

The Page as Gendered Cultural Recess

Female Creative Anxieties in Margaret Oliphant's *The Library Window* (1896)

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In her posthumously published autobiography, Margaret Oliphant mourns her own potential as a female writer by foreseeing that »[n]o one will mention [her] in the same breath with George Eliot. And that is just.«¹ No matter if justified or unjustified, her premonition should prove correct as her impressive oeuvre spanning more than 120 works completely vanished from the literary canon for more than a century following her death in 1897. Only in recent decades has scholarship rediscovered her novels, short stories, and journalistic works that provoked some of her predominantly male critics to dispute her writing talent during her lifetime, arguing that nobody who produced such a large quantity of literature could be considered a credible writer.² With Sir Walter Scott's eclipsing shadow towering over Britain's publishing industry in the second half of the nineteenth century,³ Oliphant's writings reveal anxieties about her legacy as a female writer, but especially about underlying fears of being only of middling talent, as it was occasionally implied by her contemporary critics. This chapter thus investigates the traces of female anxieties in

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- 1 Oliphant, Margaret: *The Autobiography of Margaret Oliphant*, ed. by Elisabeth Jay, Peterborough 2002, p. 51.
 - 2 Skelton, John: »A Little Chat About Mrs. Oliphant«, in: *Blackwood's Magazine* 133 (1863), pp. 73–91.
 - 3 Scott's novels continued to sell in millions after his death and well into the Victorian era. *Ivanhoe*, for example, sold more than two million copies between October 1866 and June 1868, reaching unprecedented popularity (cf. McAdams, Ruth M.: *The Posthumous British Editions of Sir Walter Scott's Waverley Novels, 1832–1871, And the Evolution of his Literary Legacy*, Master Thesis, University of Edinburgh 2008, p. 117). Ian Duncan goes as far as to hold Scott responsible for the »[t]he use of male pseudonyms by women authors ... [that] can be dated with some precision from the time of Scott's death« (Duncan, Ian: *Modern Romance and the Transformation of the Novel: The Gothic, Scott and Dickens*, Cambridge 1992, p. 17). If Oliphant's abovementioned comparison of herself to George Eliot was a coincidence, this assumption offers a new perspective on the perception of her own legacy and her creative anxieties in relation to her gender.

creating literary art and the subversive potential it holds for both its writer as well as its readership in Oliphant's most renowned and famous ghost story, *The Library Window* (1896).

Academic scholarship has predominantly focused on the discourse surrounding the questions of gender ideals and national identity in *The Library Window*.⁴ Barbara Onslow famously remarked on the significance of Scottish art and its influence on identity construction for Oliphant's life, not just for her role as an art critic for *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, but also for her own identity as a Scottish writer, since Oliphant »saw her own lack of confidence mirrored in the nation as a whole«. ⁵ Scottish art, Onslow argues in her reading of Oliphant's novella, lacked the self-confidence of its Southern counterpart and was thus perceived as inferior – an inferiority which Oliphant attributes to the Scots' suppression of emotions.⁶

While this chapter will not investigate the national character of the novella in greater detail, it builds upon the existing scholarly debate and aims to extend it beyond the »anxiety of authorship« as notably coined by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar⁷ to the anxieties of the author-reader-relationship by uniting scholarly approaches on textuality, materiality, and creatorship. By focussing on the material centrality of glass as »the source of anxiety, . . . the disputed space of the century«⁸ and the eventual interchangeability of windows with the literary materiality of books, this reading suggests that the novella implies a meta-level that places the reader in the narrator's metaphorical window seat. In the architecture of the Victorian British book market, the window serves as a poetic and dialectic element to illustrate the counter experiences and hauntings of male and female creativity in the late nineteenth century. By contrasting the female with the male narrative authority through the metaphor of the window seat, Oliphant depicts a deeply pessimistic view on female authorship that is fraught with anxiety, heightened by the metamorphosis of the narrator and reader.

4 Cf. Calder, Jenni: »Through Mrs Oliphant's library window«, in: *Women's Writing* 10/3 (2003), pp. 485–502; Heller, Tamar: »Textual Seductions: Women's Reading and Writing in Margaret Oliphant's ›The Library Window‹«, in: *Victorian Literature and Culture* 25/1 (1997), pp. 23–37, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25058371> (last accessed 15.08.2025); Onslow, Barbara: »Humble Comments From the Ignorant: Margaret Oliphant's Criticism of Art and Society«, in: *Victorian Periodicals Review* 31/1 (1998), pp. 55–74, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/20083053.pdf> (last accessed 30.07.2024).

5 B. Onslow: *Humble Comments From the Ignorant*, p. 61.

6 *Ibid.*

7 Gilbert, Sandra M./Gubar, Susan: »Infection in the Sentence: The Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship«, in: Robin Wahol (ed.): *Feminisms: An anthology of literary theory and criticism*, Piscataway/New Jersey 1991, pp. 289–300, here p. 13.

