

Recovering the ‘Daughters of Decadence’: Gender politics and modernist aesthetics in *The Yellow Book*

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Abstract: *The Yellow Book* (1894–1897) occupies a pivotal place in the culture of *fin-de-siècle* literature, positioned between decadence, aestheticism, and early modernist experimentation. Critical scholarship has traditionally privileged its male contributors over its women writers. However, the short fiction of *Yellow women* like, Ella D’Arcy, Netta Syrett, and Charlotte Mew exemplifies sustained experimentation with narrative indirection, psychological interiority, and tonal restraint, challenging conventional representations of feminine desire, marital confinement, and emotional dependence through fragmented plots, unresolved endings, and weakened narrative authority. These strategies do not represent aesthetic retreat but rather a mode of feminist resistance determined by the cultural limitations of the 1890s, when overt challenges to gender roles invited moral censure or critical dismissal. The title, ‘Daughters of Decadence’, foregrounds this paradoxical positioning where women authors were simultaneously associated with cultural decline and aesthetic excess yet compelled to articulate their critique through reticence and ambiguity. Thus, D’Arcy, Syrett, and Mew transform decadence and aestheticism into tools for probing the emotional and psychic costs of gendered social discipline. This paper situates their work within the intersecting frameworks of female authorship, periodical culture, and *fin-de-siècle* debates surrounding decadence and modernity and reconsiders ambiguity as a productive feminist intervention that challenges conventional evaluative criteria in literary criticism. The methodology adopted here is three-fold: first, it contextualises *The Yellow Book* within broader historical and literary discourses of gender, authorship, and aesthetic experimentation; second, it offers close readings of selected short fiction by D’Arcy, Syrett, and Mew, paying particular attention to narrative structure, affective economy, and ethical ambiguity; and lastly, informed by feminist criticism, theories of decadence, and early modernist narrative studies, it shows how, these three, along with the other women

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writers of the periodical, were central in shaping a gender-conscious and ethically complex modernist prose tradition.

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Literary and historical background

The 1890s was fraught with issues of gender, women's education, sexuality, and authorship. Debates on social order and morality became more intense. At the heart of such debates emerged the figure of the *New Woman*, both in reality and fiction, representing ambitions for economic freedom, professional success, and sexual self-will (Heilmann and Beetham 2004, 22-25; Ardis 1990, 45-48). However, she existed more as a cultural space where progressive and conservative impulses were locked in mutual tension. *New Woman* writers inhabited a contradictory site where heightened possibility and immense limitations co-existed; where their experiments with literature were closely examined for their ethical and cultural adequacy.

The boom in periodical culture provided women writers with unparalleled exposure even as these periodicals established multiple editorial, commercial, and ideological lines. It was within this framework, that the short stories emerged as a very appropriate genre, one which called for the condensation of narratives as well as a certain rhetorical openness and reserve so far as the treatment of marriage, desire, or interiority was concerned (Beetham 1990, 348-51; Kooistra and Brake 1990, 12-15). *The Yellow Book* occupied a pivotal place in this literary milieu. As an avant-garde magazine aligned with decadence and early modernism, it rejected Victorian moral didacticism in favour of stylistic refinement, psychological complexity, and emotional restraint. Although early commentators such as Max Nordau condemned decadence as a symptom of cultural decline, aesthetic experimentation provided women writers with what Gilbert and Gubar describe as an elastic and oblique language through which they could explore desire, alienation, and the psychological costs of social regulation without resorting to overt political declaration (Nordau 1993; Showalter 1990, 201-03; Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 245-47; Heilmann and Beetham 2004, 35-37; Schaffer 2000, 112-15; Ledger and Luckhurst 2000). Aesthetic distancing thus functioned not as disengagement but as a mode of strategic involvement, enabling them to expose the pressures of marriage and gender roles without inviting accusations of moral impropriety.

