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ARTHUR SYMONS AND DECADENT LYRIC: ART IN THE AGE OF URBAN MODERNITY

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

BY  
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ABSTRACT

ARTHUR SYMONS AND DECADENT LYRIC: ART IN THE AGE OF URBAN MODERNITY

My honors thesis seeks to examine the redemptive potential of the lyric form in urban modernity. I specifically engage critically with the lyrics in the minor Decadent poet Arthur Symons' second volume of poetry *Silhouettes* (1892). In my paper, I trace the influence of English art critic Walter Pater's influence upon Symons' poetry and life. The cultural period of Decadence coincides with a burgeoning modernity and the rise of bourgeois values in London. An increasingly capitalistic urban London consequently precipitated an erosion of beauty and romance; fin-de-siècle poets such as Symons were often disillusioned with the alienating circumstances of the modern metropolis. In my honors thesis, I explore the consequences of Symons' actualization of the Paterian aesthetic outlined in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. Symons adapts Paterian impressionism in his verses in order to introduce an aesthetic moment in degraded urban spaces. However, Symons' resuscitation of the romance and beauty befitting Pater's antiquated world of art galleries proves to be problematic in London's urban landscape.

Throughout the honors thesis, I discuss Symons' hopeful belief in the potential of the Paterian aesthetic and his attempts to aestheticize sleazy or quotidian scenes in fin-de-siècle London. I ultimately argue that it is the salvific qualities of the lyric form that allows him to perpetuate and freeze these fleeting aesthetic moments in a necessarily ephemeral modernity. As a result, my thesis primarily focuses on Symons' exploitation of lyric in his career and how the form allowed him to introduce beauty and romance in even the most degraded of urban spaces.

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## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to Professor Joseph Bristow for being incredibly helpful, patient, and understanding throughout the entire writing process. This thesis is the long awaited product of Professor Bristow not only overseeing my work and research in English Pre-Raphaelite and decadent literature during the past two years, but also his gracious guidance of my growth as a mature writer, literary critic, and intellectual. The time and effort that he has devoted to helping me actualize and perfect my vision of this project were instrumental to the successful completion of my work on Arthur Symons. Without the countless editing sessions and revisions, my thesis would have fell short of my expectations.

Thank you so much for introducing me to the delightful world of fin-de-siècle poetry and English aestheticism. Your influence in my intellectual growth extends beyond the honors program. I have enjoyed every minute of our long discussions about Victorian literature and art, and I especially delighted in learning about eccentric decadent writers and their odd idiosyncrasies! I have been a fervent admirer of Oscar Wilde and his circle for years and learning from you has made my experience as an English major beyond ideal. I could not have asked for a better mentor during my undergraduate career.

## Introduction: “Nocturne”

In my honors thesis, I have chosen to examine critically the lyrics of the minor Decadent poet Arthur Symons, a writer whose poetry and aesthetic lifestyle encapsulated the ideals of Decadence more than any other fin-de-siècle poet. Despite Symons’ relative obscurity when compared to figures such as Oscar Wilde, Symons played an important part in the shaping of Modernism,<sup>1</sup> and he is, as John M. Munro observes, “the Decadent *par excellence*” (Munro 18). Symons published several collections of poetry, was a prolific literary and Impressionist critic, was a translator who introduced the works of Symbolist poets Paul Verlaine and Charles Baudelaire to the English-speaking world, and helped initiate and edit *The Savoy*, a periodical that exclusively published decadent poetry (Munro 18). My decision to write an honors thesis on Symons primarily stems from my conviction that he was a living Dorian Gray whose poetry ultimately epitomized the Decadent aesthetic that was predominantly shaped by the English art critic Walter Pater’s highly subjective critical analysis of Renaissance art. Symons faithfully actualized and adapted Pater’s influential “Conclusion” to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* in both his lyrics and urban experiences in fin-de-siècle London. Through my critical engagement with Symons’ lyrics, I will ineluctably provide a revelatory glimpse into the lonely misery of the aesthetic lives of fin-de-siècle poets and artists who sought to challenge their provincial realities under the auspices of Pater. I endeavor to show that it is only through Symons’ extensive use of the redemptive lyric form that he is allowed to preserve and perpetuate his invocation of intrinsically transient aesthetic moments inspired by Pater in a degraded urban

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Symons was an influential member of The Rhymer’s Club, a London based group of poets that included minor decadent poets such as Ernest Dowson and Lionel Johnson, but also included members that would become prominent figures of the Modernist movement in literature such as poet W.B. Yeats. Symons had correspondences with Yeats and frequently wrote letters to novelist James Joyce during the years 1904-1932 (Beckson 12).

modernity.

Pater's belief that an individual should always passionately "burn always with this hard, gemlike flame" and pursue the "highest quality" in novel fleeting impressions or "moments as they pass" proved to be incredibly inspirational for poets frustrated with the mediocrity of urban London in the 1890s (Pater 188). Pater's cultural significance is manifested in Oscar Wilde's adaptation (or distortion) of Pater's infamous closing words in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Indeed, an entire chapter of the novel is devoted to an espousal of Pater's aesthetic and Paterian impressionism; the art historian appeared to figuratively and inadvertently function as an indelible Lord Henry Wotton to many writers during this period.<sup>2</sup> My intention to shed light on the more obscured poets of a cultural period often neglected in literary criticism as either a mere transitional phase between the supposedly more significant literary periods of Victorian literature and Modernism or a languorous decade whose writers were known more for their sexual perversities, fashionable diseases, and personal scandals than their literary talent, however, has led me not to focus on the Paterian aesthetic in Wilde's iconic Decadent novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Rather, I will be tracing Pater's influences in the verses of Symons, a writer who was in fact more well-known for despising his middle-class existence and being the most faithful disciple of Pater.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Pater in fact recognized that fin-de-siècle writers were misinterpreting his words. He suppressed the conclusion to the second edition of *The Renaissance* because it "might mislead some of the young men into whose hands it might fall" (Buckley 249). Pater also responded to Wilde's distortion of his closing lines (most notably the phrase in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: "one could never pay too high a price for any sensation") by stating that "a true Epicureanism aims at a complete though harmonious development of a man's entire organism" and in no way implied a loss of "moral sense" (Munro 18). Munro also argues that Wilde's "Paterian echoes" were either an innocent misunderstanding or an intentional distortion to suit his special needs (Munro 17).

<sup>3</sup> In a letter following Arthur Symons' death in 1954, Richard Jennings wrote a letter in the magazine *The New Statesman* and focused on Symons' infamous mental breakdown in 1908. He referred to Symons as "the too faithful disciple of Walter Pater" and in the same line assumed that he already "died mentally to all creative effort" in 1908 and that all works published after that date were either marked by incoherence should be received with caution; the proximity of his discussion of Pater and the breakdown insinuates that there were devastating



The thesis thus aims to demonstrate the profound influence that Symons' literary friendship with and reverence for Pater had upon his own poetry and, more generally, Pater's pivotal role in the male decadent poet's confrontation and disillusionment with modernity in the 1890s.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, I will be exploring the implications of Symons' perversion of the Paterian aesthetic by bringing Pater out of the antiquated past and distinguished world of art galleries and aesthetic historicism into a debased modern, urban setting. For example, in his "Prologue" to his first volume of poetry *Days and Nights* (1889), dedicated to Pater, Symons describes his invocation of Pater in urban modernity when he states that art does not only live on "some high peak" but can also be found in the "turbid human stream through street and mart" (Symons 20). In my discussion of the theoretical works of writers such as Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin, I inevitably argue that Pater's "Conclusion," which encouraged the multiplication and intensification of sensations, proved to be problematic in the modern urban landscape whose fundamentally ephemeral nature heightened the transience of experiences.

As a result of my decision to elucidate the salvific promise of lyric to a fin-de-siècle urbanite, I will be focusing exclusively on lyrics from Symons' second volume of poetry, *Silhouettes*, which was first published in 1892 by Elkin Matthews and John Lane and then published again in 1896 by the controversial London publisher more closely associated with decadence, Leonard Smithers. The lyrics discussed in this paper are taken from the 1896 edition, which included revisions and previously omitted poems. In contrast to the collection *Days and Nights*, which includes longer poems and monologues influenced by Victorian poet Robert Browning, *Silhouettes* largely features impressionistic lyrics depicting quotidian or sleazy urban

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consequences to being "too faithful" to the Paterian aesthetic and misunderstanding the art critic's Conclusion.  
<sup>4</sup> Symons' correspondences with Pater began in 1886.

scenes inspired both by the impressionism espoused by Walter Pater and the Impressionist movement in the visual arts. Although *Silhouettes* received a generally positive reception and did not produce the public controversy that the at times sacrilegious poems of *London Nights* (1896) provoked,<sup>5</sup> Symons' contemporaries were evidently perturbed by his aestheticization of ugly, melancholic urban scenes. Poet Lionel Johnson, for example, despised the sleazy "naturalism of Zola" and somber "Parisian impressionism" found in scenes of "glaring gin shops and slatternly shivering women" in *Silhouettes* and hoped that Symons would "wash and be clean" (Johnson in Beckson 87).

My selection of five lyrics from the 1896 edition of *Silhouettes* depends largely on Symons' aestheticization of such prosaic urban situations and undesirable aspects of the modern condition. Each lyric presents a particular and unique problem of modernity and Symons' different attempts to imbue the scene with beauty, maintain his evocation of the Paterian aesthetic, and overcome modern predicaments such as alienation through the lyric form. I begin the thesis with a close-reading of the poem "Nocturne," a quintessential fin-de-siècle poem that generates a wide palette of stereotypically decadent themes, such as a distressingly acute consciousness of the passage of time and the nostalgic recollection of an erotic, but ultimately transient erotic experience. I then proceed to examine Symons' ekphrastic sonnet "The Absinthe Drinker" and how both a popular hallucinogenic drink and the traditional function of lyric provide a temporary reprieve from urban loneliness and transitoriness to the urban speaker. My reading of "La Melinité: Moulin Rouge" discusses the space of the dance-hall and figure of the

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<sup>5</sup> Symons most controversial poem is arguably "Stella Maris," a poem that recounts the speaker's passionate encounter with a prostitute. Symons does not only compare her to William Shakespeare's Juliet, but makes the blasphemous move of invoking a hymn to the Holy Virgin (*Ave, maris stella!*). Moreover, erotically charged and hypersensual lines describing the speaker's interaction with a London street-walker such as "I feel your breast that heaves and dips, / Desiring my desirous lips" caused a public outcry.

dancer as possible solutions to the male decadent's dread of temporality, but the multitude of erotic choices and potential love objects in these urban venues presents the problem of the erosion of intimacy and romance in the modern metropolis. The sonnet "Nerves" then follows, for it is a sonnet that desperately seeks to revive antiquated romance in an urban space that has degraded more enduring, grander forms of intimacy. I close the thesis with a close reading of "Pastel," one of Symons' shortest poems. "Pastel" is the only poem in which Symons alludes to the lyric form in his verses as a means to summons an aesthetic moment and preserve his evocation of Paterian impressionism in a degraded urban context. By concluding my thesis with a poem that directly evokes the lyric in the degraded space of a dingy room that serves as the site of a sleazy one-night stand, I demonstrate that lyric undeniably plays a salvific role for a poet desperate to resuscitate the beauty and romance worthy of the works of Pater in even the most tawdry of circumstances.

Arthur Symons' "Nocturne" (1896) is an appropriate poem to begin the thesis, for it is the most typical and representative poem of the decadent aesthetic of *Silhouettes* because of its palpable invocation of Paterian impressionism and allusions to the redemptive function of lyric. "Nocturne" was one of the many poems added to the revised and expanded 1896 edition of *Silhouettes* published by Leonard Smithers, and the lyric recounts a male decadent relishing the memory of a brief, albeit sleazy amorous encounter with an unknown woman in a taxi-cab:

One little cab to hold us two,  
 Night, an invisible dome of cloud,  
 The rattling wheels that made our whispers loud,  
 As heart-beats into whispers grew;

And, long, the Embankment with its lights,  
 The pavement glittering with fallen rain,  
 The magic and the mystery that are night's,  
 And human love without the pain (Symons 1-8).

In the opening lines, the poetic voice transforms a dingy city cab to a private sphere of magic and adventure: “One little cab to hold us two / Night, an invisible dome of cloud” (Symons 2). The image of an “invisible dome” suggests that the urban couple is being transported to a fantastical world. Additionally, the adjective “invisible” is especially significant, for it shows that the speaker and his lover are temporarily oblivious to their actual surroundings. They are totally immersed in the moment of their temporary tryst and are distracted by the wavering, otherworldly sight of the glittering city in their careening vehicle. In addition, the “invisible dome” momentarily estranges them from the judgments and ugliness of a metropolitan bourgeois existence. Night thus becomes a magical period in which urbanites can escape their dull daily routines. The speaker further emphasizes night’s ability to promote an alleviating escapism and artistic subjectivity in the closing lines of the second stanza: “The night was all about us: we were free, / Free of the day and all its cares!” (15-16). Symons is evading the “cares” of his reality with the aid of poetry and night’s supposed transformative properties.

Symons’ depiction of nocturnal London directly evokes American Impressionist painter’s Whistler’s preoccupation with the seemingly supernatural combination of fog, darkness, dimmed city lights, and depopulated streets of London during times of darkness. Symons is also purposefully borrowing from the artistic techniques of the emerging school of Impressionism in the visual arts through his use of literary impressionism in order to aestheticize the unpleasant

reality of urban London as a mysterious space of romance. During this period, fin-de-siècle poets were inspired by and applied the theories of the famous Impressionist painters to their poetic descriptions of the industrial capital; literary impressionism soon became a trend among decadent poets. They were indubitably drawn to the movement's subversion of the principles of academic art that complied with the standards of the French Académie des Beaux-Arts. Instead of seeking to portray an objective reality or meaning, Impressionists painted spontaneous sensations or impressions which were essentially meaningless because they depicted a "private, individual, and subjective expression of reality, whether of urban life or of nature" (Callen 14). The importance that the Impressionists placed on the unique, subjective impression of reality and the power of the artistic imagination rendered their works to be incredibly alluring to Symons. The Impressionist who influenced Symons' poetry the most, however, was not a French painter, but rather the eccentric American artist Whistler. Symons did not hide his fondness and admiration for Whistler, for his lyric "Nocturne" is an obvious literary translation of the vague, highly impressionistic Whistlerian *Nocturnes*, such as the *Nocturne: Blue and Gold – Old Battersea Bridge* and *Nocturne: Black and Gold – The Falling Rocket* (Appendix fig. 1 and fig. 2).