8 Armstrong, Isobel: *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830–1880*, Oxford et al. 2008, p. 7 (emphasis in the original).

I. The Window in the Victorian Era

Following its first publication in Oliphant's 1880 collection of short stories, *A Beleaguered City and Other Tales of the Seen and Unseen*, *The Library Window* was republished posthumously in 1889 in Oliphant's anthology *Stories of the Seen and the Unseen*. Set in the fictional Scottish town of St. Rule's, the novella centres around a young, female narrator whose name and identity are never disclosed. She recounts the events retrospectively when she was a little girl and spent the summer at her Aunt Mary's house where she would retreat to a window recess to read and sew. The window recess is located opposite St. Rule's college library, facing a window that is much speculated upon by both the town as well as Aunt Mary's tea party guests: at times, it appears to be a real window while at other times, »[i]t may be filled in or it may be built up, but it is not a window to give light«. ⁹ As midsummer approaches, the narrator begins to spot a room behind the window, empty at first except for furniture, and eventually the ghost of a writer with whom she develops a one-sided sexual obsession until she is eventually sent home to London.

As opposed to the title of the anthology the novella was originally published in, its republication with its emphasis on the visible and the invisible alludes to one of the most defining materials, objects, and symbols of the Victorian era: glass. Following the 1851 Great Exhibition and its Crystal Palace and Osler's glass fountain, glass came to signify »mass transparency« that culminated in »a poetics of glass«. ¹⁰ Ranging from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871) over the window as a recurring narrative element in the novels of Dickens and Eliot to the infamous magnifying glass in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* stories (1892–1927), glass became a potent symbol for Enlightenment thought, knowledge, insight, modernity but also distortion and escapism.

The act of looking through glass was, not least due to the gender ideals of the Victorian era, also stained with a political undertone. The window's politicisation offers a broader horizon, redirecting the focus beyond the periphery of the home. It also creates a zooming effect from the personal everyday life to the greater reality of the Empire, »reaching into broad nation-wide concerns, most importantly about health and sanitation but also about new routines and mechanisms of personal action and interpersonal relations«. ¹¹ The world, on the individual level, is en-

9 Oliphant, Margaret: »The Library Window«, in: Margaret Oliphant: *A Beleaguered City and Other Tales of the Seen and the Unseen*, ed. by Jenni Calder, Edinburgh 2000, pp. 363–402; here p. 367. Cited in the text with the abbreviation LW and the page number.

10 I. Armstrong: *Victorian Glassworlds*, p. 1.

11 Catalan, Zelma: »Literature and Architecture: The Window in Mid-Victorian Fiction«, in: Emilia Slavona et al. (eds.): *New Paradigms in English Studies: Language, Linguistics, Literature and Culture in Higher Education*, Sofia 2017, pp. 216–227; here p. 217.

larged. And yet, such zooming effects cannot be entirely separated from the gazers' everyday lives since »the invisible wall of solid crystal was also seen to encourage an increasing distance between people«. ¹² What evokes feelings of longing and desire between passers-by and consumer goods behind shop windows also solidifies in the growing sensations of anonymity and blindness of the metropolis as employed in Gothic stories like Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) or Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). Scotland's capital especially comes to represent an ambivalent cityscape of constant surveillance and yet unobserved spaces that facilitate horrendous crimes as the gruesome murders narrated in Stevenson's horror story *The Body Snatcher* (1884).

The politicisation of the window in Britain dates back to 1696 and the implementation of the window tax in the wake of the need for funding the re-coinage and restoration of the Crown's treasury during the Restoration. ¹³ For the subsequent 150 years, the tax served as a crucial source of income and provided the government with reliable funds, albeit not without resistance. ¹⁴ Especially in Scotland, the tax was highly contested after its implementation in the wake of the Union of 1707, resulting in the nation's exclusion from the administration and modernisation of the tax system. ¹⁵ Oliphant briefly addresses its significance for Scotland's social carpet in the novella through Aunt Mary's insistence that the window must be painted onto the library's wall since »it's a case of these wicked window duties [...] when half the windows in our houses were blocked up to save the tax« (LW, p. 368). Painted windows without translucent material naturally lose their characteristic as »a paradoxical ethereal *substance*«. ¹⁶ Without their transparency, they are no longer a *medium*, but only a *barrier* or, as Aunt Mary phrases it, »ornaments« (LW, p. 368) – they lose their *raison d'être* entirely and are turned into mere adornments without a function or a distinct materiality.