The editorial structure of *The Yellow Book* and significant contributions to it by its New Woman writers, are central to understanding the journal's aesthetic and cultural ambitions (Kooistra 1995, 25–28; Ardis 2002, 150–53). George Egerton, Vernon Lee, and Rosamond Marriott Watson foregrounded female desire, agency, and moral complexity in their fiction (Ardis 2002, 155–58; Ledger 1997, 918–21). Ella D'Arcy, Netta Syrett, and Charlotte Mew stood at the forefront of periodical experimentation and developed distinctive narrative practices which, together, demonstrated an impulse of proto-modernist concern for interiority, fragmentation, and narrative incompleteness. Rather than occupying marginal positions, they shaped the aesthetic identity of *The Yellow Book*, redefining decadence and early modernism through ethically attentive and formally innovative literary practice (Kooistra and Brake 1990, 18–20; Ardis 2002, 155–58).

Theoretical framework

This paper will engage with feminist critical readings of literature, theories of decadence and aestheticism, and critical interpretations of narrative in early modernist fiction to assess the writings of women implicated in *The Yellow Book*. These critical approaches allow a reading of how methods of formal control, narrative obliquity, and emotional subtlety might be considered gendered aesthetic techniques in the constricted social climate of the *fin de siècle* era. Based on this interpretive lens, this study positions D'Arcy, Syrett and Mew at the centre of late nineteenth-century literary experimentation. Pioneering critics such as Elaine Showalter and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have demonstrated that women's writing emerges in dialogue with, and often in resistance to, patriarchal literary traditions that marginalised female authorship and constrained acceptable representations of female subjectivity. Showalter's concept of women's literature as a 'double-voiced discourse' is particularly relevant, as it foregrounds the ways women writers negotiated dominant masculine traditions while simultaneously articulating gendered experiences often excluded from canonical narratives (Showalter 1990, 201–04). Gilbert and Gubar's analysis of the ideological structures governing women's literary production further illuminates how female authors were compelled to encode dissent obliquely, frequently adopting strategies of indirection, fragmentation,

and tonal ambiguity in order to evade moral censure (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 245–48).

Within the *fin de siècle* context, these pressures were intensified by widespread cultural anxieties surrounding the figure of the *New Woman*. Showalter's analysis of *New Woman* discourse highlights the paradoxical expansion of women's authorship alongside increased scrutiny and regulation of female behaviour, sexuality, and intellectual autonomy (Showalter 1990, 212–15). Women writers publishing in periodicals such as *The Yellow Book* operated within a contradictory space: they were afforded unprecedented opportunities for literary visibility while remaining subject to rigid moral expectations. However, feminist critique has tended to recognize that such a contradiction not only influenced the thematic preoccupations of women's literature but also influenced its formal aspects. Thus, instead of overt polemic, women writers took recourse to articulating the critique indirectly through silence, absence, and emotional reticence, thus shifting the focus to formal and stylistic manoeuvres as locations of critique (Heilmann 2000, 38–41, 918–20; Thain 2007, 172–75, 12–15; Kooistra and Brake 1990).

The periodical context of *The Yellow Book* reinforces the necessity of such a strategy. Periodical culture enforced commercial, editorial, and ideological constraints that shaped the form and content of published fiction. Critics have stressed that magazine-published short stories required forms of narrative compression, suggestive understatement, and formal economy, conditions that facilitated women's necessity to encode critique indirectly (Kooistra and Brake 1990, 12–15). Feminist periodical studies thus offer some productive methodological groundwork for demonstrating how women writers reformed aestheticism and decadence to the serial demands of publication, transmuting limitation into stylistic innovation. The intellectual climate of *The Yellow Book* provides the theoretical grounding of this study, further informed by theories of aestheticism and decadence. Underwritten by writers as Walter Pater and Arthur Symons, aesthetic experience was a mode of expanded perception that valorised interiority, sensibility, and ethical undecidability above moral dogma (Pater 1980, 55–58; Symons 1958, 101–04). If its deviance from the cultural status quo moved Max Nordau to famously brand decadence as the symptom of cultural degeneration, later critics have disputed this reductive reading by revealing how decadent aesthetics lent a versatile expressive vocabulary to voices articulating alienation,

desire, and psychological disintegration (Beaumont 2010, 98–102; Denisoff 2007, 567–71).

