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# The Semi-Nude and Collapsing Female Figure: Sexuality in the Aesthetic Paintings of Albert Moore and Edward Burne-Jones

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THE SEMI-NUDE AND COLLAPSING FEMALE FIGURE: SEXUALITY IN THE  
AESTHETIC PAINTINGS OF ALBERT MOORE AND EDWARD BURNE-JONES

By

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Honours Bachelors of Arts, University of Toronto, 2008

A thesis

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in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

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# THE SEMI-NUDE AND COLLAPSING FEMALE FIGURE: SEXUALITY IN THE AESTHETIC PAINTINGS OF ALBERT MOORE AND EDWARD BURNE-JONES

By Meaghan Collins  
Master of Arts, Fashion, 2012  
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## ABSTRACT

The female nude has been researched extensively over the history of Art, and continues to fascinate researchers and art enthusiasts alike. However it is difficult to find information on female figures who are semi-nude: one who is not fully clothed nor entirely nude. The Victorian period in England was a very conservative time, especially for women. Influenced by the Pre-Raphaelites, Aesthetic painters Albert Moore and Edward Burne-Jones depicted women in a peculiarly sexual manner, one that encapsulates the struggle with sexual acceptance of the era. Women are often shown wearing loose, transparent fabric and often asleep or in languid, weary poses. These weary poses are what I refer to as “collapsing women.” In this visual analysis I take a close look at these female figures, and examine them using the terms “semi-nude” and “collapsing female,” in order to determine the meaning behind their dress and body language.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

Chapter One: Body Language and Space in Albert Moore

Chapter Two: Edward Burne-Jones and Imaginary Space

Conclusion

Bibliography

Appendix 1: Images

## INTRODUCTION

The objective of my research will be to visually analyze how feminine sexuality is represented through the concepts of the *semi-nude* and the *collapsing woman* in paintings from the Aesthetic movement from 1860 to 1890. The *semi-nude* is an expression that defines a woman who is neither fully clothed nor nude. I mostly look at women draped in transparent robes that may cover their entire body, or fabric that partially covers the body. The term *collapsing woman* as explained in Brian Dijkstra's book *Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture*, describes this type of woman found in Victorian painting, particularly in the Aesthetic and Pre-Raphaelite style as being asleep, lethargic, and inert. The collapsing woman is passive and often lifeless, beaming with a type of sensuality and promiscuity that is submissive and for the viewer's pleasure. The theme was a response to the rediscovery of feminine sexuality in the later 1870s, and the image is prominent in the paintings of the Aesthetic movement in England. Primarily I examine paintings by artists Albert Moore and Edward Burne-Jones, although similar artists' work will also be compared. Looking at the social politics of Victorian England, I apply feminist theory from authors such as Griselda Pollock, Judith Butler, Joanne Entwistle, and Ann V. Murphy to how Aesthetic representations of the female body convey sexual submission and a lack of individuality. The women are props for the decorative details within the paintings, and the politics that surrounded these artists influenced the way in which women were depicted. Aesthetic painting did not receive wholly positive responses from the general public because these women were also symbols of the change in family life in Victorian England, and they represented an unfamiliar, dangerous woman that threatened traditional Victorian values.

Critics of art in the Victorian age were outraged by the unconventional way that the British Aesthetic artists depicted feminine beauty and sexuality in their highly distinctive style of painting. The Aesthetic movement as a whole was seen as an extreme contradiction to the traditional strict and conforming social codes of the era. British Aesthetics were seen as melodramatic, and it was believed that their lust for the beauty in life was petty and irrational. Positivism and rational thought dominated the Victorian episteme, and these ideological viewpoints were opposite to how the Aesthetes saw the world. The paintings of Moore and Burne-Jones would have been seen as irrational and certainly unconventional, as it was not only the fantastical settings of many of the paintings, it was also the distinct unique sexuality of the women portrayed that upset the mostly stringent upper society of Victorian England. At a time when women were expected to wear constricting clothing such as corsets and strictly bound undergarments, British Aesthetic painters depicted women in loose, flowing gowns reminiscent of Classical robes with long hair and slim, lithe bodies. This type of nude did not fit under any specific category for the Victorians. She was desirable yet unattainable. The woman in these paintings represents the rapidly changing social position of women in terms of their role within the family and their roles as sexual beings.

During the Victorian era, prostitution was rampant, and there was much scientific discussion on the causes of prostitution, as well as sexual desire in women. William Acton was a doctor who popularized the idea that women had no sexual desires, and that it was women's sinful nature that was to be blamed for the existence of prostitution (Valverde 174). Scientific discourse on the subject of women's ability to orgasm or even if they should feel any sexual pleasure at all was widely discussed during this time. In



1864, with further additions made in 1866 and 1869, the Contagious Diseases Act was passed by the Parliament of the United Kingdom. Women who were discovered to be prostitutes were subjected to mandatory inspections for venereal diseases. If a woman was 'infected' she was confined to what was known as a 'lock hospital' and was only released when doctors believed her to be cured of whatever infection she was thought to have had. Many believed the Act to be inhumane and cruel. It was not just female prostitutes involved in the sex trade, obviously men were the initiators of the demand for prostitution, but it was only women who had to suffer through medical examinations and subsequent confinement. The Contagious Diseases Act and its segregation and objectification of women is an indication of the oppressive life that most women experienced in Victorian England. Sexuality was not something that was openly discussed and if it was, women were often chastised for having sexual thoughts. Nudity was also considered just as sinful. Many married women boasted proudly that their husbands had never seen them naked. Women in childbirth were often smothered in voluminous clothing, modesty being more important than common sense (Pearsall 11). Due to the unconventional use of partial nudity, the paintings of Albert Moore and Edward Burne-Jones would have shocked audiences of the late 1800s because of the sensuous nudity and the lack of modest behaviour depicted through the body language of the female representations.

It was an era when the role of woman was extremely restricted. Upper and middle class women were meant to play two roles during the nineteenth century: wife and mother. The idea of female eroticism was frowned upon, and female masturbation was practically considered a crime. Sexologists and authors such as Nicholas Francis Cooke

wrote on the subject, and warned against signs about the “private habits of young girls.” There was a strong dichotomy between women’s existence in the private realm versus the public, and dignified middle-class women were expected to be on their best behaviour in and outside of the home. Woman was meant to embody the family and the home, as a saintly figure free from indecency and temptation. Women who visibly went against this norm were seen as fallen women and impure. As Kathy Alexis Psomiades explains there was the sexless idealized woman who played the roles of mother and wife, and the dangerous sexualized woman who was “desired in her capacious psychological interior” (Psomiades 5).

Many Victorian women began to recognize and oppose this oppressive role that society had created for them. Men viewed women as passive and sexless, and shame existed for both men and women for having sexual urges. Paintings of sensual women were often an outlet for upper and middle-class Victorian men to express their sexual desires. The female form was presented in paintings of Aesthetic artists such as Burne-Jones and Albert Moore as a lifeless prop for men to objectively admire. Detached and aloof, the women in these paintings played a much different role than the virtuous and devoted wives men lived with in their daily life. I will be looking at the sexual politics of Victorian England, and in particular I will take a close look at prostitution and its role in popular culture at the time. Was there a relation between the controversy of prostitution and the representation of women in the paintings of Moore and Burne-Jones? The artists would have been aware of things such as the Contagious Diseases Act, as well as the debates of whether or not these ‘fallen women’ turned to the sex trade out of poverty, or for the desire for ‘finery’ and flashy clothes.

Within Aestheticism and in particular the works of artists like Moore and Burne-Jones, the female models' fragile passivity presented through body language connotes a submissive, concealed sense of sexuality. Women were shown in long, flowing dresses with long hair and soft, demure faces. This representation of women differed from the traditional Victorian notion of female beauty, where women were dressed in corsets with hairstyles of tightly bound buns. *Punch* magazine was a weekly London magazine originally published by Henry Mayhew that featured satirical cartoons and articles of daily life, and often the cartoons poked fun at styles of dress, and what was happening in the art world in England. Cartoons illustrating the Aesthetes stood out like sore thumbs against the images of women and men in traditional dress. It is easy to see how the women in loose Classical robes differed from the busty, corseted lady with dainty features by looking at the print culture of the period. The contrast is clear in two examples given here: a fashion plate from the 1860s and a cartoon from 1880 by *Punch* cartoonist George du Maurier, which criticizes the flightiness of the Aesthetic movement (figs. 1 and 2).

My research focuses on the significance of semi-nude representations of women. The aloof female form represented in Aesthetic painting became an object of desire and did not conform to either the dressed, or the nude body. Often these women are covered in gauzy drapery, as if to signify ephemerality and delicacy. This is what defines the *semi-nude*: when female representations are not fully clothed nor entirely nude. The women represent a sense of transitory space and elusive feminine sexuality. I look at how women were depicted in society, as well as through mediums such as pornography. I take a close look at images of contemporary women depicted in publications such as

*Punch* and paintings of everyday life, as well as photographs of female actresses in Victorian pornography as described in Tracy C. Davis' essay "The Actresses in Victorian Pornography", and compare them to the partially clothed women imagined by Moore and Burne-Jones. I also discuss the relationship between social and sexual politics of the time and the female figures of the elusive paintings. Tracy C. Davis argues, "As on the stage, actual nudity was not a requirement for sexual titillation. Simulated nudity with tights or maillots was just as powerful and by Victorian standards, much more beautiful" (Davis 313). Although the Aesthetic paintings were not 'pornography' per se, it is interesting to associate this form of entertainment and the dress code of these actresses to the models within the imagined space of paintings.