In nineteenth-century Britain's emerging *nation of shopkeepers*, windows, especially shop windows, represented compulsive, epistemic, and social dynamics that produced sharp contrasts of longing and disillusionment, deceit and veracity, and

12 Miller, Andrew H.: *Novels behind glass. Commodity culture and Victorian narrative*, Cambridge et al. 2009, p. 5.

13 Glantz, Andrew E.: »A Tax on Light and Air: Impact of the Window Duty on Tax Administration and Architecture, 1696–1851«, in: *Penn History Review* 15/2 (Spring 2008), pp. 18–40; here p. 19, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/76391915.pdf> (last accessed 24.01.2025).

14 Ward, W.R.: »The Administration of the Window and Assessed Taxes, 1696–1798«, in: *The English Historical Review* 67/265 (October 1952), pp. 522–542; here p. 524, DOI: 10.1093/ehr/LXVII.CCLXV.522 (last accessed 24.01.2025).

15 *Ibid.*, p. 530. A detailed overview of Scotland's opposition to the window tax and reformation of the system is outlined here.

16 I. Armstrong: *Victorian Glassworlds*, p. 5 (emphasis in the original).

individual seclusion and socialising.¹⁷ By erecting this invisible barrier »between the seer and the seen«, windows and glass in broader terms »became a third or middle term«. ¹⁸ Conflating two opposites, »[g]lass's pellucid transitivity – you can see through it – represents at the same time the first gradation of opacity. It is both *medium and barrier*«. ¹⁹ The window's function as a medium is particularly interesting because it implies a communicative aspect. Armstrong associates glass as a communication device not only with the persons separated through the glass or the highly ideologically charged private and public sphere of Victorian gender ideals but with the manufacturing process and the manufacturers of the glass themselves. Glass was produced through manual labour, glassblowing, in factories that were operated by a predominantly male workforce. ²⁰ In other words, »[t]o look through glass in the mid-nineteenth century was most likely to look through and by means of the breath of an unknown [male] artisan«. ²¹ While Armstrong describes the act of gazing through a window as an act of communication between the gazing person with the glassblower, the gender dynamic suggests a new layer of interpretation: the woman gazes out from the private sphere of the home through solidified male breath. ²² Consequently, the window becomes a male communicative device that is merely *used by* women but never a product of their own creation due to their exclusion from the manufacturing process. In the Victorian glass world, the woman remains a passive spectator.

II. The Window as Gendered Cultural Recess

The nameless narrator in Oliphant's novella is confined to the role of the passive spectator from the first page onwards. While the window as a material object is closely linked to the senses, it is especially connected with the act of reading:

Aunt Mary always said I could do two or indeed three things at once – both read and listen, and see. I am sure that I did not listen much, and seldom looked out, of set purpose – as some people do who notice what bonnets the ladies in the street have on; but I did hear what I couldn't help hearing, even when I was reading my book, and I did see all sort of things, though often for a whole half-hour I might never lift my eyes (LW, p. 365).

17 A.H. Millner: *Novels behind glass*, p. 5.

18 I. Armstrong: *Victorian Glassworlds*, p. 3.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 7 (emphasis in the original).

20 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 4f.

Here, the narrator admits that, while she is more than capable of engaging in active listening or looking out, she chooses not to make use of her abilities. Instead, she limits herself to passive hearing and seeing as a natural corollary of reading. Her gift of »a sort of second-sight« is the only indication why she is more receptive than the women around her (*ibid.*). As if in anticipation of a possible misinterpretation, she hurries on to declare that her enhanced vision offers no explanation for the controversy surrounding the window, emphasising that the debate expands to a greater context than a mere dialogical engagement of a young woman with literature (*ibid.*). Instead, the discussion expands at least to Aunt Mary's tea party guests, but also to the community of St. Rules as a whole.

While the members of Aunt Mary's tea party actively engage in a discussion about the library window's existence, the young woman remains a seemingly invisible auditor who, when asked about her opinion, simply replies: »I have no opinion. I was reading my book all the time« (*LW*, p. 369). Her lack of authority continues throughout the novella, limiting her to a passive observer whose very actions seem halted by the act of gazing through the window at the ghostly writer opposite the street, rooting her »in a kind of rapture, yet stupor too . . . following [his look] as if [she] were his shadow« (*LW*, p. 395). Strikingly, she never attempts to mirror the writer's actions, never pursues him through his own craft, never even attempts to pick up the pen herself. If she aspires to become a writer, it is only her imagination that leads her to »almost seeing things through his eyes« (*LW*, p. 386). It is the medium, the window, that reinforces this separation which cannot be overcome, not even when the young woman physically entered the writer's study on the fateful night of the soirée and »went to the picture [in the room behind the library window] and looked at it without seeing it« (*LW*, p. 392). Only the window seems to filter her gaze to see what others cannot, simultaneously trapping her in a state of passive spectatorship.

