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## Concerning the Perceptive Gaze: The Impact of Vision Theories on Late Nineteenth-Century Victorian Literature

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CONCERNING THE PERCEPTIVE GAZE: THE IMPACT OF VISION THEORIES  
ON LATE NINETEENTH-CENTURY VICTORIAN LITERATURE

by

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for the degree of Master of Arts  
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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines two specific interventions in vision theory—namely, Herbert Spencer’s theory of organic memory, which he developed by way of Lamarckian genetics and Darwinian evolution in *A System of Synthetic Philosophy* (1864), and the Aesthetic Movement (1870s–1890s), famously articulated by Walter Pater in *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873 and 1893). I explore the impact of these theories on late nineteenth-century fiction, focusing on two novels: Thomas Hardy’s *Two on a Tower* (1882) and Edith Johnstone’s *A Sunless Heart* (1894). These two authors’ texts engage with scientific and aesthetic visual theories to demonstrate their anxieties concerning the perceptive gaze and to reveal the difficulties and limitations of visual perception and misperception for both the observer and the observed within the context of social class.

It is widely accepted by scholars of the so-called visual turn in the Victorian era—following landmark works by Kate Flint and Nancy Armstrong—that myriad anxieties were associated with new ways of seeing during this time. Building on this work, my thesis focuses specifically on how these two approaches to visual perception—organic memory and Aestheticism—were intertwined with anxieties about social status and mobility. The novels analyzed in this thesis demonstrate how subjective visual perception affects one’s place within the social hierarchy, as we see reflected in the fluctuating social statuses of Hardy’s star-crossed lovers, Swithin St Cleeve and Lady Constantine, and Johnstone’s two female protagonists, Gasparine O’Neill and Lotus Grace.

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## INTRODUCTION

In these experiments with convex glasses, important as they were to eye and intellect, there was little food for the sympathetic instincts which create the changes in a life, and are therefore more particularly the question here. That which is the foreground and measuring base of one perspective draught may be the vanishing point of another perspective draught, while yet they are both draughts of the same thing. (Thomas Hardy, *Two on a Tower*)

The narrator of Thomas Hardy's *Two on a Tower* offers this explanation of Lady Constantine's and Swithin St Cleeve's inability to see each other clearly, illustrating the problem of visual perception and emotional response depicted in late nineteenth-century Victorian literature. Lady Constantine often laments that she cannot see the person she wishes to see. Her inability to see the people around her, especially her lover, Swithin St Cleeve, affects her perception of her own feelings as she becomes unable to process emotional stimuli. I will use the term "visual-emotion response" when referring to perceptions and feelings associated with vision. The term visual-emotional response suggests the idea that the perception of external stimuli produces a response that is both visual (based on what is observed) and emotional (based on what the observer feels). This thesis examines two specific interventions in vision theory—namely, Herbert Spencer's theory of organic memory, which he developed and articulated by way of Lamarckian genetics and Darwinian evolution in *A System of Synthetic Philosophy* (1864), and the theories associated with the Aesthetic Movement (1870s–1890s) as evidenced by Walter Pater's *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (specifically the "Conclusion" in which Pater articulates his own theory of visual aesthetics). I explore the impact of these theories on late nineteenth-century fiction, focusing on two novels: Thomas Hardy's *Two*

*on a Tower* (1882) and Edith Johnstone's *A Sunless Heart* (1894). These two authors' texts engage with the scientific and aesthetic theories discussed to demonstrate the anxieties concerning the perceptive gaze, thereby exploring the difficulties of visual perception and misperception for both observer and observed.

The theme of subjective visual perception in relation to physical life was extensively circulated from the 1870s–1890s by writers and theorists associated with the Aesthetic Movement such as Victorian writer and art critic, Walter Pater. In 1873, Pater theorized the complexities of perception arguing that when an individual perceives something, the meaning is lost to anyone other than that individual: “Experience, already reduced to a group of impressions, is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without” (187). Pater's concern is that beauty will be corrupted by peoples' inability to cast aside their own biases and prejudices when observing aesthetic art. The only way to combat this issue, according to Pater, is through education and awareness of one's own impressions which allows the aesthetic critic to “know one's own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly” (xix). Artists of the Aesthetic Movement employed new techniques in their works including the focus on accurate depiction of light. This new style, in turn, effectively concentrated on producing new visual perceptions for the eye of the observer rather than focusing on the precise details of the subject at hand. However, the privileging of visual perception over accurate depiction led Victorian writers and social thinkers to question the inevitable complications of relying on perception over fact.

Proceeding from the foundational works of critics including Kate Flint and Nancy Armstrong, who helped inaugurate the so-called visual turn in Victorian studies, critics have become increasingly mindful of the Victorians' preoccupation with sight and vision. Kate Flint asserts, "The Victorians were fascinated with the act of seeing, with the question of reliability—or otherwise—of the human eye, and with the problem of interpreting what they saw" (1). Nancy Armstrong also comments on the nature of gazing at an object: "In looking at a picture, the observer was looking at an object as it was seen by another observer, albeit someone with special access to the subject matter and the ability to represent it" (75). For example, the picture Armstrong refers to here operates as a visual stimulus—a physical object (or subject) that functions as a source of information for the observer. When observers look at a visual stimulus, they produce a visual-emotional response—the immediate response to physical and affective information based on one's sight and emotional feelings. The visual-emotional response kick-starts the individual's visual perception, or their cognitive processing and long term understanding of a visual stimulus. As Armstrong implies, an observer looks at an object that was created/seen by another observer with their own set of biases. It is this subjective bias of vision that renders sight problematic for Victorian writers and theorists.

The idea of visual perception begs the question of accuracy. If one cannot or does not see clearly, then how does this affect the accuracy of one's visual perception? Flint's seminal work on visual imagery provides insight into the numerous Victorian writers and theorists who speculated on ideas of visibility. Flint argues that Victorians were fascinated with the act of seeing and with questions regarding the reliability of what the



human eye sees: “These problems extended from the observation of the natural world and the urban environment, to the more specialist interpretation demanded by actual works of art. In each case, the act of seeing was something performed by individuals, each with their particular subjectivities, and their own ocular physiology” (1–2). Flint’s discussion of an individual’s visual perception emphasizes a crucial point of contention for mid-to-late nineteenth-century scientific and aesthetic theorists for understanding the role of vision during this time: visual perception accounts for one’s understanding of visual stimuli; however, it does not account for an individual’s emotional response.

In her chapter, “The World as Image,” Armstrong argues that visual accuracy was a stable concept until 1839, when photographic methods developed by the likes of Henry Fox Talbot and Louis Daguerre enhanced what the human eye could see (75). John Plunkett likewise explores the difficulty for Victorians at the mid-century with defining the term “visuality” because the idea combines technology, theology, and subjective perception (2). He attempts to provide a definition for “visuality” saying, “There is no single definition of ‘visuality’; it stands for an open-ended yet interlinked series of concerns, closely tied to cognate issues such as the function of modern spectacle; subjectivity, power, and the gaze; the phantasmagoria of urban life; science, rationality, and observation” (1). Both Armstrong and Plunkett explore the connection among vision, science, and literature; however, they are less concerned with the psychological and emotional aspects inherent in the process of the visual response.

Scholars including Arlene Young, Alan Rausch, and Alexandra Lewis discuss emotion within the context of nineteenth-century science and literature arguing that (like

visuality) the concept of emotion itself was problematic because of the many states of mind associated with a single term. Young comments, “Early nineteenth-century analyses of emotional life employed terminology, also inherited from the philosophers of the previous century, that defined the varieties of experience and gradations of intensity—passions, emotions, feelings, sentiments, affections” (2). As studies of psychology progressed over the course of the century, however, these various states of mind and subjective experiences were subsumed by one word—emotion (2). New theories of the mind articulated by influential people such as Spencer, a polymath in subjects including biology, sociology, psychology, and philosophy—helped to establish a link between physiological response and emotion (6). Mid-to-late nineteenth-century literature was influenced by the same ideas: “Victorian fiction was reciprocally engaged in the discourse of psychological and emotional states” with the relationships between human emotions and moral judgement evident in, for example, Charles Dickens’s novels (Young 6). Yet, as Alan Rausch writes, these new scientific theories that regarded emotion as something that could be observed externally were met with resistance by writers such as Hardy who rejected “the notion that qualities of ‘merit’ can either be discerned or acted upon” ( Rausch 11).

I argue that the emotional response not only changed the way Victorian’s understood the individual’s visual perception, but that it reshaped the understanding of the individual’s place in the social hierarchy. Visual perception promotes new insight into, while simultaneously influencing, fears concerning the stability of that hierarchy during the fin de siècle. The idea of visual-emotional response—the notion that it is

possible to actively interpret the surrounding environment by processing information through sensory input, which then creates an emotional response, thereby coloring an individual's response to a given stimulus—serves as the foundation for my analysis of Hardy's and Johnstone's texts. I argue that the shift in the Victorians' understanding of visual perception from faith in accurate recognition of the viewed object to recognition of the subjective impressions of the viewer by late nineteenth-century writers is the cause of anxiety expressed by these writers. I intend to further develop the connection between aesthetic and visual perception. Although it is widely accepted by scholars of visual imagery during the Victorian era (including Kate Flint, Anne DeWitt, and Katherine Lochnan) that anxieties were associated with new ways of seeing, my thesis focuses on how two approaches to visual perception—organic memory and Aestheticism—develop throughout late nineteenth-century literature as a commentary on how these anxieties were specifically implicated in concerns about where subjects “fit” within the social hierarchy.

Visual culture presented a contentious topic of discussion long before Spencer and Pater offered contributions to the concept of visual perception. The Pre-Raphaelites were known for experimenting with emotional responses to visual stimuli through precise observations of objects, landscapes, and even aspects of emotional life, while the emergence of mid nineteenth-century literary genres such as sensation fiction also highlighted the Victorians' preoccupation with visual culture. As Elizabeth Helsinger observes, the Pre-Raphaelites were concerned with using old ways of seeing to understand new ways of seeing, a sort of “medievally inspired modernism” (2). The most

important aspect to consider here is that the Pre-Raphaelites were involved with perception in terms of creating new subjective meaning in their art. They employed techniques found in pre-Renaissance and medieval art to give new definition to the emotional content expressed in their own artistic endeavors and adapted different styles and techniques across a variety of formats including painting and poetry.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti was well-known for his work on both page and canvas, often combining the two modes around the same subject (i.e., his famous “double works,” such as “The Blessed Damozel,” in which sonnets accompany paintings). By the late 1860s, Rossetti was working with other artists to write sonnets for their paintings as a way of providing a connection between art and poetry. One example is Rossetti’s correspondence with Edward Burne-Jones in 1870 as they worked toward creating a sonnet to go with Burne-Jones’s 1869 painting, “The Wine of Circe.” A letter in the *Rossetti Archive* from Rossetti to Burne-Jones documents Rossetti’s request for Burne-Jones’s opinion on the last verse of his poem, which is meant to complement the painting. Rossetti expresses his desire to capture the essence of the painting’s colors as well as the moral of the poem writing: “I have tried in the first four lines to give something of the picture’s colour, and in the last two of its moral. Which is the best form of these last?” (Rossetti “Letter to Edward Burne-Jones” 1870, 1). Rossetti devalues the notion that a work should stand on its own. In *Art for Art’s Sake*, Elizabeth Prettejohn comments on Rossetti’s artistic practices writing: “They create a wider arena in which works of art may respond endlessly to one another, constantly generating new possibilities for artistic expression” (204). Rossetti’s portrayal of thoughts and feelings as existing in a symbiotic

relationship to artistic (visual and poetic) stimuli is noteworthy because it aligns with the developments in scientific theories of philosophy during the 1860s.

Narratives depicting the individual gaze increased during the 1850s and 1860s resulting from the rise of sensation fiction wherein story plots often focus on what people see and how vision functions as a method of interpretation. People were interested in the act of looking and the processes of understanding that which is seen through the eyes. In her discussion of sensation fiction's preoccupation with visuality, Lisa Surridge notes, "Observing, spying, and peering into the recesses of the bourgeois home: all of these actions suggest the pervasiveness of the gaze in the sensation genre" (6). Sensation fiction appealed to readers because it conveyed modern settings and plot lines while also indulging in the illusion that one's own family or neighbor had secrets (6–7). For example, in sensation novels such as Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*, the accuracy of the characters' visual perceptions and the emotional responses to what they perceive is constantly called into question. The plot hinges on the fact that the characters' social biases cloud their ability to accurately interpret the visual cues they receive. When Sergeant Cuff arrives, Collins begins to blur the lines between objective data (what exists as fact) and subjective experience for the reader (what exists when combined with an individual's own impressions). As one of the other characters, Gabriel Betteredge, observes Cuff, he notes, "His eyes, of a steely light grey, had a very disconcerting trick, when they encountered your eyes, of looking as if they expected something more from you than you were aware of yourself... he might have been a parson, or an undertaker – or anything else you like, except what he really was" (155). Collins populates his novel

with characters and events that are not what they seem based on direct evidence, causing the characters to frequently misinterpret each other. Collins's work proves a curious piece within the context of visual perception; although it predates representations of the visual-emotional experience as exemplified by Hardy and Johnstone, Collins does portray the problems associated with misperception relating to subjectivity. Despite the accrual of material evidence regarding the moonstone's disappearance, the plot develops because of the characters' misinterpretation of the facts presented to them.

Sensation novelists employed visuality as a way to prompt a physical-emotional response, a response that could be perceived by an observer. Sensation fiction parallels the issues that Victorian scientists were trying to work through in their own theories—the difference between “sensation” and “perception.” Surridge offers an explanation on the difference between these two ideas:

Sensation fiction referred to the emergent science of the central nervous system, where it denoted impressions carried along the nerves to the brain, like electricity along a wire. For Victorian scientists, sensation differed from perception, the ability to discriminate between and respond consciously to those impressions. (2)

The difference between sensation and perception that Surridge directs us towards is also indicated by Spencer's discussion of the differences between internal and external processes and how those processes work. According to Spencer, “There is invariably, and necessarily, a conformity between the vital functions of any organism, and the conditions

in which it is placed—between the processes going on inside of it, and the processes going on outside of it” (73).