Specifically for female writers, aestheticism became a strategy of dealing with contentious matters without having to depend on explicit social commentary. Such distancing served not as an act of withdrawal but rather as an engagement with social matters, as suggested by critics, Schaffer and Rose, where female writers could respond to female norms through irony, ambivalence, and stylistic obliqueness rather than explicit confrontation (Schaffer 2000, 112–15; Rose 1978, 7–10). In more contemporary studies, it is emphasised that there was complex engagement with power, responsibility, and subjectivity in aestheticism, in contrast to the possibility of its association with political detachment (Moran 2007, 392–95; Schaffer 2000, 118–20). This study also draws on theories of early modernist narrative to situate the fiction of D'Arcy, Syrett, and Mew within a proto-modernist trajectory. Modernist critics have identified fragmentation, interiority, narrative ambiguity, and open-ended form as defining features of early twentieth-century literary experimentation. However, feminist scholars have increasingly argued that these techniques were already being developed by women writers in the late nineteenth century, particularly within the context of periodicals that encouraged formal innovation (Marcus 2007, 45–47; Thacker 2003, 237–40). By examining these women's fiction in *The Yellow Book*, this study challenges linear, male-centred accounts of modernist emergence.

Ella D'Arcy's works of fiction are examples of an early modernist style that captures the held-up emotions of an individual and bears an abstruse plot line. In "Irremediable", D'Arcy creates a story line without any redemption of the characters; nor does the conclusion effect a specific change (1894, 87–108). In "The Pleasure-Pilgrim" again, the travel-freak female character remains just as emotionally restricted as she was prior to her travel (1895, 34–67).

Netta Syrett's works of fiction further the idea of ethical limitations and moral ambiguities. In "Thy Heart's Desire", she presents a desire dictated by social ethics; therefore, the female character in the story has to deal with her own morals, creating an overall feeling of hesitation (1894, 230–45). "Far Above Rubies" further interrogates moral virtue through irony and tonal ambiguity, challenging cultural ideals of feminine self-sacrifice without offering corrective resolution (1897, 250–72). Feminist critics have noted that Syrett's stylistic restraint mirrors the psychological containment experienced by her

characters, transforming narrative form into an implicit critique of gendered moral discipline (Ledger 1997, 920–23).

Charlotte Mew's "Passed" represents the most radical articulation of narrative indirection within *The Yellow Book* (1894, 121–41). The story portrays grief as an ongoing psychic condition resistant to narrative closure, denying readers the consolation traditionally associated with mourning narratives. Critics have interpreted Mew's refusal of resolution as a feminist intervention that challenges cultural expectations that women's suffering should be morally redemptive or narratively productive (Heilmann and Beetham 2004, 36–38). The compression, ellipsis, and silence that structure "Passed" anticipate modernist explorations of trauma, memory, and affective disruption.

Collectively, the fiction of D'Arcy, Syrett, and Mew exemplifies what critics have described as a 'politics of indirection,' in which ethical meaning is conveyed through narrative hesitation, ambiguity, and silence rather than explicit statement (Ledger 1997, 920–23). This study situates these authors within feminist, aesthetic, and modernist theoretical frameworks to locate them at the centre of the literary project of *The Yellow Book*, arguing for women's writing as crucial to the emergence of a gender-conscious, morally complex modern literary narrative.

Narrative indirection and feminist ethics

Ella D'Arcy's short stories in *The Yellow Book* repeatedly examine the thematics of emotional entrapment, misplaced intimacy, and the deceptive notion of female mobility under late Victorian social arrangements. They are an important part of contemporary discussion regarding the ways in which women express and seek liberation. In contrast to writers like Kate Chopin, D'Arcy does not use the *New Woman* protagonist to represent the liberated woman; instead, she illustrates the social reality of how women continue to experience emotional dependence, social vigilance and psychological obstacles unabatedly. As a result, feminist evaluations have identified D'Arcy as one of the most astute psychological analysts of the time for her ability to show the complex interrelationship between the legal and social and the constraints thereof. In addition, D'Arcy's tales are not only about man-woman relationships, but also about how women internalise the concept of 'gender deafness' in their everyday lives through an ethical obligation to comply with the 'feminine standard' defined by patriarchy, suppressing their desires.

D'Arcy's "Irremediable" is a powerful sketch of her obsession with the emotional imbalance within heterosexual intimacy. Unlike most literature related to abandonment which has some level of moral judgement or 'white robe-redemption' about those abandoned individuals and instead of offering a sense of spiritual understanding or emotional reward, "Irremediable" explores the concept of abandonment without creating any form of closure at the end of the narrative. There's no reconciliation in "Irremediable" between the woman, Esther, and her husband, Willoughby.