Age is a prerequisite for the character's perception of the window. Light and darkness, vision and blindness, are central to the novella, sharpening the contrast between the dark interior of Aunt Mary's house, which requires lit lamps, and the brightness of dazzling lights at the library. Jenni Calder suggests that this difference in perception stems »from within, the result of an internalised energy which may be intensified by [women's] confinement« to the domestic sphere and one that is supposedly enhanced with age.²³ However, Oliphant's description of the first mention of the tea party invading the narrator's recess contests this reading as well as her repeated mentions of the others' blindness throughout the novella. Upon the first discovery of the window, the narrator remarks first on »a row of old faces« and then »the wall of old ladies«, contrasting her singular youth (*LW*, p. 366). She breaks the wall of old age, similar to a window. Her gift of second sight underlines her isolation from

23 J. Calder: *Through Mrs Oliphant's library window*, p. 489.

the group further as it »bring[s] tears to [her] eyes to think that all those clever people, solely by reason of being no longer young as [she] was, should have the simplest things shut out from them« (LW, p. 379). Due to the narrator's youth and willing suspension of disbelief, the unfolding story of the novella becomes discernible: »at that time I was not old, which makes all the difference« (LW, p. 363). The baker boy, the only other character of the novella who witnesses the library window being opened, and his youth further support the argument that youth outranks gender concerning the library window's visibility. The novella identifies age as the decisive lens through which the world is conceived, but the narrator's resignation when her sight eventually dims towards the end of the novella, and the ghostly writer vanishes, does not imply the didactic undertone of wisdom and experience gained with age as implied by Calder. Instead, the window serves as a patriarchal filter for a young woman's perception of the world, similar to the male lens of a novelist through which young female readers explore the fictional world. This is strikingly emphasised through the baker's boy who stood »there, in the middle of the street, [...] staring up at the open window, with his mouth open and his face full of wonder – breathless as if he could not believe what he saw« (LW, p. 396). Unlike the narrator, however, who watches the writer open the window and disappear into the depths of the study from her recess, the baker boy »saw nae gentleman« but only the open window because he is missing the filter of the window glass the narrator believes herself trapped behind (LW, p. 397).

As readers, we quickly learn that the debate surrounding the library window serves as a substitute for the phenomenon of the ghostly writer, a mystery that remains vague and without explicit explanation until the end of the novella when Aunt Mary reveals the haunting ghost to be part of the family's curse (LW, p. 399f.). The ghostly writer appears alongside a writing desk – deserted at first but later occupied by »the human inhabitant who gave it all meaning« and who »moved just as much as a man will do who when he is very busily writing, thinking of nothing else« (LW, p. 379). Noticeably, the writer is only identified as such through the act of writing:

But he was immovable there facing the window as he had been seated at the desk. Sometimes he made a little faint stir with a hand or a foot, and I held my breath, hoping he was about to rise from his chair – but he never did. And with all the efforts I made I could not be sure of his face (LW, p. 383).

Like the narrator, the writer remains a fragment of the reader's imagination, as neither his visual appearance nor his identity is ever fully disclosed. The numerous references to characters from Walter Scott's novel *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818) and the writer's »fair« hair (LW, p. 395), a trademark feature of Scott, have led academic scholarship to agree that the ghost embodies Scott as father, scholar, and lover in one

persona.²⁴ The most distinctive characteristic of the two mirror images of the narrator and the ghostly writer, however, is that the ghostly writer *acts* and »is very busily writing« (LW, p. 379). Following the identification of the writer through his actions – writing – the narrator must be identified as a reader due to her preoccupation with novels rather than the act of writing. In her interaction with the ghost, she takes on the position of the distanced reader and admirer – a distance that is emphasised by the barrier of the two windows and the street separating them as a frontier. Similar to the consumer goods behind shop windows, the transparent boundary amplifies the narrator's desires for the ghostly writer, rendering her even more passive »as if [she] were a puppet moved by his will« (LW, p. 395). This striking confession reveals the authority the male ghost holds over the female narrator who finds herself »drawn to him as if [she] could have gone out of [herself], [her] heart out of [her] bosom, [her] eyes out of [her] head« (LW, p. 395) – but it reaches much further than a young woman's seduction and inevitable sexual fall.²⁵ The ghostly writer's merging with the library window represents the materialisation of the past, which, in turn, serves as the redirecting lens of the present. Considering the autobiographical background of Oliphant's own anxieties about female authorship, the deflecting influence of the past on the present – Sir Walter Scott's looming shadow over the Scottish publishing industry of the Victorian era – mirrors her own scepticism about her abilities as a writer. If the present is viewed through the lens of the past, if Scottish literature is read through the dominating voices of the past, there is no room for novelty.

