

### **New Woman or Not a Woman?**

Financial struggles can put quite a strain on a relationship, and initially, money seems to be the core of the problem between Cecil and Theodora in Victoria Cross's 1895 short story "Theodora: A Fragment." Because Theodora makes more money than Cecil, marriage seems unlikely between the two, who are in the beginning stages of an unusual courtship. However, money issues are not the root of the story; they simply conceal Cross's underlying queer theme. Cecil, the protagonist and narrator, is a gay man suppressing his homosexual identity, while his love interest, Theodora, is an undercover gay man living as a woman. By creating these two outwardly ordinary characters, Cross has produced a condemnation of the social norm, attempting to make homosexuality a normal part of English culture.

Reactions to homosexuality in the 1890s were, to put it mildly, negative. Same-sex desires were so poorly received in England that it was not until 1967 that the country "grudgingly legalized homosexual relations" (Crompton 23). The Victorian elite found homosexuality so appalling that it became a "nameless" crime, and "Sodomy remained a capital offence until 1861" (Cocks 107). With their behaviors deemed too wrongful for acknowledgment and their lives put at stake for it, homosexuals really had no choice except to become members of an invisible subculture. The aristocracy would have much preferred if homosexuals were literally invisible: "The general view of those in authority was that in order to protect public morals sodomy should remain nameless, or at least should not be discussed more than was necessary." Retaining innocence amongst the general populace was so important that "The press concurred and tended not to describe such cases as sodomy, but instead to use euphemistic terms. . . . Before the 1880s, newspaper accounts also tended to blank out the key evidence with asterisks, dashes or with the statement that the evidence was, of course, 'unfit for publication'" (Cocks 113). In addition, scientific and literary writings were "ruthlessly" censored (Crompton 30). Unquestionably, the outcry against

homosexuality created many hardships for those who practiced it, and left authors no choice but to bury homosexual themes beneath layers of other, “normal” things in order to satisfy scrutinizing eyes.

Unsurprisingly, Cecil is embarrassed by his sexuality. When Theodora and her sister pay a visit to his place, Cecil is eager to show off the items he has returned home with from the East. Many of his treasures are gifts, which his friend Digby claims are given to him because Cecil “admires these fellows, and that is why they like him,” encouraging readers to understand Cecil’s foreign tastes, paralleling the popular refusal to believe homosexuality is normal or natural. Digby proceeds to offer Theodora Cecil’s sketchbook, provoking an immediate reaction from Cecil: “I reddened slightly and tried to intercept his hand” (Cross 82). The sketchbook is obviously something private he would rather not share. He ultimately allows Theodora to see the contents, and admits that the sketchbook contains “only portraits of men whose appearance struck me” (Cross 83). Between that admission and his claim of having no artistic talent, that portraiture is “easy to do . . . when your heart is in it” (Cross 84), Cecil might as well stamp “HOMOSEXUAL” across his forehead; clearly, he has a heart for men. Questions of his sexuality are pulled further into light when he reacts to Theodora’s request to keep the sketchbook:

For a second I felt the blood dye suddenly all my face. The request took me by surprise, for one thing; and immediately after the surprise followed the vexations and embarrassing thought that she had asked for the one thing in the room that I certainly did not wish her to have. The book contained a hundred thousand memories, embodied in writing, sketching, and painting, of those years in the East. There was not a page in it that did not reflect the emotions of the time when it had been filled in, and give a chronicle of the life lived at the date inscribed on it. It was a sort of diary in cipher, and to turn over its leaves was to relive the hours they represented. (Cross 88)

In the stereotypical fashion of homosexuals, Cecil is a rather feminine man in the way he is so emotionally attached to his sketchbook and the memories contained within it. Clearly, he is not at all pleased by the idea of Theodora perusing his memories, and it causes him much

more embarrassment than the earlier passage in which the sketchbook is initially brought to attention—there, he only “reddened slightly” (Cross 82). According to him, the book is “a sort of diary in cipher.” The word “cipher” has multiple definitions, but one is particularly relevant to this situation: “A secret or disguised manner of writing . . . intelligible only to those possessing the key” (OED). Cecil’s sketchbook is a diary only he understands in full. Taking this into account, one might interpret that the portraits—most of which are men—are those of people he had sexual encounters with during his travels.

