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Elisabeth Rose Gruner

University of Richmond, egruner@richmond.eduFollow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/english-faculty-publications>Part of the [Fiction Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

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Short Fiction by Women in the Victorian Literature Survey

Elisabeth Rose Gruner

The first time I taught a Victorian Literature survey, fresh out of a curriculum integration workshop in graduate school, I taught ten authors: five male and five female. One student evaluation after the course was over complained that despite the promise of “great” Victorian writers, half of those on the syllabus were women. While this did take place in the dark ages of the early nineties, I still find myself, as I design my syllabi, caught in the familiar conundrum as to what to teach, what to cut, and why. In my case, it seems simple: The Victorian period is characterized by great authors who are also women, so I try to teach them. Lest that seem flip, I hasten to add that one important element in the course is interrogating the notion of greatness, or of canonicity: Should we read what the Victorians actually read, or the texts that have become part of our intellectual history since the 1950s? Should we teach a story of the development of English, or, alternatively, the literary history of English engagement with its empire or, possibly, the rise of the professions? Faith and doubt, the Woman Question, Industrialization—the terms label sections of our anthologies and help to structure our courses. A truly integrated survey would cover all these issues and more, with authors representing the varied genders, sexualities, classes, and races of writers in Victorian England.

In that case, my course is not truly integrated. I do, however, value historical coverage, and attempt to acquaint students with at least some of the aesthetic, political, and social issues of the day. The course catalog description need not limit our design of a syllabus, of course, but at a time when the whole issue of “English studies” is on the table, when articles in *Profession* ask whether we really know what we are talking about when we talk about English,¹ the catalog description gives an indication of what we think we’re talking about. In my Victorian literature survey course, I am asked to select “representative” works for my students. “Representing” a literary period in fourteen weeks, however—leaving aside the theoretical problems with the task—can be daunting. No longer can I blithely assume that whatever’s in the anthology will simply do the trick; I’ve participated in too many graduate school discussions on canon formation and the exigencies of anthology-production, read too many works that were never included in an anthology, to do so. Even so, there are also the practicalities of the semester, and of student life, and of modern technology: there simply is not time to teach everything (could we even decide

what “everything” is, or should be), students do not like to read off of photocopies, and the machines may break down anyway.

When considering the difficult question of what to teach, then, and what to cut, I have been assisted by the availability of short stories by women authors. Of course, Victorian short fiction may still seem like an oxymoron to many, who, like me, were not trained in short fiction in graduate school, and who associate the Victorian period with prolixity. Indeed, an MLA search when I began this project turned up only ten references when the terms “Victorian” and “short fiction” were paired. In fact, though, the short story thrived in the period, and offered a publication outlet to a variety of writers, both canonical and not. Glennis Stephenson’s recent anthology for Broadview, *Nineteenth-Century Stories by Women*, brings some of these to our attention; Harriet Devine Jump recently edited a similar anthology for Routledge, and other collections should be in the works.² In fact the major anthologists are not blind to these changes: For example, Norton’s most recent edition of its classic anthology of English literature, as well as the newer Longman anthology of British Literature, both include more short fiction in their Victorian offerings than ever before.³ In addition there are at least three major reasons for this growing interest in Victorian short fiction. One, the form itself is extremely teachable. Short stories, like shorter poems, can be read at one sitting and discussed, in depth, in one class period. Two, the form is vital to the period. Though we often focus on the longer works, most of the major novelists also wrote short stories, and many authors published exclusively or nearly so in this genre. In order to provide a full picture of the many genres of literature popular in the period, short stories are essential. Third, it is a form particularly congenial to women writers—as the examples of Elizabeth Gaskell, Margaret Oliphant, and Mary Elizabeth Braddon, to name only three, make clear.

I frequently teach stories by all three, and other writers, but in this essay I’ll focus on only two, Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s “Good Lady Ducayne” and Margaret Oliphant’s “A Story of a Wedding Tour.”⁴ Both stories easily connect with the themes of the survey and with other works in this and similar courses, but can also function to comment on, enlarge, and revise those themes and to call into question our assumptions about those works and the period as a whole.