The window recess has been identified as a liminal space in previous scholarship, mediating between the private interior and the public streets of St. Rules.²⁶ If we consider the significance of the window for the novella's characters and plot development, it can be interpreted beyond this horizon: the window recess embodies an ideal, mediating space between the fictional space inhabited by the ghost behind the library window and the dark reality of the domesticity of Aunt Mary's house. Viewed from a cultural angle, the production of glass and its increasing incorporation into Victorian architecture »produced simultaneously an ideal, bodiless space that could not be grasped, and an empty, abstract space that presented itself as there to be filled, seized, or possessed«.²⁷ The narrator of *The Library Window* echoes this dichotomy through her description of the window recess in Aunt Mary's house as such an ideal space, »the deep recess of the window, and the curtain that fell half over it, and the broad window-seat, where one could collect so many things without

24 E.g., see T. Heller: Textual Seductions; McCarthy, Elizabeth: »The Library Window«, in: The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies 5 (2008), pp. 78–80, <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/library-window/docview/1834041077/se-2> (last accessed 06.02.2025).

25 T. Heller: Textual Seductions, p. 26.

26 Ibid.

27 I. Armstrong: Victorian Glassworlds, p. 9.

being found fault with for untidiness« (LW, p. 364). Similar to Jane Eyre in Charlotte Brontë's eponymous novel, the window recess serves as an escape for the narrator from the domestic duties of the private sphere, an act of rebellion against the authority of the domestic (ibid.). What distinguishes Oliphant's narrator from Jane, however, is the contrasting of the female and the male window recess as depicted through the narrator's and the ghostly writer's realms. While Brontë employs the window recess as a »position of both visual and narrative authority . . . from which the novel itself is written«, Oliphant's depiction of female narrative authority is less confident and infused by anxiety.²⁸ The narrator's window recess depicts a space of seeing and being seen that she never completely inhabits, other than the ghostly writer opposite the street. While the narrator fills the window recess with her books, her stitching basket, and her fantasy which gives her »great comfort« (LW, p. 364), the recess is equally invaded by Aunt Mary's tea party guests who »were all pressing into my recess, pressing upon me a row of old faces, peering into something they could not understand« (LW, p. 366). The window recess is thus turned into an ambivalent realm: on the one hand, it serves as a safe space for the narrator to escape from the female duties imposed upon young women by society, but on the other, it is not completely free of societal judgment as represented by the peering intrusiveness of Aunt Mary's tea party guests. Consequently, the narrator's possession of the window as an ideal space is never fully achieved but remains just as contested as the existence of the window at the library opposite the street.

Tamar Heller alludes to this ambiguity in her reading of the novella's window seat as »a permeability emphasized by the female gaze of the narrator, whose voyeurism connects the domesticity of the aunt's house and the male learning of the college library«,²⁹ resulting in a collision of the female gaze and the male gaze when the two finally recognize each other.³⁰ In allusion to Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Heller identifies the lack of a writing room in the female realm of Aunt Mary's house with the lack of women's capacity for authorship.³¹ This lack, she argues, contrasts the male realm of the library occupied by the ghostly writer and the male servants, resulting in a separation of the female writer from the male writer due to their respective spheres.³² A greater emphasis on the novella's title and the materiality of the window, however, amplifies the narrator's role to a greater context than merely the stand-in for the female writer as a fallen woman as Heller suggests. The anxieties the narrator has to confront in the face of the ghostly writer

28 Bellis, Peter J.: »In the Window-Seat: Vision and Power in *Jane Eyre*«, in: ELH 54/3 (Autumn 1987), pp. 639–652, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2873224> (last accessed 28.06.2025).

29 T. Heller: *Textual Seductions*, p. 24.

30 Ibid., p. 29.

31 Ibid., p. 24.

32 Ibid., p. 24f.

are not limited to her supposedly sexual desire for him but reach as far as her religious beliefs, betraying Oliphant's deep-rooted conservative convictions and her ambiguity about female authorship.

When the narrator's vision of the room behind the library window is absolutely clear, she is almost »able to read the old lettering on one of the big volumes which projected from the others and caught the light« (LW, p. 376). Like the undisclosed painting, the book remains a remark in passing without specification, but the following religious undertones could be a subtle indication that the old, big volume may be the Bible. The subsequent introduction of the narrative time approaching midsummer, the day of St John, which simultaneously leads to the climax of the novella, gently eases the narrative into its religious subtext. The summer solstice of midsummer marks the turning point in Teutonic culture when the sun starts to decrease, leading to the winter solstice shortly before Christmas and the birth of Jesus. Its Christianisation links midsummer to the celebrations of the Eve and Day of St. John.³³ Cultural interpretations of the related Bible verses suggest that John surrenders his honour and reputation willingly in favour of Jesus' increase rather than succumbing to envy and resentment as some readings suggest:³⁴ »He must increase, but I *must* decrease«. ³⁵ Midsummer or the Day of St. John fittingly references the decrease of the sun in the approach to Christmas. Oliphant implies to have chosen this day deliberately for the setting of her story to mark the loss of significance of culture in Scotland, lamenting that »Midsummer Day – the day of St John, which was once so much thought of as a festival, but now means nothing at all in Scotland any more than any other saints' days: which I shall always think a great pity and loss of Scotland, whatever Aunt Mary may say« (LW, p. 376). While this is often regarded as another reference to Oliphant's criticism of the lack of a distinct Scottish cultural identity, her choice to link the climax of the novella, the writer's recognition of the narrator, with the Eve of St John betrays her deep-rooted beliefs that one writer's legacy, in this case Sir Walter Scott's, must come at the expense of another's failure, namely the female narrator's failure to become a writer, serving as a substitute for Oliphant's persona as a female writer herself. The collapse of the female writer, both metaphorically and physically through the narrator's subsequent illness, is triggered when the ghostly writer finally acknowledges her, first with a glance and then »with