Shifting definitions and terminology were a feature of nineteenth-century scientific discourse, such that the meaning of a particular term—i.e., “material circumstance,” or “external stimulus”—varied widely. I offer here a brief gloss on some of Spencer’s terms as they relate to my own key terms in this thesis. Spencer uses the term “circumstances” to define any observable external changes in one’s environment. He refers to the change itself as the “external stimulus,” while I will use the term “sensory perception” to explain the act of looking “for a response when an external stimulus is applied to a living organism, and then perceiving a fitness in the response” (*Biology*, 72). The question of the disparity between sensation and perception occupies scientific and aesthetic theories including Spencer’s organic memory and Pater’s Aestheticism throughout the late nineteenth century.

The theory of organic memory—the theory that an organism’s material and social circumstances create permanent changes in the organism and are inherited by that organism’s offspring—originated during the 1840s. Although the ideas of organic memory predates the 1840s as evidenced by the works of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck and Erasmus Darwin (and later, Charles Darwin), the definition of organic memory remained the same. In her book on organic memory, Laura Otis provides a working definition of the theory by taking into consideration the scientific contributions of a multitude of scientists including the ones discussed here: “The nineteenth-century organic memory theory ... proposed that memory and heredity were essentially the same and that one

inherited memories from ancestors along with their physical features” (2). Spencer articulates his theory of organic memory in the first volume of *The Principles of Biology* (1864). From 1864 through the end of the nineteenth century, organic memory became a polymorphous term as a result of Spencer’s assimilation of the theory into his book, *A System of Synthetic Philosophy*, along with the simultaneous rise of the Aesthetic Movement from the 1870s–1890s. Spencer’s theory of organic memory consisted of two parts: first, a sensory reception component and, second, a genetic component (Spencer, *Biology* 4). Lamarck and Darwin theorize that an individual attains their characteristics through genetic inheritance.<sup>1</sup> Spencer assimilates Lamarck’s and Darwin’s ideas to hypothesize that sensory perception affects an individual’s understanding of their environment, but only in the sense that environment is an external stimulus: “In its simple form, the adjustment of certain inner relations to certain outer relations is one indivisible action; but in its complex form, such adjustments consist of several stages admitting of greater or less dissociation from one another—capable of becoming fragments of correspondences” (*Psychology* 303). As Otis points out, Spencer’s contribution to organic memory relies heavily on the idea that accumulated experiences lead to evolutionary adaptations within a species (11). Although Spencer expresses interest in sensory input and an individual’s response to a visual stimulus, he does not account for how subjective experience affects emotional response.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I will use the gender neutral pronoun “they/their” when referring to the “individual” throughout this thesis.

<sup>2</sup> In the later volumes of *The Principles of Psychology*, Spencer argues that emotional responses elicited by external stimuli are inherent in every organism—that is, organisms are built to react in specific ways to specific stimuli.



The idea that sensory input shapes an individual's response to a stimulus also complicates the aesthetic subjective experience by influencing how individuals feel and what they think based on what they see (the object of observation serving as the external stimulus). The notion of subjective experience was foundational to theories of Aestheticism and, later, Decadence, but its ambiguity as a concept contributed to difficulties in defining Aestheticism. Aestheticism was never really an organized movement but rather, "a set of creative and critical practices that authors integrated in differing manners and in varying degrees into their works" (Evangelista 1). Aesthetes including Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde believed in the notion of "art for art's sake,"—the idea that a piece of art could exist as its own thing and not something that held religious, moral, or social implications. Pater recognizes that it is possible for a work of art to embody these characteristics, but only on an individual level. In the "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance*, Pater comments on the individualistic nature of impressions:

And if we continue to dwell in thought on this world, not of objects in solidity with which language invests them, but of impressions, unstable, flickering, inconsistent, which burn and are extinguished with our consciousness of them, it contracts still further: the whole scope of observation is dwarfed into the narrow chamber of the individual mind.  
(187)

Early writings by Swinburne also indicate the belief that art does not hold the key to "individual or collective redemption" (Evangelista 2). This idea is not without its own complications as many critics of the Aesthetic Movement took issue with Pater's shift

from objective to subjective criticism. In her book, Prettejohn comments on Pater's paradoxical shift: "A purely subjective criterion for judgment means that objective characteristics or the work under consideration, such as its fidelity or otherwise to natural fact, lose their determining force; now the judgement must be referred solely to the critic's impression, and not to the qualities of the object under consideration" (261). In *The Renaissance*, particularly the "Conclusion," Pater turns his attention toward visual culture and the idea that science (what he refers to as philosophical thought) can help one understand the subjective experience on a moment-to-moment basis.

Pater refers to earlier philosophies of thought to infer that it may be possible for art to influence an individual's visual-emotional response in order to help that person make sense of things from moment-to-moment. Commenting on scientific philosophies of thought, Pater writes, "Of such wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for its own sake, has most. For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake" (190). Pater holds onto his conviction that art exists for its own purpose, one that can be divorced from the visual perception but not from the visual-emotional response of the observer; art can exist without understanding, but it cannot exist without feeling.

Scholars such as Stefano Evangelista, Joan Maria Hansen, and Elizabeth Prettejohn identify the 1880s as the time in which Aestheticism permeated popular culture by working its way into well-known periodicals of the time (*Punch*, for example) which poked fun at the "perceived elitism of the aesthetes" (Evangelista 1, Hansen 23,

Prettejohn 2). By the 1890s, Aestheticism began to disperse into other theories including Decadence, Symbolism, and later the theory of degeneration with some scholars arguing that the mid-to-late 1890s marks the end of the Aesthetic Movement within the context of Pater's ideas. Evangelista and Bernard Lightman research Aestheticism in the context of culture and art for art's sake, the science of visual theology, and *Punch* and the Syncretics as Victorian prologue to the Aesthetic Movement. Evangelista and Lightman both emphasize the importance of visual imagery in correlation to the development of individual subjective impressions with Lightman hypothesizing that late Victorian visual culture centered on the notion that there was a reorganization of vision that included a new kind of observer—an observer who was no longer a passive receiver of sensation (655). Evangelista argues that these new kinds of observers also included women, which the aesthetes placed into new roles and dialogue in their writings. Evangelista comments on the more varied inclusion of female roles saying: “Nonetheless, aesthetic writers played a crucial role in reshaping late Victorian ideas of femininity and promoting the acceptance of non-normative modes of desire .... Aestheticism valued traditionally feminine fields, such as emotions and domesticity, over and above male pursuits such as work, science, militarism, business political commitment, and action” (7). In turn, aesthetic writers pushed the representation of women beyond the confines of middle-class society and placed them in roles that defined women as both emotional and social beings.

Writers such as George Meredith, Charles Algernon Swinburne, Mary Robinson, and Oscar Wilde were all proponents of Pater's ideas. Other aesthetic writers such as Vernon Lee argued that Pater's writing articulates conflicting theories on how moral

judgement and social values influence one's subjective experience (Cheeke 236). Lee, in particular, took issue with the "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance* where Pater's writing expresses the impact of subjective impression on moral values in contrast with his earlier thoughts on individualism in relation to an observer's perception of art.<sup>3</sup> The ongoing dialogue between the writers who supported Pater's ideas and those who opposed them often resulted in works that comment on what Stefano Evangelista calls "acts of interpretation": "The authors construct fictional situations around texts or artifacts and develop plots that mirror acts of interpretation: in other words, they use fiction to frame the discussion of actual literary or art-historical questions, creating a dialogue between the science of aesthetics and the readerly pleasure associated with fiction" (5).

The collision of science and art, for example, plays out in Max Nordau's diatribe against fin-de-siècle culture, in which he uses evolutionary theory to argue, "The disposition of the times is curiously confused, a compound of feverish restlessness and blunted discouragement, of fearful presage and hang-dog renunciation ... and mankind with all its institutions and creations is perishing in the midst of a dying world" (2). According to Nordau, the collision of scientific and artistic theories only clouds the minds of the scientists and artists who construct these theories based on morally corrupt subjective impression which leads to the degeneration of society (17). Although Nordau's theory could not exist without the scientific and aesthetic theories that he renounces, he is more worried about other people continuing to coin new theories related to subjective impression—whether they be scientific or aesthetic.

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<sup>3</sup> Vernon Lee most notably criticized Pater's ideas in her 1895 text *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*.

The next two chapters of my thesis explore mechanisms of visual perception in scientific and aesthetic theories found in two late nineteenth-century novels. More specifically, visual-emotional response is explored in chapter one, in which the objective and detached vision of the astronomer is pitted against the emotionally colored and subjective impressions of those who surround him in *Two on a Tower*. In chapter two, I examine the artist/protagonist Gasparine's struggles to reconcile her investment in aesthetic pleasure and art for art's sake with painful social realities and the need for social activism in *A Sunless Heart*.

In chapter one, I examine three key elements of organic memory found in Thomas Hardy's *Two on a Tower*: genetics, external appearance, and material circumstance. I argue that Hardy's novel uses theories of organic memory and exemplifies anxieties associated with accurate vision by telling the story of how a man of science is visually misperceived using the same tool he values in his own work to formulate perceived truths. Anne-Julia Zwierlein claims, "Organic memory, be it real or imagined, weighs heavily on all of Hardy's characters. His novels are frequently concerned with the idea of a cumulative influence of past 'layers' of experience on the individual" (353). In fact, Lady Constantine and Swithin struggle to overcome their "past 'layers' of experience" because of how the other characters perceive them. Swithin and Lady Constantine inhabit different social classes that both shaped by and are dependent on their organic memory. Nonetheless, in Hardy's novel, organic memory is determined by the visual perception of the observer (which often proves inaccurate). I contend that subjective visual perception

becomes a catalyst for inaccurate vision, leading to Swithin's realization that he cannot achieve social mobility and Lady Constantine's death after she rejects her social decline.

Chapter two concentrates on the accuracies and obscurities of vision in Edith Johnstone's *A Sunless Heart* by exploring elements of the aesthetic approach including the influence of aesthetic characteristics (light and perceptions of beauty in relation to subjects and objects) on the observed and observers' sense of sight and perception. This novel tells the story of Gasparine O'Neill and her relationships with both her twin brother and a lady named Lotus. While Hardy's novel deals with external appearance, I use *A Sunless Heart* to explore the idea of obscured vision—when something can be seen but not seen clearly, or in full detail. For example, the two female protagonists, Gasparine and Lotus, continuously form their opinions based on what they can and cannot see. Gasparine looks at Lotus as an obscured object as she forms an attraction to her because of her ambiguous nature; Lotus' perceived persona (an independent and successful woman) entrances Gasparine, thus forming the basis of their ensuing friendship. Johnstone creates a depiction of the New Woman in Victorian England in context with art for art's sake, one that centers on the fluctuation of social status along with the decay and development of personal relationships over a period of time as viewed from both the observer and observed individual's point of view. In her article of female friendships, Pauline Nestor traces changes in the idea of female friendship in mid-nineteenth-century England. As she points out, female friendship in literature during this time period were mostly left unexplored. Even characters in novels by the Brontës and George Eliot portrayed female relationships as either representative of positions of servitude like Jane

Eyre or relationships characterized by superior and competitive behavior (Nestor 45). However, Nestor argues that this time period also supplants a new representation of friendship: “[The encouragement of female friendships] altered the complexion of women’s friendship, giving rise in particular to the possibility of professional friendships” (36). I would argue that idea of “professional friendship” is one that characterizes the initial relationship between Gasparine and Lotus; however, the connotations of success associated with Lotus’ job as a college teacher give Gasparine a romanticized view of Lotus’ life: a life that Gasparine perceives to contain beauty despite the often grim, if obscure, portrayals of both Gasparine’s own situation and Lotus’s circumstances. Gasparine’s friendship with Lotus affects her social status, which fluctuates between being extremely poor and being well respected as an independent, successful member of society. I argue that Johnstone comments on gender, politics, and social circumstances as they relate to Pater’s version of Aestheticism in order to explore the ways in which Pater’s theories are problematic. Gasparine’s standards change based on the situations she observes of the people around her, primarily those of her sickly brother and Lotus. It is only when she realizes that the aesthetics of the people and places around her obscure her visual perception that she is able to rise above her own standards and become independent of her brother and Lotus.

In the conclusion, I turn to an examination of Vernon Lee’s thoughts on the individual subjective experience in response to Nordau’s theory of degeneration. Nordau utilizes both organic memory and Aestheticism in his work as he hypothesizes that art and literature will lead to the social degeneration of the Decadents. He expresses fears

about the degeneration of society through the assimilation of scientific theories into aesthetic theories throughout *Degeneration*. In response to Nordau's theory of degeneration and his attack on the Aesthetes, Lee rebuts Nordau's argument in her 1896 essay, "Deterioration of Soul," in which she advocates for importance of expressing sympathy and friendship which function as determining characteristics in a person's subjective impression. Each of the primary texts involves vision/sight by characters that portray the observers and the observed, reflecting the shift in visual perception from what can be proven as accurate sight to the question of whether or not sight can ever be fully accurate by the turn of the century. Whereas organic memory originates from scientific theories including evolution and genetics, Aestheticism comments upon the nature of beauty and the observer's response to it. *Two on a Tower* tells the story of how a man of science is visually misperceived using the same tool he values in his own work (accurate vision) through organic memory. Johnstone's story incorporates elements of Aestheticism in order to comment upon the dangers of obscured vision in relation to social status. Hardy and Johnstone incorporate aspects of visual-emotional response into their characters. Hardy's emotional component traces back to the scientific basis of organic memory, whereas Johnstone incorporates notions of individual subjective impressions drawn from Aestheticism to explain the emotional responses of her characters. Visual-emotional response depends on the subjective experiences of the observed and the observer within a situation and acknowledges the fallibility of visual perception. By the late 1880s and 1890s, writers such as Lee and Johnstone use science and Aestheticism to examine how visual perception plays a role in the understanding of social mobility.



