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Individual Femininity and the Modernist Epiphany

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The 20th century author Frank Swinnerton was well respected for writing "excellent, credible stories about contemporary people, usually living in or near London, [people who were] intelligent and aware of the times they were living in but concerned above all with their relationships as friends, enemies, lovers, or rivals in love" (*Times*). Despite Swinnerton's relative renown, his biographies do not mention that he wrote short stories, so the discovery of his short stories in at least two 20th century periodicals, *The Open Window* and *Rhythm*, sheds light on a largely ignored aspect of the author's work. Swinnerton's short stories, like his novels, focus on relationships and everyday experiences. His story "A Day in Potter's Life," for example, follows an awkward, rather depressed young fellow on a blind date with a girl he just so happened to watch on a train earlier that day. The foreignness of romance and social connection greatly affects the main character, whose life, much like Swinnerton's own, is predictable and averagely middle class. Despite the ordinariness of these events, Potter undergoes profound internal change and experiences an epiphany as a result of his altered understanding of femininity. These themes, along with the literary tools used to convey them, align closely with the aims of modernist literature.

Swinnerton's placement within and knowledge of modernist literature makes his short stories worth studying. "As a contemporary not only of Joseph Conrad, Arnold Bennett, H.G. Wells, and John Galsworthy but also of the 'second' generation of novelists Virginia Woolf

mentions in her now-famous essay ‘Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,’ Swinnerton’s work spans the entire history of what is often called the modern novel” (Catron 289). His stories attempt to bridge differences within modernism, such as those identified by Woolf. This is demonstrated by Swinnerton’s attempt to balance direct quotation with free indirect discourse, as well as by his balancing exteriority with interiority. Swinnerton reenacts this literary transition through Potter, as Potter shifts from bitter, dead-end observations to openly thinking and discoursing with his date: “He looked at her black cotton gloves, which were very neat, at the dirty library book she was carrying, at her large black hat with roses in it. Then he gradually came back to her face, and found that the girl had raised her eyes from her book and was looking across at him as though she understood all that was in his mind” (Swinnerton 394).

“A Day in Potter’s Life” first appeared in *Rhythm* 2.13, the second-to-last issue of a short-lived magazine. Swinnerton’s publishing job led to his acquaintanceship with *Rhythm*’s key contributors. By 1912, Swinnerton had been introduced to John Middleton Murry and Katherine Mansfield, two of the journal’s editors. He had also met author Gilbert Cannan, who published multiple works in *Rhythm*. Swinnerton’s association with these contributors likely facilitated the publication of this short story. Upon a first reading, the simplicity of Swinnerton’s story may seem incompatible with the loftier aims of *Rhythm.* Afterall, *Rhythm* and its highbrow readership consciously sought for “some kind of aesthetic key to the future: ‘an art that strikes deeper, that touches a profounder reality, that passes outside the bounds of a narrow aestheticism” (Hoffman 240). The periodical’s nature thus calls for a closer examination of Swinnerton’s story and what justifies its inclusion therein. What makes “A Day in Potter’s Life,” and the short story genre in general, artistic? As Clare Hanson explained, “[t]he short story can approach the art of painting more nearly than the novel… the actual process of reading cannot

‘interfere’ so much with the text. The modernist impulse to short-circuit the sense of process and chronicity dominant in prose fiction thus found one of its most characteristic outlets in the short form” (68). This said, Swinnerton’s story is an artistic form, a sort of literary portrait: a single day in one man’s life.

“A Day in Potter’s Life” experiments with a major literary technique pursued by the journal’s modernist editors: free indirect discourse. Swinnerton seems to seek a balance between free indirect discourse and direct quotation, frequently switching between the two in sentences like, “‘Oh, damn the alarm!’ Potter, in a panic, pulled the bedclothes over his head, while the thrilling voice of the bell rang itself relentlessly into a whirring dry echo. It was rotten… rotten!” Although Potter’s initial thoughts are enclosed in quotation marks, his later thoughts burst free and blend with the narrative text. As Swinnerton continues, even Potter’s action of yawning is portrayed in free indirect discourse: “[e]very man’s hand ‘gainst you…. Morning after morning. Morn—when you’d gone to sleep at last… Every man’s hand ag—kh—gaince you” (Swinnerton 388, ellipses original). Interestingly, the way Swinnerton gradually transitions from direct quotation to thoughts, and even actions, contained in free indirect discourse mirrors modernists’ gradual transition to the literary trend itself. While modernist writers experimented and pushed the boundaries of free indirect discourse, Swinnerton captured the very process of their experimentation.