Cecil is not interested in Theodora as a woman; he is drawn in by her masculinity, which satisfies his sexuality while protecting him from the judgmental society he lives in. At first seeming to appreciate her intelligence, it becomes clear as their relationship develops that Cecil manipulates Theodora for his own purposes. He treats her respectfully, yet his thoughts indicate an opposite attitude; he refers to Theodora—and women in general—as objects multiple times throughout the story. When Theodora first arrives at his place, Cecil’s thoughts prove his misogynistic attitude. When she crosses the threshold, he feels a “delightful sense of ownership” that “is the very illusion of possession” (Cross 82). Cecil finds joy in the traditional idea of women being inferior, simply items to control; he clearly lacks respect for them, proving just how deeply misogyny is rooted in his being. To him, women exist merely to bear children. He suggests, “My inclination towards Theodora could hardly be the simple, natural instinct, guided by natural selection, for then surely I should have swayed towards some more womanly individual, some more vigorous and at the same time more feminine physique” (Cross 80). The idea expressed is that, because she is not a “womanly individual,” Theodora is unfit to be a mother, so Cecil’s attraction to her is unnatural. Reading closely, his sexual desire, based on her lack of “womanly” traits, indicates a homoerotic relationship. In Victorian England, and even still today, homosexual relations are considered unnatural due to incompatibility in regards to procreation. Though they technically *can* produce offspring, Cecil finds Theodora too manly to be the mother of his children—not that he is looking to have any. He “finds a dizzy pleasure, that this passionate, sensitive frame, with its tensely-strung nerves and excitable pulses, promised the height of satisfaction to a lover” (Cross 80). It matters not that Theodora is less than ideal for

childbearing, because she can offer something even better: great sex. According to Cecil, “our strongest, fiercest passions and keenest pleasures are constantly not those suitable to, nor in accordance with, the ends of Nature. The sharpest, most violent stimulus . . . the true essence of pleasure, lies in some gratification which has no claim whatever, in any sense, to be beneficial or useful” (Cross 79). Essentially, his opinion is that while women are good for continuing out Nature’s work, men are best for achieving supreme sexual satisfaction.

Much like Cecil protects himself by engaging in a homoerotic relationship with a woman, Theodora protects herself—and Cecil—by living as a woman. “The word ‘drag,’” says Cocks, “meaning wearing women’s clothes, was first coined publicly in the 1860s, and at that time it did not only take place within the relatively safe confines of the fancy dress ball.” In fact, the opposite is true, because “dressing as a woman in the sense of trying to pass as one, was a sufficiently common phenomenon” (Cocks 121). Since “Theodora: A Fragment” dates back to 1895, Cross was likely aware of the term. Taking this information into consideration, Theodora’s name is only one vowel away from being Theodore, and her nickname, which her sister addresses her with, is Theo (Cross 88). In addition, she has a “pale, well-cut face” and “two well-made feet and ankles” (Cross 73); a “curious masculine shade upon the upper lip” (Cross 83); as well as the appearance of “a young fellow of nineteen” (Cross 77). Her looks pale in comparison to the Persian woman’s—an actual woman—in Cecil’s sketchbook (Cross 84), likely due to her blatantly masculine features. She so closely resembles a man, in fact, that she is “Quite passable, really” (Cross 87) in a zouave, a jacket once worn by French soldiers (OED). Between her name and physical attributes, Theodora’s image is certainly less than feminine. Her masculinity extends beyond her characteristics and stretches even into her lifestyle:

She had called the room her own, so I glanced around it with a certain curiosity. A room is always some faint index to the character of its occupier, and as I looked a smile came to my face. This room suggested everywhere, as I should have expected, an intellectual but careless and independent spirit. There were two or three tables, in the window, heaped up with books and strewn over with papers. (Cross 76)

As Cecil notes, “A room is always some faint index to the character of its occupier.” In other words, an examination of Theodora’s room is an examination of Theodora herself—and her room confirms suspicion, suggesting the “intellectual but careless and independent spirit” Cecil has already recognized within her. Her spirit is captured in the mess of books and papers, which indicate intelligence. Stereotypically, men create messes for housewives to clean, and boys receive quality educations while girls learn the trade of house making. Theodora quite obviously does not fall on the feminine side of the gender binary. In this male-reminiscent room of hers, Theodora only allows one maid. She declares, “I never let any of the servants answer this bell except her; she has my confidence, as far as one ever gives confidence to a servant” (Cross 77). In the previous room, Cecil “had to thread [his] way through a perfect maze of gilt-legged tables and statuette-bearing tripods,” hinting that, overall, Theodora’s house is one of “perfect,” feminine luxury. Perhaps Theodora lets only one maid into the cluttered room because it is the one she identifies with most, and her male identity must remain hidden if she wishes to live as a woman in the public eye.

The evidence stops not at Theodora alone. Cecil meets her at a dance, where they “sat in that passage long enough to be going through a banking account, and balancing it too, for that matter!” (Cross 72). H.G. Cocks makes an interesting observation that “certain institutions such as the music hall, theatre or the fancy dress ball became the locations of homosexual desire” (115). These were “places where men in search of sex could meet,” and they—“the fancy dress, or drag ball”—began to substitute for prostitution houses (Cocks 108). The social space obviously serves Cecil and Theodora well; they can mingle publicly under a façade of everyday courtship, suggesting that nothing is out of the ordinary.

In *fin de siècle* culture, neither Cecil’s sexuality nor Theodora’s way of life would have been accepted. Authors such as Victoria Cross were the greatest advocates for homosexuals, incorporating subtle hints at the normality of same-sex relationships. Because homosexuality was a punishable crime, Cross and writers like her perched themselves on the edge of danger. Without a doubt, authors possessing enough nerve to put quill to paper in favor of homosexuality have helped ensure that twenty-first century homosexuals do not live as if the world is stuck in England’s 1890s.

## Works Cited

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