## CHAPTER ONE: SENSORY PERCEPTION AND THE THEORY OF ORGANIC MEMORY IN THOMAS HARDY'S *TWO ON A TOWER*

St Cleeve being in the unhappy case of deriving his existence through two channels of society, it resulted that he seemed to belong to either this or that, according to the attitude of the beholder. (Thomas Hardy, *Two on a Tower*)

Many scholars including Kate Flint, Nancy Armstrong, and Anna Henchman acknowledge that developments in the field of optical scientific inquiry during the mid-nineteenth century play a vital role in how writers of the time express their mounting concern over the societal implications associated with the growing reliance on scientific and Positivist ways of thinking. Scientific theorists like Jean-Baptiste Lamarck and Charles Darwin, in 1809 and 1859 respectively, posited theories on adaptations and evolution within species and within societies during this time. Lamarck argued that the adaptations and evolutionary genesis of a species develops within the paradigm of natural laws. Later, Darwin contested Lamarck, instead arguing that natural selection was often influenced by environmental conditions—not just natural laws as Lamarck had proposed (Freeman 213). In the 1860s, Herbert Spencer combined Lamarck's and Darwin's theories on adaptation to formulate the foundations of what later became known as the theory of organic memory, which he first articulated in his book *The Principles of Biology* (1864). Like Darwin's theory of evolution and Lamarck's theories on heredity, Spencer's theories manifested in mid-to late-nineteenth-century literature. Thomas Hardy's 1882 novel, *Two on a Tower*, tells the story of the growing relationship between a young astronomer, Swithin St. Cleeve, and his lover, Lady Constantine. Hardy uses Spencer's theory of organic memory to examine the societal implications of judging

people based on subjective visual impressions. At the beginning of the novel, Swithin is a member of the lower gentry through his father, a preacher, though with humble peasant origins on his mother's side; he is orphaned and lives with his maternal grandmother as he spends his time studying the stars hoping to make a breakthrough scientific discovery in the developing field of astronomy. Lady Constantine belongs to the upper gentry through her marriage to Sir Blount Constantine—a retired soldier/war hero and the current land owner of Welland House.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout the novel, Swithin's methods of scientific observations of the sky are juxtaposed with the methods utilized by the characters to observe each other. Hardy constructs each character's observations of others based on what an individual can see externally while underscoring the idea that a person's subjective impression is based on both the seen and the unseen. As Swithin observes, "I often experience a kind of fear of the sky after sitting in the observing-chair a long time. .... And when I walk home afterwards I also fear it, for what I know is there, but cannot see, as one naturally fears the presence of a vast formless something that only reveals a very little of itself" (Hardy 57). When Swithin looks at the sky, he knows there is more there than what he can see, but he can only form his theories based on what he knows to be true, on what he can see with certainty. Hardy mirrors this concern with the seen and unseen by showing the characters' oftentimes inaccurate subjective impressions of one another as they rely on

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<sup>4</sup> Sir Blount inherited the rights to Welland House from his grandfather implying that Sir Blount is landed gentry. The origin of the title "Sir" is not explained in detail as it pertains to Lady Constantine's husband. Hardy does mention that Sir Blount was a soldier and fought in war suggesting that Sir Blount may have been knighted, which explains the titles of "Sir" and "Lady" here. If this is the case, it should be noted that knighthood only lasts for the duration of the individual's lifetime. Since Lady Constantine attains her title through marriage, she stands to lose her title upon Sir Blount's death.

one another's external appearance to formulate their initial impressions. Hardy then places the observer's perceptions of the observed person within the context of social hierarchy as he delves into how each character's perception within a situation affects the observed character's ability to move between social classes.

Garrett Peck, Christine Devine, and Ann DeWitt are among the scholars who explore the themes of social class present in Hardy's novel. Devine argues that "class issues were so pervasive in Victorian England that a realist novelist would be hard put to invent a convincing character that was not dealing with class issues in some form" (216). In turn, Peck argues that the treatment of social class in *Two on a Tower* is expressed through the protagonist's interest in scientific discovery. He claims that Hardy's representation of social class in conjunction with scientific discourse is a difficult subject to dissect because of Hardy's tendency to "undercut the surety with which many of his contemporaries latched on to scientific discourse as a satisfactory explanatory frame for human life" (31). As Peck asserts, social morality and the sometimes indirect hegemonic commentary in Hardy's novel coincides with the rise of scientific discourse at the turn of the century. The result for Hardy is a collision of the seen and the unseen—of fact and abstract ideas. Likewise, in her article on Hardy's conception of science, DeWitt, argues that Hardy realized that science exposes a universe that is removed from human experience and "in doing so, Hardy helps to create a late-Victorian picture of a universe remote from or inhospitable to humanity and thus unable to provide guidance in the social or moral realms of human experience" (484).

The scholarly discussion surrounding social class in Hardy's novels is extensive, but I will focus on the criticism surrounding the individual's perception of social class for the purposes of this chapter. The act of passing between social classes and the perception of an individual's social class are topics discussed by Edward Neill in his article on metaphors of the real and imagined in Hardy's novel and Athena Vrettos in her article on displaced memories. Neill comments on the ambiguity between social classes: "The novel itself deals with a series of aporatic 'betweenities,' wobbling between themes of a passion for the stars and the passions traditionally announced by them...and the book is composed of hesitation between states or conditions" (30–31). Neill focuses on Swithin's state of passing between social boundaries by discussing the young astronomer's family history: "Swithin is suspended between the state of peasant and patron as the offspring of an intelligent lapsed clergyman and a local maiden, with 'two stations of life in his blood'" (31). Additionally, Vrettos examines the implication of memories in relation to perception of individual identity in her article on displaced memories. Vrettos describes how the sensory details of a person's identity influence the perception of social class:

Theories of displaced memory included speculations about a range of topics: how recollections could become disconnected from individual personalities; how memories could wander both temporally and physically; how reminiscences could be transferred to other minds; and how residues of human emotions and experiences might adhere to the material world. (200)

While Vrettos convincingly argues that ways of seeing affect sensory and physical perception in *Two on a Tower*, a discussion of how a person's perception might be mistaken or confused based on the collision of memory with the act of seeing inaccurately, as is the case with the perceptions of Lady Constantine and Swithin, is worthy of further inquiry. In this chapter, I examine three key elements of organic memory present in Hardy's *Two on a Tower*: genetics, external appearance, and material circumstance. By applying the theory of organic memory, I argue that characters who pass between social classes (Swithin, Lady Constantine, and Mr. Torkingham) project their subjective impressions onto one another based on their own visual-emotional responses to their material and social circumstances.

The initial perception of an individual's external appearance by the observer plays a significant role in the theory of organic memory. Organic memory physically manifests within an individual through their genetic predispositions and social circumstances.<sup>5</sup> Spencer assimilates components of Darwin and Lamarck's theory into his own argument that sensory input affects the human condition: "There is invariably, and necessarily, a conformity between the vital functions of any organism, and the conditions in which it is placed—between the processes going on inside of it, and the processes going on outside of it" (73). Here, Spencer argues that there is a connection in the relationship between the internal and external conditions of an organism. These conditions are what he calls

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<sup>5</sup> The term "social circumstances" coincides with the notion of material circumstance that I discuss throughout this chapter in relation to *Two on a Tower*. Hardy uses material items such as how a person dresses, objects within their homes, and other physical possessions as indicators of social class, which aligns with the theory of organic memory—the idea that material circumstance can be determined by one's outward appearance/surroundings.

“circumstances” and “external stimuli.” Spencer uses the term “circumstances” to define any observable external changes in one’s environment. He refers to the change itself as the “external stimulus.” “Sensory perception” is the term I use to explain the act of looking “for a response when an external stimulus is applied to a living organism, and then perceiving a fitness in the response” (72; vol. 1). I will expand on the parameters of these definitions pertaining to the gaze of the observed and observers in Hardy’s novel. The “external stimulus” in the case of *Two on a Tower* is the perceived material circumstances of each character by the observer (defined here as the character doing the observing). The perception of the response by the observer, when combined with the emotional feeling of the observer, as exemplified by Hardy’s characters, is what I am calling the visual-emotional response.

As I discuss in the introduction, terminology regarding emotion and emotional response was still in flux during the nineteenth century with some writers remaining committed to the metaphysical states of being as opposed to the scientific models of emotions that “experimented with language that would more precisely articulate the material (i.e. physical) dimensions of that experience” (Young 2). Eighteenth-century terms such as “affect,” referring to states of mind, remained prevalent in the nineteenth century. By the mid-nineteenth century, theorists such as Alexander Bain and Herbert Spencer posited the idea that an individual’s emotions were actually connected to their physical feelings and sensations. Spencer began publishing *The Principles of Psychology* books in 1855, articulating in them the correlation between emotion and sensation: “Every emotion implies some portion of the nervous structure” (Spencer 607; vol. 1). The

“nervous structure” refers to the nervous system, which is the source of sensations (and arguably, emotions) felt throughout the body. In his 1870 volume of *The Principles of Psychology*, Spencer draws a correlation between emotion and organic memory writing: “The evolution of composite feelings is effected by the inheritance of continually-accumulating modifications. ... The accumulated and transmitted modifications of structure produced by experience, lie latent in each newly-born individual” (491, 493; vol 1). The idea that inheritance motivates an individual’s “composite feelings” places organic memory in the context of the visual-emotional responses that Hardy’s characters express and experience throughout *Two on a Tower*. Although Spencer does not directly provide a definition for organic memory, he does provide the foundation for his thoughts on memory and heredity when placed within an individual and observed by another person.

In her book, *Organic Memory*, scholar Laura Otis provides her readers with an example of how organic memory functions:<sup>6</sup>

The theory of organic memory placed the past in the individual, in the body, in the nervous system; it pulled memory from the domain of the metaphysical into the domain of the physical with the intention of making it knowable. Through analogy, it equated memory with heredity, arguing that just as people remembered some of their own experiences

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<sup>6</sup> Otis describes the nineteenth-century theory of organic memory as a literary scholar—not as a scientist describing a scientific theory.

consciously, they remembered their racial and ancestral experiences  
unconsciously, through their instincts. (3)

Although the majority of Otis' book focuses on culture as a medium through which organic memory is expressed, she discusses some important ideas such as the notion that memory and heredity can be seen or observed externally—that they can be known without being verbally expressed or articulated. Otis comments on the influence of organic memory on writers and theorists of the late nineteenth century: "The appeal of the organic memory is now clear: it was 'scientific'; it promised to unite all that was known—and all that was unknown—into a coherent system; it privileged the individual—or certain ones ... and it made history potentially visible by locating it within the individual" (40). For authors like Hardy, then, participating in the discourse of organic memory, scientific observation becomes a means of representing social issues such as class. Take for example, Hardy's depiction of Lady Constantine's first observations of Swithin in the tower; the narrator describes the tower as run-down, while the youth within is beautiful and seemingly innocent as Lady Constantine observes him watching a cyclone on the sun through his telescope and remarks, "[Lady Constantine] had ample time to make these observations; and she may have done so all the more keenly through being herself of a totally opposite type" (Hardy 7). Although Swithin's beauty contrasts with his surroundings, it is his surroundings that indicate his material circumstances as Lady Constantine goes on to observe that the house in which he resides with his grandmother is the "old house behind the plantation" (11). Lady Constantine, the observer in this situation, acquires an understanding of Swithin's lower gentry social



standing by observing his surroundings in the tower, his antiquated telescope, and his grandmother's old house. Hardy explores ideas of memory and heredity through Swithin's family history, particularly that of Swithin's late mother and father. We also see this theme interwoven into the narrator's descriptions of Swithin's church choir friends, namely Mr. Torkingham, which I will expand upon later.

Organic memory operates on the notion that material and social circumstances are genetically transmitted from parent to child, from generation to generation, or from old to new. Otis relates the transferal of organic memory from past to present to the Positivist idea of turning the abstract into concrete: "The theory of organic memory placed the past *in the individual, in the body, in the nervous system*" (3). In essence, memory functions similarly to chemical processes—external circumstances can alter chemical processes within the body in the same way that they can alter or influence one's memory. Spencer thought of organic memory as more of a visual concept because sensory input is essential to the formulation of impression by which the observer perceives the material circumstances of the observed. Because sensory input varies from person to person, each individual has their own subjective perception of another individual's organic memory.

The connection between sensory input (stimuli) and sensory perception is formed through a series of subjective and objective actions in response to external circumstances, which then contribute to the formation of an individual's subjective impressions. Spencer's clearest articulation of this idea is in the chapter, "Correspondence between Life and its Circumstances," where he explains how subjective actions overcome objective ones: "The recognition of an object is impossible without a harmony between

the changes constituting perception, and particular properties co-existing in the environment” (*Biology* 77; vol. 1). Spencer explains this point by using the example of a sailor navigating stormy waters. The sailor’s objective is to get through the storm, but as Spencer notes, there are changes within the sailor’s immediate environment that affect his actions (77). The actions that the sailor takes are subjective because they are based on how he perceives changes in his external circumstances. He calculates his position at sea and makes the deductions and actions that follow by forming subjective visual impressions of his immediate circumstances: the wind, rain, and waves. These external circumstances make him feel specific emotions, which then predict his subsequent actions.