Women were depicted in loose, Classically inspired robes exposing parts of the female body, but not bearing all, leaving much to the imagination. These delicate and airy robes worn by withdrawn and beautiful women represent a kind of female sexuality unlike any other representation of women in western art history. These beauties dwelled in strange places, often surrounded by historically inaccurate references and in dreamy, transitory spaces. Griselda Pollock argues that the male observer idealized women in the Victorian era through art in *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and the Histories of Art*,

In the visual sign, woman, manufactured in a variety of guises in mid-nineteenth century British culture, this absolute difference is secured by the erasure of indices of real time and actual space, by an abstracted (some would call it idealized) representation of faces as dissociated uninhabited spaces which function as a screen across which masculine fantasies of knowledge, power and possession can be enjoyed in a ceaseless play on the visible obviousness of woman and the puzzling enigmas reassuringly disguised behind the mask of beauty. (Pollock 123)

Here Pollock discusses the “uninhabited spaces” which occupy the vacant stares of the women who are the object of the male viewer’s gaze.

This relates to how female models are portrayed in British Victorian painting through not only dress and space, but through body language. Joanne Entwistle explains in her book *The Fashioned Body*, that the body is a societal symbol and it is thus a symbol of whatever contextual situation it is in (Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body*, 20). In the context of the paintings by Moore and Burne-Jones the female body is meant to manifest the sexual desire of the male spectator. These painted women became representational aesthetic props void of personality in a fantasy world imagined by artists. They symbolize the artists’ yearning for escape from contemporary life, but in doing so, the sexuality of these women is compromised. The artists give her no choice. Within imagined spaces conjured by the artist, the painted woman draped in gauzy fabric wearily falls asleep almost as if intoxicated. While asleep she has no control over her situation, she is powerless as unknown viewers are watching her. She becomes the object of the painting who has no choice but to lie, or sit there, and often unaware that she is being gazed upon because she is not conscious of her surroundings. The body language that is depicted creates an objectified portrayal of this unique form of female beauty: one that places these weak and languid figures in the hands of the men who step inside their mythical, dreamy world. It is as though the artists constructed the female figures in this way to counter what was happening in the real world. Women’s power was increasing socially, and sexually. It could be argued that the power of sexual desire that prostitutes hold over men is, in a sense, a type of authoritative practice. Men succumb to the allure and temptation of the seductive female, and at the end it is only his money that she

inevitably desires from him. Clearly sex workers in Victorian times (and today), have been often treated with much disrespect, yet there remains the mysterious aspect of the lustful seductress that is perhaps alluded to in the sensual and enigmatic representations of women in Aesthetic paintings of semi-nude women. Perhaps it can also be said that groups of women whose sole intention is to entice the attention from men and pluck money from weak willed and gullible men maintained a sense of agency in the disreputable business transaction. Yet, the submissive body language and indistinguishable faces of the women make it hard to believe that the artists placed these women in powerful positions. Although admired for their unique beauty, the female models are simply there to accentuate the beauty of the painting. They are void of personality, and the sensuousness that they convey does not seem to come from their own desires. It is as if they are defeated, they have succumbed to the gaze of the dominant male, and often seem frightened or simply exhausted. Although the ideal 'wife' at the time was meant to exude gentility and grace, which is what the women within these paintings also exemplify to a degree, the women depicted in paintings of Burne-Jones and Moore were threatening to society because of the way their sexuality and physical appearance differed from what was accepted and what were considered to be social norms. The women in the pictures do not seem to mind that men could take advantage of them, and that their freeing style of dress and transparent robes bothered the Victorian public.

During this time period, there was a lot of scientific discussion on feminine behavioural patterns, especially on the subject of female masturbation. Nicholas Francis Cooke's book strikingly titled *Satan in Society* was a cautionary discourse full of reasons

why girls were rapidly becoming perverse masturbating deviants. Cooke “was only one among a host of experts who were beginning to push the dualistic pendulum of male notions concerning the essence of femininity back on its return swing from the extremes of the mid-century idea of woman as household nun” (Dijkstra 64). Much of this misogynist concern stemmed from the threat of the emancipation of women and the power women of the Victorian period were seeking. Writers such as Cooke saw the women’s rights movement “as indicative of a perverse strain of delusion in the female mind” (Dijkstra 65). For the middle-class Victorian man, placing woman in a position of authority or one of sexual assertion was extremely threatening to his own sexuality. Women were meant to be precious, virginal creatures whose only purpose was to take care of the home and the family. To even view women in a sensual manner was considered improper, and men were to feel ashamed for having feelings of sexual arousal.

A new voyeuristic form of masculine self-reassurance of noninvolvement in women’s sexuality found expression in the visual arts . . . in British art in particular. This new depiction of women generally showed her to be at once an object of erotic desire and a creature of peculiar self-containment, not really interested in, and hence not making any demands upon, the viewer’s participation in her personal erotic gratification. (Dijkstra 70)

Visual images of women in self-contained states of drowsy indifference displayed in the works of artists such as Albert Moore allowed men the opportunity to have a voyeuristic peep into the lives of women without dealing with the guilt of doing so in reality.

Images of women in groups and in transient states of sleep conjured the nineteenth-century artistic phenomenon of the *collapsing woman*. It came from the Victorian male’s expectations of his wife: the safe keeper of his home and keeper of

spiritual values. Gazing at paintings of lethargic, weak women dressed in transparent, loose robes in unidentifiable spaces gave men the chance to enjoy women's sexuality without jeopardizing the saintly status of their wives. In Lionel Lambourne's book *The Aesthetic Movement*, he explains the artists' fascination with sleeping female models. He says, "in sleep, problems of the relationship between men and women are postponed, so that the sleeping person for the viewer becomes an object of admiration or worship and physical involvement is sublimated. Eroticism is, of course, present in the relaxed poses of the models" (Lambourne 195). Through analyzing visual images of these *collapsing women* in works by Edward Burne-Jones and Albert Moore, I relate female body language and their translucent, draping dress in order to understand why and how these women were objectified in such a sexual and submissive manner.

I chose to concentrate on Albert Moore and Edward Burne-Jones because I feel out of all of the British painters of the later nineteenth-century, their work predominantly demonstrates these themes. Both artists objectify women in a way that leaves them powerless and completely submissive to the gaze of the male spectator. The female body is meant to ignite sexual desire and longing from the male viewer. Her ephemeral dress and docile fragility contrast with the reality of what existed outside the canvas. These dream-like, sensual transient non-spaces were an escape from the rigid, sexless Victorian world in which the male artists and viewers were expected to participate.

I take a close look at several paintings by Edward Burne-Jones and Albert Moore, and examine the drapery and body movement of the female models presented. When looking at Burne-Jones I concentrate on *The Legend of Briar Rose* series, and the 1880 painting *The Golden Stairs*. Both of these paintings



convey female passivity through sleep or through a sense of exhaustion. In both paintings the women wear robes of Classical or Medieval influence, suggesting an untouchable and mythical world far from the realm of present day reality.

Women are shown together in groups, which reflects the late-nineteenth century idea that women learned to masturbate in groups, such as in places in boarding schools where many women congregate and live together (Dijkstra, 64). This is also the case for many of Albert Moore's depictions of women.

Within the *Briar Rose* series, every figure is asleep, except for the prince and most of the other characters portrayed are women. In *The Legend of Briar Rose: The Rose Bower*, four female figures lay in what appears to be a wooded area, with vivid, deep colours in exquisite detail. The sleeping beauty lies on a bed in the centre of the picture, with her attendants asleep around her.

Medievalism is prominent in the style and decorative aspects of this painting, as it is known that Burne-Jones liked to create a world far from his contemporary one. He once wrote that a picture should be a, "a beautiful romantic dream of something that never was, never will be – in a light better than any light that ever shone – in a land no one can define or remember, only desire" (qtd. in Spalding, 42). Here, Burne-Jones emphasizes his desire to create imaginary worlds, and within these scenes of romantic dreams are the female objects that men seek to escape the present day politics of their own lives. This idealized feminine sexuality that is displayed as untouchable creates an even stronger segregation between the two sexes. The artist and the male viewer place these powerless women in an imaginary world that degrades not only the position of the models

within the images but the women who exist in reality, as this degradation became a part of the expectation of female behaviour.

Feminine sexuality depicted by Albert Jones and Edward Burne-Jones is a subject that can be discussed at great length. Both artists use the female figure as a sexual being in a transitory state of sleep or as impassive and aloof, and she becomes an object to be scrutinized and leered at by a clearly identified male audience. Of course women were also avid viewers and consumers of Aesthetic painting, but there is a male viewer implied which was simply accepted and internalized by the female audience. Vulnerable and submissive, the female figure is more of a beautiful prop meant to satisfy the romantic dreams of the artists themselves as well as the spectator. Through analysis of the paintings mentioned above, and others by Burne-Jones and Moore, I examine the concepts of the *semi-nude* and the *collapsing woman* and explore the sexual representation of women in the Aesthetic movement in Victorian England.

