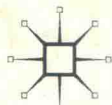


British Women Writers and the Short Story, 1850–1930

Reclaiming the Short Story

KATE KRUEGER



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Reclaiming Social Space

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*For the brilliant women – teachers, scholars, friends, and
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Introduction: Feminine Occupations

'I will begin by saying, for the encouragement of would-be writers, that there never was a greater opening for short stories than at present, for magazines multiply nowadays faster than do good writers.' So begins the encouraging columnist of 'How Women May Earn a Living – As a Short Story Writer' in the 21 March 1896 edition of *Woman's Life*.¹ By the turn of the century, short stories seemed to be everywhere. Evolving out of the explosion in periodical publishing beginning in the 1850s and continuing into the twentieth century, the genre of the short story afforded women an unprecedented opportunity to launch their careers as writers. Nevertheless, the *Woman's Life* columnist's instructions for the would-be woman short story writer are rife with warnings. She recalls a conversation with a plagued magazine editor who desired to know 'a sure recipe for getting rid of the unknown lady writer, when she has managed by some occult device to gain admission into one's office'?² Despite the dramatic increase in women writers, in 1896, there remains a sense that the appearance of a determined woman in an editor's office is an act of trespass; a surreptitious, suspect, and ominous phenomenon.

Gendered spaces – locations wherein social interactions are governed by expectations surrounding masculine and feminine behaviors – are necessarily fluid and complex, varying according to time, location, and the acts that occur within them. Defining gendered space is thus a process that is also always in process. For example, a Victorian woman standing alone on the street awaiting an omnibus in London violates codes of conduct because she is unchaperoned in a public arena that in mid-Victorian society is defined as predominately male. As a result, she might be misconstrued by police as a prostitute 'loitering' in wait for a salacious business proposition. Such a woman could subsequently

be subject to arrest and, in the years between the enactment of the Contagious Diseases Act in 1864 and its repeal in 1886, possibly forced to undergo a gynecological examination. However, the uproar surrounding mistaken identities and the mistreatment of women in such locations, including protests published in such popular newspapers as the *Pall Mall Gazette*, mocked the dangerous naiveté of police who made such erroneous judgments, demonstrating that many different women actually occupied the streets of Victorian London.³ While space can become freighted with associative meanings that have implications for culture at large, in reality, it cannot be so easily regulated. As geographer Doreen Massey explains, space is designated through both the lived practices and the symbolic meanings that are attached to it.⁴ Both concrete acts and the representations of acts within certain spaces inevitably affect the way that gender is constructed and understood. Space and gender are connected, then, by the way we experience locations in their relation to the bodies and behaviors that occupy them.

This tension is magnified by the revisionary potential of the short story. *British Women Writers and the Short Story, 1850–1930: Reclaiming Social Space* explores the way in which women writers pen heroines who surmount the limitations of their prescribed roles by redefining their boundaries and, in so doing, revise dominant narratives of femininity. Such short stories begin to establish alternative narratives of occupation. Spinsters reside by family hearths; wives flirt with ghosts in family gardens; New Women masquerade as working girls on omnibuses; settler women shore up fences; and transient writers wander through streets. My assessment of the representation of social space within the short story attends to both the formal capacities of the short story and writers' larger engagement with their own sociopolitical moment. These writers' attempts to narrate transgressive experiences deeply engage with the actual and imaginative borders that demarcate women's lives during this period. Consequently, when I look at vivid depictions of physical spaces through the lens of cultural geography, my argument moves away from the artificial and over-used abstract dichotomy of public and private spheres. Specific architectural and environmental features of space – the parlor, the threshold, the omnibus, the stairwell, the street – resonate with larger cultural concerns about the place of women in society.

Because the short story's compressed narrative occurs on a narrow stage, setting becomes more than a benign backdrop. Instead, spaces are crucial in the short story because they accrue symbolic significance. The locations of characters' metamorphoses become metaphoric and literal

sites of crisis wherein characters often find themselves in a world made suddenly unfamiliar. The social space embedded in a story provides the symbolic frame that, when breached, can become the catalyst of characters' realizations. I examine how the short story provides women writers a way to challenge the cultural codes of society by depicting normative spaces as sites of crisis. These short stories hinge upon catalytic moments that urge protagonists to disrupt the spaces that press conventional behaviors and feminine identities upon them.

