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Gendering the Innovator: The Case of R&D in Turkey 288
*Ece Öztan, Setenay Nil Doğan*

Approaching Bosnian War in Light of 'Violence Against Women' and 'Gendered Violence' 297
*Efser Rana Coşkun*

Role of Assisted Reproductive Technologies in the Production of New Forms of Social Control and Discrimination 307
*Elena Bogomiagkova, Marina Lomonosova*

Bride Kidnapping Elopement in Violence Against Women Context: The Cases of Ardahan and Rize 317
*Elif Gazioğlu Terzi*

Moderation vs. Militancy: The Rhetoric of American Suffrage Movement 326
*Emine Geçgil*

Feminist History in the Pursuit of Fatma Aliye 333
*Erman Örsan Yetiş*

How Women Were Represented in the War Propaganda Posters? Soldiers, Mothers and Families 343
*Esin Berktaş*

Trapped in Between State, Market and Family: Experiences of Moderately Educated Divorced and Widow Women 353
*Esra Gedik*

Global Economy and New Gender Identities: A Study of Saleswomen in Turkey 363
*Esra Sarıoğlu*

Gendered Engineering Culture in Turkey: Construction and Transformation 372
*Ezgi Pehlivanlı Kadayıfçı*

Feminist History of Periods of "Stagnation": Women's Movement in the 1950s 382
*Ezgi Sarıtaş, Yelda Şahin Akıllı*

Booze and Women: Gendered Labor Market Outcomes of Unorthodox Consumption in Turkey 392
*F. Kemal Kızılca*

The Impact of Colonization Feminism in Colonized Countries: The Case of Algeria With the French Colonization 402
*Fatima Taourite*

Home-Based Working Women Within the Context of Recent Developments in the Social Reproduction Theory: The Turkish Case 409
*Fatma Özlem Tezcek, Özlem Polat*

Blur on Gender and Its Relevancies in Symons' Poem "White Heliotrope" 419
*Ferah İncesu*

International Conference on Knowledge and Politics in Gender and Women's Studies

# Blur on Gender and Its Relevancies in Symons' Poem "White Heliotrope"

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**Abstract**

This paper studies the British poet Arthur Symons' "White Heliotrope" within the scope of literary criticism and analysis, yet with the strong bond between literature and life/history it can function to reconsider the material of gender and women's studies past and present. Concerning its period and style, it has been regarded as a sample of "decadent literature". Thus, it presents associations with symbolism, aestheticism, and extends from romanticism to modernism, through fin de siècle. Within such rich and deep dimensions, and cherished by relevant obscurity and ambivalence, the text exploits conventional female images and questions already set conceptions. Though obliquely, this brings food for thought in feminist and gender politics, and further involves comprehensive and all related entities of lifestyle, mind, freedom, respect and love. The poem relies on a brief narrative alongside symbolism. It is composed like a subjective experience. The poet speaker employs a couple of lovers, whose genders are indefinite. As one of the included parties is the speaker, the narrative voice gains a comprehensive and flexible frame of mind. In this fictionally personal account, the reader does not find certain knowledge about gender, age, ethnicity, profession and status. The text contentedly provides symbols as clues to go through guess work/detective business. Very pertinent to the ambivalence, one point is for sure; it is a secret unconventional love affair. In the shadow or the background we have a clash of world views, choices and preferences. Hence, gender and taste become spontaneous sites of politics.

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*Keywords:* Symons; gender; Decadence

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## 1. Introduction

With the strong bond between literature and life/history this paper of literary analysis may function to reflect the issues of gender and women's studies even in a brief and blurry artwork.

The British poet Arthur Symons' "White Heliotrope" was first published in his 1895 collection *London Nights* (Maxwell 214). It has been categorised into "decadent literature". It presents associations with symbolism, aestheticism, and extends from romanticism to modernism through fin de siècle.

The poem constitutes a subjective narrative with no certain knowledge of gender, age, ethnicity, profession and status. Cherished by relevant ambivalence, it exploits conventional female images and questions already set conceptions. Though obliquely, this relates to feminist and gender politics and criticism, and points to entities of lifestyle, mind, freedom, respect and love. Within the obscurity, a secret unconventional love affair is for sure. In the background of a couple of lovers we have a clash of world views, choices and preferences. Hence, gender and taste become spontaneous sites of politics.