## CHAPTER ONE: BODY LANGUAGE AND SPACE IN ALBERT MOORE

During the 1850s, Albert Moore began to take interest in studying the female nude, as he believed the female form embodied the beauty of nature in a purely and organically (Asleson 121). While studying the female nude during this time, he explored classical drapery and started to idealize physical body types. He also began to pursue an abstract mode of painting, one without narrative or psychological or ethical concerns, as he focused primarily on formal qualities. Like many artists of the period, Moore was also fascinated with the ‘Orient’ and the idea of ‘other’ cultures, especially from the East. His Western notion of what ‘the other’ may resemble is often reflected in his work, especially in the details of the interiors and what his sexually enticing female models wear. His female figures seem void of emotion and psychological interior. His female representations were simply there to embellish other aspects of his paintings, such as furniture. Also, the painterly qualities of his pictures differed from the usual pictorial approaches of Victorian genre paintings due to their “flatness, linearity, and simplicity” (Asleson 121). Looking at a painting such as James Tissot’s 1878 *In the Conservatory* (fig. 3), it is easy to see why Moore’s style of painting as well as his subject matter would have outraged the general viewing public in England. Firstly, the women portrayed in the Tissot work are dressed conventionally (as are the men), and the setting depicts a scene that would have been familiar to many of the upper class viewers. Tissot’s scene represents a realistic setting that certain classes of people could identify with and relate to. Moore’s paintings, on the other hand, were not only artistically different in the concentration on pure aesthetic and formal harmony, but the subject matter and the way

in which these subjects were presented are shockingly different. Moore's images of nearly nude women draped in cloth baring the physique of their bodies, in a strange and fantastical world, would have contrasted greatly with Tissot's realism. But it is also the way in which his female representations interact within his paintings. Asleson states that Moore turned human figures into geometric configurations due to their complete lack of human psychology and expressionless facades (124).

Yet the statuesque bodies of the women in paintings such as *The Dreamers* (fig. 4) are portrayed in a very particular fashion. In Albert Moore's soft and dreamy paintings, listless women draped in cloth who sleep and rest upon one another are what catches the eyes of the viewer. Although without an obvious narrative, it is through their lithe, soft movement and carnal interactions that captivates interest from the onlooker. Often described as props, Moore's women "act as the support structures on which he flaunts his skillful manipulation of line, texture, and colour" (Spalding 58). I believe the work of Albert Moore demonstrates the *collapsing woman* in a more detailed manner than Burne-Jones, as well as his particular attention to drapery and the way in which his models' dress are often translucent or unidentifiable in terms of time and space. Often his women hold hands or lean against one another, with expressions of contented exhaustion on their faces. There has been a lot of discussion over the role of women in Moore's paintings, and that his intention was to use them as accessories in his elaborately detailed settings. The women "serve as mannequins, of no interest in themselves, but, draped and posed before richly decorated background hangings, providing the scaffolding for inventive and ever changing formal arrangements devoted primarily to colour, pattern, and paint itself" (Staley 139). Their bodies become the same as the inanimate

objects around them: beautiful decorative pieces to be admired. However, it cannot be forgotten that they are not pieces of furniture or cloth. They are women who have been placed in these situations to be stared at and objectified by a male audience.

I explore these ideas in the 1882 painting, *Dreamers*. In this image four girls are horizontally displayed, clothed in cream-coloured classically inspired gowns and hazily sleeping or gazing into the distance, lifeless and fatigued. In the far right corner, we only see a glimpse of the drowsy girl, who covers her face in a delicately detailed East Asian inspired fan. Moore was very interested in the aesthetic qualities of his work above all other concerns. He thought painting should be a pure artistic expression of beauty and an outlet for escapism, and did not believe in depicting true life in a realistic way. Thus, the women he painted were an extension of this concept.

In *Dreamers*, Moore's dominance is evident over the figures he draws, as their expressionless faces and acquiescent bodies suggest a strange acceptance that they are being watched, and are aware that they are there as mere props to emphasize the beauty of the painting and nothing more. The awkward poses of the four girls expose their vulnerable, torpid state, which conjures visions of the girls in compromising positions of sexual advantage on the part of the male viewer. Although the girls are fully clothed, their body positions and over-sized gowns create a vulnerable yet sensual atmosphere. An interesting aspect about this painting is the girl in the far right corner who shields her face with an ornamentally Asian inspired fan. Is she consciously hiding from the viewer? Her lack of expression is combined with a sense of complexity, it is as if she hides from the viewer on purpose. This action could be interpreted as a coy gesture of sexual invitation.

Moore's models often resemble Turkish and Middle Eastern harems that were so often depicted in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Erotic, listless prostitutes smoking opium, symbolize explicit sexuality and the notion of exotic femininity, such as in Eugène Delacroix' 1834 masterpiece *Algerian Women in their Apartments* (fig. 5). The dreamy atmosphere in Moore's painting is very similar to that of Delacroix'. The setting obviously connotes sexual desire as the location of Delacroix's is a place where men go for sexual pleasure. The viewer is transported to Moore's dreamy world of the passive women who sit and entertain the fantasies of those who objectively enter their unworldly space. The docile female body represented is not just there to add aesthetic pleasure for the male spectator, but through cultural interpretation of the setting and context of the picture and through analysis of the submissive body language and aloof nature of the women, it becomes a symbol of sexuality to be witnessed by the male viewer.

Living in a society where women were slowly starting to rise above the limited amount of freedom they were allowed, Moore's docile girls represent a much different type of female than assertive, powerful women fighting for equal status as men. Furthermore, the total passivity and aloof expression of his models do not connect to either the Madonna or the whore feminine archetypes that were so prominent during the Victorian age. The lack of enthusiasm shown through the inert body language and drowsy facial expression of the female models suggests a deviance from what the conventional Victorian audience was accustomed to seeing when applied to images and roles of women. Their shared languor implies indifference, and the women in his paintings do not fit in any fixed social

category. Their blatant sexuality threatens Victorian social codes of family and of the morality of women.

Their unidentifiable surroundings and timeless draped fashions place the girls in a fantastical and nameless time and place. The scenes within the paintings have Classical and Medieval inspired themes, and objects and dress are anachronistically placed. Aesthetic paintings showcase a much different view of life than what would have been regarded as traditional, “yet the art of this period cannot be described as pure escapism for it had as much to do with the longings and aspirations of the age as it was false to the externals of everyday life” (Spalding 34). Artists such as Moore longed for a different way of life and the enigmatic way in which he illustrates women in his painting demonstrates how his imagined world of strange, yet beautiful feminine creatures embody this yearning for escape from societal norms. Women in his paintings are uninterested in what is happening around them, they are distant and appear self-involved. It was thought that women who adorned themselves in Aesthetic dress in Victorian English popular culture challenged the female dominion and the female domestic sphere (Mitchell 47), because they did not conform to the strict Victorian fashion trends. The ideal Victorian woman “as depicted in fashion magazines and cartoons had a corseted body and enlarged her figure with the use of large hoops” (Mitchell 53). As depicted in this image from circa 1860, the woman in the photograph demonstrates the large hooped skirt that was common in later Victorian female fashion (fig. 6). Aesthetic painting was a reflection of the style

movement, so at the time, women half-dressed in unencumbered fabric would have been revered in the same way as an Aesthetic woman seen on the street.

Moore's whimsical, semi-nude female models were mere figments of something unattainable that contrasted with the societal norms of the era. In *The Dreamers*, the group of sleeping women lay languid and draped in gauzy fabric, in a setting full of warm tones and pretty, delicate forms. Moore is known for creating visual harmony in his paintings, and in *The Dreamers*, this is clear through the horizontal linear congruity present in the position of the girls, the horizontal perspective of the painting, and the repetition of figures and form. The sleeping figures are there to accentuate this formal harmony. They are void of expression, and instead of providing a narrative of some sort, they translate into objects that compliment the aesthetic harmony of the painting.

Spalding argues, "if Moore's monumental figures verge on the monotonous, they are enlivened by the frisson of the drapery. Moore excelled in the representation of fabric, particularly the semi-transparent" (Spalding 67). As well as in *The Dreamers*, Moore has several paintings in which women are portrayed in translucent Classical drapery. In *Silver* (fig. 7) of 1886, a woman of fair complexion is shown stretching in a similar 'exotic' interior setting to *Dreamers*, and wears a coy facial expression as she looks downward. Her body is exposed, yet a sheer covering is draped across her entirety. This connotes a unique sense of female sexuality that will be explained further in this analysis. Moore's attention to detail in the fabrics presented was extremely particular, and it is obvious that he wanted the viewer to notice the transparency and delicacy of the



cloth worn by his female figure, which also mirrors the softness of her skin. This also suggests that the striking display of translucent material and the semi-nude figure play a great role in the paintings of Albert Moore. The woman in *Silver* looks demurely down toward the floor as she plays with her hair. Her whereabouts is hard to identify. She is covered in a beautiful, transparent fabric and there are definite elements of what would have been considered to originate from 'the Orient,' with what appears to be a Persian rug on the floor, a golden lamp on the windowsill, and her vibrant green cap is reminiscent of a kind of turban. The decorative details of the wallpaper and windows place her in a space that does not seem to register with any particular time or place. The window behind her is closed, confining her in this tiny space. She is like a jack-in-the-box: isolated and enclosed in a small, constricted room, she is there to amuse whenever she is needed.

