The Death of the New Woman in Sara Jeannette Duncan's *A Daughter of To-day*

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Despite its republication two decades ago by Tecumseh Press, Sara Jeannette Duncan's *A Daughter of To-day* (1894) remains a surprisingly neglected text. A witty narrative about a modern woman's assault on tradition, it was Duncan's first serious novel after a string of comic works arising out of her first career as a journalist. *A Daughter of To-day* struck a new, sombre note. As the title suggests, the novel follows the (mis)adventures of an unconventional young American, Elfrida Bell, who escapes her parents and her hometown to seek fame in Europe, first in Paris, where she takes art lessons and imbibes avant-garde ideology, and then in London, where she becomes a modestly successful journalist. In both cities, she dedicates her life to the "repudiation of the bourgeois" (29), and her determined unconventionality is at the heart of the novel's interest and its interpretive challenges.

The plot hinges on the series of reversals experienced by Elfrida as she pursues her destiny. In London, she develops two friendships: with Janet Cardiff, a young writer whose literary abilities, which eventually result in a well-received first novel, inflame Elfrida's admiration and jealousy; and with John Kendal, a painter she had first met in Paris, who finds her an absorbing artistic study. Her relationship with Janet is complicated when Janet's widowed father, Lawrence, believes himself in love with her; in turn, she begins to think love possible with Kendal, though she determines not to let it interfere with her writing. Seeking material for a book, she shocks her friends by taking a performing role in a burlesque show outside of London. Upon her return to the city, Kendal paints her portrait, which crystallizes his insight into her egoism — a revelation painful to Elfrida, who for the first time sees herself as others do: "So that is how you have read me," she cries as she looks upon the painting (250). When her book manuscript is rejected by one

of her literary idols, and when Janet ends their friendship with a flippant letter, the collapse of her ego is complete, and she kills herself by taking poison. The novel ends with an image of the shrine set up to her in her parents' drawing-room, where Elfrida's Buddha statue smiles amidst her sketches, "the only person whose equanimity is entirely undisturbed" (281). What had begun as a comedy of manners concludes as a tragedy touched with farce.

Like Duncan's more mature "international novels" (Tausky, *Novelist* 91), *A Daughter of To-day* contains astute observations about a range of contemporary subjects, including the distinction between Old World and New World cultures, the nature of modern art, and the situation of the New Woman.[1] Yet as the previous summary may suggest, it is a difficult novel to make out, and more than one critic has found that its "point of view seems merely confused" (Tausky, *Novelist* 111).[2] From the time of its publication, critics have been perplexed by its tonal ambiguities and apparent moral ambivalence. What are we to conclude about its flamboyant heroine — and of her death at the novel's end? Did Duncan intend her heroine's fate to be read as a warning, a judgement, or a protest? And if so, what exactly is she warning against, judging, or protesting? Carole Gerson reads the novel from a feminist perspective as a story about a young woman's "entrapment and destruction by gender," a reading "overdetermined by the tone of the novel itself, which condemns female ambition because it is female" ("Wild" 69). Gerson suggests that Duncan makes Elfrida a victim both of patriarchy and of her own "uncompromising ambition" (65). For Thomas Tausky, on the other hand, the novel's ending is simply a failure, Elfrida's suicide "no more justifiable on moral than on dramatic grounds" (*Novelist* 119). Both readings are persuasive in their different ways, but neither accounts fully for the work's peculiar emphases and ambiguity. While many of the interpretive puzzles of the novel may be impossible to solve, a thorough consideration of its main character in relation to Duncan's own life and writing may help us to make sense of its apparent incoherence.

Contemporary reviews clashed sharply about the degree of sympathy to be accorded the heroine. The *Athenaeum* admired the novel but disliked Elfrida, noting that "her creator touches her with an almost malignant hand, illuminating her egotism, her affectation, her heartlessness, the ill-breeding of her gospel of art and life, in letters of flame" (qtd. in Tausky, *Novelist* 110). A reviewer in the *Saturday Review* found