33 Macbain, Alexander: »Celtic Mythology«, in: The Celtic Magazine 9/105 (1884), pp. 427–434; here p. 431, <http://ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-periodicals/celtic-mythology/docview/3208492/se-2> (last accessed 06.02.2025).

34 Neyrey, Jerome H./Rohrbaugh, Richard L.: »He Must Increase, I Must Decrease« (John 3:30): A Cultural and Social Interpretation«, in: The Catholic Biblical Quarterly 63/3 (July 2001), pp. 464–483; here p. 482, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43724492> (last accessed 06.02.2025).

35 John 3:30 (emphasis in the original).

a little wave of his hand, as if it were a salutation – yet not that exactly either, for [she] thought he waved [her] away« (LW, p. 395).

Similar to the decreasing sun after midsummer, the narrator's mental health rapidly declines as well, leaving her »as weak as water« until her mother eventually comes to take her away (LW, p. 396). When the narrator eventually returns to St. Rules many years later as a widow, she has made peace with the past:

You ask me did I ever see him again? I cannot tell: the imagination is a great deceiver, as Lady Carnbee said: and if he stayed there so long, only to punish the race that had wronged him, why should I ever have seen him again? for I had received my share. [...] If it was he whom I have seen again, the anger is gone from him, and he means good and no longer harm to the house of the woman that loved him (LW, p. 402).

If her ancestor was indeed »a light woman« as Aunt Mary assumes and the Scholar had declined her advances only to be killed by her brothers and haunt the family ever since, the narrator's desire for him, and her willingness to surrender honour and reputation willingly for him instead of harbouring resentment and envy, echo conservative undertones of a woman's salvific, self-sacrificing love for a vengeful man (LW, p. 399).

Furthermore, the narrator stresses that »for years of [her] life [she] never again looked out of a window when any other window was in sight« (LW, p. 401f.). The continuing interlink between the haunting writer and the material object of the window implies that the narrator has surrendered the one place that constituted an »ideal, bodiless space that could not be grasped, and an empty, abstract space that presented itself as there to be filled, seized, or possessed«. ³⁶ Her abandonment of the country-house »which belongs to [her], but where [she] never live[s]« (LW, p. 402) and her recent return from India suggest different interpretations of this ending scene. Either the narrator has found a physical space that she now possesses, a mother of »little children« and maybe even a writer herself in a mirror image of Oliphant (ibid.), or she has yet to find such a place and even discarded the possibility altogether. In both scenarios, the passive young woman has claimed authority – either within or beyond societal limitations.

III. The Bookshelf as Window: A Metamorphosis of Reader and Writer

Returning to the relationship between reader and writer, it has been remarked that the identities of the ghostly writer and narrator seem to merge over the course of

36 I. Armstrong: Victorian Glassworlds, p. 9.

the novella.³⁷ The narrator is less preoccupied with the writer's identity or personality than with his writing, admitting that she »trembled with impatience to see him turn the page, or perhaps throw down his finished sheet on the floor, as somebody looking into a window like [she] once saw Sir Walter do, sheet after sheet« (LW, p. 380). With the mention of Scott as a writer, the implication here suggests that the turning of the page, the looking through a window, is a process shared by both the protagonist (turning the page), and Scott as embodiment of the writer (through the act of writing): when looking into a window, we look into other peoples' lives similarly to when we read and glimpse into fictional characters' lives. And at the same time, the writer is looking back from the other side of the page at the reader when composing the story reminiscent of »the two-way passage of vision«. ³⁸ Through the act of »[g]azing out, or gazing in, experience is invisibly shaped from both sides of the film of glass. The commercialized window offers public access to spectacle and display and a fantasmatic vicarious ownership of its contents«³⁹ – a process that can be compared to the mimetic act of writing and reading fiction.