## 2. Preconceptions, conventional senses

As the real poet is male, the subject is private and the narrative voice is first person, the reader may regard the content as autobiographical. Especially in the conventional conceptualisation of its period, the text hosts a male vision and experience. The account is sensual, the topic is passionate, the speaker, in an artistic and oblique way, refers to physical intercourse and aftereffects of satisfaction, and pleasure typically induces disgrace and hypocrisy.

### *2.1. Man and woman*

Symons makes use of certain objects, setting and states which address to the conventional typology and perception. The poet persona refers to "skirts" (2), and "Hat, hair-pins, puffs, and paints, are spread" (4). These garments and makeup materials relate to femininity. In the late Victorian times ladies were still wearing several layers of skirt, and cosmetics, perfumes and hair accessories were to serve them to beautify themselves ("Late 19th and Early 20th Century Ladies' Dress Glossary", "Introduction to 19th Century Fashion"). The narrator's handkerchief might be in the top jacket pocket of a gentleman's suit (Lenius 192). Peter Goodrich surveys the cultural symbolism of the handkerchief as it "signals an image of desire in the same sense that the knot in the handkerchief seeks to remind the amnesiac that there ought to be something to remember, that it is good or erotic to recall what has already passed, that there must be desire for there to be memory.... The handkerchief is evidence or proof, it is invitation or seduction, it is a standard or flag, and marks both lust and sorrow, departure and mourning, identity and defeat." (147) He specifically mentions "the scented handkerchief" to signal "love" (147). The poet speaker says of "my handkerchief" as "scented with White Heliotrope" (15-6). As the phrase is written with capital first letters, the signification of a special name is highly relevant. The archives and old catalogues suitably contain it as a label female perfume of the late 19th century ("Oriza L. Legrand", "White Heliotrope", Maxwell 214). The image of the flower, not only at the end of the narrative as a perfume, but also immediately at the beginning as the title, evokes femininity. It has been customary to regard and talk of women, especially women of privileged classes, in terms of flowers (Holm et al, ed. 21-2). Also the colour of the flower recalls the white skin of a British lady. The Victorian patriarchal idea of female beauty required an elegant and meek stance, delicate appearance, and a smooth, white skin (Orgel et al 135-6). When we consider that the flower heliotrope is mostly purplish but rarely white ("Heliotrope"), the implication of a white beauty ascends.

The setting evokes the private world of two people. Just a room is indicated rather than a complete house. The place is bestowed with a human attribute and gains animation. It is "feverish" (1). The introduction of the microcosmic setting immediately has a narrower focus as the speaker says of "that white bed" (1). The personification of the room becomes suggestive as the first quatrain tells of "The tumbled skirts upon a

chair,/The novel flung half-open where" the cosmetics are spread. Past participle qualifiers point to action, hurry and carelessness or carefreeness. The concerned parties are so passionate that the setting gets disorderly and diffuses fever. The third quatrain positions the couple most probably on the aforementioned bed. The speaker's partner is "half dressed and half awake", with "slant eyes" while the speaker gazes "drowsily" "having slept not". Thus, the couple is supposedly qualified as male and female. The clothes, accessories, the setting, the event and the sentiments seem to support this biological convention. Within the general ambivalent atmosphere of the poem, on the one hand fever suggests passion and physicality, on the other hand it unites with the negative aspects of the colour white to hint at disease or infection. The qualities of the title image are coherent too; the heliotrope is nice but poisonous (Ejtemai). Accordingly, references to half sleep, slant eyes, drowsiness in the third quatrain may remind unconsciousness or swoon owing to intoxication. The undercurrent conception contains the unhealthy or disastrous capacity of intense desire.

*2.2. Misfits in respectable society*

The Victorian times are famous with their strict morality (*Norton Anthology* [*NA*] 980). Despite the married gentlemen's preference to hold mistresses (Reed 58), child prostitution available in the streets of the capital city (Reader 141), the suppressed and abused labour force ([*NA*] 983, 989, 991) denying the universal virtue of justice, national haughtiness ([*NA*] 985) disregarding the universal virtue of modesty and human equality, and aggressive imperialism ([*NA*] 985, 988) disrespecting the principle of world peace and freedom, the typical Victorian people might be prudes or prigs (Reed 355, [*NA*] 981). A bourgeois imperialist would hardly approve of letting alone blacks, natives, labourers, females, children, agnostics, artists, and people with different sexual orientations. That is, all these various people could not easily, quickly and sufficiently hold and fulfil their human rights, voices and integrity before a representative of the British bourgeoisie, capitalism and imperialism. For a conservative person, the categories of people listed above are misguided by their nature ("power"; Reed 52, 57). So, there are typologies, stereotypes or conventions, all pointing to certain conceptions (Reed 20, 22).