Symons' romanticized depiction of vulgar and disappointing urban locations is in fact not only a literary translation of Whistler's purely suggestive and mystical paintings, but it is also a direct evocation of the American painter's aesthetic philosophy. In his famed "Ten O'Clock Lecture" (1885) on aesthetics, Whistler does not only make assertions about the appealing transformative properties of night in a *flâneur's* experience of London, but also establishes the claim that the production of art should be a purely subjective and liberating experience:

And when the evening mist clothes the riverside with poetry as with a veil, and the poor buildings lose themselves in the dim sky, and the tall chimneys become campanili, and

the warehouses are palaces in the night, and the whole city hangs in the heavens, and fairy-land is before us – then the wayfarer hastens home; the working man and the cultured one, the wise man and the one of pleasure, ceased to understand, as they have ceased to see, and Nature, who, for once, has sung in tune, sings her exquisite song to the artist alone, her and her master – her son in that he loves her, her master in that he knows her (Whistler 85).

In Symons' "Nocturne," a cramped little cab's transformation into a whimsical "dome of cloud" mirrors the same metamorphosis of Whistler's dreary "warehouses" into fantastical "palaces" and "tall chimneys" into romantic "campanili." Symons explicitly extols the redemptive potential of artistic subjectivity in the line: "The magic and mystery that is night's / And human love without the pain" (Symons 7-8). Nighttime, however, is not wholly responsible for the speaker's magical view of the city. It is the artist's subjective view of London that, as Whistler stressed, transforms a polluted, industrial scene of London into a mystical fairyland. According to historian of the 1890s Holbrook Jackson: "It was Whistler who taught the modern world how to appreciate the beauty and wizardry of cities" (Jackson 106). Similarly, in *Conceiving the City*, a study on the depiction of London in literature and art, Nicholas Freeman also observes Impressionism's profound effect on the art of *fin-de-siècle* poets. Freeman states: "Whistler's use of outline and shadow offered a more fluid and less didactic reality, and thus seemed one means of evading the impasse of realism" (Freeman 107). For decadent poets dissatisfied with their bourgeois realities, an Impressionist approach towards modern London offered the promise of creating the illusion of the "magic" and "mystery" that Symons's speaker experiences in his cab. Whistler established "a precedent for maintaining that dusk, smoke, and fog transformed the capital into one of romance" (Freeman 120). For instance, the poetic voice

momentarily forgets his actual metropolitan existence in which “human love” is often accompanied by a painful ephemerality and disillusioning fleetingness.

Symons’ aestheticized view of his sleazy urban encounters, however, of course did not solely rely on Whistler’s philosophy. In fact, the touted ideal of artistic subjectivity in the “Ten O’ Clock Lecture” and Impressionism’s focus on the intensity of brief sensations and passing moments are tenets more prominently touted by art critic Walter Pater in his famous Conclusion to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873). In the controversial closing lines to his incredibly subjective analysis of Renaissance works and painters, Pater eloquently encourages a similar refutation of Victorian orthodoxy and a strict adherence to objectivity in aesthetics. In each of his collections of poems *Days and Nights* (1889), *Silhouettes* (1892) and *London Nights* (1895), Symons consistently and consciously applies a Paterian aesthetic to his urban landscape. Symons shows his deference to Pater in a study dedicated to his works, *A Study of Walter Pater* (1932) in which he selectively quotes and analyzes an omitted passage from Pater’s chapter on The School of Giorgione:

A desire how bewildering with the question where there be indeed any place wherein these desirable moments take permanent refuge. Well! In the school of Giorgione you drink water, perfume, music, lie in receptive humour thus for ever and the satisfying moment is assured (Symons 29).

Here, Symons reveals the inspirational effects that Pater’s philosophy has on his own experiences of beauty and the senses in the city, for they are reflected in his attempts to prolong the moments of Whistlerian beauty depicted in an urban lyric such as “Nocturne.” Symons followed Pater’s assertion that always “courting new impressions” (especially without the burden of intellectual analysis) in which each impression represented an individual’s own subjective

“dream of a world” was key to success in life (Pater 188). The Paterian aesthetic thus depends on not only aestheticizing, but also preserving and relishing the perfect moment in a life where only “a counted number of pulses only is given to us” (Pater 188):

For our one chance lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time. Great passions may give us this quickened sense of life, ecstasy and sorrow of love, the various forms of enthusiastic activity... Only be sure it is passion --- that it does yield you this fruit of quickened, multiplied consciousness. Of such wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of the 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” (Pater 190).

In “Nocturne,” Symons’ male decadent speaker is adapting Pater’s closing lines to his poetic description of both a transient tryst and his delight in the beauty of the passing city lights. He illuminates the Thames Embankment with impressionistic images in the lines: “The river shook with wavering gleams,” and “And, long, the Embankment with its lights / The pavement glittering with fallen rain” (Symons 7, 9). In these lines, Symons is evoking Paterian impressions which are notably “unstable, flickering, inconsistent” as a means to preserve his sensations of a bygone and particularly modern experience in his art (Pater 187). Therefore, Symons is using the theories of an English critic of Renaissance art while operating within a modern fin-de-siècle impressionistic aesthetic. However, this mediatory role of the impression ostensibly proves to be invaluable to the urban poet. In *Literary Impressionism and Modern Aesthetics*, critic Jesse Matz expounds on the mediatory, yet paradoxical character of the impression. Matz defines the impression as “a transient, insubstantial, passive sensation” that also “mediates opposite perceptual moments” of experiencing the sensation in the moment and in the lingering thoughts



that last (Matz 1, 12). However, the impression does not only mediate between states of mental perception. Its most significant mediatory role, as Matz observes, is its ability to link art to life as writers record their impressions of various sensations and transitory experiences: “As these writers invoke it, the impression is nothing less a name for the aesthetic moment itself, a new sign for the old bridge between art and life” (Matz 13).

But the constant desire for Paterian impressions or the aesthetic moment proves to be not particularly rewarding in the modern metropolis; the intrinsic rapidness of modernity magnifies the transience of the passing moment. Symons’ urban lyric speakers appear to have an amplified consciousness of the passage of time and are typically overtaken by a disillusioned weariness at the poem’s close. The male decadent’s invocation of the Paterian aesthetic ineluctably disintegrates into an enervating *ennui* that is characterized by a hopeless resignation in which an urbanite recognizes that everything beautiful and worthwhile is passing and subject to decay.

In “Nocturne,” for instance, the speaker begins the lyric with hopeful exhilaration as he confronts vivid impressions and striking sensations, but he is eventually tormented by a sudden awareness that these moments must come to an end. In the last stanza, he states “That was an hour of bliss too long, / Too long to last where joy is brief” (Symons 17-18). The previous two stanzas which recounted the speaker’s blissful moments with a lover in a secluded cab consequently culminate in a melodramatic lamentation of the transitoriness of even the most passionate activities. Indeed, the repetition of the phrase “too long” discloses his cynical surprise at the apparently lengthy duration of his feelings of romantic bliss and insouciant happiness. This cynicism is also manifested in the phrase “where joy is brief,” a statement that indicates the urbanite’s weary acceptance of the intrinsic ephemerality of modernity. The attempt to “get as many pulsations as possible into the given time” is virtually impossible because it is mentally

exhaustive and emotionally destructive in the sensorium of a metropolis in which technological advancements and hurrying urbanites render these “pulsations” or moments to be even more fleeting.

The recurring state of *ennui* in Symons’ lyrics, which signals the failure of the Paterian aesthetic, is a result of Symons’ keen understanding of Charles Baudelaire’s definition of modernity in the *Painter of Modern Life* (1863): “By modernity, I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent” (Baudelaire 13). Symons, who frequently translated the French Symbolist poet’s works into English, features a Baudelairean consciousness that modernity is necessarily ephemeral in “Nocturne” when the speaker expresses a desperate yearning to transform a fugitive sensual moment into an enduring permanent romance in the lines: ‘O heart last for ever!’ my heart cried / It ended: heaven was done” (Symons 17-18)<sup>6</sup>. By replicating Baudelaire’s conception of modernity in addition to his frequent evocation of Paterian impressionism, Symons is devising a novel and distinctly decadent version of the Paterian aesthetic in an urban context. In an environment constantly subjected to dissolution, a pursuit of

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<sup>6</sup> These closing lines closely resemble the final stanza of Charles Baudelaire's poem “A une passante” in which he recounts a missed romantic opportunity with a female passerby that he sees in an urban crowd:

A flash...then night! – O lovely fugitive,  
 I am suddenly reborn from your swift glance;  
 Shall I never see you till eternity? (Baudelaire 188).

Baudelaire’s speaker is not dejected in the missed encounter, but is instead seemingly rejuvenated by this loss and expresses a lust for modern ephemerality. Walter Benjamin, in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* critically examines “A une passante” at length in order to demonstrate how erotic desire and romance function in the metropolis. He argues that the lonely flâneur is in fact invigorated by romances that are not consummated in the city, a point that I will later refute in my reading of Symons' sonnet “Nerves” later in this paper. He argues :

Far from eluding the erotic in the crowd, the apparition which fascinates him is brought to him by this very crowd. The delight of the city-dweller is not so much love at first as love at last sight. The never marks the high point of the encounter...it partakes more of the shock with which an imperious desire suddenly overcomes a lonely man... these verses could only have been written in a big city (Benjamin 45-46).

the Paterian aesthetic collapses because a flâneur is consistently haunted by the specter of decay, a predicament that is responsible for his disillusioning *ennui*. Indeed, Nicholas Freeman affirms that Pater's model was especially damaging to the metropolitan type by referring to Symons' own infamous mental breakdown: "It was a stance not without its dangers, as Arthur Symons would discover in the course of his catastrophic mental collapse in 1908" (Freeman 99).

Symons' speaker in "Nocturne" therefore reveals a certain perversion of the Paterian aesthetic in urbanity, for the once flickering and glittering impressions diminish into vitiated images of death. The river's "wavering gleams" eventually become "Deep buried as the glooms that lay / Impenetrable as the grave of day" (Symons 9-10). In his essay "The Decadent Movement in Literature," a response to Richard Le Gallienne's ridicule and critique of decadent poets as "diseased lepers," Symons recognizes the decadent qualities and implicit morbidity of Pater's aesthetic criticism. Symons attributes the irregular, depraved, and contorted style of French and English writers during this period, which he diagnoses as *maladie fin-de-siècle*, to the "restless curiosity" encouraged by Pater, "who was horrified by the excess of aestheticism and *carpe diem* that it had taken to sanction" in lush decadents in the metropolis. (Freeman 97). Yet Symons nevertheless uncovers the same anxiety and morbidity in some of Pater's writing in *Studies in the History of The Renaissance* and *Marius the Epicurean*: "have they not that morbid subtlety of analysis, that morbid curiosity of form that we found in the works of the French decadents?" (Symons in Beckson 149-150).

Despite the speaker's eventual disillusionment with the Paterian aesthetic and his forlorn state as the magical evening nears its termination, Symons finds solace in poetic activity and the lyric form, especially the specifically decadent lyric that he outlined in his essay. The speaker of "Nocturne," for example, remains surprisingly hopeful in the closing lines: "I had been dreaming

by her side / That heaven was but begun” (Symons 23-24). The source of his renewed hopefulness is the promise of the permanence of this blissful moment in his poetry. The recollected state of heavenly bliss and the fleeting aesthetic moment will be revived in the experience of the reader, who may well be the poet himself in the future. He implies the salvific potential of the lyric in the enigmatic and ambiguous lines: “Yet one escape of souls may yield relief / To many weary seasons’ wrong” (19-20). By writing about their temporary “escape,” the lyric speaker preserves the aesthetic moment and as a result, provides relief to future readers wearied by a disappointing urban reality.

“Nocturne” consequently appears to be a subtle evocation of the redemptive lyric form. Indeed, its musical title also invokes the lyric; the poetic form’s close association with music and melody elicits Whistler’s similar interests in music as the supreme art because of its inherently impressionistic quality and ability to arouse the subjective imagination. In “Whistler and the English Poets of the 1890s,” R.L. Peters observes that Whistler wanted to create “harmonies independent of naturalistic meaning” and “repeated broad tonal areas to give the effect of music...” (Peters 252). More important, the fugitive, evanescent notes of music mirror the fleetingness of the male decadent's moments of passion and beauty in the rapidness of the city. Symons himself recognized music's potential to preserve the Paterian impressions that he pursued, but nonetheless have always eluded him in urban modernity. In a work of aesthetic criticism, *Studies in Seven Arts*, Symons admires Whistler's preservation of the impression in the symphonies he created on canvas, a goal that he discernibly strives to achieve in his own lyrics:

What Whistler aims at is an aspect cunningly chosen, a rarity of aspect in which the the thing may be caught off-guard...only a suggestion, a moment out of an unending series of moments; but the moment has been detached by art from that unending and unnoted

series (Symons 142).

Thus, with its emphasis on instantaneous moments of beauty and its themes of artistic subjectivity, music, and intimacy, “Nocturne” addresses all of the characteristics of the lyric that have been defined by major poets, writers, and philosophers. *The New Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms* provides a compilation of these definitions:

Among the best known and most often cited proscriptions regarding the lyric are that it must (1) be brief (Poe); (2) “be one, the parts of which mutually support and explain each other, all in their proportion harmonizing with...metrical arrangement” (Coleridge); (3) be the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (Wordsworth); (4) be an intensely subjective, personal expression (Hegel).

The conscious allusions to music and lyric in “Nocturne” evinces that this poetic form holds out a promise to a male decadent dwelling in the metropolis. Within the space of a lyric, Symons finds the “permanent refuge for desirable moments” that he seeks and discusses in his analysis of Pater; it is the lyric that finally assures the survival of the rare “satisfying moment.”

“Nocturne” shows Symons' pattern of exploiting the lyric form as a means to challenge his prosaic reality and conquer mortality and the passage of time. Lyric's promise to the urban fin-de-siècle poet is its ability to create a poetic realm through a “subjective, personal expression” and to conjoin the past with present moments. Throughout Symons' poetic corpus, the male decadent poet desires to create an aesthetic moment in a degraded modern context. It is the salvific lyric form, evidently a genre of poetic triumph, that represents the hope of preserving the Paterian aesthetic moments that he evokes in urban locations relentlessly besieged by time. In poems that describe sordid experiences and social issues peculiar to urban London, it is lyric that promises to perpetuate his aesthetic escape from a modern metropolis whose rapid economic

growth has led to a suffocating alienation and the erosion of beauty and romance.