My analysis engages with the architectural, social, and historical circumstances that shape women's experiences, while I offer equal attention to the generic innovations of their short fiction. I intend to provoke discussion about the strategies of narrative construction, the revision of spatial rhetoric, and the negotiations within the literary marketplace through which women writers were able to produce popular and publishable fiction that was also unconventional in both form and function. My goal is to transform scholarly understanding of Victorian and modernist literary history by revealing the early political dimensions of the short story and by recovering a body of those fictions which were visible in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literary marketplace, though many have disappeared from our own.

Numerous critics have recognized the outlet that the short story has offered women writers. Stemming from Frank O'Connor's influential description of the short story as a form focused on submerged populations, characters on the fringes of society, and an intense awareness of human loneliness,⁵ critics have segued easily into a feminist reworking of that premise. Ellen Burton Harrington and Dean Baldwin similarly assert that the short story can serve feminist ends because it invites writers to 'plumb alienation and repression in the symbolic subtext'⁶ and, in doing so, provides women writers a mechanism to redefine their roles and desires.⁷ Emma Liggins, Andrew Maunder, and Ruth Robbins ground the short story's feminist potential in its freedom from the novelistic sway of the marriage plot; women writing the short story could consequently 'explore new ways of being' and '[diagnose] the problems of femininity'.⁸ Clare Hanson uses the term 'squint vision' to articulate the way in which women writers see things differently from men and express their alienation from presiding cultural expectations, 'frightening in its intensity', that would otherwise remain hidden.⁹ Such commentary exemplifies what has become a basic assumption in analyses of the relationship of the short story to women writers. Due to its qualities of symbolic suggestiveness, intensity, and rejection of novelistic premises and structures, the short story provides women a venue

in which to represent their alienation from dominant ideologies of femininity and, at the same time, to offer alternative definitions. I begin in agreement with the assertion that women writers had something to gain from writing the short story. But, that premise is incomplete. The short story as a genre, in turn, gained something from the contributions of women writers. Such women were innovators, shaping the form through their creative aesthetics as it slowly became recognized as a legitimate and autonomous genre.

From decade to decade, women writers commented upon the controversial issues of the moment through their rapid production of topical short fiction. The 'Woman Question' – an ongoing debate regarding woman's role and proper place in society – raged in print throughout the nineteenth century and subsequently influenced ongoing concerns regarding women's sociopolitical identities well into the twentieth century. A phrase introduced into the British lexicon early in the Victorian period, mentioned as early as 1833, it gained currency as a general term regarding the expansion of women's rights and roles in a variety of contexts.¹⁰ I track a corresponding relation between women writers' representations of transgressive women in short fiction and a series of gendered sociocultural anxieties including increases in the number of unmarried women; agitation for marital rights; *fin de siècle* controversies surrounding the influx of professional urban women in newly industrialized cities; and crises of British Imperial identity due to the expansion and dissolution of the Empire. The women writers of this study address these contemporary debates in their works. They depict female protagonists surmounting the limitations of their prescribed roles by redefining their literal boundaries.

By offering disruptions in seemingly already-constituted entities of femininity and masculinity, women can actually rewrite themselves and the world. Pierre Bourdieu's 'Social Space and Symbolic Power' articulates the way in which social reality is an object of perception. The social world, perceived as natural, is 'essentially a product of the internalization of the structures of that world'.¹¹ In other words, we are unable to apprehend gender or class distinctions as artificial constructions because we have internalized our own constructed system – a recursive loop that entraps us in structures of performance in which associated locations function as symbols. *British Women Writers and The Short Story* lays bare the way in which certain locations accrue 'naturalized' social codes and function, simultaneously, as social signs. For instance, Chapter 1 explores the way in which the fireside becomes linked to the bourgeois family and concomitantly becomes exclusionary, barring

those outside that classed family circle. The work of the chapters is to show how the appropriation of those spaces within short stories that dramatize moments of crisis – the spinster sitting by the hearth divulging her secret losses – divorces those spaces from their former symbolic associations. In doing so, such short stories expose the constructed nature of everyday life, a realization that can affirm the humanity of characters that extends beyond their prescriptive roles.