The course syllabus is a fairly traditional one, emphasizing historical coverage. We no longer require our students to take a traditional British literature survey, preferring to give them a slightly deeper acquaintance with fewer works in a selection of historical survey courses, thematically organized courses, and courses on genre. This course, then, does not fall into a sequence with other courses in British literature; it is in fact likely to be the only course

that deals with British literature between 1660 and 1900 that some of our students take.

While I do not always teach from an anthology, I have found it useful as so many do, for the breadth of its coverage and the variety of its selections. I organize the course chronologically, not because I necessarily believe in “progress,” but because I find it is a useful organizing category. My focus in the course is first formalist, next historical. I emphasize close reading skills, remembering that I am trying to build skills for English majors to transport to their other coursework. However, I try to put the works in historical context, both the purely literary-historical contexts of who read whom, and what allusions are you catching, to the more cultural and political history offered in the anthology headnotes, timelines, and other resources. The goal is to draw connections between the works, both thematic and formal; to give the students a sense that they are not simply reading a random assortment of works that happened to be published within a century or so of each other, but that they are seeing a variety of literary and social concerns expressed by a community of writers and thinkers. When we get to the Oliphant and Braddon stories it’s rather late in the term, and we already have quite a wealth of allusions built up, as well as a clear sense of the varieties of Victorian writing styles.

As the syllabus demonstrates, students spend much of the early part of the term reading several longer works, usually including some or all of *Aurora Leigh*, a Dickens novel, perhaps an Eliot novel, and sometimes all of *Sartor Resartus* or *In Memoriam* as well. In this particular term, they had also read a Gaskell short story by this time, and I later taught both Stevenson’s “Jekyll and Hyde” and Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Whereas Conrad has ended many a Victorian literature survey in the past, the implicit message has often been that it took until the end of the century for Victorian writers to learn compression or brevity. I have been guilty of the same easy dichotomizing; it is underscored, for example, by the presence of *In Memoriam* early in the semester, and Hopkins’s sonnets to close it out. However, students no longer ask about being “paid by the word” or make other uninformed contrasts between Victorian prolixity and modernist compression when they read short stories throughout the period (and, I might add, when they encounter *Ulysses* rather than *Dubliners* as their “representative” Joyce).

The sensation story “Good Lady Ducayne,” then, resonated for students with the mysteries of *Great Expectations* and the later sensationalism of *Jekyll and Hyde*. It is a tale of a young woman (Bella) who, engaged as a companion to the elderly woman of the title, finds herself mysteriously weakening in the lush and fecund atmosphere of the Italian Riviera. Befriended by a young English doctor and his sister, she is discovered to be the subject of a particularly unpleasant

experiment: Lady Ducayne's vicious doctor, Dr. Parravicini, is transfusing her to keep his client/patient alive. Braddon's narrative is distanced and ironic: Bella neither recognizes the danger she has been in nor the specifics of what has happened to her. Much of the story is carried on through her happily naïve letters to her mother, and she ends the story engaged to the young doctor, for whom "the word 'mother-in-law' holds no terrors."⁵

Oliphant's "A Story of a Wedding Tour" has a similarly distanced narrative style, and also focuses on the fortunes of a single young woman—otherwise, though, it initially seems to have little in common with Braddon's story. Janey, Oliphant's heroine, is married off within paragraphs of the story's opening; an orphan, her guardians have accepted a proposal for her that would not suit one of their own daughters, that of the rather disgusting, but wealthy, Mr. Rosenman—a somewhat stock Jew whose appetites quickly disgust Janey. Fortuitously separated from him when he gets off the train at a short stop during their honeymoon journey, Janey goes on to live an unnarrated ten years without him in a tiny French village she has come to almost at random via a local train line. The mother of a son (she is carrying him, but unaware of the pregnancy, when she and Rosenman are separated), she has established herself in this village when her husband suddenly reappears. Seeing her out of the window of the train, he returns only to die of a heart attack brought on by years of dissolute living, anger, and, finally, the sight of her. The story ends leaving her in the village, reflecting on her responsibility: "she had not blamed herself before; but now seemed to herself no less than the murderer of her husband: and could not forgive herself, nor get out of her ears the dreadful sound of that labouring breath."⁶ Far from celebrating her ultimate freedom, then, the story ends on a tragic note.