## Lyric and Alienation: “The Absinthe Drinker”

The salvific quality of lyric is especially prominent in “The Absinthe Drinker,” a Petrarchan sonnet whose distinguished traditional form belies its vulgar, particularly modern subject. Symons’ sonnet unusually recounts the psychoactive effects of absinthe, an icon of *la vie boheme*, upon a lonely urbanite who is seated next to a disembodied, phantomlike companion, who may well be a lover. The lyric’s depiction of urban alienation in a degraded space, presumably a bohemian café, strongly evokes impressionistic painter Edgar Degas’ 1876 painting *L’absinthe*, a polemical work that indirectly functioned as a social critique of isolating modern conditions during Paris’ rapid economic growth (Appendix fig. 3). It would not be unreasonable to propose that Symons is describing the thoughts of Degas’ infamous young female absinthe addict as she stares dully ahead into space while her accompanying lover distractedly smokes a pipe. For example, the sonnet’s title “The Absinthe Drinker” is one of the many interchangeable names for Degas’ painting. Symons was also more than likely familiar with the painting whose brazen portrayal of bohemian decadence, café culture, and moral dissoluteness rendered it to become a *succès de scandale* in the media and contemporary art scene, especially amongst English art critics and connoisseurs with tamer tastes and bourgeois sentiments. Moreover, Symons was well known for his literary translations. In addition to translating the works of French poets Paul Verlaine and Charles Baudelaire into English, Symons also translated works of impressionism in the visual arts, such as Whistler’s *Nocturnes*, into ekphrastic poetry. Symons’ “The Absinthe Drinker” is arguably an instance of ekphrasis in which the lyric speaker is examining and describing the inescapable loneliness between Degas’ two bohemian lovers, a social situation that has become all too common in a modern metropolis that dehumanizes its constituents and disintegrates human relations.

*L'absinthe's* degenerate subjects, dejected social outcasts,<sup>7</sup> drained neutral colors, and setting of a dingy café are indubitably responsible for the general public opinion of the painting as repulsive and disgusting. Degas' intention to emphasize the prevalent urban issue of alienation rather than the social problems of absinthe addiction and vagrancy is manifest in the universality of his original titles for the piece; the initial 1876 titles in fact did not allude to the illicit drink. *L'absinthe* was originally called *A sketch of a French Café* or *In a Café* in 1876 and then *Figures at Café* until it received the current title in 1893. These ambiguous titles imply that Degas is giving the viewer a general glimpse into the social life of city inhabitants in which the ugliness and loneliness of modernity displayed in the painting's café have become commonplace. He expresses alienation and divests the scene of romanticism through body language, for the young woman has her arms slack at her sides and the man is turned away from her.

Stylistic decisions such as a flat composition and muted hues express the numbness and hopelessness experienced by the female absinthe drinker. The noticeable green tint in the painting, however, is an allusion to the famous green color of absinthe and more important, hints at the drink's psychoactive effects and the woman's escapist experience. Thus, the painting is depicting the young woman's rejection of her overwhelmingly disappointing reality and slow descent into a dreamy oblivion. Degas also implicates the viewers in her escape, for optical illusions such as the seemingly floating tables that lack legs and the absence of chiaroscuro to show depth, causing the space to recede on a slant, parallel the drink's capacity to create an illusion of a beautiful world of impossibilities. In the controversial painting, Degas is demonstrating to shocked crowds at galleries that there are larger social problems than absinthe

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<sup>7</sup> The main source of the public indignation surrounding *L'Absinthe* is Degas' controversial models: the actress Ellen Andrée and Parisian artist Marcellin Desboutin, both recognizable Parisian bohemians. Additionally, Andrée's clothing, both the color and style, designates her as a prostitute.



addiction, namely the growing human indifference in urbanity. Absinthe was merely a temporary antidote to the pain of alienation.

Absinthe's abilities to induce a change in consciousness, heighten the senses, and most important, alter reality caused it to become the alcoholic drink of choice for rebel poets such as Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud who sought artistic inspiration or escape from social isolation. The high alcohol content, which ranges from 50% to 80%, and the presence of the chemical substance thujone in the wormwood in absinthe rendered the mystical Green Fairy to be a consolatory muse for metropolitans frustrated with an industrial and bourgeois urban world. Absinthe's alleged hallucinatory properties are inarguably responsible for its popularity among disillusioned urban poets during this period. Absinthe became a means for them to supplant the ugliness of modernity with beauty and romance. Oscar Wilde, the most recognized figure of *fin-de-siècle* decadence and champion of art for art's sake, has perhaps left behind the most dramatic account of absinthe's effects in an anecdote he related to an eccentric hotelier:

After the first glass of absinthe you see things as you wish they were. After the second you see them as they are not. Finally you see things as they really are, and that is the most horrible thing in the world. I mean disassociated... Three nights I sat up all night drinking absinthe, and thinking that I was singularly clear-headed and sane. The waiter came in and began watering the sawdust. The most wonderful flowers, tulips, lilies and roses, sprang up, and made a garden in the cafe. "Don't you see them?" I said to him. "Mais non, monsieur, il n'y a rien" (Fothergill 12).

In the lyric "The Absinthe Drinker," Symons is interpreting and dramatizing Degas' melancholic scene of a sodden urban woman who, like his weary *fin-de-siècle* contemporaries and disillusioned decadent poets, has grown dissatisfied with her mundane bourgeois reality and

turns to absinthe both to resolve her alienation and introduce beauty and sensation in a degraded, phlegmatic environment.

The lyric speaker immediately signals a desire to escape her lonely and sleazy urban surroundings in the simple declarative sentence that begins the lyric: “Gently I wave the visible world away” (Symons 1). By opening the sonnet with such a declaration, she expresses a dissatisfaction with her reality. The verb “wave” indicates the speaker’s conscious rejection of the “visible world” whereas the adverb “Gently” suggests her succumbing to the soporific effects of absinthe. Therefore, it is an abject dissatisfaction that evidently induces her to drink a glass of absinthe that will aid her, like Wilde, to “see things as she wishes they were.” This rejection of her immediate environment is prompted by urban loneliness and alienation. The most prominent feature of the speaker’s “visible world” was the relentless and indifferent urban crowd, an intimidating entity that social critics such as Walter Benjamin and Friedrich Engels identified as one of the main contributing factors to the feelings of isolation and despair in the metropolis.

In the opening chapter “The Great Towns,” to Friedrich Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, the Marxist philosopher captures the alienating aspect of the crowd:

The very turmoil of the streets has something repulsive, something against which human nature rebels. The hundreds of thousands of all classes and ranks crowding past each other, are they not all human beings with the same qualities and powers, and with the same interest in being happy? And have they not, in the end, to seek happiness in the same way, by the same means? ... and their only agreement is the tacit one, that each keep to his own side of the pavement, so as not to delay the opposing streams of the crowd, while it occurs to no man to honour another with so much as a glance. The brutal

indifference, the unfeeling isolation of each in his private interest, becomes the more repellent and offensive, the more these individuals are crowded together, within a limited space (Engels 6).

In this passage, Engels draws attention to the mechanistic urbanites that belong to this oppressive, ominous mass that traverses the streets of London. As Engels observes, it is the dangerous solipsism of these preoccupied city inhabitants that has resulted in “the brutal indifference” and profound loneliness of the city. Capitalistic conditions in a growingly industrial metropolis resulted in masses of civilians preoccupied with mercenary concerns as they hurry to work and other duties. As a consequence, metropolitans like the speaker were exposed to a dreary picture of London in which inhuman urban crowds further cramped already suffocating city spaces.

Walter Benjamin, in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, also provides a memorable illustration of the London crowd in a critical analysis of Baudelaire’s French translation of Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd.” In Poe’s short detective story about flânerie in London, the combination of the new technological advancement of gas lamps, feverishly fast-paced crowds, and the city’s iconic night fog produced a distortive and gloomy urban setting. Yet Benjamin argues that Poe’s virtually unrealistic representation of the metropolis reveals the fundamentally inhuman, quasi monstrous nature of its urban crowds. Benjamin states that “Fear, revulsion, and horror were the emotions which the big-city crowd aroused...For Poe, it has something barbaric about it” (Benjamin 190). Like Engels, Benjamin attributes the nightmarish quality of the London crowd in Poe’s tale to the dehumanization and degradation of human relations: “The people in his story behave as if they can no longer express themselves through anything but reflex actions” (84).

Thus, the speaker of “The Absinthe Drinker” is reacting to this mechanistic “visible world” that has led to the breakdown of human intimacy which she experiences in the café with her lover. The depiction of a fragmented and peculiar conversation in the café intimates her disinterestedness and a lack of a romantic connection. She appears to divulge her own views of the relationship in the lines: “Far off, I hear a roar, afar yet near, / Far off and strange, a voice is in my ear” (Symons 2-3). The phrase “afar yet near” suggests that the proximity of a lover does not have to necessitate feelings of intimacy. The repetition of the words “Far off” further underscores an emotional distance. Moreover, her lover remains a floating cipher that is only an accompanying body who simply helps the speaker pass the time and fill space. She does not proceed to describe the lover’s body, sensations, or words. Indeed, the lover’s identity is reduced to only an incorporeal voice in the speaker’s ear.

Her nonchalant attitude towards her partner is further expressed in the couplet: “Two voices, his and mine: the words we say / Fall strangely, like a dream, across the day” (4-5). The word “strangely” encapsulates the superficial nature of both their interaction and affair. The speaker appears to be removed from her surroundings not only because she is entering a drunken stupor, but also because she is truly indifferent. According to the poetic voice, the words they are uttering simply “fall” from their mouths. Rather than endow her partner with a personality or provide details about their interaction, the speaker does not offer more than a mere record of aural sensations in the phrase: “Two voices / his and mine” (4). Despite the presence of a companion, the speaker appears to be very much alone. These lines are consequently a poetic actualization of Engels’ phrase “the unfeeling isolation of each in his private interest.” The couple illustrates the suffocating loneliness and emotional detachment that have become characteristic social problems of the modern metropolis.

As Symons' sonnet progresses, the speaker further slips into a state of oblivion and consequently, escapes this state of alienation. In fact, the Petrarchan sonnet's subject matter is not the failed romance of the detached couple, but is instead the speaker's gradual change in consciousness and the psychedelic effects of an alcoholic drink. Thus, the most unusual and striking quality of the lyric is the decadent speaker's fidelity to the noble traditional Italian sonnet form in spite of the depravity of her subject. For example, the poem features an octave that follows the rhyme scheme ABBA ABBA that is followed by a sestet that has the rhyme CDE CDE. The lyric also adopts the Petrarchan convention of the change in rhyme scheme signifying a change in subject matter. The sestet, for instance, typically resolves a problem presented in the octave. Here the octave introduces the speaker's yearnings to avoid her reality by drinking absinthe; the sestet describes her successful, but ultimately temporary and damaging escape.

The lyric speaker's decision not to deviate from the Petrarchan tradition is especially significant, for it reveals the escapist speaker's intention to exploit an essential characteristic of lyric: it is a distinctly personal and subjective poetic expression. This subjectivity of the lyric form thus allows the speaker to forge a more favorable reality. Both the aesthetic act and indulgence in narcotics consequently serve the purpose of creating a world that is completely divorced from a prosaic setting. In his lecture on lyric in *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, G.W.F. Hegel emphasizes the redemptive role of the imagination in the lyric form by stating that "genuine lyric poetry, as *art*, tears itself free from this already existent world of prose, and out of an imagination now become subjectively independent creates a new poetic world" (Hegel 1127). Lyric thus shares the same escapist properties as absinthe. Just as an absinthe drinker rebels against bourgeois values and society by imbibing the forbidden beverage, a lyric poet also rebels against a debased reality by engaging in poetic activity.

In his essay "Lyric Poetry and Society," Theodor W. Adorno examines the social implications of the lyric form. Adorno goes beyond Hegel's explanation of lyric as a subjective experience that frees an individual from a dissatisfying reality by insinuating that it is also an act of social rebellion. As a result of a lyric speaker's stressed individuality, Adorno argues that lyric "has the quality of a break or rupture" (Adorno 158). He elucidates that lyric's social nature stems from its identity as "the strictest negation of modern middle-class values" (163). Consequently, by participating in the lyric form and receding into the private world of imagination, the lyric speaker is responding to and "negating" the "unfeeling isolation" described by Engels:

The meaning of a poem is not merely the expression of individual experiences and stirrings of emotion. Rather, the descent into individuality raises the lyric poem to the realm of the general by virtue of its bringing to light things undistorted ...The generality of the lyric poem's content is, nevertheless, essentially social in nature. Only he understands what the poem says who perceives in its solitude the voice of humanity; indeed, the loneliness of the lyric expression itself is latent in our individualistic and ultimately, atomistic society... (156).

It can thus be argued that the salvific aspects of the lyric resemble or even mirror the hallucinogenic effects of a narcotic such as absinthe that are recounted in the poem. Both mediums permit the speaker to imbue an otherwise bleak urban scene with beauty. In the sestet, the stanza that resolves the octave's problem, the speaker realizes the desire to escape her environment. The opening line of the sestet, for example, represents the actualization of the speaker's departure from the "visible world" that dissatisfies her. The sestet presents a marked contrast to the situation described in the octave and denotes her entrance into a more appealing

reality in another declarative sentence: “The world is very fair” (Symons 9). Through drunkenness and creation of a poetic world, she evades the more troubling and disconcerting features of urbanity such as alienation. For instance, before the speaker reaches her euphoric state in the sestet, she views an approaching urban crowd in a more positive light in the closing exclamatory sentence of the octave: “How clear, / New as the world to lovers’ eyes appear / The men and women passing on their way!” (6-8). The adjectives “clear” and “new” are obvious references to the rejuvenating clarity of mind and vision that absinthe consumers report as an expected effect of the drink. But more important, the transformation of her companion’s status from a disembodied voice to a lover represents a shift in the speaker’s mood from a benumbed resignation to hopeful elation in the sestet. In this line, the poetic voice begins to find beauty and romance in her now “fair” external world. Instead of responding to the sight of a passing crowd of self-interested “men and women passing on their way” with disgust, the speaker is invigorated. The urban crowd loses its characteristic bourgeois indifference, and it becomes the object of poetry.