More fabric lays on the floor beneath her, a golden lump of silk or satin. It is unclear what exactly it is – perhaps something that was worn overtop of her transparent clothing. Is she stripping off her clothing for someone else that is in this strange room? The entire scene is enigmatic, and the fabric from her robe moves across whole canvas, endlessly intertwining itself amongst the blue and white background against which she is posed. The translucent robe she wears appears to be made of silk. Moore constantly referred to classical antiquity, and this painting is without exception. The model's face, hair, and body type reflect the idealized Classical Greek or Roman woman recreated in such statues of Venus di Milo or Aphrodite. An interesting piece of information regarding the fashion of

ancient Rome is the adornment of corn silk and its relation to the status of women.

The women who dressed in very thin or transparent corn silk were even closer to the station of a prostitute, because the transparency of their clothing made their bodies almost as visible as if naked (Croom 95). Thus, a woman who wore see-through clothing would have been recognized as a prostitute in ancient Rome.

This woman who is shown in Moore's picture wears exactly this. She is beautiful, and there is also something about the painting that is soft and lovely. The colours of the interior and her soft, creamy complexion make the painting very inviting for the viewer. She has a willowy and lonely presence that creates a sense of sorrow for the viewer and he is unable to gravitate toward her helplessness. What makes this helplessness apparent is not just expressed through her blank facial expression, but through her body movement that seems lackluster and contrived. She appears vulnerable. The "realization of vulnerability [of the body] may surely inspire care, love and generosity, but it may equally inspire abuse, intimidation, and violence" (Murphy 579). She is alone and essentially naked, even with the fabric that drapes upon her one can see the outline and details of her body. She is also alone and thus susceptible to attack from others, whether it be physical, or in this case, a voyeuristic attack.

A woman alone, and in particular naked and alone, is extremely vulnerable and susceptible to uninvited exterior forces. The body in general, is an entity that is vulnerable to injury and suffering, and when this entity is alone it is without the support of others to assist it or to guide it away from danger. When a female body is shown naked, or even partially naked, she is completely void of the shield of

protection that is her clothing. Although the woman depicted in *Silver* is not seen to be in any form of direct danger, the possibility of something of unwanted nature happening is implied. The very act of voyeurism in itself is an intrusion. The viewer invades the woman's private space, what appears to be a bedroom as she is dressed in lounging or sleeping attire. She is exposed and defenseless, as well as unaware of what is taking place beyond the confines of her tiny place of existence.

Judith Butler writes that, "we cannot exist without addressing the Other and without being addressed by the Other, that there is no wishing away our fundamental sociality" (Butler 25). Moore would have been aware that when he painted this fragile girl, others would be conscious of her, and look at her. As much as she is part of the aesthetic harmony of the painting, she is also there to please the onlooker. It is almost as if she is a secret, the woman that men would flee toward in order to escape from the banality of traditional life, and more specifically their traditional sexual life. As John Berger recalls, "to be born a woman has been to be born, within an allocated and confined space, into the keeping of men" (Berger 49).

Henry Mayhew, who wrote notoriously on the subject of female sexuality and prostitution in Victorian England, believed that crinolines were a sign of "good clothes with higher social standing" (Valverde 179) because they distracted the public from the shape of the body, and also because they were made of expensive materials. The women who Moore depicts in his work, such as in *Silver* and *Dreamers* blatantly reject this conventional sartorial notion. The

female body is most definitely on display, with the sensual, organic falls of the drapery heightening the sensation of her sexuality even more so. She is not presented fully nude, rather there is still something (although sheer and hardly concealing), shielding parts of the body to be fantasized by the viewer, making the interaction between him and the objectified female that much more visceral. She becomes an idealized figure in an idealized, imaginary world only accessible within the boundaries of the canvas.

The space that Moore paints does not reflect the time in which he lived, or really, any specific era. The only signifiers of what the paintings represent are the clothing and style of the women portrayed, and their backdrops. Moore creates these perfect scenes, with idealized, sexualized women. However, things were hardly perfect in the social politics of everyday life in England. The political landscape was rapidly changing, and with the fight for progressive rights for women a popular issue, traditional values were no longer only in the hands of men. Although there was pressure on women to behave obediently, “contrary to their presumed natural passivity, modesty, and domesticity, women were demanding greater access to education, engaging in women’s rights, joining the work-force in growing numbers, and marrying later or not at all, having fewer children” (Mason 341). The woman in *Silver* shares the same qualities as the women *The Dreamers*; although she does not appear to play a great role in the narrative of the painting, her sexuality is accentuated by the way in which her robe seems to delicately fall off her shoulders, baring a minimum of skin but just enough to peek interest from the viewer.

Another aspect worth noting in *The Dreamers* and *Silver* is how the women are physically portrayed. Their large, statuesque bodies counter traditional expectations of Victorian beauty. Instead of depicting women with regular oval faces and graceful features, artists such as Moore took “delight in figures with heads phrenologically clumsy, faces strongly marked and irregular, and very pronounced ankles and knuckles” (Casteras 13). This was a deliberate protest against conventional markers of beauty, as Moore and artists like him longed for an idealized world outside of contemporary taste; they were nostalgic for Classical antiquity, Asian and ‘exotic’ design, as well as Medieval fairy tales and lush dress.

Magazines such as *Punch* often satirized Aesthetic women in cartoons, illustrating them as distraught and helpless, wearing unconventional loose gowns, and often in peculiar and unflattering postures. This was because corsets were not worn, as is evident in the female representations in *Dreamers* and *Silver*. In the December 17, 1874 edition of *Punch*, a cartoon entitled “Acute Chinamania” (fig. 8) depicts a mother mourning the loss of a broken teapot. She is dressed in an unconventional dress without a corset, with long, messy hair down the sides of her face. Her daughter, who is traditionally dressed for the time, is “the embodiment of socially appropriate behaviour [and she] attempts to reason with her hysterical, disheveled mother, inverting the roles of parent and child” (Mitchel 47). The Aesthetics were viewed as irrational, especially women. “Acute Chinamania” suggests a complete deterioration of family values, as the mother is seen on the verge of a breakdown over a broken teapot. Her dress and body language

epitomize this, and these things would have been signifiers for the Victorian English audience. There is a lack of control implied by the female protagonist in this cartoon, and although sexuality does not play a significant role in the illustration, there is a link between these types of images within popular culture at the time, and the sexuality of the painting of the time. The women in *Dreamers* cause a threat to Victorian social norms because they do represent a type of woman that does not seem to care about keeping the order of things. She is sensual and carefree, and her lack of clothing and sleepy state conveys this contradiction to the typical Victorian wife or mother.

In many of Moore's paintings, women are displayed in groups, lacking individuality in appearance or movement. In several of his female depictions, women take on similar facial qualities, body type, and posture. It is hard to distinguish between the individual physical characteristics, body language, and often dress. His models are rhythmically aligned to the furniture or setting of the painting to mimic the harmonious line and form within.

In his 1884-1890 *A Summer Night* (fig. 9), four white, semi-nude women appear together on a bed that seems to look out to a sea or an ocean, surrounded by pretty floral arrangements. All of the women have strawberry blond hair, have a similar Classically inspired body type and robe, and have extremely similar facial features. The four of them have matching hair-styles, and the two figures whose faces are shown to the audience share the same vacant expression with very similar features. Elizabeth Prettejohn argues, "The multiplication of similarly styled, similarly featured women may further be read as signifying an excess of

generic femininity and a concomitant erasing of individuality” (152). Moore’s goal was to highlight the harmony of the line and form of the painting by means of including prop-like accessories within the painting such as the women displayed and the fabric with which they are draped. Is there a narrative within the painting? Although it is clear that Moore’s positioning of the women was to convey the harmony of the painting, why are they grouped together half-naked? It is as though they are waking from a nap, or perhaps it is morning. The colour of the models’ hair compliments the decorative accessories of the setting such as the golden floral arrangement and the colour of the bedding on which they sit. The four of them are draped in the same cloth, which appears to be some kind of luxurious cotton. They are oblivious to the viewer, and the scene that Moore has created is entirely contained by the actions and movement of the girls. The girls have a look of purity to them, with their white skin and pretty faces. Although the models are not fully dressed and parts of their bodies are exposed, there is an element of delightful innocence to the scene.

The body language of Moore’s female representations is of particular interest when conceptualizing his painting from a sexual point of view. In John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing*, he proclaims,

A woman’s presence expresses her own attitude to herself, and defines what can and cannot be done to her. Her presence is manifest in her gestures, voice, opinions, expressions, clothes, chosen surroundings, taste – indeed there is nothing she can do which does not contribute to her own presence. (Berger 49)

Moore’s women are often depicted in lethargic, sleepy-like poses, leaning against one another, or individually positioned in a state of languor. There is a sense of

submission to these poses, and their facial and body language conveys passive submission to the viewer, who is assumed to be male. This is clearly demonstrated in *The Dreamers*, as the women featured appear dreary and almost unaware of their spectators. Perhaps the women do realize the existence of an audience, but Moore's intention was for them to be in a state of indifference or compliance; they know they are being watched, but do not seem to mind and in fact appear to enjoy it.