These brief summaries suggest only some of the richness of the tales. In class, students focused initially on the issue of the "independent woman" in the stories. Already familiar with the old dictum that the Victorian novel ends either in marriage or death, they were pleased to find an alternative future imagined for Janey, though they also noted the ways in which Oliphant qualifies that future with the lingering shadows of tragedy in the final paragraphs. Similarly, while they were romantically pleased by Bella's good fortune, they nonetheless recognized that she, despite her "independence" in seeking and finding work, finally ends her story as dependent and even ignorant as she has begun it; she is characterized by energy rather than wisdom. As one student claimed, Bella's stupidity is her strength. Another student, however, noted the generic differences between the two stories, and argued that, in the Braddon story, both Bella and Lady Ducayne are victims of a society that has no room for strong women; thus, Bella's life is compromised by Lady Ducayne, then Lady Ducayne

herself is villainized for her independent-minded actions. The students astutely noticed the limitations of both genre and chronology as they wished for more modern heroines, while recognizing the achievements that are visible here. Their ability to compare these characters with those they had encountered earlier—from the Lady of Shalott to Dinah Morris—enriched their readings of all the texts in the course.

While the anti-Semitism of “The Story of a Wedding Tour” and the vampirism of “Good Lady Ducayne” may seem to be their most salient features, in the context of the course these were less significant to my students. Indeed, few registered the anti-Semitism of the Oliphant story, not recognizing “Rosenman” as a distinctly Jewish name, nor his features as stereotypically Jewish. Similarly, many of our students have not yet been “taught” that sensationalism is cheap or less aesthetically valuable than, say, the suspense of a Dickens novel or the tragedy of an Eliot novel. Thus, I encountered few if any objections to these texts on those grounds. Rather, as I noted, they were keen to connect these with other texts we would read during the semester—perhaps, indeed, flattening out the significant aesthetic differences they encountered.

Using short stories allows me to develop a variety of the themes of the course with more complexity than simply relying on the *Norton* had done. For example, both stories deal with the impact of technology on modern life. Students recalled the “vast steam engine” metaphor that haunts *Sartor Resartus* as they considered what Oliphant means in the final paragraphs of “A Story of a Wedding Tour”: “the whole tragedy was one of the railway, the noisy carriages, the snorting locomotives.”⁷ The railway has of course brought freedom to Janey, and up until her husband’s return we have been encouraged to think of her freedom as a positive good; the narrator says, for example, “she found a niche in the little place which she filled perfectly.”⁸ However, the ten unnarrated years of her freedom pale, in the story and in our imaginations, when placed against the drama of her flight and eventual discovery. Students were frustrated by what they see as Oliphant’s ambivalence about Janey’s plight; they, like me, preferred to see her as freed twice by the railway rather than trapped as she seems to be in the conclusion. These frustrations, however, are part of the experience of reading literature from earlier periods: Just as we fail to find Dinah Morris as “liberated” as even her creator was, so we may be frustrated with Janey. It seems to be a fruitful frustration, though, that reminds us of the differences between ourselves and our predecessors.

The fact that both stories are set in “old” Europe but deal with “new” technology was also central to our discussions. Our earlier reading of *Aurora Leigh* may have conditioned my students to read for representations of the continent as fertile, a refuge from the bustle of modern England. However, the