The second quatrain of "White Heliotrope" is the key section of the poem. It unfolds the dramatic situation, in critical terminology, Problem or Conflict. As Kennedy and Gioia define, it "generally occurs when some person or thing prevents the protagonist from achieving his or her intended goal." and " Drama in fiction occurs in any clash of wills, desires, or powers" (G7, 11). The quality of the love affair, the couple's experience constitutes Conflict and the dramatic situation. It banishes them into a chamber to exert their will and fulfil their desire. Another critical definition, the antagonist, is relevant: "The most significant character or force that opposes the protagonist ... may be another character, society itself, a force of nature, or even—in modern literature—conflicting impulses within the protagonist." (Kennedy and Gioia G2) Thus, in this pattern, if the poet speaker or the couple is the protagonist, society is the antagonist.

If we rationalise backwards, the situation is secret because it is unacceptable; it is unacceptable because it is shameful; it is shameful because it is against the prevalent social norm. Via a symbol the speaker subtly conveys the fierceness of the norm or the pressure especially his partner senses. The chamber contains a mirror. Yet, it is depicted very subjectively and even ambivalently. "The mirror that has sucked your face/Into its secret deep of deeps," suggests aggression and antagonism in return for secretiveness. The verb, through the fricative consonant "s" and the stop consonant "k", phonetically conveys force, thus semantically evokes interpolation of force and resistance. The harsh qualification of the symbol is reinforced as it is the face of the partner which is subjected to force. That is, it is a woman's face which is sucked by the mirror, thus, which is the object of violence. The bourgeois convention regarded females as flowery beings to handle with care (Reader 8-9). Instead, the face, thus, the woman is drawn into, in a way, drowned in the deepest layers of the mirror. This symbol of hiding or taking away can easily refer to wiping

out the image and entity of the woman. It may function to suggest a metaphorical kill. The mirror also seems to recall an image of the sink swallowing refuse liquid via the analogy available with the verb "suck". The female member of the couple turns into a metaphor of garbage. As she is shameful, she is the bilge of society, unwanted, waste, to be kept out and disposed of.

As the second quatrain is the key section, within it the concept of "grace" is the key word. The reason of the woman's erasure is given away. As the context is moral, her shamefulness is indicated. The mirror continues its function to reveal and point at: "And there mysteriously keeps/Forgotten memories of grace;" It has not only taken the woman's face into its depth, but also her grace. *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* gives the several senses of "grace": "**1** fineness in movement, form or behaviour, esp. that which seems effortless and attractive **2** kindness; willingness to do what is right **3** a delay allowed as a favour, as for payment, work, etc. **4** a prayer before or after meals, giving thanks to God **5** (in the Christian religion) the mercy (of God) **6** (in the Christian religion) the state of the soul when freed from evil **7** a way of speaking to or of a DUKE, DUCHESS, or ARCHBISHOP". Grace is a symbol and concept of society, morality and religion. It bestows and points to propriety, approval, respectability and conformity. If one forgets or discards one's grace or gracefulness, social, moral and spiritual consequences emerge. A loss of grace would be synonymous with a loss of virtue, a loss of respectability and a loss of God's favour and approval. Such a person would be a fallen one on earth and in heavens. "Forgotten memories of grace", uttered in reference to the speaker's partner, who is supposedly a woman, engender a fallen woman.

The mirror reflects the images of what is in front of it. Being there and with her actions the woman disregards grace. The oblique but rich, multi-layered discourse of the poet works through conceptual details. The woman is not utterly an evil being or directly a figure of depravity. Once, she has been graceful, full of grace, or known grace. The narrator talks of memories of grace, then we can think of their presence beforehand; and he further depicts these memories as forgotten, then we can infer that the woman does not or cannot care for past grace or gracefulness. This is an experience of loss or abandonment, and a transition from upwards to downwards, a fall within the conventional or conformist understanding.