Moreover, according to Spencer, an individual’s genetic predisposition affects how the person will react to external stimuli. For instance, if we consider the example of the sailor’s subjective impressions, the sailor is genetically predisposed to act a certain way, both on a species level and on an individual level. Spencer writes,

That necessary action and the re-action between the parts of an organism and the organism as a whole—that power of the aggregate to re-mould the units, which is the correlative power of the units to build up into such an aggregate; implies that any differences existing between the units inherited by an organism, must gradually diminish. (*Biology* 282)

Spencer acknowledges the complexity of this process in determining how an individual will react based on aspects of genetic influence described here.<sup>7</sup> Spencer is saying that a person's responses are made up of two components: genetic traits and hereditary traits (he refers to these as "parts" or "units" of an organism). Genetic traits can be thought of as traits that are common across a species while hereditary traits are familial. The genetic aspect is two-fold in that a person responds based on how the species would respond to, say, fear or danger, by fight or flight. The other aspect of genetics is the familial component; Spencer argues that people inherit familial personality traits, which factor into a person's actions (282–283). The hereditary component is also familial, but one that is harder to trace because it consists of one's entire family history on a broader scale such as social class, occupation, education, etc. (Spencer believes that these are passed on from parent to offspring similar to how genetic traits such as eye color are passed down.)

Organic memory also influences how individuals view each other based on the combination of perceived social class of the observer and observed and the social class of their family. Anne-Julia Zwierlein describes how scientific discourse influences the portrayal of social classes in Victorian literature. In her article, "The Biology of Social Class: Habit Formation and Social Stratification in Nineteenth-Century British *Bildungsromane* and Scientific Discourse," Zwierlein claims, "Organic memory, be it real or imagined, weighs heavily on all of Hardy's characters. His novels are frequently

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<sup>7</sup> Spencer's use of the term "genetics" predates modern gene theory which was developed throughout the early to mid-twentieth century from Gregor Mendel's work in the mid-nineteenth century. At the time when Spencer was writing, Mendel was largely known for his work on plant hybridization rather than genetics. When Spencer refers to "genetics" in this chapter of *The Principles of Biology*, he is referring to the characteristic responses that are the same or that overlap amongst and between homogeneous and heterogeneous species as opposed to traits passed from parent to offspring.

concerned with the idea of a cumulative influence of past ‘layers’ of experience on the individual” (353). She argues that because of this fascination with “past layers of experience” being transferred from generation to generation, there is an underlying concern with social order. In *Two on a Tower*, Hardy shifts the paradigm of organic memory to include not only layers of past experience associated with inheritance, but layers of experience(s) associated with the situational condition of marriage. The distinction between upper gentry (Lady Constantine) and lower gentry (Swithin) is a point of contention between the two protagonists and the social classes to which they belong. Because Lady Constantine’s marriage maintains her social status, it is possible for her to lose her status after her husband’s death. She fixates on maintaining a platonic relationship with Swithin while in the public eye. As time passes and Lady Constantine’s feelings grow stronger, she fears that she will act on her feelings for Swithin and that her love for him will then become observable to others. The narrator comments, “To speak plainly, it was growing a serious question whether, if he were not hidden from her eyes, she would not soon be plunging across the ragged boundary which divides the permissible from the forbidden” (Hardy 69). Here, “permissible” refers to their friendship and working relationship through Lady Constantine’s sponsorship of Swithin’s scientific endeavors. Lady Constantine’s plan to sponsor Swithin is an attempt to smooth out the “ragged” boundary between being a beneficent patron to him (an action viewed as morally correct by the public) and being his lover (viewed by the public as morally unjust and an action that crosses both class and moral boundaries). The distinction between social classes proves uneven because of the difference in observation between the private

gaze of Lady Constantine and Swithin and the gaze of the public. If their relationship is unveiled, Lady Constantine and Swithin risk becoming a public spectacle.

As Lady Constantine and Swithin try to conceal their relationship from public knowledge, both characters experience a dual existence within two social classes simultaneously. They experience this duality as a result of material circumstance: the physical traits and material items that they inherit from their families and that are present in their environment. Lady Constantine most clearly exists within both the upper and lower gentry after she finds out about the death of her husband.<sup>8</sup> After Sir Blount's death the narrator comments, "Sir Blount's mis-management and eccentric behaviour were resulting in serious consequences to Lady Constantine; nothing less, indeed, than her almost complete impoverishment" (Hardy 73). The only thing that holds her aloft is the possession of Welland House. In Lady Constantine's mind, her social standing is certainly lowered, but it is not as low as Swithin's social level as long as she retains possession of the house because she still has the material possessions which serve as a physical indication of her social status.

At this point in the novel, Hardy uses Lady Constantine's perception of material possession as a catalyst for her loss of self-perception. The death of Lady Constantine's husband, Sir Blount, causes her to experience *déjà vu*—the phenomenon of associating past events with current events similar to how organic memory places the past within individuals. Put another way, Lady Constantine's organic memory—the accumulation of

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<sup>8</sup> I use the phrase "upper and lower classes" here as opposed to gentry because if Lady Constantine loses possession of the house, she would be at a lower social standing than that of lower gentry.

her material circumstances during her marriage to Sir Blount—triggers her *déjà vu* causing her to disassociate from her present circumstances. At this point in the novel, it is difficult to tell whether Lady Constantine sees herself as closer to Swithin's social standing or closer to the social standing that she maintained while married to Sir Blount. Despite the death of her husband, thoughts of Sir Blount haunt Lady Constantine with uncanny feelings that he is alive and watching her. When he was alive, her social life was nonexistent per Sir Blount's wishes. As previously discussed by Vrettos and Zwierlein, "layers of past experience" haunt Lady Constantine (Zwierlein 353). She experiences *déjà vu*: "A feeling of living 'in duplicate' ... an absolute identification of the past with the present" (Vrettos 196–197). According to Vrettos, the fact that Lady Constantine experiences *déjà vu* indicates a fall in social class: "This construction of *déjà vu* as both a marker of class and a sign of widespread nervous decline demonstrates some of the tensions within the disciplinary project of defining memory—especially displaced memory" (208). During this experience, Lady Constantine loses her sense of self-perception—she identifies with a time when she was perceived by her peers in a more favorable light while also feeling a sense of dread that Sir Blount and his social circle know about her affair with Swithin. When Swithin adorns himself with Sir Blount's coat to conceal himself from her brother, Lady Constantine fears Swithin is actually her deceased husband: "At once she raised her hands in horror, as if to protect herself from him; she uttered a shriek, and turned shudderingly to the wall, covering her face" (Hardy 134). The coat functions as a visual stimulus for Lady Constantine; it affects how she sees and how she feels about what she observes. Sir Blount's coat serves as an external

stimulus (in this case—a material item that affects a character’s emotional response in a visual way). Lady Constantine mistakes Swithin for Sir Blount because of the coat and the circumstances in which she finds herself: in the dark, in Sir Blount’s house. She sees the coat (the object) with accuracy, but her circumstances create a false impression of the situation. Lady Constantine associates Sir Blount’s coat with her fear of him and his abusive behavior toward her into her present experience with Swithin.

Each observer’s visual-emotional response to other characters is influenced not only by their knowledge of that person’s social and familial histories and present circumstances but by the observer’s own material conditions, past and present. Lady Constantine and her brother perceive Swithin as being from the lower gentry based on the revelation that his father was of that class. Swithin’s father was a curator with a moderately respectful upper-middle gentry social standing. When Reverend St Cleeve married Swithin’s mother, a farmer’s daughter of lower social standing, he discovered that the upper-class gentry would not accept her as their social equal. As a result, the St Cleeves’ social standing was lowered as was their child’s. While talking with the Bishop, Swithin’s friend Torkingham states, ““This lad was an only child. There was enough money to educate him, and he is sufficiently well provided for to be independent of the world so long as he is content to live here with great economy. But of course this gives him few opportunities of bettering himself”” (150). Hardy’s reference to Swithin’s familial circumstances as “an only child” in relation to his “independent” financial status and his “few opportunities” for social advancement suggests that Swithin inherits his

parents' social standing just as readily as (if not more readily than) he inherits anything of material value.

The act of seeing a person through their physical characteristics emerged during the mid-to-late nineteenth century in conjunction with an interest in tracing a person's physical traits in order to predict their social status. The Victorians essentially believed that a person's physical characteristics signaled their social class. Kate Flint comments on the Victorian's increasing fascination with visual perception during the *fin de siècle*:

The idea was wide spread, in the mid-century, that different social types, and different types of character, were physiognomically distinguishable. Not only faces in their entirety offered themselves up to be read, but facial expressions (pathognomy), lines on the forehead (metoposcopy), lines on the hand (chiromancy and chirognomy), and moles (neomancy) were all available for deciphering. (14)

Note the parallel here between social class and physical appearance; "facial expressions" and "lines on the forehead" contribute to the immediate perception of one person by another. Flint argues that the emphasis on the link between physical appearance and social class manifests itself in the literature of the nineteenth century. She quotes a passage from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet* to illustrate her point that the act of observing goes far beyond one's memories and moral histories as argued by Vrettos and Otis. As Doyle's detective explains: "By a man's finger-nails, by his coat-sleeve, by his boots, by his trouser-knees, by the callosities of his forefinger and thumb, by his expression, by his shirt-cuffs—by each of these things a man's calling is plainly



revealed” (18). Flint suggests that it is the combination of the physiognomy and materiality that contributes to the visual perception of social class by Victorian society.

Flint’s idea of materiality as an indicator of social class prevails throughout Hardy’s novel; however, Hardy uses material circumstance to obscure the boundary between what different people observe about an individual’s social class according to a person’s outward appearance. For example, Lady Constantine calls on Swithin’s friend Mr. Torkingham to her house to speak with him about Swithin. Upon Torkingham’s arrival, the narrator muses, “His boots, which had seemed elegant in the farm-house, appeared rather clumsy here, and his coat, that was a model of tailoring when he stood amid the choir, now exhibited decidedly strained relations with his limbs” (Hardy 22). When Torkingham is in Swithin’s company, they are both portrayed as rather “elegant” characters based on their environment; however, when they are in the company of Lady Constantine, who at this point is perceived as upper gentry, they appear to be less physically attractive and less socially adept when placed in the environment of her mansion. In other words, shifting material contexts contribute to changing perceptions of the self.

Hardy’s blurring of social boundaries is a commentary on how and what people see as both the observed and the observer, and in a sense, how visual interpretation is often inaccurate. Ruth Bernard Yeazell’s article on how Thomas Hardy uses light as a source for vision comments on Hardy’s use of individual states of interpretation:

“But light in Hardy is more than a precondition of seeing, especially if one thinks of seeing as the perception of a world independent of the perceiver. How his

characters see—whether by sunlight or moonlight, candle or gas lamp—cannot finally be distinguished from what they see, which is as much a quality of light as it is any object or person that light illumines.” (49)

Indeed, light in Hardy’s novel does often shape characters’ perceptions of each other, though I would argue that the other material (if invisible) circumstances of the characters (their histories, etc.) weigh more heavily in the equation. Take, for example, the description of the day on which Lady Constantine first notices the astronomy tower: “On an early winter afternoon, clear but not cold, when the vegetable world was a weird multitude of skeletons through whose ribs the sun shone freely, a gleaming landau came to a pause on the crest of a hill in Wessex” (Hardy 3). We know that Lady Constantine has a clear view of what she is seeing. Again, when Lady Constantine first decides to visit the astronomy tower, the narrator comments that the path there is covered by “blue-black vegetation” whereas the tower is “bright .... and flushed with sunlight,” indicating that the first time Swithin and Lady Constantine meet is in the light of day, where they can see each other clearly and in natural light (6). The “natural light” may add to Lady Constantine’s impressions of Swithin’s beauty, but it does nothing to stop her from noticing his dilapidated surroundings; it further obscures her perception of Swithin’s inability to shed his social circumstance without holding onto his family history. Swithin and Lady Constantine see their identical circumstances differently because they come from familiar social circumstances—the subjective experiences create radically different views of how they perceive each other and their surroundings during the scene in the tower. The narrator remarks that “beautiful” is not a good enough word to describe him.

The image of Swithin in the natural light makes Lady Constantine think he looks like a Greek god (7). Lady Constantine romanticizes him in a way that takes him out of the social hierarchy altogether.

Hardy also uses light to depict Swithin's and Lady Constantine's houses and how the characters in these residences perceive each other. Anna Henchman notes how the infusion of light into Hardy's novels often speaks to the subjectivity of the characters: "As Hardy designs them, however, such lighting effects are characteristically partial—both in the sense that they call attention to some details but not others and in the sense that the light at issue is often suffused with the perceiver's subjectivity" (58). Light is also a stimulus that coincides with the material circumstances of the observed and the reader who observes the social classes of the characters within Hardy's novel. The first time readers are introduced to Swithin's family/friends is when he returns to his grandmother's house after encountering Lady Constantine. The narrator says, "Inside the house his maternal grandmother was sitting by a wood fire .... She was gazing into the flames .... quietly re-enacting in her brain certain of the long chain of episodes, pathetic, tragical, and humorous, which had constituted the parish history for the last sixty years" (Hardy 13–14). This scene is juxtaposed with the following scene when Torkingham goes to see Lady Constantine at her house as the narrator says, "The long, low front of the Great House .... was in darkness as the vicar slackened his pace before it, and only the distant fall of water disturbed the stillness .... [Lady Constantine] looked small and isolated" (21). The first scene with Swithin's grandmother creates the image of a warm house lit by the fire and embellished by Mrs. Martin's faith that her grandson will do

great things one day because of his father's success (15). Lady Constantine's house is dark and cold, which matches Torkingham's impression of her.

Light influences how the characters perceive the touches of organic memory (material circumstance, genetics, and heredity) of the subject matter at hand. In this case, the warm glow of the fire predisposes Mrs. Martin to think of memories associated with her daughter and son-in-law and to project the latter's perceived success onto her grandson. Conversely, the darkness of the Great House affects Torkingham's perception of Lady Constantine as someone who is hard to see, or someone who might not be what she appears to be. Light and material circumstance also affect the reader's perception of the meaning of Mrs. Martin's memories as she sits near the fire and of Torkingham's thoughts on Lady Constantine's social ambiguity. Although light functions as an external stimulus for the characters' subjective impressions of each other, their material circumstances within their normal environment also influence how they perceive each other. Torkingham fits in and is comfortable with the casual, warm environment of Mrs. Martin's house while he feels small and out of place in the Great House.