luxurious overgrowth of the Italian Riviera tires Braddon's Bella: "southern" fecundity is too much for her, and she longs to return—with her English doctor/lover—to the tamer pleasures of Walworth. In this story technology is associated with the virulent overproduction of southern Europe—unlike the sterility it evokes in *Sartor*, but perhaps like the oddly naturalistic metaphors with which Dickens describes Coketown in *Hard Times* (the melancholy mad elephant, for example, which the steam engine's piston becomes, or the serpents of smoke that issue from the chimney).⁹ The technology in Braddon's story, though less a part of her readership's everyday life, creates an even greater sense of anxiety than Oliphant's railway. Dr. Parravicini's blood transfusions are represented as an intrusion of a dangerous new technology into the natural course of life. Good Lady Ducayne ("born the day Louis XVI was guillotined") is associated throughout the story with bringing life out of death; young Bella, whose life she slowly drains for her own, is associated with youth, naïveté, and growth.¹⁰ Bella is sexual, but it is a chaste sexuality she represents; significantly, she reads Scott and Dickens to her mistress, who prefers the racy French novels her maid provides.¹¹ Bella's young lover, Mr. Stafford, chastises Lady Ducayne in the final pages: "I think you have had your share of the sunshine and the pleasures of the earth, and that you should spend your few remaining days in repenting your sins and trying to make atonement for the young lives that have been sacrificed to your love of life."¹² Braddon offers an interesting twist on the vampire story; although Lady Ducayne, like so many other literary vampires, seems to represent the ancient world of continental Europe, she also—unlike them—embraces technology and uses it to further her own life rather than succumbing to it, as Stoker's vampires do. Technology is countered here by a natural love. Specifically, the mother-daughter bond that has motivated Bella throughout the story is retained to the end, as she returns first to her mother, second to a marriage—and a marriage, as we've noted, to a man who embraces his unknown mother-in-law as part of his wife.

Motherhood, then, that "natural" component of womanliness, seems to stand against technology in both stories, though in different ways. In a rare comment on Janey's interior life, the narrator notes that "sometimes, I think, she felt that if she had known the boy was coming she might have possessed her soul in patience, and borne even with Mr. Rosendale. But then at the time the decisive step was taken she did not know."¹³ This rare honesty about the relationship between maternity and identity contrasts significantly with what students had already read in *Adam Bede* and offers a comparison to Gaskell's "Lizzie Leigh." More specifically, Janey, who becomes a single mother and raises her child—unlike the fallen women of the earlier tales—may be redeemed by her maternity. Furthermore, she also imagines it as offering the potential to

redeem a loveless marriage. Her son figures prominently but ambiguously at the end of the story as well: "When she found herself and her son recognised, and that there could be no doubt that the boy was his father's heir, she was struck with a great horror which she never quite got over all her life."¹⁴ What is it about this heirdom that generates horror? The thought that she is the murderer, not of her husband, but of her son's father? The thought that she will be indebted to him forever for the means to raise his son? The subtle but distinct possibility that the son will somehow inherit the father's temperament or, less subtly, his Jewish ethnicity, along with his property? Oliphant leaves this, as so much else in the story, merely suggested rather than fully developed, leaving us to work out the conclusion on our own. The openness of this conclusion disturbed some readers, who found themselves longing for a "longer" work—more like the novels we had read earlier in the semester.

However, that very openness allows us to discuss Victorian aesthetics in new ways. Undeveloped relationships, suggested connections, make the tales connect in ways that surprise me each semester with the longer texts I have always taught and continue to teach. Working both within and against formal constraints, the stories enact a critique both of longer novels and of the marriage plot that so dominated fiction by Victorian women. The stories are rich and suggestive, so mine is perforce a brief and rather partial demonstration of how they can work within the confines of the Victorian literature survey.

Incorporating short fiction by women into the survey course accomplishes several goals at once: it increases the number of texts by women, creating a greater sense of the actual publication rates of the period and the breadth of literature real Victorians were reading. It helps demonstrate the ways in which women writers engage both similar and different issues than male writers—in the cited stories, for example, technology and marriage are perhaps equally at issue, though one topic might be thought of as more stereotypically "masculine" than the other. In addition, it reveals another aspect of Victorian literary aesthetics, demonstrating that compression, brevity, and suggestiveness are all as available to the Victorian author as to the modern. At the same time, these are expansive short stories, often quite long short stories, and in many ways they demonstrate the pervasiveness of the more familiar aesthetic even as they demonstrate its flexibility. Like the heroines of these stories and their authors, we teachers have limited means and options; nonetheless, like them, we can make some tiny steps towards freedom, and these stories may offer one way to do so.