Alongside this evolving modernist technique, Potter experiences an evolution of character, a sort of personal awakening. Although Potter mainly complains for the first half of the story, he ultimately becomes more optimistic. Originally, Potter cannot imagine a positive outcome to the blind date. He even contemplates running away before the girls arrive: “‘O God!’ groaned Potter, ‘let’s get out of this!’” (Swinnerton 401). Yet by the end of the evening, the date

has deeply moved Potter until, "[his] heart felt as though it was bursting. He was not like himself, but like a great fountain of sighs" (404). In addition to shedding his pessimism about the date, Potter progresses from his pessimistic observations about his surroundings. He begins commenting on the pleasant evening and he even feels less annoyed by Tadd and the other people he interacts with. The final paragraph includes a complaint from Potter, "[a salary of] twenty-five bob a week, O God!" (406). I feel, however, that the majority of evidence suggests that Potter's character has been profoundly changed. He returns home "blazing" with desire to see Hetty again, and when he retires to bed, "his heart beat great convulsive beats in his throat, and he began to whimper" (406). Potter's awakening functions as another modernist convention, the epiphany.

Digital analysis helps decipher the nature of Potter's epiphany by revealing a change in Potter's thought process at the word level. Using the Voyant Trends tool, I determined that the words "know" and "think" increase in frequency together towards the end of the story (Davies). Swinnerton uses both words relatively infrequently until over halfway through the story. Although "know" experiences a substantial increase before "think," both words reach their highest peak in the same document segment. This suggests that Potter's knowledge increases when he begins to think more complexly, which he does during his date with Hetty. Because Potter spends the first half of the story complaining, he doesn't engage or analyze his circumstances. He simply grumbles about them and learns nothing. The positive correlation between "think" and "know" suggests that Potter must formulate critical ideas before he can acquire actual knowledge. Also of note, the past tense word "thought," while used somewhat frequently at the beginning of the story, decreases in frequency as the story continues. This transition from "thought" to "think" suggests that Potter lives in the past until his pivotal

moment. When he closes himself off from new experiences, his story is literally past-tense, but when he engages in new experiences, his ability to "think" independently leads him to actual "knowing."

Consistent with trends in modernist literature, Potter's epiphany results from a distinct event. Clare Hanson referred to such events as "moments of being," a phrase which I find especially suited to describe Potter's increased selfhood. Potter allows himself to be acted upon for much of the story; he is a reactor rather than an agent. But as the story continues, Potter becomes more active. Hetty asks Potter complex questions at the beginning of their date, but the only instances where Potter questions Hetty are to seek affirmation: "you're not a…?", "don't you think so?", "see what I mean?" (Swinnerton 403, 404, 405). But Potter comes into himself by the end of the story, and he boldly asks his first truly open-ended question: "when shall I see you again?" (406). And yet the uncertainty remains, was Potter's moment of being the entire date, or a precise moment within the date? After all, Hanson argued that "[t]he emphasis of modernist short fiction was on a single moment of intense or significant experience" (55). I would argue that Potter's most profound moment occurs when he is faced with the possibility of losing Hetty and returning to his predictable drudge through life. After the couple has walked some while, Hetty suddenly says, "[t]hat's my road over there." At this moment, Swinnerton says, "Potter suddenly awoke" (406). I argue that more than just awakening from a lull in conversation, this sentence signals the moment when Potter awakens from his past self. The next line continues, "Potter's eyes were fire," after which Potter asks Hetty that pivotal first question: "when shall I see you again?" "Soon," he adds (406). Potter experiences his own moment of being, wherein he takes action to protect the newly discovered meaning in his life.

Because Swinnerton's story first appeared in the highbrow, heavily artistic periodical *Rhythm*, the story's gendered themes take on additional emphasis. On Potter's way to work, he notices Hetty on the train. Of course, he does not know her name at that time, but he does spend a short while observing her. He remarks, "She was a pretty girl! Round face, she'd got, and large eyes" (Swinnerton 394). But then his mind proceeds to wander back to the boarding house. When they both get off the train, "[h]e didn't even follow her with his eyes" (394). In this way, the text acknowledges his noticing Hetty, but it seems to be a relatively unimportant event, quickly mentioned and just as quickly dismissed. However, the original periodical interleafs a full-page portrait just one page later. The portrait depicts the outline of a nude woman, bending over and reaching down with one hand. This insertion literally magnifies the girl's significance. Obviously, the editors recognized the girl's pivotal role in affecting Potter, and they inserted a sketch that perhaps mirrors Potter's own perception of the girl, a vague outline that will eventually become clearer. Perhaps *Rhythm*'s highbrow modernist editors (John Middleton Murry, Katherine Mansfield, and others) selected Swinnerton's story for publication because of how it deals with gender. As Potter becomes more acquainted with Hetty the individual, the generalized "girl" disappears. This evolution occurs conterminously with Potter's epiphany, suggesting that the adoption of a more modernist view of femininity naturally results in an enlightened state for all participating individuals.

