INTRODUCTION

Although George Moore returned obsessively to *Esther Waters* after its publication in 1894, revising it in 1899 and again in 1920, it remains quintessentially a novel of the 1890s. Very few novels of the time capture so vividly the fear of social breakdown and the promise of renewal that coexisted in the closing decade of the nineteenth century. The resilient Esther Waters embodies the ambivalent attitudes of her age in the way that she moves between the contrary experiences of misery and hope, between a pervasive anxiety about homelessness, poverty, and destitution, and a pleasurable anticipation of rest, security, and motherhood. These are common human feelings and desires, but in *Esther Waters* they are played out within a bleak environment where values and beliefs are in flux, and where the struggle for survival has a brutal actuality. The novel’s magnificent picture of London life in the 1890s conveys the glitter and excitement of the Piccadilly theatres, music halls, and restaurants, but also the desperate resort to gambling, prostitution, and suicide. Without any sensationalism or dogmatic intent, the novel exposes the deep injustices and inequalities of the decadent 1890s. It is hardly surprising, then, that it was simultaneously castigated and celebrated for its truthfulness, and that it became a controversial test case for Victorian censorship. The extraordinary achievement of *Esther Waters* is that it presents a life of almost unbearable struggle without cynicism or sentimentality, in a clear and beautifully articulated style that is, itself, a source of hope and reassurance.

Like many other Victorian novels, *Esther Waters* began life as a serialized work of fiction. A short, ten-chapter version of the novel was printed in instalments in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in October 1893, under the title ‘Pages from the Life of a Workgirl’. The original title suggests the production of a memoir or the transcript of an autobiography, though Moore’s design was not to write a first-person female life-story in the style of Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders*, but to come as close as possible to conveying the viewpoint of his heroine within an otherwise omniscient narrative. Representing the subjectivity or consciousness of Esther Waters was to constitute a major breakthrough in Moore’s fictional technique and in novel writing in
England more generally. As early as March 1888, he wrote to his brother Maurice that he was contemplating ‘a book about servants, from their point of view’, and in November 1889 after poor reviews of his novel *Mike Fletcher*, he wrote to Clara Lanza that ‘my next book will be more human: I shall bathe myself in the simplest and most naïve emotions, and shall not leave them—the daily bread of humanity’.¹

Looking back on the origins of *Esther Waters* at the very end of his life, Moore recalled how the novel was inspired by a newspaper article on servants that he read one morning as he walked along Fleet Street: ‘I was asking myself if servants . . . might not be treated as the principal characters of a novel’. He claims that he fastened upon the figure of a kitchen maid as the heroine of his new book, and that the main requirements of the plot were quickly sketched out in his mind. He adds that George Eliot’s *Adam Bede*, in which Hetty Sorrel murders her child, conditioned his treatment of motherhood. A ‘true moulding’ of the subject, he suggests, ‘would be Hetty living to save her child’. One of the most revealing comments on his characterization of Esther Waters and her role in the novel can be found in his remark that ‘women bear the world on their shoulders when they lack that eternal instinct of motherhood that pervades the world from end to end, and perhaps extends to the furthest star’. The title *Mother and Child* was briefly considered for the novel, as was *Traveller’s Rest* (the original name of the London pub where Esther rejoins William), but Moore wanted ‘a humble name, beautiful in its simplicity’.² The imagery of the stars, a recurring reminder of uncertain fortune throughout the novel, no doubt prompted the name Esther (from the Persian ‘Satarah’, meaning star). In the name of his heroine, Moore emblematically aligns the star of her unknown destiny with the troubled waters of her everyday existence.

What makes *Esther Waters* so much more than ‘Pages from the Life of a Workgirl’ is its intense concern with the formation of Esther’s personality and identity over a period of twenty years. In its unflinching attention to the material and environmental pressures that condition its heroine’s behaviour, the novel obviously owes much to the

naturalist techniques of Émile Zola, but it clearly challenges and questions the very notion of social determinism. Moore’s interest lies as much in the unfathomable workings of psychology and instinct as it does in the inevitable impact of circumstance. At the same time, the novel has a deeply mythical impulse that gives depth to its naturalist, scientific mode of enquiry, even while it runs counter to it. If *Esther Waters* is unmistakably modern in its vision, it also looks back to that most time-honoured literary archetype, the journey.

The opening of the novel is beautifully poised and purposefully ambivalent. The platform on which Esther stands is a symbolic marker, one of many stations on her life’s journey. Although she travels by train, it is clear that in some fundamental way her arrival is also a departure, and that what Moore is describing is a rite of passage:

She stood on the platform watching the receding train. A few bushes hid the curve of the line; the white vapour rose above them, evaporating in the pale evening. A moment more and the last carriage would pass out of sight. The white gates swung forward slowly and closed over the line. (p. 3)

From the very outset, the world is seen through Esther’s eyes, and all of the details here, including ‘the pale evening’ and ‘the white vapour’, create an impression of her uncertain transition from one state of being to another. The image of the train ‘receding’ and ‘the last carriage’ about to ‘pass out of sight’ carries with it connotations of loss and separation. The white gates are symbolic of freshness and a new beginning, but they nevertheless represent an entry point into an unknown future. Even as they swing forward to allow passengers to cross the line, they convey a sense of closure.