The characters' inability to see each other clearly results in ambiguity between social classes. The narrator ponders this occurrence in the quote with which I began this chapter, as he notes, "St Cleeve being in the unhappy case of deriving his existence through two channels of society, it resulted that he seemed to belong to either this or that, according to the attitude of the beholder" (Hardy 172). By this point in the novel, the notions of sensory perception including the effects of organic memory and *déjà vu* all depend on the subjective impression of the person watching. At any given moment in the

novel, Swithin and Lady Constantine can belong to “either this or that” (172). The observers themselves consist of members of a variety of social classes as they project those classes and views about society onto the people they watch (namely Swithin and Lady Constantine).

The act of looking as an observer implies a recognition that every observed individual has a past and is, in part, made up of their past experiences. When Lady Constantine meets Swithin, the first sight she observes is Swithin looking through his telescope as she observes his beauty: “His visitor has ample time to make these observations .... As she continued to look at the pretty fellow before her, apparently so far abstracted into some speculative world as scarcely to know a real one .... and a qualified observer might from this have hazarded a guess that there was Romance in her veins” (Hardy 7–8). In this instance, there are three types of observers: the scientific (or speculative) observer who is so busy looking at the abstract universe that he is not aware of his surroundings (Swithin), the “Romantic” observer who is gazing at the abstract quality of beauty through her own romantic lens (Lady Constantine looking at Swithin’s perceived beauty), and the “qualified” observer (the reader/narrator) who is watching both Lady Constantine and Swithin and can determine that Lady Constantine is the romantic observer and that Swithin is the speculative observer by looking at her observing Swithin.

As the novel progresses, Swithin’s speculative nature and Lady Constantine’s romantic disposition obscure their ability to perceive the distinctions between social boundaries within the novel. These characters react to their own subjective impressions

of social class, but they do not react to each other's impressions; or, at the very least, they do not acknowledge a reaction or an awareness of each other's impressions. For instance, when Swithin embarks on a journey to Cape Town to study astronomy, he becomes more emotionally distant from Lady Constantine despite her letters proclaiming her unhappiness. The narrator comments, "That which is the foreground and measuring base of one perspective draught may be the vanishing-point of another perspective draught, while yet they are both draughts of the same thing" (Hardy 250). At this point in the novel, Swithin and Lady Constantine are struggling to understand each other's perspectives, but they only react to their own. Lady Constantine remains in England after Sir Blount's death and Swithin's departure becoming closer to Swithin's social status at the beginning of the novel, while Swithin is in Cape Town on the verge of an important astronomical discovery. Interestingly, the narrator aligns himself and the reader as the qualified observers: "Swithin's doings and discoveries .... from our present point of view .... served but the humble purpose of *killing time* while other doings, more nearly allied to his heart than to his understanding, developed themselves at home" (250). This is the closest the narrator comes to explicitly saying that a character is unaware of other impressions with the statement "more nearly allied to his heart than to his understanding," which further cements Swithin as the speculative observer and Lady Constantine as the Romantic observer—both remain unaware of each other's perceptions of social boundaries that prevent them from being with each other. The "perspective draughts" that the narrator mentions speaks to perceptions of separate social and moral boundaries held by the characters (Swithin and the church choir as lower gentry; Lady

Constantine as upper gentry). The narrator is saying that their boundaries are unclear because they overlap with each other as shown by how Swithin passes for different social classes throughout the novel. Organic memory dictates that Swithin cannot enter a new social class without the characteristics of the one in which he was born into, because he is limited by his self-perception and by the perceptions of the people within his environment.

The perception of an individual's social class elicits a visual-emotional response from the observer which corresponds to the portrayal of social hierarchy in *Two on a Tower*. Spencer, when hypothesizing about the correspondence between perception and fact asks, "How can the *dynamical* phenomena constituting perception, correspond with the *statical* phenomena of the solid body?" (79) In other words, how can an individual differentiate between their subjective understanding and what is verifiable as a physical fact. Spencer goes on to conclude:

The fact to be expressed in all cases, is, that certain changes, continuous or discontinuous, in the organism, are connected after such a manner ... they have a reference to external actions, constant or serial, actual or potential—a reference such that a definite relation among any members of the one group, implies a definite relation among certain members of the other group. (79)

This idea is discernable in Hardy's novel in the context of the visual-emotional responses of observers from both the upper gentry (Lady Constantine) and the lower gentry (Swithin and Torkingham). Each character shows a greater awareness of their own social

limitations in regards to their relationships than they do of each other's perceptions and feelings. Their actions result from the projection of their own subjective visual-emotional responses regarding social class onto each other in the absence of an awareness of each other's impressions. Swithin, Lady Constantine, and Torkingham react to each other based on the impressions they form by observing each other's external material circumstances, often resulting in the inaccurate perception of expressed social boundaries as exemplified by Lady Constantine's attempt to elevate Swithin's social status by funding his research and her subsequent disappointment at being unable to perceive Swithin's malleable social status based on her knowledge of his family's occupation within the lower gentry. Hardy again expresses the idea that a personal social status is fickle the end of the novel when Swithin goes abroad leaving Lady Constantine to face social ruin. His social status is out of anyone's control—Swithin, like many of his peers are characters of circumstance. Swithin's social status, even if on the rise, cannot help Lady Constantine when she faces poverty and ostracization. Her social status is in danger of slipping entirely due to her pregnancy resulting in her desperate attempt to retain some impression of her original social status through her marriage to the Dean. Upon his return from Cape Town and despite success in his career, Hardy implies, Swithin will pursue Tabitha Lark, a member of the church choir group and someone from the same social class to which Swithin originally belonged.

Although the difference in social class does affect the relationship of each character, it is also inaccurately perceived by them. These characters treat social class as something observable, similar to how a quality such as beauty is observed. However,



much like beauty, social class is evident only in the eye of the beholder, and even then, it varies greatly depending on the subjectivity of the individual's perception. The accuracy of sensory perception fluctuates depending on who is observing and what they see upon examining a person's external appearance. Hardy's assimilation of the theory of organic memory into *Two on a Tower* is indicative of cultural and societal changes to come and of his growing weariness with how misperceived visual stimuli impact the formation of an individual's subjective perception.<sup>9</sup> The characters' subjective visual perception of each other's genetics, heredity, and material circumstances influences their impressions. The sensory perception and subjective visual-emotional responses expressed by these characters speak to a larger concern with the visual aesthetic trope during the late nineteenth century. Aesthetic judgement is defined as the formulation of impressions "based on emotional responses to art" (Young 1) and will be subject to further discussion in the next chapter.

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<sup>9</sup> Although one of Hardy's early novels, *Two on a Tower* (1882) nonetheless anticipates some of the pessimism regarding the influence of organic memory in determining individuals' fates observed in Hardy's subsequent works such as *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895).

## **CHAPTER TWO: SUBJECTIVE IMPRESSIONS THROUGH GENDER POLITICS, ECONOMIC SITUATION, AND SOCIAL CIRCUMSTANCES IN EDITH JOHNSTONE'S *A SUNLESS HEART* AND WALTER PATER'S *THE RENAISSANCE***

Strange! The sentiment which you possess towards me to-day, I may possess towards you to-morrow. The position you occupy to-day I may occupy to-morrow. The hero of to-day is the victim of to-morrow. (Edith Johnstone, *A Sunless Heart*)

Miss Lotus Grace, M.A., of the College at Stirling has this thought as she gazes through the window of her house watching Gasparine O'Neill mourning the loss of her brother. Lotus and Gasparine are the female protagonists of Edith Johnstone's 1894 novel, *A Sunless Heart*, which tells the story of Gasparine O'Neill's relationship with her sickly brother, Gasper, and later, of her developing friendship with Lotus Grace as Gasparine traverses from extreme poverty and dependence on her brother and father, to becoming an independent, working woman after her brother's death. Although Johnstone is not identified as a well-known aesthetic writer, her novel endorses a "moral Aestheticism" similar to that proposed by Vernon Lee, which highlights the complexity of the emotive response. The characters (Lotus and Gasparine) reflect on their experiences to form their own subjective impressions about their social circumstances, self-awareness through the pursuit of aesthetic pleasure, and how the collision of these themes manifests in art and literature during the Victorian era.

In this chapter, I argue that Pater's philosophical take on Aestheticism is present in *A Sunless Heart*; however, Johnstone's portrayal of Pater's Aestheticism, like Lee's, also demonstrates its limitations. Johnstone utilizes Pater's theory of aesthetic subjective impression through the portrayal of how the two protagonists—Gasparine and Lotus—

see and perceive issues relating to gender politics, social degradation, and the social elevation of one another throughout the novel. Pater argues that art is thematically amoral, that the subjective impression of the individual should be removed from the perception of beauty, and that only a trained aesthetic critic will be able to uncover the impressions of the individual who creates the artwork. Pater asserts that an individual's past experiences should not play a role in how they perceive and create meaning from art. In this respect, too, Johnstone's Aestheticism closely aligns with Lee's, who argues that past experiences were not merely inescapable, but foundational to the aesthetic experience of the moment.<sup>10</sup>

In her version of moral Aestheticism, Johnstone uses themes of gender and social hierarchy as the basis for her argument that art and the perception of beauty expounded by art and impressed upon the observer do have ethical implications. She explores Pater's notion of aesthetic criticism through gender politics as demonstrated through her representation of different relationships in Gasparine's life. More specifically, Johnstone first portrays the disintegration of Leon Smith as an ideal artist in Gasparine's eyes and later depicts Gasparine's social elevation through her growing friendship with Lotus. Moreover, Johnstone experiments with Pater's notion of reflection and subjective experience through her depiction of how the two characters' opposing social convictions become intertwined (i.e., Gasparine's belief that social elevation is attainable versus Lotus's point of view that one cannot attain independent and permanent social elevation).

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<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting that Pater's views of the importance of past experience in "The Child in the House" (1878) are a departure from his argument in *The Renaissance* (1873).

As I have discussed in the introduction to this thesis, the Aesthetic Movement, often identified as beginning in the 1860s and continuing through the end of the nineteenth century, peaked during the late 1870s and 1880s. The definition of Aestheticism was a point of both expansion and contention during the mid-nineteenth century. Critics such as John Ruskin argued that art functions to bestow useful moral values upon the observer, whereas Pater's version of Aestheticism evolves into a movement where art functions independently from social and moral values. Pater describes Aestheticism in the 1893 Preface to *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* as the process through which beauty is defined by an individual observer with the stipulation that the perception of beauty is relative to that individual. Because beauty is dependent on the experiences of the observer, Pater argues that the definition of beauty becomes "unmeaning and useless" (xix). The goal, for Pater, is to establish a definition of beauty "not in the most abstract but in the most concrete terms possible, to find not its universal formula, but the formula which expresses most adequately this or that special manifestation of it" (xix). Pater believed that beauty, and the criticism associated with a beautiful object, should be reserved for the aesthetic critic—someone trained to "indicate what the source of that impression is, and under what conditions it is experienced" (xxi). Pater places his theories on impressions in relation to the objective and subjective critic in context with the idea of art for art's sake—the idea that art exists as a form of expression uniquely beholden to the artist who created it—to comment on the merits and limitations of creating and looking at art from collective and individual points of view.

The first several chapters of Pater's *The Renaissance* establish the role of the aesthetic critic, while the remaining chapters articulate Pater's thoughts on the individual subjective impression formed through the consumption of images and the visual sensations those images leave on an observer. Pater comments on the role of the aesthetic critic: "What is important, then, is not that the critic should possess a correct abstract definition of beauty for the intellect, but a certain kind of temperament, the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects" (xxi). Pater argues, at this point, that vision is the lens through which an individual experiences and processes that which they observe, and the aesthetic critic's job is to distinguish, analyze, and separate the means by which a work of art elicits "special impressions" of beauty or pleasure (xxi).

Vision functions as a perceptive process for the observer (critic) as they reach an understanding of that which is being observed. According to Pater, the critic and artist alike are often influenced by the collective ideas of their generation and their perception of those ideas. The artist or "producer" then forms from their perception of intellectual stimuli by their own solitary reflection upon their work. Pater argues that the rejection of this notion of artistic discussion is what sets the fifteenth century apart: "Here, artists and philosophers and those whom the action of the world has elevated and made keen, do not live in isolation, but breathe a common air, and catch light and heat from each other's thoughts" (xxiv). For example, in this discussion of the merits and limitations of the intellectual discussion and manifestation of art and culture, Pater says that although the forms of intellectual activity can find themselves connected through a general

happenstance of common themes and ideas associated with the people that make up that generation, the ideas of the artists themselves were often marked by solitary thought processes (xxiv).

In her 1887 book, *Juvenilia*, Lee both critiques and expands upon Pater's ideas on collective and individual thought processes. Lee likens the idea of beauty existing for the purpose of beauty—Pater's notion of art for art's sake—to an individual's youth. She argues that subjective impression becomes collective when an individual person encounters and attempts to reconcile the unpleasant with the pleasant (or the present, adult life with the past experiences of youth):

And if not, why talk or think about either; when there are things which are clean, pleasant, and which require only that we should enjoy them: art, music, poetry, beautiful nature, delightful people? ... Not so. For do what we will, devote ourselves exclusively to the pleasant and certain things of life, shut our eyes and ears resolutely to the unpleasant and uncertain; we shall be made, none the less, to take part in the movement that alters the world. Help it to alter we must, in so far as each of us represents a class, a nationality, a tendency, nay, as each of us eats a certain amount of food and occupies a certain amount of standing-room. (Lee, *Juvenilia* 17–18)

The visual-emotional response, then, becomes a moral reconciliation of both perceptive and physical processes for the artist through their creation of what might be perceived as beautiful art.