The window metaphor gains momentum on the evening of the soirée at the library. Anticipating her opportunity to finally see the writer in person and enquire about his writing projects, the narrator accompanies Mr. Pitmilly »to see the curiosities« (LW, p. 390). Upon entering the room that the protagonist observed so many times through the window, she discovers that her communication with the writer did not occur through a window but the medium of literature similar to the inverted effect of a camera obscura: »On that side of the wall which was to the street there seemed no windows at all. A long line of bookcases filled it from end to end« (LW, p. 391). This discovery leaves her »altogether confused« and »as if [she] was in a strange country, not knowing where [she] was going, not knowing what [she] might find out next« (LW, p. 391). Instead of gaining a sense of orientation, a sense of revelation as we might expect from uncovering a mystified view through a distant window, the protagonist is left more bewildered than before. Rather than meeting eye-to-eye with Scott's ghost, the young woman finds herself at an even greater distance to him since the only space where his presence would have been feasible is a void. Just like in the beginning when she first glimpsed at him, she finds herself in the position of the wondering spectator, asking »[w]here is my window? – where, then, is my window?« (ibid.). In her codependent existence with the ghostly writer, the removal of the ghost consequently results in the extinction of the spectator, namely herself.

We can link this existential shock to the underlying debate about art and identity in Oliphant's works. As aforementioned, Onslow describes Oliphant's conflicted relationship with Scottish art in her autobiographic reading, writing that Oliphant

37 T. Heller: *Textual Seductions*, p. 28.

38 I. Armstrong: *Victorian Glassworlds*, p. 7.

39 Ibid.

»saw her own lack of confidence mirrored in the nation as a whole«. ⁴⁰ The lack of names, visual descriptions, and other character traits for both the narrator and the writer echo this identity crisis because only if the individual identity is stable, then the communal, national identity can be considered stable as well. *The Library Window* undermines this stability with the generation-transcending curse of the ghostly writer, returning time and time again to haunt young women, the future mothers, to destabilise the foundations of nation-building in nineteenth century ideology: the family. Oliphant similarly alludes to the value of the past for the family in her ghost story *The Secret Chamber*: »It is wonderful how easily a family learns to pique itself upon any distinctive possession. A ghost is a sign of importance not to be despised; a haunted room is worth as much as a small farm to the complacency of the family that owns it« (LW, p. 109). In other words, the past can turn into a family's – or projected onto the national level – a country's currency. If this is true for art as well, her words suggest a cynical view of Scott's artistic legacy for Scotland's cultural family.

With both the communication between the narrator and the writer impaired and the protagonist's ability to see and describe the painting's content distorted, it seems like the Scots' appreciation of their art is significantly disturbed. What has been neglected in previous readings of *The Library Window* are the boundaries imposed upon art throughout the novella. In Aunt Mary's house, there is only room for creativity and imagination in the narrator's idealised window recess, whereas the study in the library portrays the realm of creation through writing and painting. While we never learn about the ghost's initial whereabouts during his lifetime and can only assume he must have regularly frequented the study, Aunt Mary reveals that he was killed by her ancestor's brothers (LW, p. 400). Confined to the liminal space of the mysterious library window, he haunts the institutions ever since without any prospect of ever escaping. Even when »[h]e opened the window with a noise that was heard from the West Port to the Abbey« (LW, p. 395), an act that the narrator never considers herself, he disappears further into the library rather than attempting an escape, not to mention to cross the divide between the two windows. He inhabits a space just as ambiguous in its bodiless and restricted nature as the narrator herself. The spectre of the aesthetic, romanticised art piece as portrayed by Scott is »killed« in the reality of the streets: it cannot persist outside the institutional walls that cultivate it.

Turning the page – quite literally in this sense – to what we would find on the other side of the window or the page, is the spectator, the readership. Just like the narrator in the story, we as readership find ourselves on the other side of the window, the page, glimpsing in. The lack of names and identities in the novella portray a projection surface that invites our imagination as much as the narrators, allowing both the character of the ghostly writer and the narrator to function as 'containers' – the reader is invited to possess the bodiless space of the narrator which allows

40 B. Onslow: Humble Comments From the Ignorant, p. 61.

Oliphant to slip into the place of the writer in the library. We as readers find ourselves in the same place as the protagonist: on the other side of the page, the other side of the window, captured by the narrative of unresolved mysteries in »a sort of breathless watch, an absorption« (LW, p. 378) – just as enamored with and fascinated by the story as Oliphant's protagonist herself. Considering Oliphant's skepticism of Scottish art and its lack of a distinct identity, there is a subtle implication that this story of pining and longing to see, to understand, and to love what is on the other side of both window and page, stems from a place of lack of understanding. Like Aunt Mary's tea party guests who peer »into something they could not understand« (LW, p. 366), the narrator equally fails to make sense of it. The cyclicity of the curse the narrator's family is haunted by suggests a vicious circle of female incomprehension without resolution as is evident in the narrator's final confession that she »never knew what Aunt Mary meant when she said, ›Yon ring was the token,‹ nor what it could have to do with that strange window in the old College Library of St Rule's« (ibid. 402). *The Library Window* and its use of uncanny, Gothic elements culminating in a refusal to offer an explicit explanation leaves us, like the narrator herself, »altogether confused« and »as if [we were] in a strange country, not knowing where [we were] going, not knowing what [we] might find out next« (LW, p. 391).