The novel invites us to contemplate Woodview as a rural, Edenic estate and at the same time cautions us against precisely that kind of idealization. The ‘shingle bank’ and the ‘weedy river’ that intervene between the sloping downs and the coastal setting of the novel are postlapsarian images of nature, and there is decay and disappointment in those places where human work and endeavour once flourished: ‘There were decaying shipyards about the harbour, and wooden breakwaters stretched long, thin arms seawards for ships that did not come.’ Illusions of paradise persist in the ‘apple blossoms’ that appear above ‘a white-washed wall’ on the other side of the railway. Although this is a largely barren place, it represents for Esther a
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new beginning: ‘The girl gazed on this bleak country like one who saw it for the first time’ (p. 4). Similarly, as Esther arrives at a ‘white-painted wooden gate’, she seems to pass from her previous town life into a summertime pastoral world of health and enchantment. The subtle dual focus of the narrative catches the excitement and immediacy of Esther’s vision, while intimating through slightly disconcerting images, such as ‘the uncouth arms of elms’ and ‘the monotonous dove’, a different and more circumspect way of seeing the world, one more in keeping with doubt than wonder.

Moore had a limited knowledge of working-class life and what he had previously written about servants was notable mainly for its condescension. In his *Confessions of a Young Man* (1888), he recorded his interrogation of ‘Emma, the awful servant’, who worked in a cheap London lodging-house where he lived after his return from Paris: ‘And I used to ask you all sorts of cruel questions, I was curious to know the depth of animalism you had sunk to, or rather out of which you had never been raised.’ The pseudoscientific curiosity in the animal intelligence of the working class derives from Zola and it persists to some extent in the characterization of Esther Waters, but the objective, naturalistic approach does not preclude a deep and sustained empathy on the part of the narrator. What Moore *did* know a great deal about was horse racing and betting, and the huge success of the novel undoubtedly owed much to his inspired choice of a racing stable as an appropriate setting. Moore’s father bred and trained racehorses at his stables in the west of Ireland, and enjoyed some legendary wins with Croaghpatrick (a likely model for Silver Braid) at Goodwood and Chester, two of the most prestigious English racecourses. Moore recalls in his *Confessions* how his teenage years in Ireland were spent dreaming of victory as a jockey: ‘I rode gallops every morning, I read the racing calendar, stud-book, latest betting, and looked forward with enthusiasm to the day when I should be known as a successful steeplechase rider. To ride the winner of the Liverpool seemed to me a final achievement and glory.’ Although the jockeys and trainers in *Esther Waters* were initially conceived as accessories to the plot, the sport of horse racing assumed a major significance, both as an immensely colourful source of narrative

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4 Ibid. 51.
incident and as a perfect metaphor with which to illustrate the ruthlessly competitive nature of Victorian class society.

It was very much in Moore’s interests as an energetic self-publicist that the debate over the morality of *Esther Waters* coincided with a broader debate about the morality of horse racing and gambling. The late nineteenth century was a lively time for the horse racing industry, with the widespread distribution of sporting magazines and newspapers, the growth in numbers of professional bookmakers, and the massive popularity of betting across all social classes. In terms of public morality, however, the vice and misery of betting came to be associated with the degeneration of the working class, with idleness and inefficiency, and even with the decline of England and the Empire. In *Esther Waters*, horse racing has a powerful appeal, and it proves to be the ruin of masters and servants alike. Nina Auerbach makes an excellent point about horses in novels about fallen women, when she points out that *Esther Waters* has none of the glamour and intensity associated with the racetrack in Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* (1878) or Zola’s *Nana* (1880). She reminds us of the anticlimactic effect of the Derby Day scene in which Esther misses the actual race and sees only the fringe entertainment.

It is clearly not the case, however, that ‘the novel’s racing scenes emphasise the financial desperation of betting, never the physical intoxication of victory’. The great climax of the first ten chapters of *Esther Waters* is the victory of Silver Braid at Goodwood, followed by the winning of the Chesterfield Cup. The ‘physical intoxication’ is palpable, and not just in the bar of the Red Lion. Moore’s prose is more than usually lyrical in conveying the excitement of victory:

The dear gold jingled merrily in the pockets, quickening the steps, lightening the heart, curling lips with smiles, opening lips with laughter. The dear gold came falling softly, sweetly as rain, soothing the hard lives of working folk. Lives pressed with toil lifted up and began to dream again. The dear gold was like an opiate; it wiped away memories of hardship and sorrow, it showed life in a lighter and merrier guise, and the folk laughed at their fears

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