As stated previously, many of Moore's paintings show women together in pairs or in groups. In fact, this is the case for the majority of his work. The paintings *Dreamers* and *A Summer Night*, which have already been discussed, are indicators of this, and there are several more works that depict women lounging or sleeping together. It has been suggested by Kenneth Bendiner that Moore was greatly influenced by the works of John Frederick Lewis who painted images of women in harems of the 'orient' (Staley 136). Although both paintings show just one woman, Moore's *Azaleas* (1868) (fig. 10) and Lewis' *In the Bey's Garden* (1865) (fig. 11) have often been compared due to the subject matter and composition. As well, both images include a Chinese vase. This alludes to the nineteenth-century fascination with the East, to its perceived foreign and marvelous exoticness. The East was viewed in the minds of many nineteenth-century artists as sultry and sensuous, with hot climates and beautiful girls. The East represented a kind of sexually liberated, 'exotic' place that would have been opposite to the rigidity of Victorian English society. Moore has been described by Dijkstra as the "master painter of the exhausted masturbating woman . . . who



invited his viewers to become voyeuristic observers of orgies of solitary feminine sensuality” (75). Nicholas Francis Cooke believed that due to “scientific data”, chronic female masturbators likely had been students at boarding schools and picked up the deviant, fevering practice from friends, and that often times masturbating was practiced in groups (74). Masturbation was seen as a crisis in Victorian society, it was seen as an “urgent problem” among physicians and sexologists. Some doctors believed that “masturbation could damage a woman’s internal genitalia . . . popular medical authors inveighed against it” (Mason 204).

The interest in women as sexual beings was rampant in late Victorian England. Masturbation and prostitution were seen as the loci of nineteenth-century perversions. In a painting such as *Summer Night*, the women portrayed represent something much deeper than what they appear at face value. In an era where female sexuality was very much repressed, Moore’s half-naked soft, pretty ladies with supple skin and golden hair depict a much different female type than the idealized mother, daughter, and wife archetype that had been constructed for women at the time. The women in the painting are clearly not pleasuring themselves, but the concept of the painting is evident. They are lying together on a hot summer’s night, bored with one another as they lie half-naked and half-asleep. There is something extremely sensual about the painting. As they wake from their nap, the tactility of the silky fabrics and vibrancy of the golden hues from their hair and surroundings compliment the suppleness of their soft, pale skin. It is a fantastical world that Moore has created, and so much is left to the imagination of the viewer. It is interesting that Moore was influenced by

paintings of Eastern harems by John Frederic Lewis, and at the same time there was much discussion on street prostitution, as it was one of “the most notorious topics in the sexual topics of the period” (Mason 73). In the 1860s, the number of prostitutes in London alone had risen to about 22 2, 000, which was about 7% of the entire population of the city (Mason 78).

The women Moore portrays resemble objects of idealized sexuality, or perhaps even women who dwell in some kind of harem or fantasized sexual world than that of the proper, idealized Madonna. Compare, for example, William Powell Frith’s 1851 painting *The Proposal* (fig. 12), a representation of a man and woman who have just decided to marry. The woman sits on her fiancée’s lap, docile and obedient. More importantly she is dressed in conventional modern day attire, in a pure, virginal white dress with corset and crinoline visibly apparent. The image contrasts greatly with the female figures in Albert Moore’s work. The woman in Frith’s painting represents the archetype of the female wife, who will eventually become mother and the nucleus and caretaker of the family unit. It represents what the ideal woman was supposed to be during this time. The Victorian male’s expectations of a wife were that she should be a “magnificent ornament to his worldly success and the safe keeper of his household’s collective spiritual virtues” (Dijkstra 70). She is not sexually idealized, and certainly is not shown half-nude surrounded by other women without clothing. She is contained, but within the hands of her husband. The women in Moore’s painting are contained within the eyes of the male viewer – the women belong to more than just one man. It is possible that in the imaginations of the viewer, the women

wake from a hazy orgy in the heat of a summer night. A respectable lady who is about to marry would never be a part of such deplorable behaviour. Only in the salacious minds of the viewer could such a woman exist, and this woman is the female that is represented here, within the canvases of Albert Moore. The same expressionless face, the same draped, semi-nude body appears throughout his sleepy, erotic works. She becomes an expression of what Victorian society feared: a change in normativity, the idea that something ‘wrong’ or immoral could exist among everyday life was frightening. The persistent presence of prostitution and the sex industry in Victorian England was an issue that artists such as Moore would have been aware of, as well as the other side of the spectrum, the fact that women’s rights were moving further and further to the forefront of social politics. The ladies in *Dreamers*, *A Summer Night*, and *Silver* do not exactly represent any of these things, and they particularly do not represent the empowerment of the women’s rights movement, as most of the time they are depicted with passive submission toward the person who looks upon them. Through their languid body movement and ethereal, transparent dress, Moore’s ladies signify a change in the British traditional social and political ideology and he retrospectively illustrated the importance of the traditional female role in this conservative and misogynist ideology by objectifying the female models in an idealized, untouched and unidentifiable world.

## CHAPTER TWO: EDWARD BURNE-JONES AND IMAGINARY SPACE

The Aesthetic movement stemmed from strong literary beginnings, from the ostentatious French poet, novelist and critic Theophile Gautier (1811-72), who wore cherry red and green satin clothes, and created the idea of “L’art pour l’art.” He argued that anything useful was ugly, and beauty should be useless (Lambourne 10). Poets and artists of the Aesthetic period were not just concerned with the purity of what they deemed beautiful, but as seen in the works of Albert Moore, they were obsessed with creating a utopian imagined past. It was Classical antiquity and Medievalism that fascinated these quixotic artists, and it was “this devotion to medievalism ultimately derived from the Pre-Raphaelites and with it went a new emphasis on the decorative arts, and value of ornament.” (Lambourne 12). Due to the Industrial Revolution, life was changing rapidly for Victorian English society. Emancipation of the middle class outraged the English elite, as the threat of a clash between the upper class and the working class installed a sense of moral panic. It was not only a time for the emancipation of the working and middle classes, women’s rights were slowly becoming a newsworthy topic as well. People within the artistic community such as architect Owen Jones believed that “true Beauty results from that repose which the mind feels when the eye, the intellect, and the affections, are satisfied from the absence of any want” (Jones 8). The aesthetic experience of the ornament was what mattered to the Aesthetic artists of this generation, it was not the story that mattered. Many Aesthetics were actively involved in social reform and used art as a means of social change, yet it was also used to

explore the beauty of life and to deviate socially and politically by creating imaginary spaces filled with attractive and decorative objects.

For Edward Burne-Jones, principles of ornamental harmony over narration or accurate depictions of times and spaces were applied to many of his delicate compositions. Medievalism influenced pictures of vivid colours and strange, ominous feminine beauties. Burne-Jones was obsessed with recreating the past that was not true to any space or time, rather one that was fueled by nostalgia for an imagined place that may or may not have existed. He was not satisfied with the way things were mechanically and socially progressing, and lived for a more quiet and tranquil world. He was greatly influenced by Arthurian Legend and myth, and the women in his paintings wear Medieval and Classically inspired robes, similar to those in the work of Albert Moore. Like Moore, Burne-Jones used painting as a means of escapism. His career was sharply divided between his public and the private dream world of his imagination, which was to him infinitely more important (Wood 6). In fact, his imaginative world was his real world. He is quoted in Christopher Woods' book *Burne-Jones* when he says, "imagining doesn't end with my work. I go on always in that strange land that is more true than real" (6). He was unhappy with how life was in the Victorian period, and longed for a quieter, ethereal place to pass his time.

Burne-Jones' feminine representations had an extremely unique and particular type of beauty that was unusual for the time. The sentimentality and undercurrent of repressed sexuality which runs through so many of the pictures seemed to epitomize the discredited ethical system of the Victorian age (Hayward 8). His use of elaborate ornamentation was opposite to the prevalent fashions of stark simplicity and pastel shades

of interior decors as seen in works of artists such as William Powell-Frith or the everyday scenes with women in traditional dress of James Tissot. Burne-Jones' women symbolized sorrowful mystic beings, their languid and spindly body types countered the traditional corseted Victorian woman, bound up in modesty. As in Moore's feminine representations in his paintings discussed previously, the women in Burne-Jones' are clearly free from conventional, strict clothing items such as corsets and bustles, as they often sport long, gauzy robes that conform to the shape of their bodies. This was seen as daring and extremely provocative, especially because the women portrayed had a very distinct look. Physically tall, flat chested, and often with a stoop, the type had deep, soulful eyes, a patrician nose, fleshly lips, angular jaw, and a long, rather phallic neck (Anderson 442).

It was not just the physical attributes of the women that made Burne-Jones' feminine representations stand out in Victorian society. As Anne Anderson comments in her article "The High Art Maiden", "the Aesthetic woman had the ability to signify both art and fashion, imaginary and *real* femininity" (443). The Aesthetic lifestyle started to become in vogue among those who sought an alternative to conventional bourgeois habits. It was a new, bohemian trend set by the Pre-Raphaelites slightly earlier that was based on high culture and solipsism. The theory of solipsism was reflected in the ornamentation of Aesthetic style of dress and the way in which Aesthetes went about their daily lives. Young women and men were more concerned with decorating their days with beautiful things and contemplating the passing of time than what was happening collectively in society. The style of the movement was demonstrated by women in the streets who associated themselves with Aestheticism and the style of the

Pre-Raphaelite woman as seen in Rossetti and Burne-Jones (443). The movement itself was becoming something of a media phenomenon. Cartoons by artist George Du Maurier in *Punch* magazine, theatrical plays such as “The High Art Maiden” (fig. 13) and “My Aesthetic Love (fig. 14),” as well as through looking at the literature of Mary E. Hawies whose fashion manuals advocated the unconventional and liberating styles of the movement all are examples of the growing fascination with the Aesthetic.