that dislike of Elfrida overshadowed appreciation of the novel's technique: "We are not much impressed when the heroine lives in familiar intercourse with improper persons, appears in tights on the stage for 'copy' . . . or talks disagreeably about the effects on her of the propinquity of 'a human being who would give all he possesses just to touch your hand.' We do not think we should be peculiarly anxious to touch Miss Elfrida Bell's hand" (qtd. in Tausky, *Novelist* 110). In contrast, the *London Bookman* defended Elfrida and was convinced "that her inventor is as fond of Elfrida as we are" (qtd. in Tausky, *Novelist* 110). And The *Nation* expressed its disappointment that Duncan must have felt a need to satisfy conventional expectations in making her engaging heroine die: "To leave a final impression that her fresh, original, and really delightful heroine has been after all merely a lay figure, from whom the trappings are stripped with almost vindictive exposure, is a wasteful and ridiculous excess of consideration for the requirements of a novel as understood by literary Philistia" (qtd. in Tausky, *Novelist* 110). About this latter point, it seems unlikely that Duncan would have made such a concession to the Philistines, whom she was fond of upbraiding.

Together, the reviews illustrate the perplexities in Duncan's portrait of Elfrida: her combination of charm and repulsiveness. As Misao Dean points out in her introduction to the reprinted text, "Elfrida is not simply condemned by the author" (xv) — though she certainly *is* condemned. Egotistical, erratic, and melodramatic, she is also frank, occasionally generous, and sometimes brilliant. Her zest for life and artistic dedication — her "enthrallment" with "speaking with that voice which she could summon" (210) — are worthy of admiration, while her moral shallowness and devotion to bohemian self-styling are not. The narrator sums her up by remarking, "In nothing that she said or did, admired or condemned, was there any trace of the commonplace, except, perhaps, the desire to avoid it" (27). This amused, critical assessment is typical of the narrator's attitude towards Elfrida, whose silliness (dramatic obeisance to literary celebrity, unprincipled flirtation with callow young men) does not often extend to moral culpability, but whose exaggerated self-performance and faulty judgements are not only naïve but ultimately harmful to herself and others. Possessed of an overblown conception of bohemianism, which forgives drunkenness, dissipation, and open immorality in those who honour it, she fails to make critical distinctions about values and character. But she is also

vivid, courageous, principled, and loyal, with a quirky idealism and a talent with words.

Love of self lies at the heart both of Elfrida's faults of character and of her sincerity and acuteness. She is always watching herself and aware of herself as exquisitely watchable; and she is keenly attuned to her own and others' qualities of soul. Whether standing, sitting, speaking, or even thinking, she feels "a subtle approval and enjoyment of her manner of doing it" (15). Hers is the purest narcissism, a love of self so undiluted as to transcend mere vanity. As a youth, she amuses herself by kneeling at an attic window, by moonlight, to recite Rossetti because she wants to "taste the essence" of the experience. She ends the evening by blowing kisses to her reflection in the mirror (16). When she moves to Paris, she fashions a bohemian outfit that includes an attractive Hungarian cloak; the narrator tells us with irony that it "suited her so extremely well that artistic considerations compelled her to wear it occasionally, I fear, when other people would have found it uncomfortably warm" (26-27). Her actions are less the result of egoism than of a passionate dedication to an ideal of life.

The positive side of such dedication is the courage Elfrida draws from it. In the early stages of her time in London, she sets herself to writing articles for literary journals and is disappointed to have them rejected. But her commitment to her writing — "I find here true things and clever things" (59), she states emphatically as she rereads her work — is strengthened by her equal, or perhaps even greater, commitment to the *idea* of writing: to her conception of herself as a struggling artist. The refusals from editors "formed part of the picturesqueness of the situation in which she saw herself, alone in London, making her fight for life as she found it worth living" (60). Her resilience and refusal of self-pity are bracing. Returning from a dispiriting visit to a newspaper office, where she has not been able to obtain an interview with the editor and has had a morale-quashing conversation with a junior assistant, she realizes that she has lost the purse containing her last few coins. Rather than burst into tears, she faces the situation with self-possession, even eagerness. "'Come,' she said to herself, 'now it begins to be really amusing, *la vraie comédie*.' She saw herself in the part — it was an artistic pleasure — alone in a city of melodrama, without a penny, only her brains. Besides, the sense of extremity pushed and concentrated her; she walked on with new energy and purpose" (75). Her regard for life as

performance enables her to overcome such difficulties. When wounded by the portrait that Kendal paints of her, which makes her aware of his contempt when she had begun to rely on his love, she contemplates suicide and revels in the image of herself dead on his studio stairs: "Even at that miserable instant she was aware of the strong, the artistic, the effective thing to do. 'And when he came down he might tread on me!' she said to herself, with a very real shudder. 'I wish I had the courage. But no; it might hurt, after all. I am a coward too'" (253). She is both indomitable and honest in this moment.