The lack of an emotional ending leaves the reader confused about his/her plausible reaction. D'Arcy provides no solutions, and therefore provides no self-affirmation or romance to resolve a woman's conflicting emotions at the end of the story. In the light of this, it has been suggested in recent narratology that the open-endedness of the story disrupts the traditional view of justice in Victorian narratives, where a sufferer's suffering (whether physical, mental, or moral), should create a spiritual connection, and thus create a connection to moral clarity and promote spiritual development (Marcus 2007, 45-47; Thacker 2003, 237-40). D'Arcy's lack of formal closure does not suggest her failure as an artist but indicates that it was her conscious choice to establish a different philosophical framework than that of traditional Victorian narrative justice.

D'Arcy's artistic development connects her to the late nineteenth-century theories of affect and gender which often reworked the conception of stasis from one of passivity to one originating from active contemplation or intense interiority. By doing so, she undermined the cultural ideas that defined female suffering as a means of moral elevation or redemption. The ways in which suffering is presented in these writings, however, presents it as recurring and structural (Taylor 1988, 615-18; Kooistra 1995, 12-15). The critique of women's mobility (both socially and emotionally) is further advanced in "The Pleasure-Pilgrim". This story, although beginning within a context similar to the *New Woman* narratives of travel and sexual exploration, undermines these ideas of movement and travel, and, instead, represents outward movement and travel without any accompanying inner transformation or liberation. Present-day literary critics contend that the notions in question disrupt the liberal feminist presumption that mobile women possess increasing autonomy; instead, it demonstrates that movement is sometimes accompanied by further emotional restriction (Felski 1995, 72-74; Rose 1978, 7-10). In

D'Arcy's work, travelling does not equal freedom for the female protagonist. Instead, it serves as a means to illustrate her emotional separation from other people. Research conducted on the mobility of women during late-Victorian England indicates a discrepancy between what is generally portrayed as the freedom and mobility opportunities available to women versus their lived experiences as captured in celebratory travel accounts. D'Arcy takes another route than most in her depiction of women's journeys. D'Arcy utilises the sexualised notion of excitement found in most travel narratives and instead presents a counter-point of emotional emptiness which creates a disjuncture between them. D'Arcy's critiques of both gender ideologies and the nature of modern society are accomplished through her use of emotional dependence presented in an ideological framework as an instrument of liberation for women. The title of D'Arcy's 1895 short story, "The Web of Maya" provides a frame for the discussion of women's emotional dependence and illustrates her concerns about the underlying ideologies that frame the manner in which women experience their relationships (1895, 109-135). The title is an allusion to the concept of misperception, misidentification, and mistaken self-awareness, and also hints that women's emotional dependence is a result of a far deeper, insidious veil of social programming, a web-like entrapment of societal constructs and internalised beliefs about their roles rather than direct or explicit oppression. The desire for intimacy expressed in D'Arcy's short stories is less an expression of one's innermost desires than a construct of cultural expectations acquired over generations of exposure to dominant cultural norms. In combining feminist analytic perspectives with aesthetic dimensions, critics note that D'Arcy's aesthetic choices support her critiques of gender inequality in travel narrative forms.

Unlike traditional realist representations of the process of moral and theatrical judgment, "The Web of Maya" shows the readers that there is a distance between the world of 'maya' and the concrete and objective world. Through its depiction of the continuity of suffering, the reader sees that suffering is not limited to a moment in time, but is instead a continual and systemic condition of reality. By not arriving at a point of resolution, the readers are denied a sense of consolation; thus, their experience is primarily ethical, not comforting. This same idea of unresolved tension is also present in D'Arcy's other open-ended stories. As a result of D'Arcy's continual use of this technique, readers view the discourse of the *New Woman* in a fundamentally

different way than via the traditional representations of idealised female characters in Victorian narratives where women usually attain accomplishment or moral improvement at the end of the stories.

