Woman* may not simply be about a modern woman, but it may also be about the modern novel itself—perhaps a crude attempt at literary modernism, but also an ambitious one that deserves as much consideration as any other early attempt at modernist form and integrity.
Note

1. I have quoted a passage used by Dixon that she added to subsequent versions of the novel, as noted by editor Steve Farmer.
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