In the end, of course, she is *not* too cowardly to kill herself, and her friend Janet finds her dead with her papers scattered around her. Her suicide has been prepared by references to the vial of poison she carried in her ring; still, the death has seemed to many readers excessive and unwarranted, its snuffing out of her exuberance a cruel narrative blow. How are we to read this death, and how read it back into the laughing, often affectionate portrait that has preceded it? Dean suggests that the novel is about extremes — the conventional British Janet in contrast to the unconventional American Elfrida — and implicitly advocates a middle ground, a "Canadian" alternative not present but implied.[3] Read as an analysis of cultural types and of options for the New Woman, the novel suggests that "both Elfrida's freedom and Janet's conventionality are necessary and that the interaction of the two produces great art" (xvi). This is a plausible if not entirely satisfactory argument. Duncan did believe in reconciling unconventionality and restraint, and it is true that both Janet and Kendal are inspired by their contact with Elfrida. The puzzling fact remains, however, that Elfrida dies while Janet and Kendal marry — and live to regret her loss.[4] Was Duncan's decision to have Elfrida kill herself a plot motif in the tradition of *Madame Bovary* (1857) and *Anna Karenina* (1877)? Did Duncan believe the suicide to be necessary and right? Or did she take a kind of authorial pleasure — or self-affirming sadness — in killing off her vibrant heroine in order to prove a point?

In surveying Duncan's journalism about the New Woman, in which she was suspicious of feminist extremes, Dean concludes that "placed in the context of Duncan's journalistic comments on women and the women's movement, Elfrida's 'punishment' of suicide for her desperate life is wholly consistent" (xxii). But surely such is not quite the case. Duncan's journalism does, as Dean explains, demonstrate that the writer

mistrusted the hyperbole of the feminist movement. She did not like the term *emancipation*, for example, insisting that when women gained the privilege of the vote, they would be shouldering new "duties and responsibilities" rather than freeing themselves from tyranny ("Other People," 12 Aug. 1885). After attending a lecture by Dr. Augusta Stowe Gullen, Canada's first licensed female doctor, Duncan objected to her use of the word *shackles* in discussing women's social position: "It is my opinion that there are very few 'shackled' women in our fair Dominion who do not hug their chains," she wrote tartly ("Woman's World," 2 Oct. 1886). Believing that women should pursue intellectual and financial autonomy while giving up none of their domestic affections or responsibilities, she was hostile to the shrillness of feminist claims. But there is no evidence in the journalism of a moralism so rigid that untimely death must be the end of youthful extremism. The extent to which Duncan is sympathetic to Elfrida — especially the genuine enthusiasm of the narrative voice whenever her love of writing is described — makes it impossible to say with confidence that she was punishing Elfrida (or allowing Elfrida to punish herself) with an undignified, unnecessary death. It is far more likely, in fact, that Elfrida's suicide (and the mistaken cruelty of the rejection letter that precipitates it, which was not intended for her eyes), is meant to evoke sympathy and to promote a sober awareness of her vulnerability.

Is the novel, then, a feminist protest novel, as Kathryn Ready suggests, with Elfrida's suicide symbolizing the limited options available to a woman who tries to live as an artist on her own terms? Arguing along lines similar to Gerson's, Ready sees Elfrida as so entirely backed into a corner by the end of the novel that suicide is her only remaining free act. Reading the novel as a feminist version of the magic-picture story, that genre most famously practiced by Oscar Wilde in his *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), Ready argues that Duncan "displays a specific interest in analyzing the implications of Aestheticism and Decadence for the female artist," focusing on "both the difficulties facing the female artist at the *fin de siècle*, and the consequences of the heroine's efforts to fashion herself into an *objet d'art* according to Aesthetic and Decadent principles" (100). At Lucien's studio in Paris, Elfrida encounters a conception of art that, while claiming to transcend gender, is "inherently masculine rather than androgynous" (102). Even her writing, which achieves some success, is belittled by male observers for its (feminine)

excess. Finally, she allows herself to be turned into an art object by the brutally possessive Kendal, and is "appropriated and simplified in the interest of another's art" (104). Rejected by Kendal even as he "fixes" her in the painting, she takes the first step on the way to metaphorical self-annihilation. Ready concludes that "her suicide marks an attempt to achieve value in the only remaining terms available to her within her artistic creed" (108).