Scholarship on periodicals suggests that this indeterminacy was particularly resonant within *The Yellow Book*, where aesthetic experimentation enabled women writers to encode critique and embed dissent (Beaumont 2010, 100–03; Mussell 2012, 70–72). Increasingly, D'Arcy's narrative strategies have been identified as proto-modernist, anticipating later explorations of interiority, affective stasis, and anti-teleological form (Witemeyer 1979, 81–84; Hammill 2007, 512–15). In her work, decadence does not signify aesthetic withdrawal or moral disengagement. Instead, it operates as a mode of feminist resistance, exposing the psychological cost of social conformity and the ethical consequences of unresolved gender constraint. While Ella D'Arcy exposes the affective paralysis produced by unequal emotional economies, Netta Syrett turns to a quieter but no less constraining terrain: the internalisation of ethical discipline and the regulation of desire within the norms of respectability.

The aesthetic of intentional understatement that characterizes Netta Syrett in her *Yellow Book* stories is one in which symbolism, narrative withholding, and moral ambivalence are laid in the foreground over overt feminist polemic. Instead of openly confronting patriarchal authority, she focuses on how internalised norms and expectations influence women's behaviour through imposed ideas of ethical/self-surveillance and emotional restraint. Modern feminist critics recognise this approach as one that works within the aesthetic framework while hiding the mechanisms by which women are coerced (Ledger 1997, 915–18; Heilmann & Beetham 2004, 45–48). The main character in "Thy Heart's Desire" does not clearly demonstrate approval or disapproval toward desire; instead, she is situated within her community and must navigate a social context that promotes respectability. The hesitation the character feels about achieving desire without recreating the limitations placed upon her is the central theme of the work. Contemporary scholars argue that these depictions of desire further illustrate the repressed limits on women's desires generated by late Victorian gender normativity when respectability represented a form of internal restriction rather than one placed on women by society (Moran 2007, 395–98; Marcus 2007, 48–51).

Syrett's work demonstrates through several methods (letters being the most well-known) that closeness develops on paper. It has become

popular for recently published works of literature to express women's insecurities regarding their truthfulness and emotional openness through epistolary methods (i.e., letters). During the end of the 19th century, women expressed themselves according to an artificial definition of feminine propriety.

In the narrative text and through the story form of the literature of early modernists, letters create a virtual buffer between the reader and the subject; by using letters as a means to communicate feelings indirectly, the author has an opportunity to express the emotional content of the narrative without being directly attached to the character. A number of early modernist writers have used this method. Syrett has also used an ethically paternalistic approach to critique the morality of women's honor, while making a penetrating critique of the moral hierarchy placed upon women's honor in her final short story for *The Yellow Book*, "Far Above Rubies".

In it, Syrett examines the ideal notion of self-sacrifice and moral righteousness as an ambiguous and problematic moral ideal for women. Feminist readings underline that irony functions here as a means of deconstructing moral absolutes without sacrificing aesthetic integrity; as a means of critiquing societal pressures that require women to be self-sacrificing, framing these in part, to be tools of patriarchal control rather than pure moral superiority (Schaffer 2000, 120–23; Rose 1978, 9–12).

Where Syrett's fiction foregrounds ethical self-control as a socially sanctioned form of constraint, Charlotte Mew's contribution pushes this logic to an extreme, representing emotional restraint not as discipline but as psychic fracture and unresolved trauma. "Passed" is among the most emotionally severe and formally restrained works published in *The Yellow Book*, offering a stark representation of loss, repression, and psychological alienation. Mew's lone contribution to the periodical closely aligns her with D'Arcy and Syrett's feminist and aesthetic interventions because of her similar thematic density and aesthetic discipline.

Scholarship on Mew has shown a shift in her writing from the rigid emotional structures of Victorian affective discipline towards the more subjective, intuitive, and modernist writing style of modern writers (Bristow 1991, 430–35; Ledger & Luckhurst 2000, 490–95). She has rejected the use of narrative consolation as well as transparency of emotion in her writing to benefit modern readers. Rather than providing a narrative resolution or moral interpretation of loss and

mourning, Mew has instead established the experience of loss as a stable psychic state that does not lend itself to objective interpretation or understanding.