The fictive reclamation of coded social spaces by women writers exhibits the internal manipulation of systems that Michel de Certeau argues is central to the way in which subjects resist assimilation and make room for divergent practices. He claims that 'innumerable ways of playing' and 'foiling' the space instituted by others 'characterize the stubborn, resistant activity of groups which, since they lack their own space, have to get along in a network of already established forces and representations'.¹² I apply such an approach to consider the ways in which women writers use the short story to manipulate language and depict alternative practices that reform the established order of social space. The protagonists of these women short story writers engage in play, invasion, subterfuge, and refusal. In doing so, they alter their given world and open up the possibility to construct others.

Writing as a form of discourse is wildly varied and provides opportunities for disagreement and dissent, for undercutting and reshaping norms, just as it can confirm, consolidate, and perpetuate them. I adopt Dorothy Smith's conception of femininity as 'a complex of actual relations vested in texts'. Smith resists the idea that women are subordinated to a normative order; instead, 'social forms of consciousness, femininity included, can be examined as actual practices' while attending simultaneously to the way in which texts are embedded in, and organize, such practices.¹³ In other words, the social interactions that occur in reality are established and confirmed by texts people consume and circulate. They consequently structure people's everyday worlds, and yet there remains room for individual action and reaction. Smith points out that by the late nineteenth century, questions of femininity had been raised to a level of theoretical debate, but ideologies of masculinity and femininity remained 'explicit, publicly spoken and written'.¹⁴ Although gender is made to appear to be a fixed code of relations, it is actually a series of actions and interactions – including those occurring in and through discourse as well as those in physical space – that emerge from particular sociohistorical contexts. Gender as an ideology is in constant flux and is enacted in a multitude of individual ways. Fiction that depicted the breakdown of such ideological

frames, however, could actively expose the change and transformation that enliven social practices and, consequently, constitute that change as part and parcel of gendered experience. Women writers played an active part in producing social change by representing it.

Throughout the Victorian and modernist period, masculine and feminine roles were consistently framed in a variety of texts as something complementary, innate, and absolute. John Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies*, lectures delivered in 1864 and later republished and widely recirculated in book form, exemplifies such rhetoric. Seth Koven acknowledges that scholars ubiquitously cite this work as 'the classic statement of the Victorian ideology of separate spheres – the belief that men and women ought to occupy [separate spheres] . . . men in the competitive public world of politics and work, women in the harmonious private arena of family life'.¹⁵ The prevalence of *Sesame and Lilies* in such discussions is for good reason: it was a best-seller often given to girls, regularly offered as a school prize, and became 'a fixture in middle-class homes'.¹⁶ Ruskin is a useful test case for the tensions that arise within the promotion of Victorian ideology of the spatial and moral complementarity of men and women. Although academics have understood Ruskin's writing as the exemplar of public and private spheres, he in fact anchors his construction of gender to specific spaces. Ruskin demonstrates a consistent commitment to transforming actual spaces into idealized ones. These locations are specific, concrete, and weighted through arguments that accentuate the use-value of certain spaces. One understands Ruskin's conception of femininity if one can comprehend the purpose of a woman in a garden.

Ruskin dedicates the second part of *Sesame and Lilies*, the essay 'Of Queens' Gardens', to outlining the ideal education and role of women in both the household and the country at large. He identifies these in vague terms as 'the territories over which [women reign]'.¹⁷ The house is ruled by her and becomes the shelter from 'all terror, doubt, and division', and if any of the 'anxieties of outer life penetrate into it', if the 'hostile society of the outer world is allowed . . . to cross the threshold, it ceases to be home'. The home is 'a sacred place', a 'vestal temple', and 'a temple of the hearth'.¹⁸ Ruskin offers an array of abstract language to inscribe the home as an ideal rather than solely a physical location. And yet, Ruskin constantly thinks about women in spatial terms. He yokes them to spaces that serve as signifiers of femininity and womanly action. So, the hearth stands in for 'the nobler shade and light' as a beacon in a stormy sea.¹⁹ While this interior structure is given some attention, Ruskin focuses most intently on the garden as the physical location wherein he sees these ideals embodied and enacted.