In the sestet, the speaker does not only escape consciousness of the mechanistic, superficial nature of human relationships in urbanity, but also the passage of time. In her drunken reverie and “fair world,” the young woman becomes oblivious to what is revealed to be the most painful and undesirable feature of her urban landscape: ephemerality. The sestet culminates in an image of the speaker lulled to sleep on a “dreamy and indifferent” tide (14). The poetic voice further remarks that she is no longer oppressed by time in the line: “O glide, sands of the hour-glass I count not, fall/Serenely...” (11-12). The sestet’s emphasis of absinthe’s ability to create the illusion of timelessness as its most attractive hallucinogenic property evinces the notion that the accentuated passage of time, which ultimately signals mortality, in a structured, regulated

industrial city is a source of immense anxiety for the urbanite. She finally achieves serenity and an escape in the sestet only when “The hours are all / Linked in a dance of mere forgetfulness” (9-10).

Symons’ image of a forgetful “dance” to illustrate an escape from time is in fact a recurring motif in his work. The sestet raises an urbanite’s concern for the ineluctable transience of sensations associated with even the most titillating and luxurious sensual activities. The sestet makes it clear that the fleetingness of beautiful impressions and otherworldly experiences, such as those related to drinking absinthe, is heightened in the rapidness of the metropolis. Although the young female absinthe drinker momentarily evades temporality with absinthe, the effects of her drunkenness are only illusory and eventually wear off. The urban decadent, consumed with the aim to conquer time, obsessively frequents dance-halls whose nightly entertainments and luminous beauty presented a more aesthetic and seemingly realistic means to preserve fleeting impressions. A resuscitation of the idealistic Paterian aesthetic therefore becomes probable in the impressionistic world of dance.



“Her Fleeting Leonardo Face”: The Dance-Hall and Decadent Lyric

In “La Melinité: Moulin Rouge,” a lyric that evokes the stage name of dancer Jane Avril who rose to fame at the infamous Moulin Rouge, Symons’ decadent male speaker declares the dance-hall to be “[t]he perfect rose of lights and sounds” (Symons 8). The adjective “perfect” ostensibly signals his state of enchantment in a secluded cosmos of stirring and violent stimuli. His feelings of contentment and fulfillment in a venue infamous for its transgressive entertainments are not unexpected in a decadent poet who consistently applied Pater’s aesthetic philosophy to his *flânerie*. In this rapturous realm of suggestive movements of sensual dancers, garish dress colors of fashionable women, voluptuous music, and kaleidoscopic lights, the speaker would appear to have discovered a metropolitan paradise that melds a Paterian aesthetic with a Baudelairean lust for fleetingness. With its incessant flux of both visual and auditory impressions, the dance-hall represents the inspirational line that haunts both Symons’ life and work: “To burn always with this hard gem-like flame is success in life” (Pater 189). This scintillating sphere of perpetual dissolution invokes images in the Conclusion of *Studies in the History of The Renaissance* such as “stirring of the senses, strange dyes, strange colours, and curious odours” that depicts a lifestyle that was decidedly antithetical to the loathed formation of habits “relative to a stereotyped world” (189). In other words, places like the Moulin Rouge, Jardin de Paris, and Tivoli tempted their visitors with a life that was anathema to a bourgeois existence determined by routine and convention.

World-weary decadents like Symons’ speaker were drawn to the venue’s promotion of hedonism and forbidden indulgences on an otherworldly stage and behind the stage-door (often with demimondaines and working-class women) because it presented an exhilarating nocturnal alternative to the enervating mundanity of their waking lives. Certainly, the dance-hall was a

stark contrast to Degas' scene of a low-lit, dilapidated café. Yet the decadent also recognized these dancehalls as degraded and disillusioning spaces. Symons was conscious of the fact that these locations, which cater to popular culture, certainly did not possess the idealistic beauty of high culture theatre. For example, in the closing lines of “The Primrose Dance: Tivoli”—a lyric dedicated to the sexually provocative American dancer Minnie Cunningham—Symons insinuates that the dance-hall was also a seedy environment that perhaps further disillusioned the *ennuyé*, rather than provided him with solace in beauty:

So, in the smoke-polluted place,  
 Where bird or flower might never be  
 With glimmering feet, with flower-like face,  
 She dances at the Tivoli (Symons 12-16).

Symons' speaker in these lines acknowledges that the unassuming, idealized beauty of nature, which is signified by the phrase “bird or flower,” is not only an anomaly, but is also subject to death in a dancehall “polluted” by the cigarettes of dissipated bohemians. However, it is the figure of the dancer, Minnie Cunningham, who offers the promise of the impossible beauty traditionally associated with lyric poetry; here she represents the charms of the stage through her capricious movements. Indeed, with her “flower-like face,” she is the only “rhythmic flower” that thrives in this sphere of dissolution.

Her animating movements, intoxicating rhythm, and enigmatic persona introduce an eternal vivacity into the dancehall: a world that inarguably facilitates the deterioration and *ennui* of over-indulgent degenerates. It is the figure of the dancer that continually leads decadents to

choose the dance-hall instead of the opera or classical theater as a form of entertainment or artistic escape. Paul Verlaine, the French Symbolist poet who inspired Symons' penchant for the suggestive, stated his preference for these venues: "I like to read Shakespeare, but prefer to see a ballet" (Verlaine in Carter 95). Men like Verlaine and Symons' speaker saw the dancehall as not only the domain of popular, salacious ditties of performers like Cunningham, but also as sanctuaries for these beloved insouciant dancers whose art embodies the perfect aesthetic moment. A purely subjective art form in which the dancers can fully express artistic autonomy, dance typified an escape from self-consciousness and temporality. Therefore, *ennuyés* were not only attracted to the debauchery of dance-halls; they were also interested in seeking a viable escape from the passage of time in the dancers' beguiling performances. Symons' speaker communicates this idea in "La Melinité" by saturating the poem with the image of a rose, both the traditional symbol of transient feminine beauty and emblem of the decadent movement in literature. In a passage from his essay, "The World as Ballet," Symons explains his conception of the dancehall as a "perfect rose" of eternal sensations:

As they dance, under the changing lights, so human, so remote, so desirable, so evasive, coming and going to the sound of a thin, heady music which marks the rhythm of their movements like a kind of clinging drapery, they seem to sum up in themselves the appeal of everything in the world that is passing, and coloured, and to be enjoyed: everything that bids us to take no thought for the morrow . . . and give way to the delightful present (Symons 262).

The source of Symons' fascination with the dancer in these lines is her illusion of timelessness and eternity. Her dance encourages a spectator to ignore a passing time that leads

to tomorrow and instead indulge in the momentariness of the “delightful present.” By “coming and going” to an interminable music, she achieves the decadent urbanite’s aim to preserve perfect, passing moments through her graceful insouciance and repetitive motions. She also embodies lyric’s attempts to conjoin the past with the present. Jan B. Gordon states that here the female dancer “spatializes time, a technique that Arthur Symons himself was to find so common to symbolic art” (Gordon 432). The dancer thus accomplishes Symons’ aesthetic goal of controlling time and perpetuating fleeting impressions. Gordon, for example, states that Symons’ lyrics are a “re-shaping of linear time...a poetic experience with neither beginning nor end” (433). The dancer’s manipulation of temporality thus explains why her shadowy, always evasive figure is a recurring motif in Symons’ corpus.

In “La Melinité,” the dancers conquer time through their highly controlled and artificial movements. The speaker exploits repetition and concatenation to evoke the dancers’ repetitive and seemingly interminable movements: “Down the long hall the dance returning / Rounds the full circle, rounds” (Symons 6-7). In these lines, the words “rounds” and “full circle” depict a configuration that seems to represent an inviolable infinity and dizzying eternity. The participle “returning” suggests that the whirling dancers show no signs of tiring. This stanza does not end in a description of their denouement, but rather implies a continuation of the performance: “The rose returning / Into the circle of its rounds” (9-10). It is the dancers who comprise “The perfect rose” through creating a rhythmically moving ring of ceaseless movements; they resemble the petals of a fluttering rose. This indefatigable rhythm actualizes Symons’ depiction of the dancer’s control over temporality through repetition in “The World as Ballet.” Symons further emphasizes this rhythm’s effect on a spectator by stating that the dancer “raises an invisible wall about us, shutting us off from the world,” and has a “fatal rhythm, never either beginning or ending” (262).

For Symons, dance is a consummate form of art because its participants are oblivious to the structure of time that governs the world outside the dancehall.

As a result, a spectator is transported to a dream-like unreality that is liberated from temporal constraints. The speaker underscores this feeling of unreality by portraying the performance as “A dance of shadows; / Alike the shadows of a dream” (19-20). Their incorporeal, diaphanous shapes are physical manifestations of their victory over time. Through their dance, they become the evanescent sensations that a lyric speaker seeks to preserve in his art. Furthermore, the presence of mirrors in the phrase “Before the mirror’s dance of shadows” introduces an element of multiplicity and enhances the impressionistic environment of the dancehall. The speaker is consequently enveloped in a ring of ethereal beings and he relishes this illusory performance of frozen time. This circular performance intimates Symons’ own obsession with manipulating time in his poetry, for this circular dance escapes the linear structure of time by appearing to not have a beginning or an end. For a decadent poet like Symons, hypersensitive to the fleetingness of sensation and his transitory surroundings, “[t]he dance came to represent that moment of ecstasy when the spontaneity of life became patterned” (Gordon 434).

The figure of the dancer consequently becomes especially important to an aesthete who is preoccupied with the Paterian aesthetic. Gordon refers to another poem about another oblivious dancer in Symons’ oeuvre, “Nora on the Pavement,” to illustrate this phenomenon. The circular nature of her dance transforms her into a “child, and most blithe, and wild as any elf” who “becomes increasingly free of the confines of her selfhood” (Gordon 433). Symons’ speaker distinguishes a dancer in this vertiginous circle who seems to have, like the childlike Nora, escaped from restrictive self-consciousness to liberating oblivion. The speaker notes a dancer who is “Alone, apart, one dancer watches / Her mirrored morbid grace” (11-12). By musing upon

“her morbid, vague, ambiguous grace,” the dancer is conscious of her mortality. But unlike the urban lyric poet, she is not consumed with asserting her existence in art. Instead, she delights in the momentariness of her experiences. Symons believes that this carefree oblivion is a distinct quality of dance. The dancer is a “picture who lasts long enough to have been there” and as a “pure symbol, evokes . . . all that need ever know of event” (261). For Symons’ speaker, the dancer of “La Melinité” functions as pure symbol because she possesses this “vague, ambiguous grace.” Furthermore, despite the dancer’s isolation “alone” in front of a mirror that bespeaks her morbid and mortal state, she does not appear to be perplexed:

And, enigmatically smiling,  
 In the mysterious night,  
 She dances for her own delight (26-28)

By dancing purely “for her own delight” in that moment, the female performer expresses her state of placid contentment in the form of an enigmatic smile. Her smile is in fact the consequence of an acute cognizance that she is merely a vague shadow gradually fading in an impermanent world. She is not concerned with transforming this momentary happiness into a permanent event and as a result, forgets the passage of time. Enraptured by her dance, she indulges herself in the passing moments to the point that she herself assumes the form of a dizzying fleeting impression. She expresses a knowing, enigmatic smile that discloses her access to her secret of triumphing over temporality in the final lines “A shadow smiling / Back to a shadow in the night” (29-30).

What emerges from this lyric is dance’s position as the perfect aesthetic form because it is

a perpetual reenactment of the transient beauty and evanescent impressions that Symons' speaker, as a lyric poet, seeks to preserve in his art. She is the male decadent's muse for aesthetic perfection because she becomes a symbol of all the ephemeral experiences that have eluded him in the city. Her shadowy reflection is an embodiment of Pater's ideal of a distinctly modern idea of beauty in which elusiveness is valued. Furthermore, her vagueness represents the possibilities of new experiences and impressions. Both this vagueness and enigmatic smile are in fact evocative of Pater's chapter on Leonardo da Vinci. Indeed, Pater's interpretation of Leonardo da Vinci resembles the personality of a male decadent. According to Pater's highly subjective aesthetic criticism, da Vinci possessed a peculiar "curiosity" that was often in "conflict with the desire of beauty" (Pater 86). Pater describes da Vinci as an insatiable and restless artist "with a love of the impossible" whose "life is one of sudden revolts" (77).

It would not be unreasonable to draw a connection between Pater's portrait of da Vinci and a stereotypical image of a modern aesthete, often a curious flâneur, who is also constantly desirous of beauty during his nocturnal wanderings. Indeed, Pater even states that this curiosity led da Vinci to "this agitation, this perpetual delay" and gave him an "air of weariness and *ennui*" (88). This weariness has pervaded his art, for the chapter on da Vinci is littered with Pater's observation of da Vinci's "fascination of corruption" and a peculiar emphasis on decay (83). In *The Renaissance*, Leonardo da Vinci is a distinctly modern figure that Pater masks beneath the façade of an idealized past. He shares the same malady and madness for a fleeting, elusive beauty as the fin-de-siècle decadents. In his famous passage about *La Gioconda*, which I need to quote at length, Pater's description of the timeless beauty's weary eyes and impenetrable smile demonstrates that *La Gioconda* represented to da Vinci an ideal that is virtually identical to the male decadent's perception of the dancer as the embodiment of modern beauty:

Perhaps of all ancient pictures, time has chilled it least...the unfathomable smile, always with a touch of something sinister in it, which plays over all Leonardo's work...The presence that rose thus so strangely beside the waters, is expressive of what in the ways of a thousand years men had come to desire. Hers is the head upon which all "the ends of the world are come and the eyelids are a little weary. It is a beauty wrought out from within upon the flesh, the deposit, little cell by cell, of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions. Set it for a moment beside one of those white Greek goddesses or beautiful women of antiquity, and how would they be troubled by this beauty, into which the soul with all its maladies has passed! All the thoughts and experiences of the world have etched and moulded there, in that which they have of power to refine and make expressive the outward form, the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome, the mysticism of the middle age with its spiritual ambition and imaginative loves, the return of the Pagan world, the sins of the Borgias. She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked, for strange webs with Eastern merchants: and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands. The fancy of a perpetual life, sweeping together ten thousand experiences, is an old one; and modern philosophy has conceived the idea of humanity as wrought upon by, and summing up in itself, all modes of thought and life. Certainly Lady Lisa might stand as the embodiment of the old fancy, the symbol of the modern idea (Pater 99).