The movement signified a dangerous alternative to the norm in English Victorian society. Women in Aesthetic dress often signal the downfall of the British home and hearth (Mitchell 47), because their resistance against traditional matriarchal roles threatened the social order of typical middle and upper class British life. Dress played a key role in this rebellion, as women Aesthetes not only chose to void themselves of constricting items such as the corset, but as is also prevalent in the representations of women in Burne-Jones, wearing of white became an obvious signifier of the Aesthetic maiden (444). The colour white was associated with mourning in the ancient world, and is also representative of purity and virginity. For the Aesthetes, white symbolized the deliberate withdrawal from life and was associated with entering a religious or exclusive order.

Women of the Aesthetic movement were meant to feel overwhelmed by the beauty of life and to feel extraordinary empathy toward things. As seen in this cartoon entitled “The Six-Mark Teapot” (fig. 15) by George Du Maurier from 1880 in *Punch* magazine, the woman and man admire the ‘consummate’ qualities of a teapot. The caption reads: “*Aesthetic bridegroom: ‘it is quite consummate, is it not!’ Intense bride: ‘It is, indeed! Oh, Algernon, let us live up to it!’*” This of course is a play on words on

several levels. Note that the wife's title is "intense" as well as her weary appearance. The man uses the term "consummate" to insinuate the couple's desire to emulate the beauty of the teapot together through consummation.

Secondly, the act of consumerism as depicted in this cartoon mocks the impressionable couple because it was believed that the Aesthetics were drawn to material things, and it was true that during the Aesthetic period, "more women produced and consumed culture than ever before" (445). For the Aesthetic couple the inanimate object becomes a precious symbol of passion and desire. Lastly, the word 'consummate' also refers to pulmonary Tuberculosis which was a common affliction of the Victorian era (Anderson 453). This type of Tuberculosis caused bodily depletion, deterioration, and exhaustion. These three traits of course, were also commonly identified with how Aesthetes presented themselves in their world of disinterest and wanness. This type of woman was aptly depicted in the paintings of Burne-Jones, from which the Aesthetic woman took inspiration.

Burne-Jones' feminine representations symbolized the idealized Aesthetic woman. Similar to Albert Moore's semi nude beauties, it is their enigmatic sexuality and characteristics that define Burne-Jones' oeuvre. However unlike the erotic allusion to prostitution and shameful sexual desire of wanton women, Burne-Jones creates the perfect, obedient sexual female. The later 1800s was a time when the New Woman emerged onto the political and social scene, causing great change and sometimes disparagement amongst the historically patriarchal British society. It may be possible that Edward Burne-Jones was perhaps not inclined to welcome the strong-willed, independent woman into his world, and the flighty, mournful-looking semi-nude figures



represent the type of woman who needs to be taken care of by a man, in a dream world far away from industrial Victorian England. The New Women who were participating in both social and political arenas, created a sense of anxiety and loss of power, not simply in men but in all those people, male and female, for whom masculine culture was safe and comforting (456). The Burne-Jones Aesthetic female High Art Maiden archetype was passive yet sexually invigorating. She outraged traditionalist viewers because of her strange sex appeal and self-indulgence, as she did not conform to popular conventional British fashion trends. The Burne-Jones *High Art Maiden* as explored by Anne Anderson, demonstrates an eerie sexuality that conjures nostalgic desire for a time and space within the dreams of the artist himself. Burne-Jones uses the semi-nude to convey these feelings of oddity, but he also depicts the girls as pure and untouchable, as to represent an idealized feminine figure that is passive and vulnerable enough to need the strength and guidance from a dominant male.

One of Burne-Jones most notable paintings is *The Golden Stairs* (fig. 16). In 1877 he presented a series of works at the Grosvenor Gallery and it was this painting that according to Anderson, redefined notions of female beauty (448). The painting sparked conversation amongst London's art circles, because the girls in the painting represented a merge between the real and the imaginary. The faces of the girls within the picture are all remarkably similar, and each of them wears pale coloured robes. They are not naked or even semi-naked, yet the fabric looks almost colourless and it is easy to see the movement and contour of each of their long, slender bodies. They are not of any particular time or place, and as Christina Rossetti describes the models depicted in *The Golden Stairs*, "the girl is not as she is, but as she fills his dream" (447). She is the

quintessential woman for the artist, and he has confined her in a space that is not real and difficult to locate, if not impossible. The central dichotomy that defines Victorian bourgeois femininity is the separation and gendering of public and private spheres. Femininity is meant to embody all that is public, it equals private life and all that is not political” (Psomiades 5). The perfect Victorian woman was meant to take care of the home and the family, and her roles were subjected to the interior. The women in *Golden Stairs* represent this type of woman, but at the same time she does not fully submit to what is expected of her, as her ethereal, Classical inspired dress suggests otherwise. The long, flowing gowns that the women are adorned with represent freedom of movement, and in a sense a freedom of spirit. There is a light-heartedness that surrounds the facial expressions of the girls, as they descend from the top of the stairs to the bottom. If the perfect Victorian woman was supposed to be private, silenced, and void of sexuality, in what way do these women convey the ideal woman? In the eyes of Burne-Jones and to other Aesthetics, it was their eccentric beauty comprised of big, sorrowful eyes, long limbs, pale skin and pouty lips. The women may deviate from conventional dress (which signifies a sort of sexual liberation), but they are contained in this strange setting, and it appears rather chaotic, though playful. Contrary to the women on the rise of emancipation in the real world, the women in here are non-threatening and benign. Perhaps the chaotic stance of the painting suggests their need to be controlled by the painter himself, or some form of authoritative figure.

Joanne Entwistle argues, “naked or semi-naked bodies that break with cultural conventions, especially conventions of gender, are potentially subversive and treated with horror or derision” (Entwistle , *The Dressed Body*, 34). In Burne-Jones’ 1873-77 *The*

*Mirror of Venus*, (fig. 17) Venus is depicted wearing a translucent gown, with nine maidens at her side overlooking a pool of water. The painting is reminiscent of Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (fig. 18), and is situated in an early Renaissance landscape. The figure who is believed to be Venus is the only figure standing upright in full, and is also the only figure whose body is exposed. The other maidens all wear long, similar gowns of muted colours, and each of them have nearly identical faces with identical expression. Some of them gaze into the water contemplating their reflection, while others stare adoringly at Venus. The picture is entirely and extremely feminine, as if this world that Burne-Jones has created is some sort of matriarchal society. Venus is neither clothed nor nude, and her sheer, silky fabric barely covers her body (which is very reminiscent to Venus' body in *The Birth of Venus*). The only detail we can see on the goddess is the string of forget-me-nots around her neck and head, and the halo that sits on top of her head. Her sexuality is not fully revealed, as there is a layer in between the viewer and her skin that represents a type of concealment. The fabric, although transparent, makes her a little more untouchable and that much more sacred.

The semi-nude was not just a figure in High Art during the Victorian period. Tracy C. Davies discusses women of the theatre in London's seedy theatre district, and the rise of pornography in *The Actress of Victorian Pornography*. She quotes a Reverend S.M. Vernon who warned that "the half-dress, the indecent attitudes, and postures, the lascivious looks and embraces" (295) lead to the destruction of man and further alludes to sexual arousal as an instigator of disease and demise. Davies also argues that "actual nudity was not a requirement for sexual titillation, simulated nudity (with tights or maillots) was just as powerful and by Victorian standards, much more beautiful" (313).

The female figure in Burne-Jones' painting is obviously not a direct reflection of actresses of the theatre, however the parallel between the "half-dress" and Venus' transparent dress is hard to dismiss. Burne-Jones depicts Venus as the leader of this group of women, and her slight nudity is not threatening in the same sense as a woman of the theatre's brazen sexuality would have been. Her frail demeanor and pallid colouring are not traditional nude characteristics; for example in comparison to Botticelli's *Venus*, Venus has beautiful long golden hair and a rosy complexion. For Burne-Jones and the Aesthetics, a pale complexion is a sign of lethargy, and to be ill was a sign of delicacy and femininity. Yet much of Victorian high society would have been outraged at Burne-Jones' unconventional illustration. In the Burne-Jones painting, Venus, as well as the other women, are representations of something unattainable. In the picture the maidens look to Venus with longing and attendance. Her beautiful, unusual sexuality is the focal point of the painting as eyes within the scene and out are drawn to her figure. In a sense she becomes the agent for the artist, she controls them through his direction. She remains vulnerable enough by being partially clothed to draw attention from the viewer and to not have full control of herself or the situation at large, but she is also there to convey feelings of reliance, wont, and warmth, as any well-mannered and obedient woman should.