Before his date with Hetty, Potter's interactions with and perceptions of other women are both negative and surface-level, demonstrating a traditionally stereotypical view of femininity. After waking up, Potter descends to the boarding house dining room. He immediately and critically observes, "Mrs. Cavatt's girl, Mercy, had laid the table--apparently with her thumbs, because everything was crooked" (389-90). He observes her "bony and practical, with a dirty

face and dirty hands, and hunched-up falling hair," and he concludes "Mercy was a slovenly cat… tell where she'd been reared" (390, ellipsis original). Because Potter finds Mercy physically unattractive, he projects that perception onto her work as well: she is ugly, and she does ugly work. He explicitly mocks her name, and even though it might suggest deeply valuable qualities, he declares that her christening derives from "ironic stupidity" (390). Although we do not meet the Mrs. Cavatt, Potter seems to ascribe her the same two characteristics; she is physically unappealing, and her personality, neither calm nor sweet, naturally matches. Similarly, we only hear the third woman mentioned in conversation. When Potter arrives at the office, he quickly observes, "[t]hat calendar had not been altered; Mrs. Slack always forgot it. Some of the mud had been washed away from the floorcloth, but the corners of the room were mercifully dark, and they went undisturbed from one week to another" (395). In all three cases, Potter immediately looks for faults rather than virtues, and he particularly focuses on aesthetic details, such as physical appearance, sweetness of disposition, and cleanliness, which he feels women are obligated to maintain.

As Potter anticipates the blind date, the story reveals his lack of understanding of femininity. However, his understanding increases when interacting with Hetty allows him to move past generalizations to the individual. Together, the words "girl" and "girls" appear a total of 48 times in the text, and they peak simultaneously in the text segment when Tadd informs Potter of the evening's planned date (Davies). After being thus informed, Potter's head begins spinning: "what on earth could he say to a girl? Girls—why, he couldn't even talk to a barmaid until he had had that third, fatal, whisky" (Swinnerton 399). Potter's nervousness further reveals the very generalized nature of his experience with women, "At the office, girls were not mentioned except as the origin of jokes which the other fellows found in sporting papers; and

thus they were a little flyblown as a sex. Individual girls, who transcended these jokes, were, however, as great a mystery to Potter as ever" (400). The narrative directly states that Potter's experience with girls is restricted to his participation in (though more likely, given his personality, his eavesdropping upon) stereotypical jokes. Hetty, however, will become an individual girl, who transcends jokes. She becomes more than her gender alone; she becomes a whole person. On their date, Potter "plunge[s] through the generalisations [sic] with which they had been playing round their own relation" (405). By so doing, Potter adopts a more modern view of femininity. Because "Potter longed for sympathy… he desired to be considered personally valuable," he comes to value Hetty for her conversation and her sympathy. And in return, Hetty also "longed for some such regard as this" (404). At the same time, the usage of "girl" and "girls" dramatically declines. As Potter grows to admire Hetty the individual, he stops commenting upon girls in a generalized sense. In this way, Potter sheds his traditional view of femininity, and his epiphany results in a greater appreciation for female individuality.

Although "A Day in Potter's Life" may seem deceptively simple, its publication in a highbrow periodical cues us to search for modernist trends. I argue that important modernist trends exist at both a literary and a thematic level. When Potter closes himself off from new experiences, his story is literally past-tense. He allows things to happen to him, but he fails to act for himself. So when Tadd sets Potter up on a date with Hetty, Potter reflects upon his limited experiences with and understanding of women. But Hetty becomes more than that. Potter connects with Hetty as an individual, not just as an example of "girl" as he has painted it in his mind. This more critical thought process results in an epiphany. Because Potter sheds generalizations and begins thinking for himself, he arrives at a modernist state of knowing.

Fundamentally changed, he escapes the past-tense nature of the story and begins to exist more fully in the present, modern moment.

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