Ready's analysis of the roles of Aestheticism and Decadence in Elfrida's self-conception is acute, but her conclusions about Duncan's feminist agenda are difficult to square both with Duncan's journalistic statements about the Woman Question and with internal evidence from the novel. It is hard to ignore the vehemence with which Duncan as journalist rejected feminist arguments about male bias. She repeatedly counselled that special pleading could never justify second-rate performances in any sphere of endeavour: "When a woman enters the competition of money-making," she commented brusquely in the pages of the *Globe*, "she becomes, so far as that is concerned, simply the agent of her own goods, and has no right to expect to be regarded as wrapped in a sentimental halo of sex. . . . The only remedy is obviously in well doing, and better doing, and best doing" ("Other People," 1 July 1885). She particularly scorned the feminine style in writing, whether it produced a parliamentary report that gave impressions of personalities rather than records of speeches ("Woman's World," 12 July 1886) or resulted in social commentary that was "amiably discursive, vapidly just" and displayed "a wild desire to be mistily philosophical over the simplest manifestations of society" ("Woman's World," 6 Aug. 1886). Feminine productions did not deserve respect simply because they were feminine. As a writer who understood herself to be striving to take a place alongside such contemporaries as W.D. Howells and Henry James, Duncan was uncomfortable with those who positioned themselves as cultural outsiders or sketched grim portraits of patriarchal bias; it seems unlikely she would launch such a critique in her fiction.

More crucially, the novel itself does not fit Ready's reading. Duncan makes it clear that Elfrida's artistic talent is inadequate to her inflated ambitions. Speaking of the prize-winning charcoal she sketched at a Philadelphia art institute, the narrator tells us that "as a drawing it was incorrect enough" (18). Elfrida is creative and ambitious but not particularly skilled — and a real artist must be all three. In Paris, her

teacher Lucien's comments about Elfrida's painterly efforts may be cruel, but the narrator tells us nothing to indicate that he fails to recognize her real ability. In fact, the narrator mocks this idea by showing us how Elfrida herself is convinced that "if she might only talk to Lucien she could persuade him of a great deal about her talent that escaped him — she was sure it escaped him — in the mere examination of her work" (29). The narrator is uncompromising on this point regarding Elfrida's talent, insisting that were Kendal to have studied Elfrida closely when he first met her, he would have seen her to be "a more than slightly fantastic young woman, with an appreciation of certain artistic verities out of all proportion to her power to attain them" (45).

In the sphere of writing, Elfrida is more successful — still flamboyant, undisciplined, and inadequately self-critical, lacking power "of construction or cohesion" (174), but genuinely able, with a "curious prismatic kind of mind" (174) and a capacity to write with "delicacy and truth" (88). Her "delicious scraps" (165) of letters are said to be charming, willful, and delightfully cynical — all descriptions suitable to Duncan's own work. The criticism she receives from Janet's father is intended to help her improve; it is not proof of male condescension, and Cardiff even makes a wry comment about the need to please the "Philistines" (181) to soften his suggestions. Her society is not a patriarchal tyranny. Her own father is, if anything, too much in his daughter's power; and it is clear from Janet's success that a smart woman writer can expect recognition for her talent. Duncan was not denying that young women's lives in the late nineteenth century were limited — their opportunities for career, self-development, and concourse with the outside world sadly inferior to those of young men. She knew it well. But she makes that social reality the background of Elfrida's particular story, not its outraged or plaintive focus.

What, then, of that particular story with its violent ending? I want to propose that, in light of what is known about Duncan's life and writing, Elfrida's suicide is aesthetically and morally "consistent," to use Dean's word (above), with the story she chose to tell in *A Daughter of To-day*, and that the story is best understood in its autobiographical context. Autobiographical readings can be reductive, and I do not mean to suggest that everything about the novel can be explained through recourse to Duncan's life (an impossible endeavour, given how much we don't know about that life), or that Elfrida is merely a transcription of

her younger self.[5] I will, however, endeavour to show in the remainder of this paper that the peculiar ambiguity of the novel — its seemingly inconsistent point of view, in particular — is clarified in exciting ways if we consider Duncan to be writing a fiction of self: a story that is both fictional and self-referential, where referentiality is performative or inventive rather than strictly mimetic (Neuman 215).