Like the dancer, La Gioconda possesses an imperviousness to temporality which Pater underscores in the memorable phrase “time has chilled it least.” In its timelessness and immortality, La Gioconda similarly represents aesthetic perfection. Its perfection, however, does not lie in its status as one of the most famous and enduring works of art. Rather, La Gioconda endures and haunts viewers because it captures the same eternality that the dancer evokes. Pater suggests this eternality by defining her as a “vampire.” Pater’s phrasing—“she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave”—helps elucidate the enigmatic image of La Melinité as a “shadow smiling” while delighting in her emptiness. La Melinité expresses the tenets of Pater’s aesthetic by tacitly accepting the harrowing idea that “all melts under our feet” (189). After all, she is not perturbed by her morbidity and becomes the impressionistic Paterian “gem-like flame” in her dance; the stage name La Melinité is in fact a reference to a type of dynamite that Jane Avril resembled when she violently and ecstatically danced the can-can. La Gioconda and La Melinité thus share the same appeal. They both offer a promise of a “perpetual life” to men who seek to sustain their encounters with beauty. La Gioconda encapsulates countless enchanting experiences that take the form of the distinct charms and emblematic beauties of bygone eras that Pater lists in this passage such as “the mysticism of the middle ages...and its imaginative loves.” She therefore anticipates Symons’ conception of the dancer as someone who has the capacity to “sum up in themselves the appeal of everything in the world that is passing, and coloured, and to be enjoyed” (Symons 262).

Despite the apparent optimism in both this passage from Pater’s *The Renaissance* and “La Melinité: Moulin Rouge,” this conception of beauty is nevertheless associated with disease. La Gioconda’s eyelids are “weary” and her beauty is a soul accursed with maladies. In “La Melinité: Moulin Rouge,” the dancers appear to be dancing in a perpetual dream, but the

spectating speaker must eventually awaken from this reverie. The tentative verb in the line “And she and they together seem” marks the speaker’s consciousness that the dancers are presenting to him an illusion in which he cannot fully participate. “La Melinité: Moulin Rouge” describes an intoxicating and inviting environment, but its rhetoric of disease signals the lingering presence of decay and exhaustion in this urban location. The beauty that aesthetes pursued, exemplified by Pater’s *La Gioconda*, was associated with a malady, specifically an *ennui* that results from an exhausting surfeit. By choosing to dedicate this poem to Jane Avril, a dancer who was not only renowned for her frenzied dances, but also infamous for her nervous disorders and mental illnesses, Symons signals the shortcomings of the dance-hall as an escape from modern weariness and urban isolation. Avril and her fellow dancers merely delude spectators with the promise of a “perpetual life” in their spellbinding dance.

It is the speaker’s perception that the dancehall is a place that will soon be evacuated that eventually results in his feelings of isolation and disillusionment. This venue is brimming with enthusiastic spectators and beautiful dancers, but the speaker nonetheless expects their departure and the imminent fall of the curtain. He expresses this notion through the image of sickness, for the dance-hall appears to be suffering from a fatal fever. The speaker describes the strange and nightmarish lighting of the place: “The orange-rosy lamps are trembling / . . . / In ruddy flowers of flame that burn / The lights are trembling” (21, 23). The “trembling” lights evoke the shaking of a fevered body and the hues of the lights, described as “orange-rosy” and “ruddy,” elicits the image of burning cheeks. The frenetic feverishness of the sickened dancehall resembles a convalescent whose fever signals approaching death. The death in the dancehall is the termination of the night once the spectators have left to return to their routine life and this once magical space has emptied.

The oscillation of these feverish lights—a typical trope in fin-de-siècle poetry—marks “La Melinité” as a stereotypically decadent poem. Another topos of decadence, the rose, further demonstrates the speaker’s anticipation of disintegration. Just as the rose decays as soon as it reaches the apex of its beauty, the “perfect rose” of the dance-hall’s most paradisiacal moments also culminate into dissipation. The dancers and the dance-hall, both of which evoke the Paterian “gem-like” flame, shows that Pater’s philosophy ultimately collapses into decadence and isolation. The speaker exploits the image of a shedding, fading rose to signal the end of all the activities in the dancehall such as the music and the cosmetics that adorn the dancers’ faces.

In the first stanza, Symons’ speaker perverts the image of the rose as a traditional emblem of beauty to prefigure the departure of these impressions at dawn. The speaker likens the evanescent notes of the music, aptly titled “Olivier Metra’s Waltz of Roses,” to the falling petals of a rose, for the waltz “Sheds in a rhythmic shower / The very petals of the flower” (1-3). In the last line, his specific use of the word “rouge” to describe the red hue of notes, falling like “petals in a shower,” also implicates the beauty of the dancing women in this context of decay. Most important, the image of these petals falling in a “shower” further unveils the illusion of the dancehall as a place in the modern metropolis that is most prone to a lyric speaker’s feelings of despair; this urban venue precipitates its own disintegration in its sensual excess. Sudden movements of dancers’ skirts, possible transitory sexual encounters, and fleeting beautiful faces produce a maelstrom of sensations that will all have their end in a place that will ultimately be evacuated and empty. It is no wonder that the speaker declares in the first stanza that “All is roses.” As the twirling dancers retreat back stage, Symons’ speaker realizes that he is alone and unable to ever possess or unite with these beautiful, elusive dancers.

The male decadent speaker’s encounter with the virtually insubstantial dancer in the

sensational Moulin Rouge consequently also prefigures the collapse of romantic relationships in urban modernity. The pursuit of suggestive, phantom-like lovers who comply with the Paterian idea of beauty hinder men like the speaker from forming healthy, enduring relationships with women. As the flâneur travels city streets in search of novel sensations and impressions, he implicates erotic experiences with enigmatic women into his application of a Paterian aesthetic to an urban landscape. Male decadent poets, which included members from The Rhymers Club such as Symons and Dowson, often waited for evasive dancers, coquettish demimondaines, and painted prostitutes after the shows. These girls, whether they are popular dancers or tawdry prostitutes, were essentially prized for their impressionistic and elusive nature. In addition to embodying a “modern beauty” captured through their dance and attachment to a world that tumultuously dissolves every night, the dancer’s fading theatrical make-up and false promises of intimacy to audience members further characterized them as beautiful Paterian impressions who are “suspended like some trick of magic” and are “unstable, flickering, inconsistent”(Pater 187). The dancer in “La Melinité: Moulin Rouge,” for instance, is only characterized as a magical shadowy figure in a dream. More to the point, she is “Alone, apart” and does not reciprocate the lust and admiration of her enthralled spectators, and her seductive performance is only momentary.

Symons explicitly outlines these qualities in “At the Stage Door,” another poem dedicated to female performers in venues of urban entertainment. The poetic voice, for example, describes the rouged faces of women as he waits for a potential lover after a performance. He predominantly emphasizes their faces in the darkness that have become impressionistic because of their quick, flirtatious movements and gaudy, excessive make-up:

Faces flicker and veer,

Wavering out of the darkness into the light,

Wavering back into night (Symons 6-8).

The words “flicker” and “wavering” again invokes Pater’s “gem-like flame” and philosophy that “courting new impressions” are pivotal to success in life (Pater 189). Symons certainly courted these women whose inaccessible nature, a result of the fleetingness of their hurried movements and their performative personalities, rendered them to be desirable components of a Paterian “life of constant and eager observation” (188). Thus, their allure is in fact founded upon this titillating impossibility of romantic consummation and possession. The promise of a courtship with women who always remain mysterious impressions ostensibly resolved erotic boredom and prevented the cloying romances of a bourgeois existence.

But Symons himself perhaps recognized the destructive consequences of his romantic tendencies. In his essay “The Decadent Movement in Literature,” Symons detects that his literary contemporaries’ depiction of romance and erotic desire mirrored the emergence of damaging social conditions in an urban modernity. His analysis of the strange, uncanny play *La Princess Maleine*, with its “masque of shadows,” by M. Maeterlinck evokes the nightmarish ambience, silhouettes, and Paterian aesthetic of “La La Melinité: Moulin Rouge”:

La Princess Maleine, it is said, was written for a theatre of marionettes, and it is certainly with the effect of marionettes that these sudden, exclamatory people come and go.

Maleine, Hjalmar, Uglyane – these are no men and women, but a masque of shadows, a dance of silhouettes...they have the fantastic charm of these enigmatical semblances, “luminous, gemlike, ghostlike,” with, also, their somewhat mechanical eeriness...are

mere abstractions, typifying age, infancy, disaster, but with scarcely a suggestion of individual character(Symons in Beckson 146).

Symons' appreciation of the abstraction and suggestiveness in this drama evokes a desire for the fleeting beauty of dancers recounted in his poetry. Their exaggerated impressionism and association with the unreality of the stage certainly stimulates the imagination of an aesthete, but his choice of the only quotation from the play is perhaps revelatory of his own frustrating experiences at stage doors with these abstract love objects:

I cannot see you. Come hither, there is more light here, lean back your head a little towards the sky. You too are strange to-night! It is as though my eyes were opened to-night! It is as though my heart were half-opened to-night! ...But you are strangely beautiful, Uglyane! It seems to me that I have never looked on you till now! There is something about you...Let us go elsewhere --- under the light --- come! (146).

The speaker of these lines is desperately seeking to form a relationship with this spectral beauty. But he can barely make out the outline of her face in the dark and begs her to go into the light. Indeed, his pleas to Uglyane to follow him divulge a strong and fundamentally human need for intimacy and romance, despite his decadent lifestyle, in an urban atmosphere of floating impressions in darkness. This atmosphere, unfortunately, has become common in a metropolis in which hurrying crowds have become a sovereign urban force on city streets, dance-halls, and theatres. These crowded urban locations and the fact-paced structure of a bourgeois metropolitan existence have shaped a modern conception of love affairs. Potential lovers never advance above the status of an impression in a constantly in a dynamic urban world where human relations are consequently unstable and subject to decay. Karl Marx famously described the degradation of relationships in modernity in *The Communist Manifesto*:

Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind (Marx).

In his 1888 painting *At the Café Royal*, Sidney Starr captures the essence of modern love in the metropolis (Appendix fig. 4). His use of the stylistic techniques of impressionism and vague faces in the café are evocative of the wavering faces of Symons' inaccessible love objects and Marx's depiction of the dissolution of human connections in a commercialized city in the phrase "all that is solid melts into air." What makes *At the Café Royal* an unforgettable, perhaps even perturbing painting is the dining couple at the center of the painting. The faces of both the man and woman are notably obscured, so the viewer does not have access to their facial expressions. Starr's painting is obviously not a scene of traditional romance. Instead, the obscured faces communicate the couple's lack of sustained interest in the conversation over dinner and perhaps the love affair. Facial expressions facilitate conversation, for they are the means through which a speaker can understand a listener's reactions. More to the point, the absence of these faces and facial cues show that neither the man nor the woman will truly get to know or genuinely love each other. This inability to establish intimacy is a result of the couple's perpetually distracted state in a sphere of sensual excess constantly in flux.

The urban poet thus exploits another function of the lyric form in order to overcome the disintegration of intimacy in modernity and during the rise of mercenary bourgeois values. A

lyric poet always anticipates the reception of his personal impressions and sense experiences by another being. Despite its identity as an individualistic, subjective form, the lyric poem serves to invite communication and judgment from a non-I. Susan Stewart, in *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, especially emphasizes lyric poetry's task to reestablish intimacy or interpersonal engagement in a rapidly growing economic space that is undermining human relations. She states that "The poet intends towards another, even if there is only the poet apprehending the work in a later time and other space" (Stewart 12). Stewart further compares the lyric poet's aim to establish an enduring intimacy with a non-I to Orpheus' descent into the dark underworld to procure his beloved:

Orpheus encounters the disappearance of his beloved and must attempt to fill her absence with compensatory song...the Orphic journey into darkness is a prototype for the claims poetry makes against mortality (Stewart 256).

Throughout her work on lyric, Stewart predominantly argues that lyrical impulses are the result of an individual's intense fears of loneliness and being forgotten. The lyric poet truly fears the darkness of oblivion and seeks intimacy to overcome it; he yearns to create substantial love relationships that are not based on economic, instrumental ends. Stewart describes the lyric poet's struggle with this dark oblivion in the introductory paragraph to her study:

It is unbearable, this loneliness of the mind working on its own to maintain the outline, the figure, of the person...the mind in the dark has no object to reflect on and no object to limit the endless racing of its reflection (Stewart 1).

Symons thus attempts to counter the loneliness of his nocturnal wanderings and vapid sexual adventures with the lyrical form of a love sonnet in which he can permanently hold onto the image of a fugitive, impressionistic non-I.



## The Neurasthenic Lyric: "Nerves"

In the sonnet, "Nerves," which entirely comprises rhyming couplets, the lyric speaker begins by declaring that "[t]he modern malady of love is nerves." It soon becomes clear that he is seeking genuine intimacy in persistently stimulating urban spaces such as the dance-hall, signaled by the word "modern," that are apparently inhospitable to the development of permanent and substantial love relationships. The word "modern" in the opening line of a poem entitled "Nerves" instantly evokes a pathological urban modernity, which as a result of the growing importance of commerce and money in modern culture, has transformed the city into a sensorium of urgently moving anonymous crowds and insensate passersby. His emphasis on the nervous system and, more particularly, the disease neurasthenia—the characteristic malaise of the fin-de-siècle urban bourgeois—reveals that this commercial sensorium has had a negative effect upon the speaker's psychological health. His state of agitated excitement and his overstimulated nerves are indubitably the consequences of perpetually facing these jostling, urban crowds and contending with hurried metropolitan masses, both of which provide relentless and stressful stimulation through an endless train of vivid impressions, fleeting images, sharp sensations, and alluring commodities. Thus, the speaker is responding to a form of love that is peculiar to the modern metropolis. Not surprisingly, the vertiginous phantasmagoria of the city renders potential lovers to be only ephemeral impressions and actualized love affairs to be tragically impermanent. The flâneur is compelled to be restlessly in pursuit of the next attraction. It would not be unreasonable to assume that Symons' speaker is responding to Charles Baudelaire's famed description of the insatiable urbanite's pursuit of love in the urban crowd, a multitude that promises prolific love affairs, in a passage from "The Painter of Modern Life" (1863):

he is rapturously breathing in all the odours and essences of life; as he has been on the brink of total oblivion, he remembers, and fervently desires to remember, everything. Finally he hurls himself headlong into the midst of the throng, in pursuit of an unknown, half-glimpsed countenance that has, on an instant, bewitched him. Curiosity has become a fatal, irresistible passion! (Baudelaire 7).