The arrangement of similarly styled, similarly depicted women may be read as "signifying an excess of generic femininity, or a concomitant erasing of individuality" (Flint 152). The scene is a depiction of contained women in an imaginary dream world. The women surround a pond, and most of them stare into the water at their reflections as if looking into a mirror. As the women stare into their reflections, they become framed

by the edges of the mirror. Each woman experiences herself as an image and a representation of herself within the boundaries of the frame. The formless matter of the female body has to be contained within boundaries, conventions, and poses (Nead 11). The women admire representations of themselves, and this in turn symbolizes how Burne-Jones feels about his work and life in general. He does not look at the world directly; rather, it is through the reflections and representations of reality that Burne-Jones seeks fulfillment. His whimsical images of near identical women with forlorn expressions, not quite tactile enough to be real, are constricted within the boundaries of the canvas and his imagination.

John Berger argues that the mirror was often used as a symbol of vanity when paired with a female figure. Berger argues, “you painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting *vanity*, thus morally condemning, the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure” (Berger 51). In *The Mirror of Venus*, Venus herself does not look into her own reflection, but her maidens around her do and the thought is implied. She does however look down toward the water, so perhaps she is admiring her own beauty. With Berger’s words in mind, the mirror adds vulnerability to the naked woman as it is supposed to symbolize vanity, which is generally considered to be a lamentable quality by western society, especially in women. The maidens do not conform to exterior dress codes of upper class Victorian trends of corsets and bustles, yet they do have extremely similar physical characteristics and all of them wear nearly identical dress. The congruent identities and personalities that seem to flow through the bodies and faces of the girls suggest a lack of individuality and individual thought. They appear completely in awe of

Venus, and wonderstruck at their own reflections. At a time when women were supposed to be obedient and had “no rights, [and] a duty to be uncomplaining and submissive” (Werness 7), Burne-Jones’ idealized feminine representations embody these passive traits through their body and facial language.

The women in Burne-Jones’ paintings have ambiguous social positions, as they do not embody either of the two Victorian feminine archetypes: the Madonna or the maiden. Although the typical Burne-Jones female model’s beauty and almost naked vulnerability make her an ideal, docile woman, her enigma and ephemerality places her in a strange position. She was not quite the mother/wife archetype nor was she depicted as a fallen woman. There were two very well defined roles for women at this time. Respectable women were meant to exist privately as to symbolize the social order of the home, while “the public streets were the domain of the fallen, the promiscuous, the diseased and immoral” (Nead 27). This is not to say that Burne-Jones’ female figures were meant to depict diseased and immoral beings, rather it was this dichotomy of woman that existed in the Victorian frame of reference. Burne-Jones’ girls seem to exist in a state of in between, and they do not appear to belong to anyone.

Compare the central panel for the triptych *Woman’s Mission* (1863) (fig. 19) by George Elgar Hicks to Burne-Jones’ *The Tree of Forgiveness* (fig. 20) of 1882. Compositionally both paintings depict the woman behind the man demonstrating their support. The triptych *Woman’s Mission* portrays “all the values of duty, fulfillment, and moral purity, which were commonly associated with respectable femininity” (Davies 12). *Companion of Manhood*, the only remaining panel of the triptych depicts the adoring wife attending to her distressed husband. The couple inside of what is assumed to be

their home, and the doting wife represents the heart of his private sphere. Her role of wife is clearly outlined by the tea prepared on the table beside them, and the way in which she consoles her husband who appears to have just received some bad news. She is there to comfort him, and she is always there for him to rely and depend on, and her role is clearly identified. This role of wife is there to harmonize social Victorian order. In Burne-Jones' picture, Phyllis and Demophoön are shown with similar body to the Elgar Hicks. Burne-Jones depicts the Classical Greek myth of the lovers Phyllis and Demophoön. In the story, Demophoon, on his journey home from the Trojan war stops in Thrace where he meets daughter of a Thracian king, Phyllis. They marry, but he has to leave and promises her he will return for her. However, he settles in Cyprus and forgets about Phyllis and does not return. The accepted end to the story is Phyllis either dying of grief or suicide. By choosing to depict this tale, Burne-Jones essentially illustrates the opposite to Hicks' depiction of the good wife. Phyllis is over-attached, which is evident through her smothering body language and sorrowful eyes. Her obsessive stare into Demophoon's eyes seems to frighten him. She is semi-nude and the cloth that drapes her envelopes Demophoon's body. Whereas Hicks' wife is supportive and consoling, Phyllis is over-attached and longing--even threatening. She does not epitomize any sort of female archetype, even though she is the wife, her passionate indulgence has led her astray.

Phyllis' flowing robes (although in the case of the painting discussed above, the robe was so full of movement it was almost frightful) played a large role in the depiction of her altered state of mind. At the end and turn of the nineteenth century, artists of the Aesthetic movement as well as subsequent movements such as Art Nouveau were

fascinated with the ephemeral qualities of women. Loïe Fuller (fig. 21) was an actress and dancer who was very inspired by the organic rhythm of artistic movements such as Art Nouveau, and she developed “a moving image made by multicolored illumination playing on perpetually moving silk” (Sommer 54). She seductively moved alongside long silk draperies of various colours, creating momentary images of elaborate fabrics sweeping across her agile and transient body. This fasciation for feminine ephemerality depicted through translucent or flowing gowns was a popular subject among artists of the Aesthetic movement, as well as in subsequent movements like Art Nouveau. Corporeal transience intrigued the male audience and artists because of the stagnant roles women were given in Victorian society. Women who were not afraid to deviate from traditional roles (whether they be from the imagination of the artist in a painting or otherwise), excited artists like Burne-Jones because the images allowed for escapism from a world full of predictable conventions.

In his *Briar Rose* series, Burne-Jones illustrates *The Sleeping Beauty* fairytale using vividly deep colours and inspired by German illustration of which he was studying at the time, set in lush, mythical forests. Four pictures convey the legend, and each of them portray characters draped across the canvas sleeping on top of one another. Only the first in the series, *The Briar Wood* (1870-1890) (fig. 22) depicts a figure that is not in slumber. In this picture, the prince is shown on his way to wake the sleeping princess. Throughout the series, the princess is not shown awakening. When Burne-Jones was asked why he had only shown her to be asleep, he replied, “I want it to stop with the Princess asleep, and to tell no more, to leave all the afterwards to the inventions and imagination of people, and to tell them no more” (Wood 113). The painting entitled *The*



*Rose Bower* (fig. 23) shows the princess asleep surrounded by three ladies-in-waiting. The princess is dressed in a white, modest gown and the three other women all wear Medieval inspired dresses of colours that compliment the outdoor setting of the scene. The princess is not semi-nude, but what makes her character enticing is the fact that she helplessly lies there unconscious, waiting to be saved by the male prince. Similar to the passive sleeping female representations of Albert Moore, the princess in *The Rose Bower* conveys the same type of delicate, submissive woman who awaits her dominating prince to wake her. Sleeping women are also depicted in *The Garden Court* (fig. 24), which is the third part of the painted series.

In spite of, or perhaps because of, woman's increasing role in late Victorian culture, she was even more zealously patronized as a fragile, helpless object, used in a decorative and literal sense to adorn the household (Thompson 159). Again, like Moore's sleeping beauties, the princess and ladies-in-waiting in the *Briar Rose* series serve as props to heighten the aesthetic qualities of the pictures themselves. They lack individual characteristics and personalities, as their faces and body language are all more or less the same. Even the princess' facial features mirror the girls who sleep at her feet. They are completely powerless. In *The Garden Court*, the bodies of the girls seem so malleable it is almost as if one could take hold of them and twist them around like mannequins. Their deep sleep gives the viewer extreme power over them, and much like the transparent robes of female representations in *Mirror of Venus*, the possibilities of the viewer's imagination are endless as Burne-Jones leaves much of the narrative in the hands of the viewer. Lynda Nead argues "the formless matter of the female body has to be contained within boundaries, conventions, and poses" (11). To dominate the female

form, Burne-Jones expresses his authority over these women by depicting them as sleeping, submissive representations. At a time when women were gaining control outside of the home he has objectified the women in this painted series as exposed and defenseless beings. Their passiveness is also related to illness, and the weak demeanor that was commonly believed to be a sign of extreme femininity in the Victorian era. Without aid from the strength of the prince, the princess would forever stay in sleepy stasis.

Burne-Jones' melancholy figures resign to their fate with an inert acceptance. To Burne-Jones men and women seem to be mere puppets of fortune, unable to escape what fate has decreed for them (Wood 61). In the case of the *Briar Rose* series, the princess (as well as the nameless and faceless figures throughout the series), are subject to a destiny they have no control over. The only figure who shows any sign of action is the prince, who is the only one who the viewer is able to see in a state of consciousness. Burne-Jones manipulates the actions of the characters and by keeping them asleep (especially the women, as they are ones who are most vulnerable) confines them to the positions they are in. They cannot escape and they are contained in such a manner that keeps them susceptible to danger and exploitation. As the viewer enters the world of the *Briar Rose*, it is unclear whether we are in an interior setting or in some kind of forest set with lavish beds and flowing drapery. Burne-Jones has created this mythical, imaginary world and in a way has left it up to the viewer to decide where the artist has taken them. The viewer approaches the pictures and it is as if he or she is interrupting the ladies' slumber. How did the viewer get there? Was he invited? Or is he deliberately intruding? Is it simply a matter of voyeuristic dominance over the beautiful girls taking a rest, did

the viewer just stumble upon them? Or did he actively seek them and does he mean harm? The vulnerability of the girls is immense. Burne-Jones has left the destiny of the figures to the imagination of the viewers. The sleeping girls (and in the case of the first two paintings, the sleeping men) represent an ideal fantasy world where they lack any sort of control over what happens to them.