Throughout the essay, Ruskin offers a barrage of botanical and feminine associations, culminating in his vision of the power of 'a tender and delicate woman' with 'a child at her breast':

This is wonderful – oh, wonderful! – to see her, with every innocent feeling fresh within her, go out in the morning into her garden to play with the fringes of its guarded flowers, and lift their heads when they are drooping, with her happy smile upon her face, and no cloud upon her brow, because there is a little wall around her place of peace²⁰

Ruskin's rose-covered wall bars the woman from seeing and acknowledging what is beyond: 'wild grass, to the horizon [torn] up by the agony of men'.²¹ The garden, then, becomes both the fertile setting of the woman's nurturing impulse and a guarded location. The walls protect her from both physical threat and from admitting worldly knowledge. Ruskin's separate spheres are abstracted, and yet not entirely so – his theories of gender are anchored in the garden and socialized by and through the woman's wifely body. He consequently draws his notions from this parcel of space and the body that occupies it.

These are the very spatial associations that a series of women writers disrupted. In 1866, only a year after the first complete edition of *Sesame and Lilies* was published, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, a writer I explore in my second chapter, included 'Eveline's Visitant' in her periodical *Belgravia*. Eveline embodies much the same function as Ruskin's ideal, and she, too, is relegated to a garden by her husband for her protection from the dangers of the outside world. And yet, for her, the walls become a sign of her imprisonment even as they fail to keep her safe. The shifting signification of such spatial metaphors underscores the way in which women reshape this gendered rhetoric. Women writers avail themselves of the same mechanisms to redefine women's locations in their revision of gendered spatial ideology. They use concrete details and associations with architectural features to dramatize alternative actions that baldly reclaim those locations as sites of flux.

Ruskinian gender ideology does not limit the associative properties of femininity to the house or proscribe women from public action. Ruskin uses the body of the woman to extend these ideals past the threshold of the home and into those public spaces she then transforms into the domestic. Deborah Epstein Nord points out that Ruskin pries the notion of Home loose from 'the circumscribed realm of the domestic and the cloistered dwelling place of the family' so that it is 'never quite congruent with the private sphere'.²² But, while Ruskin supports the

idea of women as public reformers, this is consistently envisioned as an extension of the home atmosphere and always tied to a revision of space. For example, he recommends that women perform public service in order to ‘help in the cooking of poorer families . . . coaxing and tempting them into tidy and pretty ways, and pleading for well-folded tablecloths, however coarse, and for a flower or two out of the garden to strew on them’.²³ The gross limitations of Ruskin’s vision of women are immediately apparent. He advocates the public work of women in order to encourage the use of tablecloths and other trappings of what he considers to be the ideal eating space. Items stand in for ideology. Yet, despite such sanitizing rhetoric, some women writers recorded anti-theoretical visions of the slums and the behavior of women titillated by the act of slumming. For instance, Charlotte Mew’s turn-of-the-century short story ‘Passed’, which I analyze in Chapter 3, chronicles the misadventures of a woman who enters a slum and does nothing to alleviate or elevate it, using it instead for her own horrified musings. The notion that the woman in public can ordain the meaning of the locations she occupies, that she can simply embody and extend the ideologies that are pressed upon her body in private locations is, in a series of narratives including Mew’s, disproven as patently false. In such short stories, public social space is defined by personal interaction rather than reaction to an angelic woman, charged instead by the scores of bodies that occupy it.

Ruskin’s argumentation demonstrates the way in which an ideology comes into being and endures through a variety of legal and social discourses that give it life and then, through repetition, maintain it. Gender is assiduously produced and promoted. Works like ‘Of Queen’s Gardens’ repeat a series of associations that, over time, circulate as a set of social codes that accrue, creating and maintaining feminine and masculine roles as they attach to certain spaces. However, Ruskin wrote and circulated such a tract precisely because such assumptions were not autonomously maintained by the public; this ideology was not stable. Throughout the Victorian and modernist period, gender ideology that divested women of agency and relegated them to peripheral spaces was challenged in the courts, on the streets, and in fiction.

The short story, rather than the novel or nonfiction, lends itself to such disruptions due to its concentrated narrative power. The short story’s etymology begins, according to a bevy of critics, with its definition by Edgar Allan Poe in his 1842 review of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s ‘Twice-Told Tales’.²⁴ In it, he asserted that the short story was, indeed, a separate and unique genre whose primary traits included unity of