Notes

- ¹ See, for example, Jonathan Culler, "Imagining the Coherence of the English Major," *Profession* (2003): 85–93.
- ² The three anthologies I'm aware of are Harriet Devine Jump, ed., *Nineteenth-Century Stories by Women: A Routledge Anthology* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Glennis Stephenson, ed., *Nineteenth-Century Stories by Women: An Anthology*, (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 1993); and David Stuart Davies, ed., *Short Stories from the Nineteenth Century* (Hertfordshire, UK: Wordsworth Editions, 2000).
- ³ Heather Henderson and William Sharpe, eds., *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*, 2nd ed. vol 2B: "The Victorian Age" (New York: Longman, 2003); Carol T. Christ and George H. Ford, eds., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 7th ed. vol 2B: "The Victorian Age" (New York & London: Norton, 2000).
- ⁴ Mary Elizabeth Braddon, "Good Lady Ducayne," (1896), in Stephenson, 71–100; Margaret Oliphant, "A Story of a Wedding Tour" (1898), in Stephenson, 403–425.
- ⁵ Braddon, 99.
- ⁶ Oliphant, 424.
- ⁷ Oliphant, 424.
- ⁸ Oliphant, 420.
- ⁹ Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (1854); (London: Penguin, 1988), 65.
- ¹⁰ Braddon, 95.
- ¹¹ Braddon, 95, 79.
- ¹² Braddon, 95–6.
- ¹³ Oliphant, 421.
- ¹⁴ Oliphant, 424.

Victorian Literature

Dr. Gruner

The period course in Victorian literature provides a survey of selected literature of the Victorian period. This course will proceed primarily by discussion; your presence and regular, informed participation are crucial to your success in the class and the success of the class itself as a shared scholarly endeavor.

The goals of the class are as follows:

- To acquaint students with the major literary genres and figures of the Victorian period, and to explore the process of canon formation in and after the period.
- To provide students with an understanding of some of the sociological factors and intellectual movements of the Victorian period, both as reflected and as constructed by the literature of the time.
- To develop more effective analytical skills in both discussion and writing, through class discussion and presentations, online “discussions,” in-class exams, and papers.
- To explore some of the variety of online resources available for the scholar of Victorian literature, with an eye to developing a more thorough awareness of what the resources and their limitations are, and perhaps to developing our own.
- To identify some of the research “problems” in Victorian literature, and to begin to find approaches to those problems through research and writing.

Course schedule:

Introductory	Slide lecture—overview of the Victorian period. Read “The Victorian Age” (Norton)
Tennyson, “Mariana,” “The Lady of Shalott,” “Ulysses,” “Tithonus”	Tennyson, selections from <i>In Memoriam</i>
Tennyson, selections from <i>In Memoriam</i>	In class: close reading exercise
Carlyle, biographical sketch & selections from <i>Sartor Resartus</i>	Browning, E., selections from <i>Aurora Leigh</i>
Browning, R., “My Last Duchess,” “Fra Lippo Lippi,” “Andrea del Sarto”	Dickens, <i>Great Expectations</i> (ch. 1–19)
Dickens, <i>Great Expectations</i> (ch. 20–39)	Dickens, <i>Great Expectations</i> (ch. 40–end)
Slide lecture: The Pre-Raphaelites Rossetti, D.G., “The Blessed Damozel”; Rossetti, C., “In an Artist’s Studio”	Rossetti, D.G., “Jenny” (handout); Rossetti, C., “Goblin Market”
Fall Break	Gaskell, “Lizzie Leigh”
Eliot, <i>Adam Bede</i> (ch. 1–16)	Eliot, <i>Adam Bede</i> (ch. 17–35)
Eliot, <i>Adam Bede</i> (ch. 36–48)	Eliot, <i>Adam Bede</i> (ch. 49–end)
Arnold, “Dover Beach,” “To Marguerite—Continued”	Oliphant, “A Story of a Wedding Tour”
Braddon, “Good Lady Ducayne”	Stevenson, <i>Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde</i>
Pater, from <i>The Renaissance</i>	Hopkins, selections
Wilde, <i>The Importance of Being Earnest</i>	no class meeting (Thanksgiving)
Conrad, <i>Heart of Darkness</i>	Conrad, <i>Heart of Darkness</i>

Figure 1. Elisabeth Rose Gruner, Sample Syllabus