*A Sunless Heart* deals with fundamentals of Aestheticism including subjective impression of the observed and observer who are influenced by political, economic, and social circumstances of the characters over time as the narrator flashes back and forth between past and present experiences. Gasparine's quest to reconcile the past and the present to imagine a better future is, I would argue, Johnstone's attempt to amalgamate Pater's use of individual subjective impression and Lee's understanding of a collaborative moral aesthetic that can influence social movement (Lee 18). At the beginning of the novel, Gasparine forms her subjective impressions based on how beauty makes her feel, a characteristic of Aestheticism also articulated by Pater in *The Renaissance*. Johnstone depicts Pater's thoughts on individual and collective perceptions of aesthetic objects through her portrayal of each character's perception of themselves and each other. Lotus observes Gasparine's societal decline while Gasparine elevates Lotus's social standing based on her initial impressions of Lotus's circumstances. The action that initiates Gasparine's social elevation is, in equal parts, reflective of Gasparine's reconciliation of her past experiences with her present material circumstances as is the result of Lotus's decision to befriend Gasparine after Gaspar dies at the end of Book I.

Many of the detractors of art for art's sake, and consequently of Pater, argued that fact (truth) should be valued over opinion (fiction), and moral judgement should take precedence over autonomous subjective experience. Evangelista alludes to the contention between art and science while scholars such as Stephen Cheeke, Yannis Kanarakis, and Benjamin Morgan directly address the relationship between science and the Aesthetic

Movement. Cheeke argues that Pater's writing is anchored in psychology where Pater builds upon Kant's theories of personhood to comment on the idea of personality and individual perception. Focusing on the topic of personality in Pater's writing, Cheeke says, "[Personality] is closest, perhaps, to subjectivity, but it records the outward-directed engagement with others (on its way to us) through which identity is constructed, the importance in this process of the perception of others, the contingency and open-endedness of the performance of subjectivity" (237). Kanarakis also notes the presence of psychology as well as more contemporary science present in the "Conclusion" of *The Renaissance*. He claims that Pater uses contemporary science to acknowledge the "fluidity of the physical world," and elements of psychology to discuss the "ethical consequences of such fluidity for the individual's thought" (89). Finally, Benjamin Morgan argues that Pater's engagement with art for art's sake and his seemingly conflicting ideas of science and the impression of art on an observer arise from the notion that the Aesthetic Movement does not completely adhere to the idea of art for art's sake (732). Morgan points out that Paterian Aestheticism adheres to the Aesthetic Movement in that it represents an individual's capacity to autonomously form a subjective impression, but it departs from the theories of other aesthetes (romantic and enlightenment specifically) by claiming that beauty controls how an individual forms an impression. Moreover, Morgan further develops the ideas of critics who argue that gender and political identity were a way for aesthetes to "perform identity, speak from the margins, and challenge the norms" by arguing that in addition to these functions, art is as much about being an "educative tool" to improve the understanding of subjectivity in



relation to political participation (733–34). Similarly, Johnstone’s novel does not adhere to only one facet of Pater’s ideas, but rather, it points out problems associated with both aspects (the art for art’s sake perspective adopted in the first chapters of Pater’s text and the moralistic aspect of the “Conclusion.”)

The literary conversation surrounding the New Woman and uptake in texts produced by New Woman aesthetic writers further complicates Pater’s theory that Aestheticism is amoral and apolitical. Scholars including Talia Schaffer and Kathy Psomiades write about gender politics in relation to female aesthetic writers during the rise of the Aesthetic Movement. Schaffer argues that Aestheticism gave female writers the freedom to create dialogue around the changing gender norms writing, “Aestheticism let women articulate their complex feeling about women’s changing roles, and thus it tended to attract precisely those writers whose gender ideas were in flux” (Schaffer 5). Schaffer notes the juxtaposition of New Women writers with female aesthetes arguing that defining specific kinds of Aestheticism is difficult and noting, “Aestheticism accommodated a vast range of political positions” (16). I contend that the aesthetic lens through which Johnstone’s portrays gender roles and politics during the late nineteenth century created a duality between the categories of gender politics and Aestheticism within which she exists as a New Woman writer.

In *A Sunless Heart*, the construct of each female protagonist’s identity is representative of the characteristics of the New Woman as exemplified by well-known female writers such as Sarah Grand as well as lesser-known writers such as Johnstone. Schaffer and Psomiades comment on the depiction of female characters by female

writers: “Putting female aesthetes back into literary history reveals how significant the novel was for turn-of-the-century women; the genre became a forum for testing competing models of female identity against each other (usually by embodying them in paired female characters)” (7). Johnstone’s novel reflects their claim in two ways which I will discuss in this chapter. Firstly, Johnstone’s own ideas about gender roles and how women perceive their own changing roles in society in context with the perceptions of the people around them aligns with Schaffer’s discussion of women’s transition from the private to the public sphere. Secondly, the female pairing idea is one that Johnstone portrays throughout *A Sunless Heart* depicted in the relationships between Gasparine and Lotus, and Lotus and Ladybird. Johnstone also juxtaposes the female relationships with male-female pairings including Gasper and Gasparine, Leon and Gasparine, and a young Lotus with her brother-in-law. The female relationships starkly contrast to the other relationships within the novel and serve to highlight the women’s changing roles throughout the narrative. I will focus on analyzing the portrayal of Gasparine’s and Lotus’s progression as independent women within and beyond their social spheres.

Johnstone experiments with Pater’s notion of the artistic individual and art critic through her portrayal of gender the relationships between Gasparine and the artist Leon Smith, and later, Gasparine and Lotus. Gasparine O’Neill and Leon Smith embody the roles of artist and critic through their perceptive and creative processes and the subjective impressions expressed through their visual feelings. Gasparine and Lotus serve as Johnstone’s “paired female characters” whereas Leon and Gasparine’s pairing at the beginning of the novel rivals the female pairing that arises later in the novel. At the

beginning of the novel, Gasparine is working on two paintings for an art school she attends. Although Leon Smith, a local artist, comments that one of her paintings is a “crude immature” painting, he also recognizes that it contains beauty. As the narrator remarks: “He recognized at once, in the crude immature work, an originality and beauty deeper and stronger than anything he had ever produced himself, successful as he was” (Johnstone 48). Smith decides to recreate Gasparine’s painting by “conventionalizing the original idea” in his style and passing it off as his own work (48). Smith’s character could arguably be classified as an aesthete critic as he observes Gasparine’s painting—he is educated and practiced in the arts, he knows about artistic style, techniques, and expression. However, Johnstone explains how hard it is for Smith to capture the emotion of Gasparine’s painting because he did not experience the emotion with which the painting was created.

When Gasparine sees his painting for the first time, it never occurs to her that he stole her idea because Johnstone notes that Leon Smith “moved in a sphere far removed from her” causing her to refrain from publicly questioning him (47). Rather than question him, Gasparine supposes that her own painting must have been unoriginal. Part of Gasparine’s decision to remain silent is because she perceives false beauty in his character—she finds him well-mannered and charming: “Her imagination began to dress his commonplace good looks with a score of subtle charms they never possessed” (48). She elevates Smith to a moral level that is disproportionate to his social level by combining her perception of his morality and his social status in such a way that it is impossible for her to consider that he stole her ideas. In fact, Gasparine supersedes Leon

as the art critic because she is the one who strives to understand beauty in different forms and who is moved by what she sees. The painting belongs to Gasparine in such a way that it elicits visual feelings from her and from the observer; even when Smith recreates it, the observer can still see/feel Gasparine's intention.

Throughout *A Sunless Heart*, Gasparine's persona as the art critic becomes more noticeable as she takes on the role of subjective observer within both her private and public spheres. Gasparine's first indirect encounter with Lotus (although unknown to her at the time) is when she observes a young Lotus walking in the garden of the painted villa next door to Gasparine's and Gasper's house. The only observation that occurs here is Gasparine watching Lotus with an obscured view afforded by Gasparine's perspective from the first-floor window of her house and Lotus's presence within the parameters of the garden. The window frame in this scene functions as a picture frame with Johnstone writing, "It was a beautiful picture to Gasparine—so opulent, so protected those two seemed, pets of society, children of the law. They were good friends too" (56). Johnstone clarifies that Gasparine's view of Lotus is not clear and that part of what she perceives is based on her sense of Lotus's defined movements as she walks around the garden:

For beauty she had a striking colouring of the eyes and face, fair hair, and a peculiar grace of movement and attitude, unconventional and exceedingly alluring. At her distance Gasparine could not see how brilliant the colouring was ... nor could she see the intense and painful eagerness in the large, expressive eyes. ... The attitude, however, was so expressive as to impress Gasparine deeply,

and the little red-cloaked figure, with head turned, as if listening, haunted her that night. (56–57)

Gasparine's subjective impressions of Lotus are composed of her perceptions based on her sight and her visual-emotional responses to Lotus' physical movements as she circles around the garden during different times of the day. In this scene, Gasparine's thoughts are shaped by how she sees the garden as well as what she cannot see. In addition to functioning as a picture frame, the window through which she observes Lotus also operates as a prism—Gasparine can see an image, but it appears distorted and different from how it exists in its natural form.

Pater's thoughts on the individualistic aspect of aesthetic criticism focus on art and the extent to which the aesthetic critic is able to achieve the desired level of appreciation based on their ability to subjectively perceive aesthetic quality. He comments on the visibility of objects: "It is the *drawing*—the design projected from that peculiar pictorial temperament or constitution, in which, while it may possibly be ignorant of true anatomical proportions ... all ideas however abstract or obscure, float up as visible scene or image" (Pater 104). On one hand, the garden where Gasparine observes Lotus functions as a visible scene or image that contains its own aesthetic characteristics through which Gasparine observes Lotus. On the other hand, Lotus is an aesthetic object within the garden. The level of observation is one-sided, similar to how it would be if someone were observing a painting or reading a poem; the object cannot and does not look back, but the obscurity offered by the garden and the limited view that Gasparine has from her window leads her to a false perception of Lotus's social

circumstances. Gasparine thinks that Lotus is wealthy and that the man who escorts her on her walks is her brother. In reality, Lotus is living with her sister and brother-in-law—her brother-in-law is the one who is escorting her through the garden and while Gasparine interprets them as having a conversation, they are actually in the middle of an altercation resulting from Lotus's brother-in-law sexually assaulting her (Johnstone 57). Although Gasparine's visual feelings arise from her subjective impressions, her perception of Lotus is ultimately obscured by her own preconceptions.

Through Gasparine's role as the aesthetic critic, Johnstone demonstrates the insufficiencies in art for art's sake that Pater himself articulates: "Each art, therefore, having its own peculiar and untranslatable sensuous charm, has its own special mode of reaching the imagination, its own special responsibilities to its material" (Pater 102). For example, right after Gasparine observes Lotus in the garden as described above, Gasparine witnesses Lotus being abused by her brother-in-law and is forced to rethink the conflicts between observation and feeling verses observation and truth: "No. She saw now; not even in such places was there safety or security. All the safety we can hope for, she found, is the safety which our own courage gives us—safety that does not consist in a certain set of circumstances, but in the courage with which we bear and dare" (Johnstone 58). I would argue that the mode through which the garden scene reaches Gasparine is through her subjective impressions which are expressed through Johnstone's description of the garden's untranslatable sensuous charm—Gasparine's impressions are most often formed from a distance where Johnstone notes that she cannot even see the "brilliant" colors of the garden or the "intense and painful eagerness" in Lotus's eyes (57). Yet, it

leaves an untranslatable impression on Gasparine that she cannot articulate until she gains access to a closer observation. When she experience a clear, unobstructed observation, Johnstone often pairs Gasparine's ideal impressions with Gasparine witnessing moments of truth. She must then reconcile contradictory occurrences with her previously established misconceptions relating to her own subjective impressions.

As Gasparine gains an awareness of the unreliability of her own impressions, she develops a close relationship with Lotus driven by their fear of being misperceived by the people who are closest to them which, in turn, works to influence how they perceive each other's social statuses. Both characters are taken advantage of by men—Lotus is abused by her sister's fiancé while Gasparine's artistic concept is stolen by Leon Smith. Lotus seeks companionship from both Gasparine and Mona because she won't allow herself to experience any kind of meaningful relationship with her daughter, Ladybird, because of her fear of what the public would think of a child born to a fallen woman. After Gasparine dies, Gasparine experiences profound loneliness, something that Lotus recognizes and immediately attempts to remedy by convincing Gasparine to move in with Lotus and her family. As readers, we know that Gasparine's perception of Lotus is not entirely accurate because of Lotus's admission of her own altered social status: "We see the necessity of performing our part of life; we do so reasonably well. What seems our generosity is a sense of fitness. What seems our justice is reason. What seems our love and affection—that, too, is our perception of what is fit ... I said I acted; I said I acted well; I did not say I acted in the interests of vice" (131). According to Lotus, things do not exist simply as they are; they exist within the context of how each individual sees and perceives them.

She acknowledges that Gasparine's visual feelings toward her are subjective and are just as accurate (or inaccurate) as Lotus's perception of herself. Lotus and Gasparine both have a level of self-awareness that situates them as observers of their own social circumstances implying that aesthetic sense is composed of the internalization of visual imagery in response to the act of gazing and the act of reflection. Their self-awareness is only achieved through reflecting on past events, whereas visual feeling is an experience achieved through the processing of subjective impressions.