Returning to the opening argument of this analysis and the power dynamic between active writer and passive spectator/reader, their capacity for action further underlines the hierarchy between writer and reader. Oliphant explicitly contrasts the liminality of their respective spaces shortly after the narrator has returned from the soirée:

Then he put his hands upon the window to open it. It was stiff and hard to move; but at last he forced it open with a sound that echoed all along the street. I saw that the people heard it, and several looked up. As for me, I put my hands together, leaning with my face against the glass, drawn to him as if I could have gone out of myself, my heart out of my bosom, my eyes out of my head. He opened the window with a noise that was heard from the West Port to the Abbey (LW, p. 395).

Oliphant stresses the volume of the sound in its repetition even though the action only occurs once. The narrator, on the other hand, remains firmly trapped behind her window, trapped between the repetition of the writer forcing the window open. The writer proceeds to lean over the windowsill, looking at the narrator, who concludes that »he did know, he did see, who it was that had recognised him and sympathised with him all the time« (ibid. 395). From Oliphant's previous description of the library's interior, we have learnt that the window is blocked by bookshelves. Considering these circumstances, Oliphant creates a rather powerful image with the writer leaning out of the bookshelf as if to verify that he is still seen, that his legacy lives on. A legacy that Oliphant herself did not believe in.

IV. Conclusion

Oliphant's novella was published forty-five years after Maria Theresa Short opened her first public exhibition of the camera obscura on Edinburgh's Calton Hill in 1835, decried by her critics as »abominable« and a »profanation of that sacred ground«. ⁴¹ The ensuing conflict between Short and local authorities and residents cumulated in the destruction of »Short's Popular Observatory« and Short's relocation to the Outlook Tower on Castlehill where the camera obscura has remained open to the public to this day. In the 1880s and 1890s, at the time of Oliphant's writing of the ghost story, the Outlook Tower became a »thinking machine« under Patrick Geddes with the primary objective to operate on the grounds of a new philosophy of education that defined the »student, though first of all freshened as an observer, [...] not as a receptacle for information, but as a producer of independent thought«. ⁴² The interlink between the act of observation and production of ideas was thus an integral topic of debate amongst Scotland's intellectual elite of the nineteenth century. Oliphant's depiction of the college library's window as an optical illusion of gendered imbalance adds an undertone of pessimism that does not hold much hope for the production of female Scottish literature at the turn of the century. The opaque and yet limiting surface of the imagination as symbolised by the window, underlined by the absence of any identification traits for the ghostly writer and the female narrator, invites a metamorphosis of identities beyond the page. With Scotland's artistic identity crisis in the nineteenth century as the underlying motif, the nature of the debate is so distorted that it is unrecognisable even to the community of St. Rule's itself. Consequently, the spectre of Scottish art, predominantly Sir Walter Scott, can only survive in institutions like libraries and universities, but never in the reality of the streets. Aunt Mary's mantra-like explanation that »Yon ring was the token,« which eludes the narrator to the very end, suggests that the inheritance of Lady Carnbee's diamond ring lifted the curse for the narrator (LW, p. 402). The implication thus remains that for women writers like Oliphant, marriage and its accompanying domestic duties may serve as a resolution to persistent anxieties of authorship. The novella's contradictory portrayal of the narrator echoes Oliphant's own paradox of deep-rooted conservatism on the one hand and desires for an escape from women's duties on the other that is reminiscent of »a feminism so fraught with contradictions, and apparently so preoccupied with narratives of female failure, that it sometimes appears to

41 No Author: »Calton Hill«, in: The Scotsman (1817–1858), 23 July 1834, p. 3, <http://ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/calton-hill/docview/486300414/se-2> (last accessed 18.06.2025).

42 Meller, Helen: Patrick Geddes: Social Evolutionist and City Planner, London 1990, p. 67.

be antifeminist«. ⁴³ Oliphant's young female narrator is not simply confined to the liminality of the window recess but is turned into a metaphorical window herself, both medium *and* barrier – or simply an optical illusion.

43 Pykett, Lynn: »Portraits of the artist as a young woman: representations of the female artist in the New Woman fiction of the 1890s«, in: Nicola Diane Thompson (ed.): *Victorian Women Writers and the Woman Question*, Cambridge 1999, pp. 135–150; here p. 135.