*2.3. Hierarchies of disrespectability*

So, the typologies of a fallen woman in the Victorian conception relate. If a married couple was concerned, their presence in a chamber with the bed would not bring disgrace, and social and moralistic disapproval. It would not be a matter of talk. In the Victorian times intercourse outside marriage was improper (Ward 3-4). The disgraceful typologies not only included people committing adultery but also two single persons. As the society was hypocritical, and male governed and dominated, in practice bachelors and married men held affairs or relationships outside bonds of marriage. Such a male could be regarded as having loose habits, and the gentlemen had the privilege to have the matter unvoiced (Ward 26, Schneewind 115). Yet, an adulterous woman, and a single woman having a love affair or relationship were fallen creatures (Ward 4). Female chastity was a Victorian virtue (Reed 58). In practice, aristocrats indulged affairs with less condemnation (Reader 140), presumably if they were adopted by men of power. Thus, in the text the beloved or the partner can be a bourgeois woman or a woman who is subject to bourgeois moral standards. Further, as the lovers eventually depart and without any concern of continuation or official unification, one can guess that the beloved is already married. Disgrace might be generated by adultery in a lack of restraint (Reed 20), another Victorian moral principle.

**3. The transgressor**

While the reader regards these potential female types of social and moral censure, alternatives of male impropriety exist in the conventional middle class understanding. A man approaching and unifying with such a fallen creature might be an artist or a dandy. Moreover, we have him as the speaker, thus, the point

of view in the text belongs to him. The poem is both narrative and lyrical; it constitutes a small tale disclosing personal experience and sentiments. Thus, it is for us to ask how the poet speaker reflects the issue. The answer is pertinent to the possible typologies he has.

*3.1. The Decadent*

The lovers escape into the chamber and consume their love and passion. The rhyme pattern abba, cddc, effe, ghhg audiovisually signifies both coupling and enclosure. At least in the site of their affair, they get rid of social censure and condemning or contemptuous gazes. The mirror is the only other being in the room with an allegorical capacity to gaze at and to reflect what the couple does. On the one hand, it is an emblem of social condemnation and repulsion. On the other hand, it is the speaker who depicts it in sucking. This reveals that the symbol can also function as the conscience and the super ego of the speaker. He is aware of the conservative conception and depreciation of their liaison. Norms, set patterns, duties constitute the super ego of the human mind and mostly come from society and its representatives ("Superego") like family, teachers, clergy, police or rulers. In the poem, the mirror like a third person present, as the witness of the couple's actions, is the agent of society and its ideology. In it the poet speaker can see and consider what he and his beloved do like a third party, with the vision of the others, the community.

But, in this complex poem nothing is simple or one sided. The mirror is not only a witness for the prosecution but also for the defence. It is like a confidant. It has got the secret of the lovers and hides it away. In its depth it also "mysteriously" keeps forgotten memories of grace. It is like a depository, a figure of the trustee to whom a person's, especially as a vulnerable, disadvantageous member of society, a woman's personal history, past and present, might be entrusted. This relatively supportive image is reinforced by phonetic associations as in the case of the negative aspect. The repetitive use of the "s", "i", "m" and "f" sounds both reminds the hushing imperative and creates a covering, caressing and lulling effect. It is possible to hear the serpentine hiss around as well. This is a moral conflict and sinful. But, all these sounds diffuse tenderness and delight too. They might recall whispers of love and moans of passion.

The speaker's discourse is engaged with sensuousness and personal perception. This inwardness, attention to sensory perception and care for self analysis point to individualism, freedom of thought and intellectuality. The narrator's sphere of interest is so complex and multifaceted that while he seems to be self indulgent in pleasure, we find him both observing the expressions of the beloved's face and the effects of the environment, and questioning and judging his emotional prospects. On the one hand he is the partner of a corrupt woman, on the other hand he remembers tenets of virtue in emblematic perception and intellectual sensitivity. The ambivalent narrative, uttered by the unknown speaker and seemingly a product of soliloquy, enables self evaluation and self projection. The speaker is a voice but a distinct entity with imagination, anxieties and hopes; a human bundle of senses, drives, thoughts, sentiments and values.

In the fourth and last quatrain, in critical terminology the poet speaker adds a complication to the dénouement, the resolution. Kennedy and Gioia explain the narrative term as "a new conflict ... rising action"; whereas the resolution is "the untying of the knot", "the concluding action or actions" (11, G6, 12). We learn obliquely that the couple would not go on, and the last meeting and emotions about it constitute a feeble memory. Among many unknown constituents of the narrative the reader is also deprived of the info about whether they have given it a try, demanded it or not. But the separation is for sure. If this is the dénouement, the complication happily does not separate the poet speaker's emotion and intellect: "This (need one dread? Nay, dare one hope?)/ Will rise, a ghost of memory, if/Ever again my handkerchief/Is scented with White Heliotrope." To this man of leisure and pleasure the secret and improper affair is distilled into a very feeble memory of smell. He would remember this moment whenever he smells the same perfume. Because of the issue of secrecy and illicitness, he is wondering whether it is a cause of dread;