Like Baudelaire's continuously distracted and stimulated flâneur, Symons' speaker is dwelling in a world of limitless sexual options and choices. Although this metropolitan "curiosity" is irresistible because it can be perpetually satisfied by infinite possibilities, it is nonetheless "fatal" because the intrinsic anonymity of the urban crowd encourages an alienating transitoriness. Symons' speaker thus longs to escape the inherent loneliness of the city in which intimacy becomes impossible. By placing himself in relation to a distant past in which love ostensibly took a far simpler form, the male lyric voice nostalgically yearns to bring back a period of antiquated romance invested with poetic idealism and revered constancy. Most important, the poem is an attempted resuscitation of the original function of lyric, which traditionally aims to move away from isolating subjectivity to interpersonal engagement. The lyric poet desires intimacy and desperately seeks to come out of a void in order to connect with another human being, whether it is an object of desire or an anonymous reader.

The form of "Nerves" and its rhyme scheme underscore the speaker's attempt to return to an idealized romantic past, presumably the Middle Ages, during which courtiers constantly professed undying love and recorded the immortality of their passions in sonnets. Symons's untraditional construction of this sonnet form both acknowledges and departs from the Petrarchan tradition and the Shakespearean model. Where both Petrarch's and Shakespeare's sonnets faithfully address a single, tangible (albeit idealized lover) such as Laura or the Dark

Lady (or the mysterious male, “W.H.”), Symons’ “Nerves” examines the pathological effects of modern love. Furthermore, where the sonnet form is traditionally associated with unfaltering loves that, as a result of their depiction in venerable works of art, have achieved immortality, Symons’ poem does something different. His poem does not take the argumentative form (octave followed by sestet) for which the sonnet is conventionally celebrated. This deliberate deviation from the traditional sonnet structure discloses the speaker’s awareness that a consummate realization of his romantic ideals is virtually impossible in a modern society that is hostile to authentic love relationships. Symons’ modified sonnet form is adapted to the ephemerality inherent in modern love. His series of perfectly rhymed couplets, resembling perfectly paired lovers, certainly intimates the speaker’s desire for romantic harmony, but the lack of the traditional final couplet that clinches a speaker’s argument in a conventional Shakespearean sonnet in fact reveals the urban speaker’s incapacity to attain enduring intimacy. A series of couplets in lieu of a single, decisive couplet represent the notion that a flâneur experiences a series of fleeting and superficial love affairs that he repeatedly recognizes as meaningless; the grand romance he seeks, however, evades him. The form therefore gives the poem a false sense of harmony and stability. Indeed, images of disease, madness, and agitated nerves reinforce the notion that the speaker is instead surrounded by feelings of disharmony. The poem’s prominent conceit of a disturbed nervous system shows that the speaker’s overstimulating urban environment has damaging psychological consequences and is complicit in the speaker’s failure to achieve romantic intimacy.

By drawing attention to the nervous system, the speaker appears to be specifically attributing the degradation of love to a modern psychological condition. His accentuated attention to the mechanisms of the nervous system is evident in the lines: “The clock for ever

ticking in my ear, / The clock that tells the minutes in my brain” (8-9). Here the speaker chooses not to use the more abstract term “mind,” but rather the physiological word “brain,” perhaps the most recognizable organ of the nervous system. Additionally, the sensory role of the brain is especially important, for it perceives sensations such as pleasure and pain and apprehends visual impressions, such as a lover’s face. In these lines, the brain is responsible for perceiving the “ticking” of a clock: a sound the speaker evidently longs to “cease to hear” (7). As a result, the image of the receptive “brain” in the poem suggests that the poem is not only concerned with the perception of sensations, but also notably features a hypersensitive speaker who possesses an incredibly nervous sensibility. He is particularly sensitive to the sound of a ticking clock because it divides the day into the inescapable monotonous tasks of a man occupied by both the entertainments and obligations that belong to the metropolis. The ticking clock also naturally represents the passing of time. In this way, the source of the speaker’s pain is his consciousness of imminent death that is masked by the rote and routine of his life.

The speaker’s use of imagery in the poem that evokes the nervous system extends to a description of the neural pathway in which the ticking in his ear in line eight is eventually perceived by the brain as a “pain” in line ten. The speaker, however, suggests that this striking reaction of “pain” to the clock’s ticking is unfortunately the only sensation he feels. By explicitly establishing a contrast between this pained reaction to time and the pained anguish of love, the speaker implies that he rather experience amorous emotions. In lines ten and twelve, he remarks: “It is not love, nor love’s despair” nor “The simple agony of love and loss” (10, 12). The poem’s context of modernity, with its implications of rapidly changing social conditions, illuminates the speaker’s agonizing preoccupation with time as a symptom of dehumanizing modern conditions. His acute awareness of time therefore ties his identity to a bourgeois urbanite whose exacting and

mechanistic bureaucratic environment has deadened his capacity for experiencing love. In *The Metropolis and Mental Life*, Georg Simmel provides a diagnosis for this inexplicable pain:

The technique of metropolitan life is unimaginable without the most punctual integration of all activities and mutual relations into a stable and impersonal time schedule...Punctuality, calculability, exactness are forced upon life by the complexity and extension of metropolitan existence (Simmel 27).

The pain that the speaker feels in response to passing time, which he describes as a “witless, keener pang,” consequently becomes synonymous with the poem’s ubiquitous and mysterious disease, itself evidently a product of an impersonal metropolitan society.

It is the juxtaposition of the two words, “witless” and “keener,” that identifies the speaker’s diseased nerves as a symptom of the malaise *du jour*, neurasthenia. The description of the “pang” is inherently contradictory, for “witless” suggests incapacity and senselessness, whereas “keener” denotes an acute understanding and a heightened awareness. This paradoxical sensory state identifies the speaker as a typical victim of neurasthenia: an over-civilized decadent who is merely responding to the constant stimulation of an urban bourgeois life. This paradox, for instance, is illustrated through the speaker’s shifting between a state of numb responsiveness and an intense excitability. The first line, for example, is a simple declarative statement, and it is characterized by a matter-of-fact tone. This line appears to be the blasé utterance of a weary and bored *ennuyé*. But the speaker’s languid attitude progresses into a profound state of frenzied agitation as the poem unfolds. For example, he uses an exclamatory phrase “Nerves, nerves!” when the poem closes (Symons 13). His vacillation between the jaded indifference of a sophisticate and the anxious sensibility of a distressed metropolitan is a manifestation of his occupation of both the neurasthenic and blasé, personality types that are created by and occur in

an over-civilized metropolis.

Neurasthenia, as Angus McLaren has observed, is “a symptom of overcivilization” in which “white-middle class men were challenged by the unremitting demands of urban life and heady, bourgeois occupations”; “its chief victim was the brain worker as distinguished from the muscle worker in an impersonal bureaucratic society” (McLaren 115). The overindulgent decadent, however, is far more susceptible to, or at least exacerbates, this uniquely fin-de-siècle malaise by having a severe, exaggerated reaction to his bourgeois, bureaucratic settings. These reactions manifest themselves in the blasé and neurasthenic personality. It is Georg Simmel who coined the concept of the blasé and neurasthenic personalities; he believed these reactions are justified in a modern, metropolitan culture that estranges human beings from one another and destroys human subjectivity and individuality through commercial instrumentalism and the rise of objectivity. Simmel explores the effects that changing modern conditions in the city had on the psychological state of the urban dweller and interpersonal relationships. An increasingly impersonal system of public transportation, technological advancements, and a society solely preoccupied with monetary gain are some instances of modernity that result for Simmel in an “overheated state” that either force the urban dweller to become an indifferent, withdrawn blasé or a restless, tormented neurasthenic who is in a perpetual state of unsatisfied desire as he is confronted with the excitements, often forbidden adventures, in the metropolitan world.

Perhaps one of Simmel’s most prominent contributions to studies in modernity is his recognition of its damaging consequences upon social relations. Human interactions suffered from what Simmel identifies as the transitoriness and instability of the nascent modern metropolis. In his essay on Simmel, David Frisby explains that “[t]his transitory nature of the new in modernity” created a society in which interpersonal engagement was “in a state of flux, in

motion, in ceaseless movement” (Frisby 34). Simmel attributes the transience and fragmentation of interpersonal relations and its resulting psychological responses to “an intensification of nervous stimulation” (Simmel 28). Simmel describes the psychological state of the flâneur responding to the barrage of stimuli in the city:

His mind is stimulated by the difference between a momentary impression and the one that preceded it. Lasting impressions, impressions which only differ slightly from one another, impressions which take a regular and habitual course – all these use up, so to speak, less consciousness than does the rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions. These are the psychological conditions that the metropolis creates. With each crossing of the street, with the tempo and multiplicity of social, occupational social life... (Simmel 25).

These psychological conditions form the blasé and neurasthenic personalities who ultimately comprise the inhabitants of the metropolis. They wander city streets and roam crowded boulevards. It is the existence of these personalities that hinder erotic, virtually impressionistic encounters from materializing into substantial love affairs. Love cannot thrive in an environment in which unfeeling blasés and easily bored neurasthenics are lovers. The excessive sexuality of the modern metropolis and its promise of variegated, novel sexual experiences prevent an urbanite like Symons’ speaker from achieving intimacy through romantic commitment

No sooner has the neurasthenic speaker projected his own disease on a personified Love than he begins a narrative about the progression of its worsening illness in modernity. The personified Love appears to be deteriorating in the face of alienating modern conditions:

Love, once a simple madness, now observes

The stages of his passionate disease,  
 And is twice sorrowful because he sees,  
 Inch by inch entering, the fatal knife (Symons 2-5).

Temporal cues such as “once” and “now” express the idea that Love’s capricious, yet harmless acts of folly in the past, a consequence of intense erotic attraction, have developed into pathological and even self-destructive behavior in the present. The phrase “once a simple madness,” for example, signifies the traditional trope of love-sickness of love sonnets. Moreover, the word “simple” and the speaker’s apparent nostalgia imply that there was at one time a pleasurable element to this madness and feelings of romantic attachment. However, this previously harmless erotic “madness” has progressed into a suicidal insanity. The personified Love is characterized as an autonomous being who indifferently witnesses its own destruction. The phrase “inch by inch” depicts a slow and gradual annihilation, but Love does not appear to avert death. Despite being “twice sorrowful,” the personified Love resignedly accepts its precarious position in the modern world. After all, the figure of Love must grow accustomed to modern love relationships whose endurance is constantly threatened with enticing impressionistic visages discovered either on an omnibus or glimpsed at in a music-hall.

Symons’ lyric speaker shares the personified figure of Love’s resignation. The poetic voice comes to the disappointing conclusion that in spite of his efforts to escape his isolating reality, he is entrapped. This realization is intimated through the image of a child who awakes from a pleasant dream only to find a suffocating darkness in the closing lines: “O folly of a child who dreams / Of heaven, and, in the darkness, screams” (13-14). Despite his hopes to actualize his vision of bygone antiquated romances through the sonnet form, the speaker eventually acknowledges that both love and its presentation in lyric poetry must adjust themselves to the



sensual excess of modernity. The preponderance of stimuli occasion this change in lyric poetry and literature. The *maladie fin-de-siècle* and overexcited nerves therefore do not only spark new kinds of intimacy, but also incite the speaker to realize that the lyric form can be of use to him in a world of perpetual dissolution and degraded romance.

Symons turns to the function of lyric as a means to freeze the fleeting moment and assert his own existence in a social sphere determined by ephemeral conditions. In addition, the lyric form also allows the poet to aestheticize a dreary and banal modern existence. The sonnet form of “Nerves” thus evokes Hegel’s lecture on the modern purpose of lyric in his interpretation of the Petrarchan love sonnets dedicated to Laura, the *Canzoniere*. Hegel’s insights into lyric and its liberating possibilities divulges the notion that this most ideal form of art achieves the escape from a world of prose and alienation to a realm of poetry and romance. In his study on Hegel’s four lectures on aesthetics, Benjamin Rutter states that Hegel illustrates a “promising tradition in lyric”:

The genre painter overcomes the repugnance of daily life not by evading or ennobling it, but by committing himself to it...The poet seeks to overcome the frustrations of love not by medicating her sorrows...but precisely by exploring them (Rutter 193).

In this excerpt, Rutter highlights not only a fundamental aspect of Hegel’s lecture on lyric, but how a decadent urban poet can use lyric to cope with a degraded modern context in which contingency and fleetingness have supplanted enduring romances.

In being a personal, subjective expression of the imagination, lyric permits the modern metropolitan aesthete to create an aesthetic moment and wrest the eternal from the transitory. According to Hegel’s readings of the *Canzoniere*, the actual circumstances and even the love object itself prove to be insignificant to the lyric poet. Hegel argues that it is two qualities of

Petrarch's sonnets that illuminate the most important function of lyric. First, despite her iconic place in literature, Laura herself is insignificant. Petrarch does not describe her with any striking particularities. Secondly, Petrarch appears to deter possession of his love object, and relishes in his longing; Hegel defines the Petrarchan sonnet as "a longing satisfied in longing" (Hegel 874). These two points lead to Hegel's conclusion that this dearth in detail and resistance of erotic consummation bestows upon the subjective imagination a power to aestheticize commonplace love objects and routine experiences. Lyric allows "a harmless play, a freedom in toying alike with rhythm and ingenious metres" to "lift the soul high above all the painful entanglement in the restrictions of the real world" (Hegel 611). Through lyric, an isolated urbanite frustrated with his prosaic surrounding, such as the speaker of "Nerves," can experience romance and triumph over the contingent and trivial.

The redemptive potential of lyric comes most forcefully in the poem "Pastel." In "Pastel," the Petrarchan lyric serves as a model for the decadent poet who, obsessed with impermanence and decay, seeks to make fleeting encounters eternal and fading beauty endure in his art. The lyric speaker of "Pastel" follows the Petrarchan model by desiring an incorporeal love object whose disembodied impressionism is an exaggeration of Laura's vagueness. This elusiveness in this lyric represents the speaker's wish to perpetuate the experience of desire and sustain momentary feelings of tenderness in a personal encounter. "Symons' speaker in "Pastel" exploits the lyric form to aestheticize the sleazy one-night stand, one of many commonplace urban erotic experiences that have degraded love and worsened its "modern malady."