Gasparine deals with fluid social circumstances throughout the novel; at the beginning of the novel, Johnstone ties Gasparine's poverty to the presence of the male authority figure, and later, her social elevation, to the presence of the female figure. At first, Gasparine experiences periods of relative safety when her father is doing well with his finances and then extreme poverty when he stops caring for her and Gasper. Johnstone suggests that the O'Neill siblings often reject the pride associated with familial relationships because of the discontent they experience as they fluctuate between social classes: "In every little adornment or luxury of life; in outward refinement, in any knowledge of the rules of society, they know themselves to be far behind the class of upper tradespeople among whom they lived; they despised these people, their petty aims, jealousies, ignoble lives, yet often in bitterness were tempted to wish themselves of them" (Johnstone 40). Johnstone's language here colors Gasparine's perception of the upper tradespeople as being undesirable, but Gasparine also longs to know how it feels to belong to that social class. Her attachment to societal elevation is affiliated with more than just having money—she wants to actually belong and be accepted by her peers



which is something that her father's social status never allowed even during times when he was more financially stable. As she begins her ascent to independence upon being rescued from poverty by Lotus, the presence of the male figure disappears. Johnstone conveys Gasparine's changing perception of who she should rely on while moving toward independence through Gasparine's interactions with Lotus. One of their first interactions occurs shortly after Gasper dies when Lotus starts caring for Gasparine. Johnstone describes this interaction saying, "Something in the eyes, something in the pallor, thrilled Gasparine's forlorn heart with pity, for it seemed that a broken heart was ministering to her own" (Johnstone 95). Johnstone creates the connection between Gasparine and Lotus before Gasparine even realizes who Lotus is. At this point in the novel, economic conditions are perceived through the observation of character traits and material possessions.

Book II of *A Sunless Heart* is where material circumstance changes from something that is tangible and therefore observable to something that is aesthetic. For example, Lotus's fear of being discovered as someone who used to belong to a lower social class relates to her fear of being reverted back to her poverty-stricken circumstances between the time when she leaves her sister's care and when she begins living with Mrs. Grace. She experiences the fear of being a social outcast later in the novel when she and Gasparine are discussing her daughter's father. Lotus is resistant to reveal Ladybird's father claiming that Ladybird is hers because it would be too easy for people to recast her: "We are the observed of all the observers. ... Look closer, and see the invisible lines diving them. There is the county set, the set from Stirling Castle, the

College set—a proud set, of whom I am one—the Glasgow visitors to Bridge Allan, recognizable by their intolerable twang, and then the rag-tag, the nobodies” (Johnstone 168). Lotus’s concern with keeping the identity of Ladybird’s father to herself evokes Pater’s notion at the end of *The Renaissance* that the passage of time and causes impressions to be continuously re-formed further complicating one’s ability to accurately analyze their ever-changing subjective impressions: “It is with this movement, with the passage and dissolution of impressions, images, sensations, that analysis leaves off—that continual vanishing away, that strange perpetual, weaving and unweaving of ourselves” (Pater 188). In the “Conclusion” to *The Renaissance* Pater does acknowledge that subjective impressions exist and may influence how and what an individual sees (even an aesthetic critic). Johnstone continuously brings the characters back to their former selves as a way to let the protagonists form impressions of themselves as aesthetic critics—as the observer looking at the observed. Lotus has her child as a reminder of her past, and Gasparine’s father returns at the end of the novel (although he appears changed, he still reminds her of her days of living in poverty with Gasper).

Johnstone’s novel is predicated on the paradigms of social ascent and social decline in which Gasparine and Lotus exist throughout the narrative. The characters’ social status is propelled and retracted by their observations of material items which they connect to their perception of one another’s status. For example, Johnstone tells the story of Gasparine’s social ascent through the retelling of Gasparine’s twin brother’s death. I would argue that Gasper and Gasparine function as one being which works to highlight Gasparine’s triumphs through her brother’s death. By this reading, Gasper’s death

functions as Gasparine's death—a death of the self, so to speak, where Gasparine is given a fresh start to rebuild her subjective experience on her own terms. Johnstone aligns Gasparine's ascent with Lotus's imagined social descent as Lotus begins to articulate her fears of regressing back into a life of poverty in the second half of the novel. Conversely, Lotus's social ascent during the first half of *A Sunless Heart* parallels Gasparine's real social descent.

Johnstone pairs social mobility with several material aesthetic experiences which function as bookends for how Gasparine and Lotus view each other during their first and last impressions of one another. The garden through which Gasparine first sees Lotus marks the beginning of Gasparine's romanticizing of the aesthetic experience as well as the first indication of Lotus's social elevation. Johnstone creates an image of the garden scene saying, "It was a beautiful picture to Gasparine—so opulent, so protected these two seemed, pets of society, children of the law. They were good friends too" (56). She paints the garden scene as an image in her mind where she begins to elevate Lotus until she witnesses Lotus's social destruction through the aggression of her brother-in-law. Johnstone writes of Gasparine's changing image, "She watched the little black bundle a long, long time; it never moved. The patch of red grew black in the dusk, and the white spots that showed the bare shoulder were suddenly lighted, and Gasparine saw the dark girl and the cowardly scoundrel pass and repass in the light and warmth" (58). At this point, Lotus's image is reduced to the colors of the changing hours of the day. Likewise, the next time that Gasparine sees Lotus is several years later in Stirling after she and Gasparine had relocated in search of a better life. Similar to Gasparine's first view of Lotus

through the garden window, this time, Gasparine observes Lotus through the window of a fruit shop: “[Gasparine] was standing at a fruiterer’s, gazing in at the still-decorated windows, when two people came out—a stylish young lady, and a little girl in furs” (82). This marks the second time that Gasparine sees Lotus and it once again occurs through a window; however, this time, Gasparine’s romanticizing of Lotus’s social status is more accurate.

The third time the two women meet, Johnstone reverses the observed and observer. Until now, Lotus was always the observed, or the subject, and Gasparine was the observer. The first time Johnstone positions Lotus as the observer and Gasparine as the subject she writes, “Meantime, outside life was knocking, with gentle hand, at her door. Two piteous and tender eyes were looking up at the dingy, unlighted windows. ‘This is the house! Oh, poor thing! I will call to-morrow,’ Lotus said” (89). The final depiction of Gasparine and Lotus interacting through a window is after Lotus’s death. For the first time, Gasparine looks out the window and does not see an image of Lotus: “Ladybird watched vainly down the road...and Gasparine, day after day, with the little fair child at her side, watched too, hoping against hope, for one who would never return” (196). For the first time, Gasparine cannot obtain an impression of Lotus through which Lotus appears elevated. In turn, Gasparine elevates Lotus to immortality by painting a picture, which, I would argue, represents each time they observed each other through window frames during each of their first three encounters.

Johnstone briefly describes Gasparine’s life at the end of the novel—she is married to a clerk who works for her father and she has two children whom she loves.

She's living the future she dreamed of early on in the novel with the addition of the two "treasures" she brought with her: "One was a grave. And one was a picture, which she exhibited in 18—on the line, and which brought to the gaunt woman of nearly forty a tardy fame" (198). Gasparine's painting illustrates each time she observed Lotus through windows at various points in the novel as described above. Johnstone writes: "Crowds stood round to gaze at the mystic face, with its expression of crucifixion and patience, which at first seemed to meet them only from a cloud of light, where rainbow flowers were faintly shadowed" (198). The themes of light and mystery align with Johnstone's first description of Gasparine seeing Lotus in the garden: "When Gasparine had nothing better to do ... Gasparine watched the gardens, the budding leaves ... the fairy palaces of mystery, and pleased herself with imagining how it would be if she and Gaspar were there, rich, strong, and free" (55). The Lotus-Flower painting references a young Lotus as well as her brother before his death. Gasparine uses her depictions of nature to make the reader see Lotus in different states of being. Johnstone writes,

Only after looking longer one saw in the shadows of the cloud, and round the dark head, phantoms of things, like the suggestions of horrors; an infant, in a shroud, the grey-blue hem drifting into the purple of a mass of violet; a cross on a dim hill, and blood-red leaves near ... expressions rather than forms, in the distances of the exquisite perspective of the picture. (198)

The image evokes experiences with death as a state a being, both literally through the course of Gasparine's life (Gaspar's death, Lotus's and Mona's deaths) and figuratively through the death of the child. The mention of blood-red leaves, I suggest, references

Gaspar's burial, the train wreck, and perhaps most significantly, Gasparine's memory of Lotus dressed in a red cloak, lying on the ground after she was assaulted by her brother-in-law. The novel ends with Johnstone offering her own impression as to Gasparine's success and the influence of the observed (Lotus) upon the observer (Gasparine): "It was, said the critics, the most powerful presentation of thought-life, of the subjective, that had ever yet been given, in form or colour; for in the eyes of the strange face one seemed to see all that the cloud could tell" (198).

Johnstone's novel assimilates visual feeling within the context of aesthetic approaches such as perceptions of subjects and objects from an individual point of view, along with the notion that natural Aesthetics contributes to an observer's perception of the observed. She explores the idea of how an individual's visual feeling within the private sphere predicts the subjective perception of society in the public sphere. Johnstone only speaks of the public's perception of the characters through those characters' own subjective impressions of themselves. In turn, the characters project their own social biases onto their perceptions of how they are viewed by people outside of their immediate social circles. Many of their actions are prompted by a fear of what other people think of their social circumstances. For instance, Gasparine and Gaspar's decision to move to Stirling results from their fear of what people think of their relationship, their father's destructive behavior, and their own poverty. Lotus decides to befriend Gasparine because she recognizes Gasparine's social circumstance as one that mirrors her own past experience.

Gasparine's role shifts from artist and critic to mostly critic as she observes Lotus in the garden through the window of her house; however, when Gasper and Gasparine move to Stirling, Lotus takes on the role of the active observer while Gasparine becomes the passive observer and the observed. Although the characters exist within private spheres (Gasper's and Gasparine's apartment and later, Lotus's house), Johnstone treats the whole of Stirling as a public sphere, and as such, it is the cause of Gasparine's fears. She thinks that if she relocates to a new place, she will no longer be inhibited by the townspeople's negative perception of her family and their lower social class. The O'Neills's move to Stirling marks Gasparine's transition into society as an independent, working woman when she takes up a teaching job at girls' school in order to care for herself and her sickly brother. Up to this point, she has taken the role of observer; even when people such as Leon Smith or her father look back at her, they don't see her as a subject, but rather as an object through which to obtain what they want—her paintings or what little money she possesses. Lotus sees Gasparine as a subject the way an art critic would seek to understand an aesthetic experience by looking at something that elicits imagination and impression. Gasparine, in turn, forms an impression of Lotus based on what she thinks she perceives as fact—Lotus' status as a college teacher and all-around stoic and morally upstanding member of society.

Gasparine's concept of morality becomes synonymous with the elevated social status that she strives to attain. She initially perceives Lotus as having always belonged to that social class, which goes against what Pater argues in the first half of *The Renaissance*. Pater claims that art should be free of any moral implications: "Art, then, is

thus always striving to be independent of the mere intelligence, to become a matter of pure perception, to get rid of its responsibilities to its subject or material” (108).

Johnstone conversely uses her portrayal of Gasparine and Lotus’s subjective impressions to push against the ideas of art being amoral. Gasparine’s and Lotus’s actions parallel Lee’s thoughts in *Juvenilia*—that past and present experiences, both good and bad, need to be acknowledged: “And therefore also ... we must look at many things that are not beautiful; we must bring home to our feelings many things that are not good ...” (19). The social roles portrayed by Gasparine and Lotus occur outside of the limitations previously experienced by female writers during this time. The focus on visual feeling as a mode for perceiving social status as illustrated by the female characters in *A Sunless Heart* is indicative of the social and visual change for female writers during the Aesthetic Movement.

In the Conclusion to *The Renaissance*, Pater posits the idea that experience and reflection constitute an individual’s subjective impressions. Reflection is the process by which an individual reaches an understanding of what he/she sees:

But when reflexion begins to play upon those objects they are dissipated under its influence ... Experience, already reduced to a group of impressions, is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without.” (187)

Johnstone engages with Pater’s notion of reflection and subjective experience through Lotus’s conviction that she cannot attain social elevation. Despite Gasparine’s perception



of Lotus as successful and independent, Lotus only sees herself as morally corrupt, which is why she cannot accept Gasparine's perception as accurate. Gasparine sees Lotus's house, her job, her clothes, and the material things she possesses as symbols of Lotus's successful social elevation. Gasparine even entertains the possibility that she can attain that level of success; however, Lotus's own self-reflection causes her to reject her new-found social status.

Whereas Gasparine engages in outward-facing reflection as explained through the earlier analysis of her questioning of Leon's character, Lotus engages in self-reflection more openly through her conversations with other characters throughout the novel. Lotus remarks on the differences between herself and Mona: "I don't know how old I am; but when I was eighteen, I was very, very, very old" (107). She alludes to the exchange that happened in the garden with her sister's husband when she was younger as she sits on the balcony of her current residence with Mona commenting that Mona makes choices based on "sentiment, emotion, and passion" while Lotus's own experiences have made her cautious of other people's intentions (107).

A notable reflective conversation where Johnstone weaves together gender and social class is Lotus's fraught exchange with Mona regarding Mona's emotional development and Lotus's belief that Mona will lose interest in Lotus once she enters into the world and becomes bound by society's expectations. She fears that Mona's gaze will be redirected to the male figure: "In a few years you will find a man is the right and legal object of these hysterics—you would have found it out long ago, but your beauty has made you proud and scornful" (107). Lotus's reflection casts her as possessing a similar

personality to Mona, but as Lotus later notes, it is her experiences that cause her to question her social status. At this point, Lotus has reached the type of emotional maturity that Mona has not yet achieved—the type that Lee says, once achieved, allows an individual to understand their visual-emotional responses: “In a hundred ways; and less perhaps from our additional experience of the world than from a greater maturity within ourselves; for external matters would not affect us were it not for a certain change in us” (*Juvenilia* 12). The conversation here between Lotus and Mona bridges the connection between the assimilation of physical and emotional experiences which are composed of past experiences between two people.