he is momentarily anxious, a repetition of the meeting even might bring real pain if they are found out. Yet, immediately his natural tendency allows the ascendancy of pleasure; it might mean a daring position to have such a liaison again, but he is so gratified that one would expect and hope about it. His mind oscillates between poles of pain and pleasure, participation and renunciation, past and future. Again the intricate diction continues as the stimulant of sensory memory is not simply the scent: he brings the condition that it will be on his handkerchief. Just sensing the same odour somewhere would not be the stimulant; the occasion would result in its pervading his handkerchief again. He would be involved with another user of the perfume, another woman, and probably a similar situation. The narrative presents the speaker like a man of physical pursuits and adventures. This might be the outcome of the narrative in one of its possible readings. Kennedy and Gioia's definition of the term "conclusion" occasions inferences: "the logical end or outcome ... Sometimes a conclusion is ambiguous" (G6). Another image reinforces the ambiguous, hedonistic and combustible portrait and prospects of the narrator. This exciting and delightful affair not only immediately becomes a memory, but it will be also "a ghost of memory". The intellectual speaker is conscious of the effects of time on the human mind and understanding. The moment has died; its trait in the human mind is feeble; the future can only raise a faint insubstantial image of it. In the moral respect, in the way the woman betrays her men in adultery, the speaker will betray the memory of this beloved. He would turn it into a ghost; he would disperse her image in his mind, killing the woman metaphorically.

Victorian conformism exalted reasonableness, logic, restraint and order (Reader 9-10), all necessary for scientific and economic progress. In the way there was hierarchy in the social structure and imperialistic system, the components of the human mind or entity were conceived on a scale. As in the previous centuries, nature, natural urges, senses, feelings, passions and imagination were to be regulated (Reed 309; *The Oxford Anthology* 792, 793). Hence, people who were considered more liable to them, the categories of people given around the beginning of this paper, were despicable or untrustworthy.

For a conservative, the voice in this narrative would be easily a poet, or even the real poet. The prevalent poetic stance or aesthetic theory was regarded and labelled Decadent. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines the decadents as "the later generation of the Aesthetic movement." and who "aspired to set literature and art free from the materialistic preoccupations of industrialised society" ("Decadent"). Carolyn Burdett summarises its features, and the conventional perception of and reaction to it:

> This mixture of radical politics, sexual dissidence and privileging of the individual's experience of beauty was highly alarming to more conventional Victorians. In the press, aestheticism was roundly criticised....
>
> 'Decadence' ... literally means a process of 'falling away' or decline. In relation to art and literature, it signalled a set of interlinked qualities. These included the notion of intense refinement; the valuing of artificiality over nature; a position of *ennui* or boredom rather than of moral earnestness or the valuing of hard work; an interest in perversity and paradox, and in transgressive modes of sexuality.
>
> Decadence alarmed those who valued 'traditional' norms and values. It seemed to signify a society and culture threatened to its core with decline and decay. By the 1890s, decadence was associated with degeneration, an association popularised by the sensationalist writing of Max Nordau, who condemned writers like Wilde in his 1895 book, *Degeneration*....
>
> Many felt it wise to distance themselves from its dangerous label. Nevertheless, the experimentalism, creative energy and commitment to thinking against the grain that characterised aestheticism and decadence did much to prepare the ground for the Modernist period, which was beginning to gather its own distinctive powers after the turn of the century. (Burdett)

The unknown speaker might as well be a dandy who visits his lover in her chamber for the last time. As elegant males might use fragrances in those times ("The Dandy"), the memory might be conditioned to the times he would wear it or scent the handkerchief. Some artists and men of letters were regarded as dandies, yet the dandy might not be the artist proper. Maurice Beebe's survey is all related to social, economic, philosophical, political, and mundane aspects: "The dandy ought to have sufficient money so that he may follow his fancy, and his dress ought to be a visible symbol of his aristocratic superiority; but neither wealth

nor material elegance is an end in itself for the true dandy.... the dandy is an artist of life who makes of himself an artistic creation." (133) The dandy figure of the late Victorian period is a bourgeois male with bohemian attitudes or poses. He is moneyed somehow and intellectual, with the air to be in the privileged social stratum, benefitting from its advantages and connections, yet deviating from its haughty values and ostentatious, strict morality. He is a social figure in between. He transgresses conventions and exposes set patterns and values to question while he exploits the products or side effects of the Establishment like comfort, artifice, luxury, arts, culture, exoticism, conceit and liberalism. Arnold Hauser indicates the paradox, individualism and relaxation of the new typologies of man:

> There is a close connection between the younger generation's quest for self-realization and its fight against the old superindividual forms and the new political and social situation. This younger generation is absolutely hostile to the bourgeoisie, but it is, on the whole, by no means democratic or even socialistic. Its sensualism and hedonism, its aim of enjoying life and becoming enraptured with it, of turning every hour of this life into an unforgettable and irreplaceable experience, often assumes an antisocial and a-moral character. The anti-philistine movement is not directed against the capitalistic, but against the dull, art-despising bourgeoisie. (190)

*3.2. The rainbow somewhere over there*

Symons mainly diffuses suggestions enabling conventional and alternative readings possible. The text exists through and celebrates its ambiguity, ambivalence and thus politics of liberation, love and respect. The speaker, in its calm, spontaneous stance, discloses an extensive world view, an open mind and comprehensive humanism. The poem basically creates a scene and atmosphere. The reader witnesses a slice of experience, a transition of time, a passage of an individual's personal history/story/life. An ultimate vision, absolute truth and objective reality, all idols of Victorianism are blurred by the poetic discourse and vision. Who are the people in the given account? Where are they? In Britain or abroad? What is their relation to one another? Are they lovers or partners in a one night stand? What is the situation? Who comes to whom, or how have they come together? To whom do the clothes and accessories belong? The poetic technique is suggestive by the choice of the present perfect tense rather than the simple past tense. Though the text evokes narration, a memory, it draws the audience into the very passage of its time. The experienced moment is simply becoming the past, a memory. The apocalyptic mood of fin de siècle, infused into the poem, subtly recalls the mortality of man and the preciousness of time, that is, life for human beings, and relevantly, people's selves, choices, or at least endeavours.

In such a context gender and politics are organic aspects of "White Heliotrope". The indistinct narrative voice can easily go beyond customs, laws, economics, and national, imperialistic and class borders in the blur and ambiguity of the text. The spot where the novel is thrown among the accessories and makeup materials might not be necessarily a woman's dressing table but might be a piece of furniture on which she has scattered her belongings when she comes to the man's flat. The partner of the speaker might be from the monetarily and culturally dominant class, a bourgeois woman secretly coming to her artist lover at an attic or rented chamber for the last meeting and love making. The speaker might be a painter, or owing to the novel, a man of letters. The voice might belong to a dandy who comes to a music hall or theatre actress, singer or dancer. His visit to a harlot or a lower class female is a lesser possibility owing to the presence of a novel in the scene, an entity of affluence or culture, like the perfume. Still, even as a possibility one considers it and thus gives it a conceptual importance among alternative situations. Anyhow, as Eugénie Briot researched on the perfume industry, synthetic compounds and new technology decreased the price of perfumes even within fifteen years and expanded the customer profile (279-82). While the perfume can be a French one as it was already an industry there and as Héliotrope Blanc was labelled in 1870s (Briot, "Héliotrope Blanc"), the speaker might be an Englishman and the beloved might as well be French. The lover's slant eyes may suggest an Asian woman. The skirts might refer to two women rather than a female's

layers of skirt or dress. The accessories and makeup objects might serve for transvestism and fetishism. The beloved or the speaker might be transgender in cross dressing. The verb "suck" can remind fellatio. The lovers might be bisexual people, or a male or female same sex couple. Whoever and whatever these persons are, the narrative voice sets them in a context of peace, love, fragility, pleasure, tenderness, longing, remembrance, artifice and nature. Within the rich symbolism of the poem, the title image both points to embracing life and life energy as the flower's name means turning to the sun ("Heliotrope"), and reminds the multicolour entity of being as the flower can range from purple, blue to red and white ("Heliotrope" [*BHG*]). The colour white may cancel other colours, but it is actually a combination of other colours as the spectrum of light reveals its various components as in a rainbow.

## 4. Conclusion

A British musician and activist John Lennon said "Your way of life is a political statement." ("John Lennon Quotes") The second wave feminists shouted "The personal is political." ("political theory") The British poet and critic Arthur Symons, in "White Heliotrope," subtly and obliquely embraced various possible lifestyles and choices. Possibilities the text enables to read in ambiguity address the contexts of practical life, colonialism, race, class system, morality, women and gender. The poem with its verbal techniques and symbolism reveals that in the individual's contact with community, a person's taste and course of life is spontaneously politicised. The blur on the female images and gender issues in "White Heliotrope" diffuses indirect flexible politics and liberated humanism.

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