Duncan had always drawn on personal experience in her journalism and prose narratives,[6] but in this, her first serious novel, she created a primary character who, in her potential for achievement and her damaging self-love, was a vehicle through which she could examine disavowed aspects of her own character and life circumstances. Reinventing herself as Elfrida, Duncan could look back at her life with the combination of wry affection, relief, and passionate refusal often found in such works of retrospection. Furthermore, she made Elfrida a disquieting symbol for the opportunities and challenges facing all modern women of her day. The *fin de siècle* was a time when a young woman's possibilities for both adventure and disaster seemed to be greater than at any time in the previous century. Women were making themselves anew, with the freedom to choose lives impossible for their mothers and grandmothers: they could live without parental control, forge careers, pursue artistic ambitions, and even enter sexual liaisons in contravention of social propriety. The dangers that attended such freedom — of going too far, of putting oneself in harm's way — were significant for a young woman of ability and willfulness.[7]

Duncan had, in fact, known such a young woman: Lily Lewis, who was only twenty-two years old when she traveled around the world with Duncan in 1888-89 and who became the Orthodocia of *A Social Departure: How Orthodocia and I Went Round the World By Ourselves* (1890), Duncan's sparkling story of travel in Western Canada, Japan, India, and Egypt. Peggy Martin has plausibly identified Lewis as a source for Elfrida (Martin 18). A precocious young bohemian and journalist, Lewis set out with Duncan to produce articles for The *Week*. Prior to the world tour, she had lived in Paris while writing for that paper. Though she was made to play the ingenue in Duncan's account of their trip together, Lewis's journalism suggests she was a young woman of the world, captivated by the contemporary art scene and conversant with its debates; she wrote with authority and verve about a range of modern ideas and was, like Elfrida, an adept scene-painter and observer

of the urban milieu — as Martin suggests, a kind of feminist *flâneur* (12). She returned to Paris after the world tour, where she continued to write of art and artists. All details of her later life are not known, but Martin has uncovered evidence of depression, estrangement from family, and mental instability, including a lengthy stay at the Broadmoor Asylum for the Criminally Insane (Martin 102). Precocious and passionate, Lewis may well have seemed, like Elfrida, to embody both the potential and the risks of female independence — and it is not unlikely that Duncan created a character who contained aspects of both her own younger self and her fellow traveller.

In her newspaper writing, Duncan frequently questioned whether or not the modern woman was better off than the generations who had preceded her. The answer, she believed, was decidedly mixed. When feminist journalists decried women's traditional "slavery" to men, Duncan was skeptical; many such "unemancipated" women, she asserted, were the "happiest being[s]" she knew, with a sense of fulfillment and purpose that few others possessed ("Woman's World," 15 Oct. 1886). The modern woman's grandmother had a repose and a certainty — in "knowing and doing her duty as wife, mother, and hostess" — that was lacking in the ambitious career woman, and although few would give up modern advantages for bygone serenity, its loss was no trifling matter ("Woman's World," 12 Nov. 1886). Moreover, Duncan believed that women would need to move slowly into the positions of power and responsibility that the women's movement claimed for them; it would take patient work to qualify for duties about which they knew almost nothing. "The day may come when women shall help to make the laws, but they will have to know a good deal more about law-making than at present," she warned ("Other People," 1 July 1885). Moreover, women would harm themselves if they gave up their feminine role in exchange for the right to vote; she counselled women to "wear not one glove-button or yard of embroidery the less, tolerate not the least diminution of courtesy or disregard of conventionality because of these latter-day privileges of ours" ("Other People," 17 June 1885). She did not want to return to an earlier era, but she believed that caution and prudence were necessary if women were not to lose a great deal in claiming their new rights.

As an exceptionally bright and headstrong young woman, Elfrida has a carelessness about such losses — a willingness to jettison tradition and custom — that qualifies her as a case study in feminine modernity.