Lotus’s own social elevation mirrors Gasparine’s rise from poverty while her emotional growth juxtaposes her perception of Mona’s youthful naivety about relationships and feelings as shown through Johnstone’s portrayal of aesthetic moments in each character’s life. Pater theorizes that impressions are captured in moments, the perception of which are limited by the individual observer:

Analysis goes a step further still, and assures us that those impressions of the individual mind to which, for each one of us, experience dwindles down, are in perpetual flight; that each of them is limited by time. ... To such a tremulous wisp constantly re-forming itself on the stream, to a single sharp impression, with a sense in it, a relic more or less fleeting, of such moments gone by, what is real in our life fines itself down. (188)

The ideas from this passage of *The Renaissance* play a crucial role in Lotus’s decision to help Gasparine out of poverty after Gasper passes away. In the passage above, Pater

conjectures that impressions have limits marked by time and that they are eventually reduced to a single impression which is reformed based on the accumulation of other moments in a person's life. Based on this idea, Lotus's single impression of the complexities of social status arises from the garden scene—the consequences of which weigh heavily on her during this conversation with Mona. This conversation is also where Gasparine's social state is brought to Lotus's attention when Mona tells her that Gasparine is living in dire circumstances with little money, hardly any food, and without warm clothes. When contextualized with Pater's ideas, it is Lotus's constant reflection on and impression of her social situation that serves as the catalyst for her desire to help Gasparine when she is in a similar economic and social situation.

The moments that form the impressions of Lotus and Gasparine as well as their thoughts on economic and social elevation are aesthetic moments. Pater asserts that impressions are thoughts or beliefs that exist in the present moment and comprise a boundless number of past moments. These "relics" serve as a reminder of what is real—what moments exist in the present life of the observer. Johnstone portrays Lotus's relics as aesthetic moments—the impression of the garden scene which is described by Gasparine as looking like a painting, and Ladybird (Lotus's daughter) who is described as beautiful but who also values vanity over love according to Lotus (109). Johnstone draws parallels between Pater's take on aesthetic moments when describing Lotus's impressions via her relics. Perhaps telling of how she feels about art existing as an amoral entity, Johnstone plays with the disparity between Lotus's impressions and the attainment of her social elevation. Lotus constantly rejects her social advancement by often telling Mona,

Gasparine, and even her suitor that she could easily be cast back into her prior circumstances. Lotus again fixes herself as being like Gasparine saying, “You do not wish to be other than you are; it would only alter the circumstances and the work, not the dead heart within you ... Pray that you may suffer every woe but that. That is what we suffer, we that are born old” (130). Although Lotus sees herself in Gasparine’s situation, it is this moment when Gasparine begins her own social ascent.

The themes presented in this chapter including aesthetic sense, individual visual-emotional response, the perception of objects as indicative of aesthetic beauty, and the visual feeling elicited within different spheres are all aesthetic characteristics valued by the characters in Johnstone’s novel; namely, Gasparine, Lotus, and to an extent, Leon Smith. Johnstone contrasts Lee’s concept of moral Aestheticism as shown by the sympathetic actions of Gasparine and Lotus with Pater’s concept of art for art’s sake demonstrates how the perception of beauty and the understanding of beauty through past experience contribute each character’s social mobility. Despite Gasparine’s perception of Lotus as successful and independent, Lotus only sees herself as morally corrupt, which is why she cannot accept Gasparine’s perception as accurate. Whereas Hardy’s characters are unable to achieve permanent social elevation, Johnstone’s use of moral aesthetic characteristics (i.e., her depiction of the beauty of the garden scene parallels her description of Lotus’s physical pain and Gasparine’s sympathy toward Lotus when she realizes what is happening) allow her character’s to attain social elevation in a way that is recognized by both the observer and the observed as the characters see each other from an individual point of view, from within the private sphere, and from the outside world.

The characters' own self-perceptions of their aesthetic qualities enable them to recognize changes in their own social status, which informs their visual feelings of their subjective impressions of each other. Furthermore, Johnstone complicates Pater's notion of Aestheticism by creating a dichotomy in relation to Lotus's rejection of her elevated social status and Gasparine's malleable acceptance of her own social ascent. Gasparine's impressions of her own social status and her ability to attain social elevation is largely formed by her impression of Lotus as a successful, independent woman who came from similar poverty-stricken circumstances. Johnstone effectively employs Pater's theories on Aestheticism—primarily, art for art's sake and the subjective impression in relation to reflection and the subjective experience to show how an amoral/apolitical view of the aesthetic nature of art does not work for these characters. Lotus and Gasparine are both bound to their social status by their experiences. Lotus's understanding is one that is fleeting and makes her feel like she is always one bad experience away from being put back to where she started while Gasparine builds her impressions of her social elevation on her inaccurate perception of Lotus's successes and often overlooks Lotus's own perception of her social circumstances.

## CONCLUSION

In these experiments with convex glasses, important as they were to eye and intellect, there was little food for the sympathetic instincts which create the changes in a life, and are therefore more particularly the question here. That which is the foreground and measuring base of one perspective draught may be the vanishing point of another perspective draught, while yet they are both draughts of the same thing. (Thomas Hardy, *Two on a Tower*)

It was, said the critics, the most powerful presentation of thought-life, of the subjective, that had ever yet been given, in form or colour; for in the eyes of the strange face one seemed to see all that there was to see. (Edith Johnstone, *A Sunless Heart*)

When analyzed together, Hardy's and Johnstone's novels ask readers to consider the implications of scientific and aesthetic theories on an individual person's subjective impressions—for example, why are Lady Constantine and Swithin unable to see past each other's material circumstances, and why are they bound by organic memory in such a way that they can never achieve their desired social mobility together? Although both novels have tragic endings with the deaths of Lady Constantine and Lotus, how are Gasparine and Lotus able to attain the social elevation not afforded to Hardy's characters?

The opening passage of my thesis begins with Hardy's comparison of how a person sees versus what a person sees; or more specifically, with a scientific comparison of how and what a person sees based on the observer's perception of organic memory. The driving force of Hardy's narrative is Swithin's and Lady Constantine's quest to see each other—for Swithin to be able to imagine himself in Lady Constantine's circumstances, and vice versa. If each character can imagine themselves in the other person's circumstance, then they can begin to understand each other. However, Swithin

and Lady Constantine are never able to achieve a true understanding of one another. In the narrator's words, "there was little food for the sympathetic instincts which create the changes in a life" (250). Hardy is saying that in order for one individual to truly understand another, they must express mutual sympathy toward each other's circumstances and feelings—something which Lady Constantine and Swithin, as the narrator points out, are never able express toward each other.

By contrast, the last sentence of *A Sunless Heart* ends with the narrator commenting on how Gasparine's painting of Lotus was perceived by aesthetic critics as "the most powerful presentation of thought-life, of the subjective, that had ever yet been given" (Johnstone 198). Johnstone mentions how Gasparine's depiction of Lotus's eyes in the painting reveal more than just beauty as they "seemed to see all that there was to see" (198). Unlike Swithin and Lady Constantine, Gasparine and Lotus sympathize with one another's circumstances and their feelings about their circumstances. This leads Lotus to actively take steps toward physically removing Gasparine from her material circumstances: "It was at this moment that Lotus, looking up at the dreary windows, said wistfully, 'Alas! Poor soul! ... This is your hour.... No one can help you now—no one. Later, I'll come and try'" (Johnstone 93). Lotus's decision here to elevate Gasparine leads to Gasparine's action to elevate Lotus beyond death through "The Lotus Flower" painting. The notion of an individual being led toward an action or way of thinking is also developed by Vernon Lee: "It is a question of being led; and in which direction; of being led towards light; for follow, in one way or another, with some result. ... Therefore, it behoves us to know what the world is; what we ourselves are; above all,

what we think, and why we think it” (*Juvenilia* 19). Lotus leads Gasparine away from her material circumstances—away from the social circumstances into which she was born.

Hardy’s text is indicative of the limitations associated with ways of seeing and perceiving based on an individual’s material and social circumstances while Johnstone’s text merges elements of science and aesthetic theory (i.e., organic memory and individual subjective impression and experience) to demonstrate the conditions by which a person can achieve social mobility. With these aesthetic aspirations of social advancement (through an individual’s subjective impression, their expression of sympathy, and their perception of the beautiful and unbeautiful) came extreme and far-reaching anxieties regarding the collision of science and Aestheticism during the fin de siècle exemplified by Max Nordau in his controversial book, *Degeneration* (1895). Prior to Nordau, this had been a topic of contentious debate among theorists such as Walter Pater and Vernon Lee (and their critics). Nordau sought to harness scientific and aesthetic theories to indict Aestheticism and Decadence which he saw as morally and physically degenerate. In the first chapter of *Degeneration*, titled, “Fin-De-Siècle,” Nordau takes issue with the term used to signify the turn of the century arguing that the term represents a mood or ailment found in certain portions of the upper class citizens: “But however silly a term fin-de-siècle may be, the mental constitution which it indicates is actually present in influential circles. ... Quite otherwise is the fin-de-siècle mood. It is the impotent despair of a sick man, who feels himself dying by inches in the midst of an eternally living nature blooming insolently for ever” (Nordau 3). Nordau argues that the intellectual perception of art (i.e., the social and moral implications of an individual’s subjective visual



perception discussed by aesthetic critics such as Pater and Lee) contributes to the biological and moral degeneration of the consumers and observers of such art. He argues that all art should have moral implications, but when an individual perceives something ugly as “morally beautiful,” it is because they sympathize with the emotions conveyed by the artist thereby leading both the artist and the critic to become degenerates.

Nordau’s commentary regarding how sympathy leads Aesthetes to become degenerates spurred a scathing critique from Lee. In his chapter, “Ego-Mania,” Nordau references French artist Jean-Francois Raffaelli’s fondness for depicting inebriated peasants and workers in his paintings, and Dostoevsky’s portrayal of a gruesome murder in *Crime and Punishment* in which the protagonist, Raskolnikov, kills Alyona Ivanovna (Nordau 331). He comments on the emotions elicited by such works upon the observer/readers saying, “These emotions are beautiful. Sympathy with them gives us a feeling of pleasure. Against this feeling the displeasure caused by the repulsiveness of the work cannot prevail. ... Those who share the emotions of the author, and hence are with him attracted and pleasurably excited by what is repugnant, diseased and evil, are the degenerate” (331).

Yet, if Nordau launched a “scientific” attack on Aestheticism and Decadence, Vernon Lee’s rebuttal sought to revalue Aestheticism—at least her moral vision thereof—precisely on the grounds that it could enable sympathetic connections and thereby ameliorate society’s flaws—an idea that Lee develops throughout a number of her works including *Juvenilia* (1887), *Althea* (1893), and “Deterioration of Soul” (1896). In the opening paragraph of her essay, “Deterioration of Soul,” Lee rebooks Nordau’s

attack on the Aesthetes and his thoughts regarding how sympathy of the individual observer functions in forming one's subjective impressions by accusing Nordau of a "lack of sympathy" along with a slew of other degenerate characteristics (Lee, "Deterioration" 928). Although Lee does acknowledge that Nordau is right to fear degeneracy, she argues that degeneration is a form of imperfection that could apply to anyone within a society—not just Decadent artists.

Imperfections, according to Lee, can be sociological and/or biological, both of which are either unacknowledged or confined to "separate categories of persons" by Nordau (Lee, "Deterioration" 932). Lee argues that it is normal for imperfections to permeate a society, because those imperfections balance each other out:

So far as we know the world's history or present condition, we cannot be certain of any human creature living in circumstances, material or social, to which he was, or is, perfectly adjusted; nay, leading a life which was not, in one way or another, too difficult for his organism, what we call either on the bodily or spiritual plane, unwholesome; and this imperfection of relations between the individual and his mode of existence would necessarily prevent his leaving behind him physical or spiritual offspring, human bodies, souls, habits, notions, which were otherwise than imperfect also; imperfection dwindling for ever, but present always, and always liable to momentary increase. (932)

In this excerpt, Lee attempts to connect the masses to the individual by saying that no individual persons within a society are going to be content with and perfectly adapted to

their circumstances, and each individual passes that on in some way through their material, social, and biological circumstances.

Lee's extensive thoughts on the individual, friendship, and the role that past experiences play in shaping a person's subjective impressions and visual perception represent her attempt to understand Aestheticism in relation to social and material reality. In the beginning pages of *Juvenilia*, Lee directly addresses Pater's novel, *Marius the Epicurean*, writing, "The book is to my mind the most charming, and in a way, consolatory, of any latterly written, precisely because it takes on back to those first years when the good and the beautiful seemed as the concave and the convex of all things" (7). Lee notes that on her second reading of "Marius," her feelings begin to change as she now understands that there are "ugly" things in the world (9). Both Pater and Lee portray the aesthetic experience as one in which an individual perceives the beautiful and the ugly. In some ways, this transcends art for art's sake because the aesthetic experience becomes focused on the internalization of the visual-emotional response. Lee comments, "In a hundred ways; and less perhaps from our additional experience of the world than from a greater maturity within ourselves; for external circumstances would not affect us were it not for a certain change in us" (12). She argues that "visible objects" become something more—something that starts to "pain us with the force of great class evils" (12). In other words, art becomes more than just something to see, it becomes something to think about. It prompts the observer to undergo an internal reflection where we consider ourselves in relation to others.

I suggest that the ideas relating to the moral aesthetic experience, which developed out of Pater's theories of Aestheticism, and which were articulated by fin-de-siècle theorists including Lee and Nordau help us to understand the portrayal of anxieties surrounding the visual-emotional responses to and perceptions of social class in Hardy's and Johnstone's texts. Lotus's active role in removing Gasparine from her material circumstances works to elevate Gasparine out of poverty. The deliberate actions driven by the understanding of Johnstone's characters is what sets them apart from Hardy's protagonists. Although the actions of Hardy's characters remove them from certain situations, their actions fail to remove them from their material circumstance because their actions are individualistic. Put another way, in Hardy's novel "vision" is always tied to the one who sees and always keeps the observed at a distance, whereas vision in *A Sunless Heart* becomes a means of drawing closer to and sharing the experiences of the observer. When considered together, these texts demonstrate late nineteenth century Victorian writers' and thinkers' high-stakes claim on the importance of understanding visual scientific and aesthetic theories.

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