Mew's work, "Passé," is representative of the feminist aesthetics in late 19th-century feminism, which promotes restraint and silence as ethical choices, rather than indicators of a retreat from feminism. Many authors in this period demonstrated that female authors used understated forms of expression to challenge the societal perceptions of sentimentalism and realism without resorting to polemics (Ardis 2002, 150–53; Flint 1993, 140–45). Mew's use of focalisation and temporality reflect the ways in which women experienced and responded to their losses during this time, and ultimately influenced the Modernists' approach to the study of memory, time, and trauma (Hammill 2007, 520–25; Thain 2007, 175–80). Mew's depiction of silence as a fluid, dynamic narrative force can only be understood by witnessing it through the eyes of someone who possesses a sensibility about ethics and moral choices—therefore it cannot be reduced to a mere description (Bourke 2014, 220–25; Parker 1984, 294–99).

Through their research, D'Arcy, Syrett & Mew demonstrate how various feminist artistic practices have developed over time as modes of expression for many-a-women-writer within the social limitations of the *fin de siècle*.

Decadence as feminist strategy

This paper argues that *Yellow Book* women authors, including D'Arcy, Syrett, and Mew, predominantly transformed decadence and early modernist experimentation into a consciously combative literary style, a subtle but effective feminist tactic, particularly for those marginalised by male oppressive gender norms. Within the feminist literary canon, examples such as interruptions, gaps, open endings are examples of the lack of formal structure that illustrates the degree to which the patriarchal norms and institutions associated with marriage and desire create instability in women's experiences thus impacting their ability to assert their agency. Ledger sees it as an ideological critique of the ideology of hesitancy and uncertainty with regards to the narrative.

By using the language of aestheticism, women writers were able to discuss their experiences about desire, agency and authoritativeness without inviting contention. Thus, formality, a form of protest, enabled women to critique established social norms within the culturally

acceptable limits (Bristow 1991, 430-35; Plain 1996, 120-25).). Scholarship on periodical literature confirms that *The Yellow Book* was shaped not only by male contributors such as Aubrey Beardsley and Arthur Symons but also as much by women writers, who used experimental forms to interrogate marriage, emotional manipulation, and hypocrisy (Brake 2001, 110-15; Liggins 2011, 218-22).

This paper draws on Rita Felski and Sharon Marcus, who place these authors in a proto-modernist lineage. *Fin de siècle* feminist writers anticipated modernist interiority through affectively acute, psychologically discontinuous, and formally fractured narratives, often achieved through subtle stylistic disruption (Felski 1995, 45-50; Marcus 2007, 212-18). Their fiction demonstrates that late nineteenth-century feminist writing became a critical intersection where feminism and formal experimentation met, transforming decadence into a space for negotiating desire, subjectivity, and resistance.

Conclusions

The paper has shown the paramount role played by Ella D'Arcy, Netta Syrett, and Charlotte Mew in *The Yellow Book* and in the *fin de siècle* literary culture. Rather than occupying peripheral positions within the periodical, these authors emerge as central figures in its sustained engagement with gender politics, psychological intensity, and formal experimentation. Their fiction demonstrates how women's writing was not only shaped by, but actively contributed to the moral seriousness and aesthetic innovation through which *The Yellow Book* established its cultural identity. Each writer exhibits a finely calibrated sensitivity to the gendered constraints their fiction interrogates (Heilmann 2000, 175-80; Marcus 2007, 210-15; Moran 2007, 392-97).

Their work anticipates key features of early modernist narrative practice through fragmentation, interiority, narrative ambiguity, and emotional restraint. Silence, hesitation, and indirection function in their fiction not as evasive gestures but as deliberate aesthetic strategies through which critique could be articulated within restrictive cultural conditions (Ledger 1997, 918-22; Thain 2007, 172-76). Recovering their significance, therefore, requires a reassessment of male-centred histories of *The Yellow Book* and of early modernism more broadly (Kooistra and Brake 1990, 14-18; Rose 1978, 7-12). Such a re-evaluation reveals that women writers were not merely participants in *fin de siècle* aesthetic movements, but pioneers of new literary forms that transformed aesthetic experimentation into a mode of gender-

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conscious moral inquiry. Recognising D'Arcy, Syrett, and Mew as key contributors to this process deepens our understanding of the transition from late Victorian aestheticism to early modernism and supports a more inclusive literary history in which women's experimental writing is acknowledged as central rather than marginal.

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