Lacking prudence or humility, she has a magnified sense of her importance and a longing for personal glory that are characteristic both of her time and her place as a New Woman formed by the New World. Her youth in a provincial town in Illinois has made her feel how special she is, and she is grateful to Sparta for, if nothing else, "showing her that she was unusual, by contrast" (14). Her self-estimation is monstrously overblown: "'I could bear not to be charming,' said she sometimes, to her Philadelphia looking-glass, 'but I could not bear not to be clever.' She said 'clever,' but she meant more than that" (14). Her single year at Philadelphia's "very young art school" (18), where she is given a medal she does not deserve for a mediocre drawing — and presumably also a good deal of unearned praise — has impressed her with an inflated sense of her ability. Rather than teaching her the difference between great art and her own productions, her training "had vitalized her brooding dreams of producing what she worshipped" (16). She is convinced that her life will and must be extraordinary. Duncan herself seems to have grown up with such a self-conception. Too smart for her small-town community of Brantford, impatient with the conventionality of the majority of her acquaintances, she chafed at her restrictive environment, did what no other young woman in her country had yet done in becoming a full-time columnist for the *Globe*, and quickly grew bored with that achievement. That she had ambitions for glory seems undeniable. As she was writing *A Daughter of To-day*, she had not yet achieved it and may have begun to recognize difficulties ahead — but its attractions and dangers must have been on her mind, and in Elfrida she embodied her own, and her generation's, complex experience.

As *A Daughter of To-day* diagnoses it, Elfrida's problem is that her quick perceptions and determination to succeed are not balanced by the thorough education, self-discipline, and proper judgement necessary to shape and channel them. Thus her potential not only remains unrealized but becomes seriously deformed. We learn that from the time she was young, "art spoke to her from all sides, finding her responsive and more responsive" (14); but she has lacked guidance, criticism, and much-needed perspective on her own talents, and she has been inappropriately encouraged by her vain mother and a spineless teacher, Miss Kempsey. She has an "instinctive apprehension" (24) of the bohemian art scene on the Parisian Left Bank, but her pleasure in beauty is without a mooring. The narrator warns us that she "saw truth afar off and worshipped, and

as often met falsehood in the way and turned raptly to follow" (15). Bright as she is, she is often deceived, and is so much convinced of her own right opinions and talents that she cannot learn from others.

Too often mistaking falsehood for truth, she embraces theories quickly and uncritically, appropriating "the casual formulas of the schools" (29) without weighing them against time-honoured principles. Her very perceptiveness becomes a liability in the absence of the traditional structures of meaning with which she should evaluate her new ideas. When Kendal reads the article that she has written about his paintings, he is so delighted to be praised and understood that he overlooks the intellectual weaknesses of the piece, which often "dismissed with contempt where it should have considered with respect" and was "sometimes inconsistent, sometimes exaggerated and obscure" (88). She is too apt to embrace the new for its own sake, telling Kendal about the "composite creed" she has developed for herself, which makes "wide, ineffectual, and presumptuous grasps to include all beauty and all faith" (127). Having made Aestheticism her religion, embracing its "unwritten laws, its unsanctified morale, its riotous overflowing ideals" (25), she is a devotee ready to sacrifice all reason and security for her fervent faith.

Because she believes that the "repudiation of the bourgeois" (29) excuses impropriety and even immorality, Elfrida thinks herself justified in discussing intimate matters such as the horrors of marriage "in a Strand omnibus" (154), oblivious to, or perhaps satisfied with, the more conventional Janet's discomfort. She is pleased with herself for accepting with equanimity her friend Nadie's adulterous liaison, proud that the revelation does not cause her to blush (28). More seriously, she cannot take advice even from those she admires. When Janet's father rewrites her rejected article on "The Nemesis of Romanticism" (note the sweeping, melodramatic title), she cannot bear to read his criticisms, preferring to throw the article in the fire (181) in a gesture at once petulant and self-protective. Though professing to admire Janet's literary criticism, she will not listen to her friend's sober and moderate judgements about contemporary literary methods (114-15). When she finds Kendal's humiliating sketch of her kissing the hand of George Jasper, the revered writer, she thanks him "for showing [her] what a fool [she] made of [herself]" (173), but the experience has no lasting salutary effects. Moreover, her contempt for traditional male-female relations — her rejection of marriage as sordid and her theoretical embrace of

free love — are crude theories based on a desire to shock and impress; they show to Janet an Elfrida "blind, . . . willing to revile, . . . anxious to reject" (154). There is a feminist point here, but it is not the one that modern feminist readers are looking to find: Elfrida is disadvantaged not because a patriarchal world suppresses her vision but because she lacks training and has been too much spoiled to appreciate opportunities for education when they arise.