## Decadence's Lyric Redemption: Pastel

In the lyric "Pastel," the speaker recounts a sordid sexual encounter with an unidentified woman in a sleazy urban setting. At first glance, this deceptively simple poem appears to be merely describing a stereotypically decadent sex act. For instance, the poem features all the usual trappings of a decadent's sexual experience with a temporary lover in the city. The lovers are situated in a forgettable dark little room and are evidently smoking cigarettes, which are hackneyed but nevertheless essential accessories for a decadent moment of post-coital tristesse. The illumination generated by these clichéd objects, however, is the most memorable and predominant image in the nine-line poem; it virtually guides the course of events in this erotic episode, for it plays a role in nearly every line:

The light of our cigarettes

Went and came in the gloom:

It was dark in the little room.

Dark, and then, in the dark,

Sudden, a flash, a glow,

And a hand and a ring I know.

And then, through the dark, a flush

Ruddy and vague, the grace –

A rose – of her lyric face (Symons 1-9).

The speaker's emphasis on the flickering cigarettes throughout these lines draws attention to the triteness, if not the downright sleaziness, of his amorous adventure. Yet, despite the ostensible tawdriness that these cigarettes provide to the sexual encounter, their impressionistic illumination invests the poem with a Paterian impressionism. The impressionistic light of the cigarettes evokes Pater's famous concluding words from *The Renaissance*:

And if we continue to dwell in thought on this world, not of objects in the 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.  
(Pater 187 my emphasis)

Despite being kitschy symbols of decadence and bohemianism, the cigarettes function as the medium through which the speaker desperately attempts to revive the idealized Paterian aesthetic in his palpably prosaic world. As the three stanzas unravel, it becomes evident that this impressionistic illumination becomes synonymous with the disembodied lovers. Two lines—"The light of our cigarettes / Went and came in the gloom"—depict the lovers' weaving bodies in the sex act with the lit cigarettes possibly in their mouths. Thus, the expiring glow of the cigarettes function as a representation of the two bodies that are only momentarily intertwined in the brief poem. The oscillating light of the cigarettes, the vague shapes of the weaving lovers' bodies, and the ultimately transitory sex act are therefore all evocative of the "flickering," and "inconsistent" impressions that Pater describes. By focusing on the flickering lights of the cigarettes in a vulgarized urban context that is diametrically opposed to the highly aestheticized and romanticized world of Pater's work, the speaker consequently renders the impressions in

“Pastel” to be a perversion of Paterian impressionism; Pater’s aesthetic evidently does not belong in this rather dingy, if not ugly, little room.

Both the form and imagery underscore the degraded context of the speaker’s encounter with this unknown woman. For example, the poem’s form implies that the interaction between the speaker and the woman is not a romance, but rather a fleeting moment of sexual indulgence. Despite the speaker’s apparent longings for intimacy or at least a romantic encounter, the lovers appear to be detached from each other and are far from intimate. It is the poem’s rhythmical variation that introduces a sense of disharmony between the lovers. The rhythm noticeably varies on a three-beat line around six syllables that expand to eight-syllable lines. As a result, the rhythm lacks repetition and bears an almost erratic, unpredictable structure.

In addition to the speaker counterpointing three-beat and four-beat lines, he also features unresolved rhymes with words suspended in a line. In each tercet, there is one unrhymed line that is followed by a rhyming couplet that is ostensibly in iambic trimeter. These prosodic elements consequently characterize this erotic scene as discordant. In other words, the unresolved rhymes and the interplay between dissonances and complementarities in the poem disclose that these lovers are not enacting a romance that will culminate in an idealistic love relationship. Rather, the unresolved rhymes reflect the speaker’s inability to possess the woman, and they anticipate her departure after this purely hedonistic experience. The lovers, characterized as insubstantial impressions by the illumination of cigarettes, are consequently incapable of achieving a level of human intimacy in a derelict room that appears to be completely divested of the aestheticism and unearthly beauty described in Pater’s *The Renaissance*.

An emphasis on the suffocating sleaziness and compactness of the speaker’s surroundings, a dark little room, also contributes to the degradation of the Paterian program and

the speaker's aesthetic frustrations. The space of the sexual encounter is sparse, and its most distinguishing characteristic is its sense of emptiness and melancholic ambience. The poem's brevity reflects the room's sparseness, staleness, and emptiness. Furthermore, the speaker does not embellish his description of the room with any ornate details; he only provides a laconic description in the line: "It was dark in the little room" (Symons 3). This sense of emptiness intimates the lack of grandeur and insignificance of a brief, meaningless sexual affair.

Despite the speaker's ostensibly romantic and aesthetic aspirations in the poem's final lines, a feeling of resignation nevertheless pervades the poem; the speaker appears to be cognizant of the fact that his relations with the woman are ultimately devoid of meaning and will not transcend the status of a one-night stand. Consequently, such sleaziness or degradation leads the speaker to associate the sparse, cramped room with an inescapable feeling of sadness. He establishes this association through rhyming the word "room" with "gloom" in a couplet in the first tercet (2, 3). By aligning these two words, the speaker implies that the space fills him with despair that is the result of not only the sordid circumstances and disillusioning meaninglessness of the sex act, but also the constriction of the room. Concatenation in lines that characterize the room as dark suggests that the room is a compressed, cramped space. Moreover, the darkness also helps create this stifling atmosphere. As a result, the lovers appear to be typographically entrapped in their squalid environment. For instance, the cyclicity, the repetition, and the image of darkness in the line, "Dark, and then, in the dark", all portray this scene of mediocre eroticism as a suffocating experience. Indeed, the line, "And then, through the dark, a flush," bears a similar cyclicity. Thus, the repetition of the word "dark" renders darkness to become a symbol that is as equally as important as the light from the cigarettes.

As the tercets unfold, the speaker modulates his use of the word "dark"; it changes from

an adjective to a noun as the poem progresses. In line three of the first tercet, the word “dark” first appears as an adjective: “It was dark in the little room”(3). However, “dark” becomes a noun at the end of the succeeding line: “Dark, and then, in the dark” (4). By changing dark into a noun in the phrase “in the dark,” the speaker changes the function of the word as a mere description of the little room to having the “dark” identify the space these vague bodies inhabit; “the dark” thus becomes the most predominant feature of the room. The word undergoes another transformation in the final tercet: “And then, through the dark, a flush.” Here, darkness does not only play a role in obscuring the woman’s identity and rendering her to be “vague,” but also becomes a medium through which her face is recognized (8).

There is so much emphatic darkness that it is only through the interplay between the dark and the light from the cigarettes in the room that these diaphanous figures can be apprehended. Their bodies remain as suggestive impressions created by the illuminated cigarettes. After all, the lovers are notably disembodied and unrepresented in the poem. For instance, the speaker defines the cigarettes with the definite article in the opening phrase “the light of our cigarettes,” but the figures in the dark noticeably remain indefinite. Most important, the speaker’s elusive object of desire is known only by her “hand,” as well as “a ring”—more than possibly as a token of adultery—which he supposedly recognizes. He catches a glimpse of her florid face in the dark only because of the lit cigarettes. As a result, the speaker renders these unstable bodies to become synonymous with the “unstable” flickering lights in the room. Their bodies become the Paterian impressions that the speaker seeks to revive in his prosaic urban environment.

The instability of this light evokes the unstable nature of bodies involved in sexual intercourse. As a result, these lines establish the parallel between the writhing bodies and flickering lights, but, more to the point, place the speaker’s revived Paterian program in a carnal

context. The phrase “went and came” elicits the image of the lovers’ physical movements during the sex act. Similarly, the climactic and intense illumination of the cigarettes in which they are about to be put out implies the moment of orgasm in the phrase: “Sudden, a flash, a glow” (5). These words, emphasizing the suddenness and intensity of an orgasm, remind us again of the familiar topos of post-coital tristesse that bemoans the transience of sexual pleasure.

Besides illuminating the urban interpretation of Paterian impressions, the cigarettes also become representations of the transitory sex act. In addition to the disembodied lovers, the sex act itself also functions as an impression in the poem. The cigarettes are fitting symbols for impressionism not only because of their kitschy association with a maudlin sadness after orgasm, but also because they are by nature transient objects. Cigarettes eventually expire and are extinguished when they are put out. The speaker’s description of their final glow is similar to Pater’s line about evanescent impressions “which burn and are extinguished with our consciousness of them” (Pater 187). The connection to this Paterian line intimates the notion that the extinguished cigarettes represent the specter of impermanence that haunts the poem and contributes to its melancholic mood. The impressions in “Pastel” are not associated with the hopeful Paterian pursuit of fresh sensations: “gathering all we are into one desperate effort to see and touch, we shall hardly have time to make theories about things we see and touch . . . for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions” (Pater 187). Unlike Pater’s perspective, the speaker’s actions do not insinuate that he is profiting from constantly “courting new impressions.” Instead, he experiences the prototypical dilemma of the urban decadent. He feels entrapped by a suffocating boredom that leads him to indulge in actions that ultimately disappoint him in their disillusioning mediocrity. The continuous indulgence in illicit sexual experiences consequently results in these acts acquiring the monotony of routine bourgeois



activities. The phrase “went and came” that simultaneously represents both the mechanistic motions of weaving cigarettes and bodies expresses this concern for the implicit monotony in the forbidden adventures of the urbanite.

The most devastating aspect of this urban experience, however, is that the woman herself becomes the specter of impermanence and decay. Through being apprehended only as an impression created by the glow of her post-coital cigarettes, she embodies the transitory sex act. The impressionistic woman, the expected figure of romance in the poem, is tied to the fleetingness of the orgasm, and it is her decay and the speaker’s fading desire for her that become the prominent subjects of the poem. The speaker counters this morbidity, however, by aestheticizing her elusiveness and portraying the contingent romance of the crowd in the subjective lyric. As the sovereign poetic form of contingency and chance, it is the lyric that transforms the transience of the orgasm into an aesthetic moment in “Pastel.” Lyric’s closeness to music, evocative of the woman’s vagueness and the evanescence of the sex act, lends itself to a liberating ideality. Rutter illustrates this feature of lyric by contrasting it to epic poetry: “epic poems give us a world, but in the lyric, the world is sort of a prop” (Rutter 199). Hegel also argues a similar point about a lyric’s ideality:

Since in lyric it is the poet who expresses himself, the most inherently trivial matter may satisfy him in the first place for this purpose...the most momentary and fleeting mood...is made permanent by its expression. The content of what is said, the topics, are wholly accidental...The attractiveness of treatment and presentation in lyric poetry may either in the sweetness that the heart exhales or the novelty of striking ways of looking at things and in wit of surprising points or turns of phrase (Hegel 1115).

Symons’ s subject matter of an elusive urban love object in “Pastel,” distressing in its

ephemerality to the alienated *ennuyé*, becomes tolerable and even beautiful because of his evocation of lyric. Lyric is the antidote to “the modern malady of love” because the speaker, rather than evade or brood over the tragic transience of the urban love object, finds and presents the beauty in the perverted intimacy found in the crowd.

At first, Symons’ speaker does not idealize nor even praise the woman for her femininity and beauty. She at first appears to be only another manifestation of the speaker’s decadent urban surroundings. For instance, he describes her “ruddy” complexion in the lines “...a flush / Ruddy, and vague, the grace –” (Symons 8). This description of the redness of her face is stripped of any lyrical idealism and continues the association of her identity with a post-coital cigarette, for the red hue parallels the burning glow of an expiring cigarette. The word “ruddy” also indicates a florid face that is exposed to the elements, and it introduces a vulgarity that is opposed to the more idealizing term “rosy.” Moreover, “ruddy” suggests a skin tone that is often associated with both alcohol and a vigorous sex-act. She is undoubtedly ruddy and flushed because she recently had an orgasm, the event upon which this brief poem evidently pivots. The word “flush” in line seven is aligned to “face” in an imperfect rhyme that represents the slovenliness and carelessness of both the experience and woman. Consequently, the terms “flush” and “ruddy” reinforce the carnality of the poem; both draw attention to her blood rather than her skin tone. Her accentuated carnality is a manifestation of the speaker’s recognition of her ultimate mortality and mediocrity.

Despite the speaker’s initial characterization of his object of desire as merely an extension of his prosaic surroundings, she is ultimately aestheticized in the final line. In the end, her rather vulgar beauty unexpectedly transforms into a “rose” (7). Concatenation and the speaker’s tone of bored resignation dissipate with an exclamation that her face is a “rose.” The phrase “A rose” in fact functions as a decisive turning point in the brief poem, for it represents

the precise moment when the speaker challenges his suffocating, prosaic atmosphere by evoking the aesthetic. The significance of this image of the rose for Symons is manifest in the marked typographical changes he made around the phrase in the revised edition of *Silhouettes*. In the 1892 edition of *Silhouettes*, the phrase “A rose” is surrounded by hyphens. Through the use of hyphens, Symons purposefully isolates the rose, the traditional symbol of feminine beauty in art, in this dark and dingy room; it represents the only glimmer of poetry that the lyric speaker seeks to preserve in a prosaic situation. However, in the revised and enlarged edition published in 1896 that featured previously omitted poems, Symons places the phrase in parentheses and adds an exclamation mark. This change is not negligible, for the exclamatory phrase now reveals the speaker’s ecstatic discovery of beauty in her face. The exclamation and the allusion to the traditional poetic image of a rose demonstrate that lyric has accomplished its promise to the speaker. Yet in both versions of the poem, the speaker’s purpose essentially remains the same: he is summoning poetry into his degraded urban world.

It is thus the vague outline of the unknown woman’s orgasmic face in the dark that introduces poetry and art into this vulgar, urban context of a one-night stand. The poem therefore surprisingly progresses from the “gloom” of a forgettable erotic moment to that of exalted beauty and sublime poetry. However, on reflection, this sudden change is perhaps not as entirely unexpected as the first eight lines might suggest. Although the brief poem is describing for the most part an unmomentous sex act, the poem’s title reveals that the speaker has been longing to locate himself in relation to some form of aesthetic beauty throughout the lyric. He evokes the aesthetic before the poem begins, for example, through the title, “Pastel.” The most distinctive attributes of the pastel medium are its drained and muted colors. Pastel evokes dissolution and effacement, and it proves to be an apt title for a poem about evanescent impressions and

ephemeral pleasures. At the poem's close, the aesthetic that the speaker thus inevitably places himself in is that of the lyric, an aesthetic form tied to evanescence and transience as a result of its closeness to music.