The entire scene is built like a dream, and it is difficult to say whether we are looking into a translation of the dreams of the sleeping figures, or that of the artist's, or, that of an unknown spectator. In any case, there is a definite sense of intrusion as the figures are unaware of what is happening around them. The painting invites the viewer to take part in the transience of sleep and dreams, and the ambiguity of the situation conveys an uncertainty that can only be interpreted by the viewer. Burne-Jones situates the female figures in a way that objectifies their bodies and makes them powerless. On the whole, women are more often portrayed as asleep than men in the series for "in sleep, problems of the relationship between men and women are postponed, so that the sleeping person for the viewer becomes an object of admiration or worship and physical involvement is sublimated" (Lambourne 195). Exoticism is present in the relaxed poses of the sleeping women, and it would be easy to take advantage of them as they are unconscious. They seem unaware of their sexuality, which creates subordination between the models and the viewer. The intruder could do what they please with the models and it is possible that they could never know. Their privacy is trumped by the omnipotent power of the viewer.

Burne-Jones' depictions of women were physically interchangeable, and it was more important to him to illustrate an escape from the Victorian society to which he

belonged. He was obsessed with creating a world of imaginary idealism filled with strikingly beautiful girls that he could use as props to display his discontent with reality. Covering them in translucent, gauzy, draping cloth adds to the mysterious fleeting moments of dreams and passing time. It was a time where women's equality starts to catch up with men, and sexuality started to become something more than private moments within the home. Those who were in support of women's rights challenged traditional ideologies of feminine sexuality, and the purity of women as wife and mother was at jeopardy. Burne-Jones wanted to hold on to this purity, and at the same time he wanted to offer it to his audience. As much as he valued the sacredness of female sexuality, he used it as a way to escape to an imaginary, utopian world. Sleeping women, or women in transient motion as depicted through dress, represents the desire to stabilize the social order between men and women. In Burne-Jones' world, women are allowed to be sexual as long as they are doing so under the control of man. His models that have been discussed in this essay are not fully nude, and are often not fully dressed. In *The Briar Rose* series, they are powerless and unconscious. They represent fleeting time and a whimsical, nostalgic nod to an imagined past. They are not of this world, they are half in it but not quite fully in it. They represent something that exceeds the boundaries of reality, but can be objectified through paint. Just as the Aesthetic movement set out to do, Burne-Jones' feminine figures were there to represent the fleeting sensation of the rapidly changing society, and just like the delicate ornamentation of the work of someone like William Morris, these girls existed as props to be admired and gazed upon.

The social and political changes that were taking place in the later 1800s such as the emancipation of the middle class, and the rise of the New Woman, were affecting the

way artists worked. The women in Burne-Jones' paintings are representative of a type of subversive sexuality that was not quite acknowledged by mainstream Victorian culture, and portray an enigmatic female ideal that men fantasized about in dreams. They have a powerful sexuality and they exhibit qualities that the Aesthetics thought highly of, such as their reluctance to dress according to traditional Bourgeois standards. However there is still lack of power embodied in these women, and they are unable to completely break free from patriarchy. Their sexuality and deviance from traditional dress is dictated by the artist, and furthermore interpreted by the viewer, who is assumed to be male in most circumstances. Their half-nude bodies and vulnerability, their weak demeanor and subservient behaviour is not really any different from the traditional archetypal Victorian woman. Burne-Jones' women's roles are unclear, they exist in between the roles of the wife and the fallen women. They are imaginary, and they represent a woman who can gratify sexual needs yet at the same time, need the dominating hand from an authoritative man. Burne-Jones' beauties are simply there to be admired and leered at, as if they are ornamental props in a picture.

## Conclusion

The question remains, why did Burne-Jones and Moore paint these women as they did? What exactly do they represent? The Aesthetic semi-nude and collapsing woman threatened the social equilibrium of the Victorian family. The female figures exemplify the male artists' yearning to maintain power over women, because of women's growing political and social status during the later Victorian era. This is displayed through weak and vulnerable states of the women, depicted through their languorous body language, and detached, vulnerable sensuality displayed through the transparent fabric of tactile, silky robes. The artists wanted to paint what they considered to be ideal feminine beauty. This ideal form of beauty to the Aesthetics was unconventional to the traditional English Victorian audience. Women with long limbs, slender bodies, large facial features, and flowing, long Classical gowns were not commonly seen as fashionable or beautiful. These types of things outraged the English high society community, because the images of women in the paintings did not fit under established gendered and sexualized roles.

A woman was seen as the nucleus of the family; she was the wife, the mother, and the daughter. She was seen as the caretaker of the husband and family and was viewed as sexless as well as selfless. Her priority was to cater to her family and home and any sort of deviance from this way of life was frowned upon. Sex was not seen as an option for the typical Victorian middle and upper class woman. Sex was associated with the fallen woman, the woman who roams the streets and corrupts the order of society. She was seen as disease ridden and someone who could disturb the mind of a good man. It was not thought possible that a woman could have both sexual desire and strong morals. This

is partly why it was so hard for the conventional Victorian viewer to grasp the feminine figures of Albert Moore and Edward Burne-Jones. They portray blatant sexuality through their transparent dress exposed bodies, and languid sexual embraces of one another. Often it appears the women mingle in what could be harems of some sort, especially in the works of Albert Moore in for example, *A Summer Night*. Were the artists saying that these women were in fact, fallen?

Just enough skin reveals itself for the images to maintain an element of mystery and more importantly, ideal beauty. Moore and Burne-Jones were not painting figures of prostitutes or fallen women. They were perfected representations of the quintessential woman. She is beautiful; she exudes sexual energy, and may even have some of her own sexual desire. But she respects herself and a social, moral code to keep part of her body concealed, even if it is with a translucent piece of fabric draped across her body. Her dreamy expressions and fatigued body movement create a powerless state where control over the actions of the figure is given to the viewer, which is presumed to be male.

The semi-nude and collapsing feminine figure demonstrate two social phenomena through the Aesthetic emphasis on sexuality: the rise of the New Woman in the Victorian era and the emancipation of women in social and political spectrums, as well as the increase of awareness of women as sexual beings. Burne-Jones and Moore feared women in power, and conveyed this through the vulnerable expression and overt sexual objectification of their models. This sexuality frightened the Victorian public as well, because it placed them in a state that was unfamiliar to the viewer; the ideal female figure in these works did not play the role of mother or wife, yet neither was she debased to act in the role of the fallen woman. She disturbed the normative way of Victorian family

life, and her ephemeral sensuality threatened an extremely static, gendered society. The Aesthetic figured of beauty in these works symbolized much more than the emotional state of an Art movement, she symbolized the emotional plight of the Victorian woman.



## APPENDIX 1: IMAGES

Fig. 1: *Fashion Plate from 1869.*



Fig. 2: *The Pleasures of Imagination*, Georges du Maurier, c. 1870s, *Punch Magazine*.



Fig. 3: *In the Conservatory*, James Tissot, c. 1875.



Fig. 4: *The Dreamers*, The Dreamers, Albert Moore, 1884.





Fig. 5: *Algerian Women in Their Apartments*,  
Eugène  
Delacroix, 1834.



Fig. 6: *Girl dressing*: c. 1860,  
<http://www.retronaut.co>



Fig. 7: *Silver*,  
Albert Moore,  
1886.



Fig. 8: *Acute  
Chinamania*,  
*Punch Magazine*,  
Dec. 17, 1874.





Fig. 9: *A Summer Night*, Albert Moore, 1890.



Fig. 10: *Azaleas*, Albert Moore, 1867-68.



Fig. 11: *In the  
Bey's Garden*,  
John Frederick  
Lewis, 1865.



Fig 12: *The  
Proposal*,  
William Powell  
Frith, 1853.





Fig. 13: *The High-Art Maiden* sheet music score cover, by Herbert Harraden, 1881.



Fig. 14: *My Aesthetic Love* sheet music score cover, 1881.



Fig. 15: *The Six-Mark Teapot*, George du Maurier, *Punch Magazine*, October 3, 1880.



THE SIX-MARK TEA-POT.  
*Aesthetic Bridegroom.* "IT IS QUITE CONSUMMATE, IS IT NOT!"  
*Intense Bride.* "IT IS, INDEED! OH, ALGERNON, LET US LIVE UP TO IT!"

Fig. 16: *The Golden Stairs*, Edward Burne-Jones, 1880.





Fig. 17: *The Mirror of Venus*,  
Edward Burne-Jones, 1898.



Fig. 18: *The Birth of Venus*, Sandro  
Botticelli, c. 1486.



Fig 19: *Woman's Mission: Companion of Manhood*, George Elgar Hicks, 1863.



Fig. 20: *The Tree of Forgiveness*, Edward Burne-Jones, 1882.





Fig. 21: Loie Fuller in la danse blanche by Taber, 1892.



Fig. 22: *Legend of Briar Rose: Briar Wood*, Edward Burne-Jones, 1870-90.



Fig. 23: *Legend of Briar Rose: The Rose Bower*, Edward Burne-Jones, 1870-90.



Fig. 24: *Legend of Briar Rose: The Garden Court*, Edward Burne-Jones, 1870-90.



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