Perhaps most seriously of all, her sense of herself as a woman superior to the claims of love and sex is a dangerous misunderstanding of herself derived from *fin de siècle* propaganda. As a journalist, Duncan was always alert to the ways that women's justified anger at injustice could degenerate into anti-male prejudice and an impossible attempt to deny female nature. Such is certainly the case with Elfrida, who claims to find marriage and childbearing "degrading — horrible!" (157) and aims to take revenge on men by playing heartlessly the game of love — by turns encouraging and checking their ardour. As she tells Janet "gaily," she "consider[s] it a compensation vested in the few for the wrongs of the many" (160). She takes a special pleasure in her own coolness in the face of male longing, discouraging her lovers' eagerness while claiming to feel "still and calm, and superior to it all!" (159-60). Such skilfulness is not an advance for women, Duncan suggests, but a disquieting perversion: Elfrida exults in her power over men because she has killed natural affection and compassion.

Her cruelty towards Janet's father is particularly damning. When he comes to "remonstrate" with her over her participation in the Peach Blossom Company's stage show — and to confess his love — she is exultant in her conquest and imagines writing the scene into her novel, laughing "at the thought of how deliciously the interference of an elderly lover would lend itself to the piece of work" (195-96). Her main concern in their initial meeting is to behave in such a way as to give herself "pleasure in looking back upon it" (196). She even critiques her own performance during the interview, finding some of her expressions less than entirely effective (200). Later, after a painful meeting at which she decisively rejects his marriage proposal, she feels more satisfaction in her own role: "A little smile curved about the corners of her mouth, half compassionate, half amused and triumphant" (231). In relation to Kendal, she believes herself kinder, prepared to let him down gently in order to honour their "artistic relationship" (167) — the only thing she

values — but she still looks forward with pleasure to the inevitable day on which he will be forced to make his declaration.

Thus when her double humiliation occurs — her rejection by Kendal and by the reader of her prose manuscript — she has no resources of character or belief to fall back on and no one whom she respects enough to call to her aid. Having striven to free herself from a woman's ordinary ties, she is fatally alone to confront the "collapse that had taken place within her" (252). As Duncan makes clear, she has given herself to an all-consuming ideal — a "religion," as Elfrida calls it, that means "everything in the world" (199) — that leaves her nothing else. The final image of the novel, the grinning Buddha sitting amidst Elfrida's Magdalene sketches in her mother's drawing-room, drives home the fatal incoherence of her aesthetic vision as well as the spiritual insubstantiality of her most prized icon. The tragic irony of the ending has thus been effectively prepared.

The mingled affection and horror with which Duncan regarded her fictional creation underlines the autobiographical dimensions of the story. When she published *A Daughter of To-day*, Duncan was thirty-two years old. A decade earlier, when only a little older than Elfrida, she had renounced a previous determination to paint[8] in order to work as a journalist, making the best of some dull assignments and writing witty, imaginative pieces. Like Elfrida, she "did a little bit of excellent work . . . every day" and "wrote about colonial exhibitions and popular spectacles and country outings for babies of the slums, and longed for a fairer field" (163). She also busied herself with "book reviews" and "comments on odds and ends in the papers of interest to ladies" (189). Even the descriptions of Elfrida's style and subject — the "bit of pathos picked out of the common streets, a fragment of character-drawing which smiled visibly and talked audibly" (163) — sound like Duncan's work. When Arthur Rattray advises Elfrida that "there's no end of a market for anything new in travels" (187), he might have been speaking of Duncan's tremendous success with her book of travel pieces, *A Social Departure*. She often preferred the brilliantly unconventional to the soberly truthful, and she was always conscious of stylistic effect. In this novel, one senses that in killing off a likeable but irritating young anti-heroine, she was saying goodbye — half in relief, half in sorrow — to part of her former self.