The earthiness of her "ruddy" flushed visage becomes aestheticized as a "lyric face" when he catches an impression of her form in the dark as she climaxes. At the surface, this transformation occurring during the sudden moment of orgasm is a sly and clever suggestion at the woman's peals of sexual pleasure resembling a melody. Yet the transience of their tryst and her characteristic impressionism express far more significant implications in the invocation of the lyric form. The speaker describes her face as a "lyric," a fundamentally impressionistic form, because she resembles a flickering Paterian impression in a dark room illuminated only by the dim light of vacillating cigarettes. As a consequence, her impressionism renders her to become the medium through which the speaker finally revives Walter Pater's aesthetic. Although she is far from being an idealized Paterian feminine figure, her impressionistic identity and elusiveness nonetheless lead the speaker to associate her with the Paterian ideal of beauty. After all, it is the vulgarity of his romantic situation that compels him to turn to the lyric form as a means to cope with his mundane world.

By distinguishing the unknown woman as possessing a "lyric face," the speaker renders her to embody "the highest and most complete form of poetry" in their prosaic world and banal circumstances (Pater 108). She is an embodiment of one of Walter Pater's most memorable declarations found in his chapter "The School of Giorgione": "*All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music*" (106). The speaker imagines the woman, a fleeting lyrical impression who will perhaps disappear in the morning, as the perfect art form. By concluding the poem with the invocation of lyric, she forever remains the achievement of the speaker's desired aesthetic

moment.

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Appendix

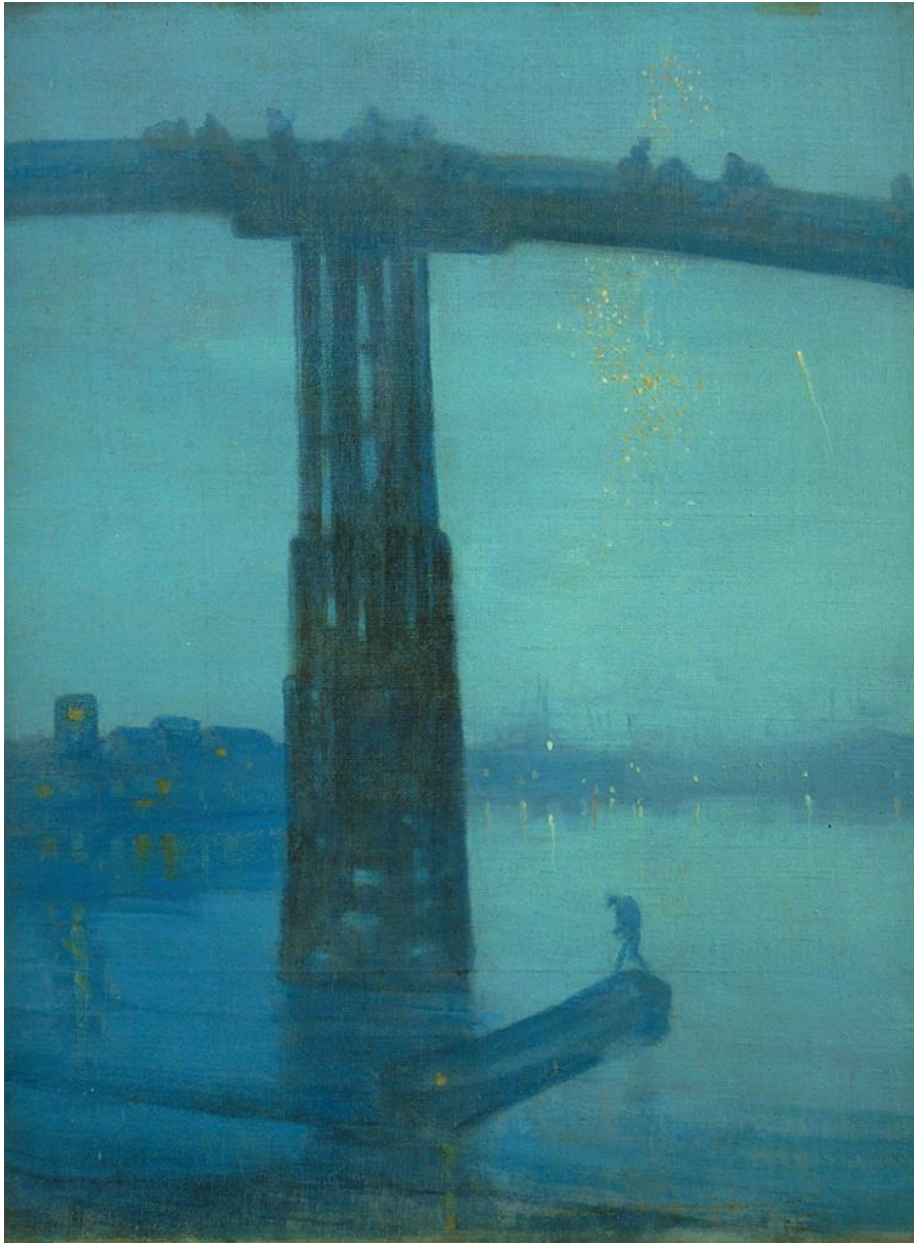


Fig. 1. Nocturne in Blue and Gold: Old Battersea Bridge. 1877. ARTstor [online]. New York: New York. [cited 18 April 2013]. Available from World Wide Web: (<http://library.artstor.org/library/secure/ViewImages?id=8DIKaF4iKjcz>).

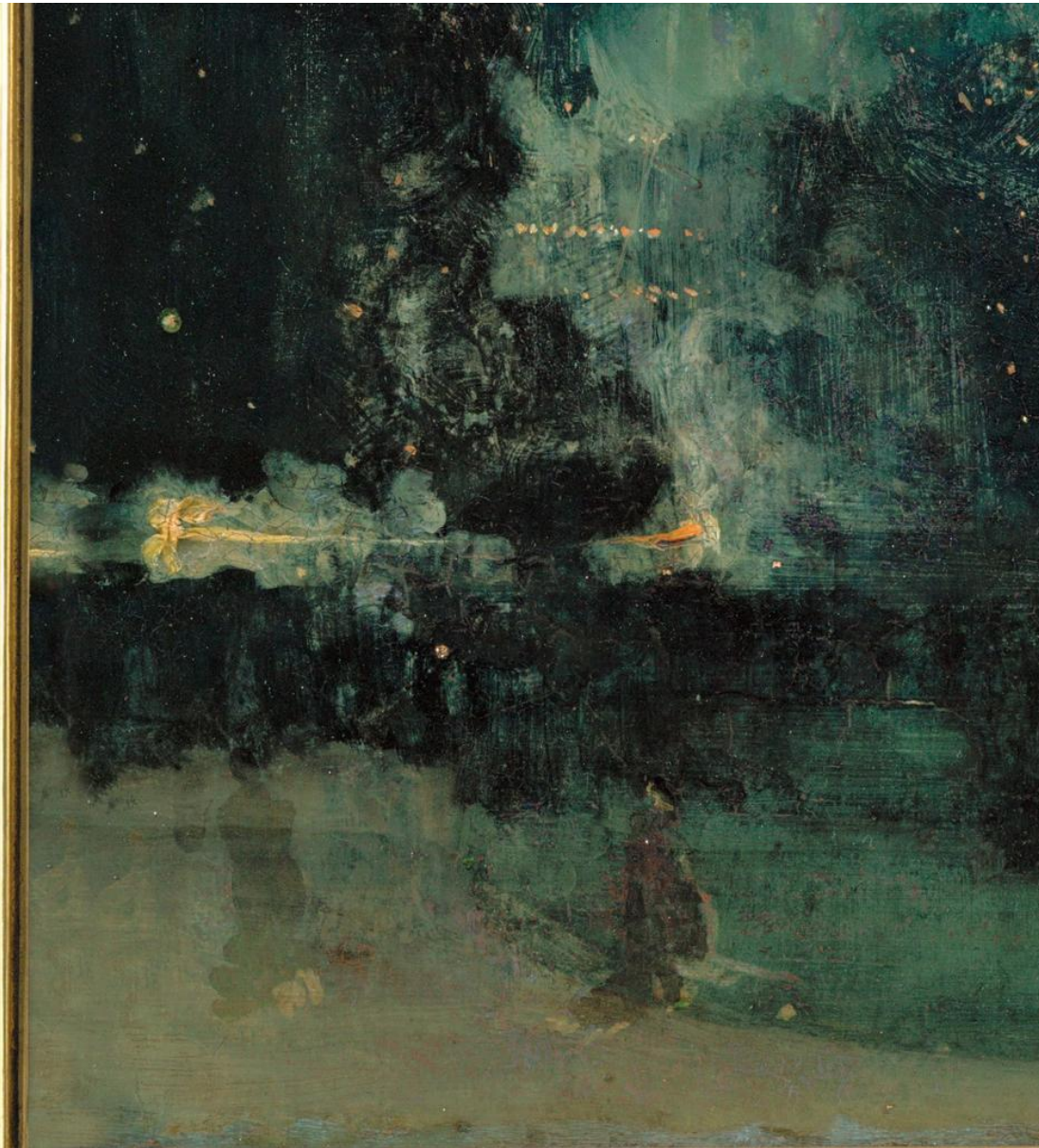


Fig. 2. Nocturne: Black and Gold – The Falling Rocket. James McNeill Whistler. 1875. ARTstor [online]. New York: New York. [cited 18 April 2013]. Available from World Wide Web:(<http://library.artstor.org/library/secure/ViewImages?id=%2FThWdC8hIywtPygxFTx5RnguXX4pfVg%3D>).



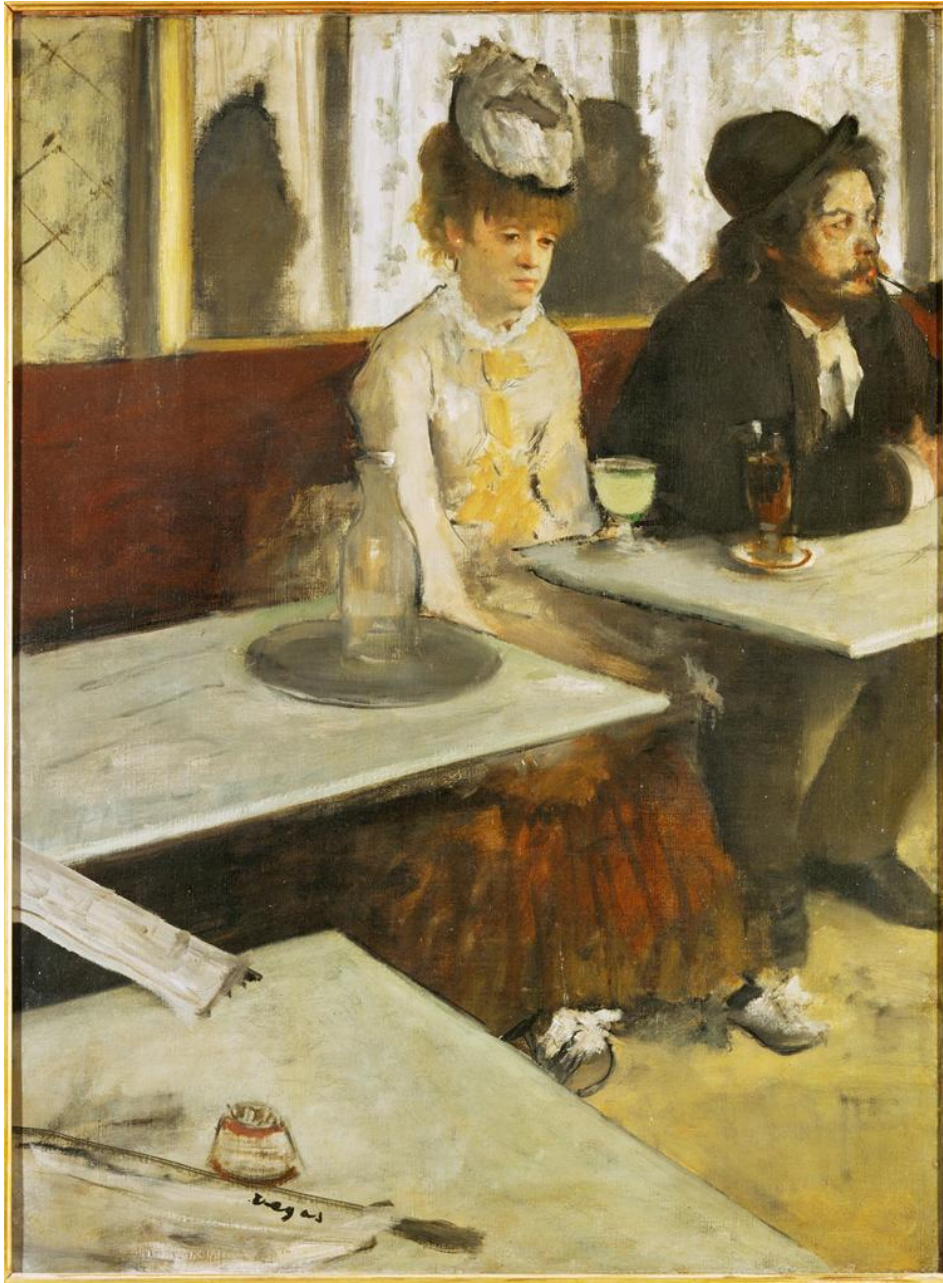


Fig. 3. L'absinthe. Edgar Degas. 1876. ARTstor [online]. New York: New York. [cited 18 April 2013]. Available from World Wide Web:

(<http://library.artstor.org/library/secure/ViewImages?id=%2FThWdC8hIywtPygxFTx5TnQkVn0reg%3D%3D>).



Fig. 4. At the Café Royal. Sidney Starr. 1888. ARTstor [online]. New York: New York. [cited 18 April 2013]. Available from World Wide Web:

(<http://library.artstor.org/library/secure/ViewImages?id=8CJGczI9NzldLS1WEDhzTnkrX3kjcF59fSU%3D>).