Writing is always personal, of course, but such overtly (auto) biographical creation is particularly fraught, possessed of associations, implications, and necessities beyond the reader's knowledge and often beyond the author's conscious control or understanding. In mandating Elfrida's death, Duncan may well have been killing off an earlier version of herself whose views and behaviour she had since renounced, which may account for both the ruthlessness and the pathos of her heroine's demise. Elfrida may represent a path not taken in Duncan's life, a cancelled self whose dangerous career she needed to trace in fiction. Or perhaps the portrait is a more general, symbolic one: a sympathetic analysis of the self-absorption and emotional instability that unaccustomed freedom could produce in a young woman. However one chooses to read the main character, the autobiographical parallels suggest that Elfrida's death is less a censorious disciplining of the New Woman or protest against patriarchy than an intensely personal and overdetermined exploration of a complex social reality. *Pace* Tausky, I hope I have shown that it is also aesthetically coherent: complex rather than "confused" (*Novelist* 111), with ambiguities appropriate to its subject.

Notes

[1] Duncan's choice to write about a New Woman placed her in company with many of the major novelists of her day, including George Gissing (*The Odd Women*, 1893), Henry James (*The Bostonians*, 1886), and George Meredith (*Diana of the Crossways*, 1885). For an overview of the efflorescence of novels about this key cultural figure at the end of the nineteenth century, see Ann Ardis's comprehensive *New Women, New Novels* (1990).

[2] Marian Fowler, without citing Tausky, makes the same point, remarking that the novel suffers from a lack of point of view: "There is no ethical norm in the novel; the authorial voice wavers between admiration of Elfrida, and condemnation" (218). And in a very brief discussion of the novel, which finds that its "main theme" is the "unreadability of . . . Americanness within England," Kate Flint also concludes that "the reader is herself left uncertain how quite to judge the figure of this daughter of today" (225).

[3] In a brief discussion of the novel in *A Purer Taste* (1989), Carole Gerson makes a similar point, commenting that "Elfrida suffers a tragedy shaped largely by her impulsiveness, which Duncan presents as a typically American trait" (149). She expands on this argument in "Wild Colonial Girls" (1995) by explaining that "for Duncan, an American in London was more out of place and therefore more capable of Bohemian irregularity than was a Canadian girl" (64). I would suggest that while Elfrida's Americanness is significant, her New World modernity is even more important to the story.

[4] Tausky argues that Janet and John Kendal also meet a "tragic end" and are "punished for their moral failings" (*Novelist* 119). He is right, but their feelings of regret are hardly equivalent to death by suicide.

[5] Fowler, who somewhat over-privileges the autobiographical element in all her commentary on Duncan's work, makes an argument similar to mine without the detailed analysis (her remarks on *A Daughter of To-day* take up only two pages). Although Fowler's position is much like my own ("Was Redney, through Elfrida's suicide, perhaps acknowledging the death of her impulsive, intrepid younger self?" she asks (217)) and predates my article by many years, I hope that my more nuanced assessment of the relationship between author and fictional character distinguishes my reading. In "Wild Colonial Girls," Gerson is also interested in the autobiographical parallels, noting Duncan's "self-projection into the interstitial spaces of the story" (69). Commenting on Duncan's height, for example, she suggests that even Elfrida's "physical size" can be read as a "direct projection of the [author's] own sense of both distinctiveness and marginality" (71). Both Gerson and Misao Dean note the potential significance of the name "Janet," explaining that Sara Jeannette Duncan was in fact christened Sarah Janet; another essay might be written to consider how Janet Cardiff may be an autobiographical projection too, especially because of her close relationship with her father.

[6] See especially "How an American Girl Became a Journalist," an unidentified article discovered by Tausky and included in *Sara Jeannette Duncan: Selected Journalism* (1978). In the article, Duncan narrated her early career through a character named Margery Blunt (6-13).

[7] For a compelling discussion of the narratives of moral and sexual peril that proliferated during this period, see Mariana Valverde 77-103.

[8] In an autobiographical sketch for the *Globe*, Duncan describes herself as a girl just out of high school picnicking with two ambitious friends and discussing career dreams. She makes it clear that she is the girl, now a journalist, who then "looked affectionately upon a large and ambitious daub in oils that was secured in the fork of a sapling near by, as in some way typical of a dazzling future career in art" ("Woman's World," 23 Aug. 1886).

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