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*Formes brèves et modernité*

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« FREUD, OR JUNG, OR ONE OF THOSE JOHNNIES, HAD A CASE EXACTLY LIKE  
MY UNCLE'S »: CASE NARRATIVES, PRETHEORISATION AND FORMAL  
HYBRIDITY IN MAY SINCLAIR'S SHORT FICTION

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**Résumé :** La forme brève est pour la romancière moderniste britannique May Sinclair (1863-1946), un double laboratoire lui permettant de prolonger ses recherches scientifiques et de tester de nouvelles expérimentations esthétiques. Sinclair est en effet une des premières artistes modernistes à s'intéresser aux récits de cas freudiens, qui en exposant l'indissoluble spécificité de situations personnelles, montrent les limites et les silences des discours théoriques généraux et ont ainsi permis la fondation de la nouvelle discipline psychanalytique. En intégrant dans sa fiction brève cette forme inédite, Sinclair fait, elle aussi, œuvre de préthéorisation tout en créant un nouveau contrat de lecture : elle explore avant tout discours et représentation fictionnelle sur le sujet, un questionnement nouveau sur l'attachement dans « The Intercessor » (1911), ou la lâcheté supposée du soldat envoyé au front lors de la Première Guerre mondiale dans *The Romantic* (1920). Nous proposons ainsi de montrer comment la fiction brève sinclairienne se nourrit de l'investigation scientifique sans pour autant apporter d'énoncés stabilisés ni se faire fiction d'idées, mais plutôt en construisant un nouveau type d'hybridité générique, se distinguant des pratiques communément associées aux expérimentations du modernisme.

**Mots-clés :** May Sinclair, récits de cas, nouvelles, modernisme, théorie de l'attachement.

**Abstract:** Short fiction enables British novelist May Sinclair (1863-1946) to both prolong her scientific research and test her aesthetics experimentations. Sinclair is one of the first artists from the modernist era who have made use of Freud's case narratives, which show the irreducible specificity of personal situations while exposing the limits or the silences of general theoretical discourses. In integrating Freud's case-based research, which was determining for the creation of psychoanalysis, Sinclair also pretheorises, i.e. in exploring the attachment between a mother and her daughter in "The Intercessor" (1911) and the supposed cowardice of a soldier in *The Romantic* (1920), she anticipates the seminal research of Freud and Bowlby, while suggesting a new form of reading pact. This paper thus aims to show how Sinclairian short fiction engages in a specific dialogue with contemporary scientific research and builds a new type of formal hybridity that clearly differs from the well-known practices of canonical modernism.

**Keywords:** May Sinclair, case narratives, short stories, modernism, attachment theory.

**M**ay Sinclair's (1863-1946) seminal use of the psychological concept of the stream of consciousness in literary criticism should not overshadow the innovative way she used psychoanalytical theory in her fiction. As her biographers have shown, Sinclair was a bestselling novelist, who was engaged in the Suffrage Movement in the early 1910s (Raitt, 2000, p. 77; Boll, 1973, p. 61-73), but she was also a psychology scholar. She contributed to the foundation of the short-lived, yet ground-breaking Medico-Psychological Clinic in London in 1913, along with Jessie Murray, with whom she developed pioneering psychoanalytical research. Sinclair's writing career also includes a wide range of non-fiction: besides her feminist pamphlets and her psychology papers, she published two major philosophy essays, and was a "cautious [and] sceptical" (yet active) member of the Society for Psychical Research (Sinclair, 1917a, p. 60). She also wrote several newspaper articles based on her experience in Belgium during the Great War, and was a keen critic of the Brontë sisters and the Imagist movement. A woman of her century, she was a friend and collaborator of many of the greatest modernist figures, including Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, H. D., and Ford Madox Ford, to name but a few.

Interestingly, quite a few studies refer to Sinclair's complex relation with modernism and modernity. Titles such as Raitt's 2000 biography *May Sinclair: A Modern Victorian*, Andrew Kunka and Michelle Troy's 2006 collection of essays *May Sinclair: Moving Towards the Modern* or George Johnson's 2004 "May Sinclair: From Psychological Analyst to Anachronistic Modernist", among others, all directly point at Sinclair's ambivalence towards her Victorian background and the specific issues highlighted by her modernist contemporaries. Sinclair's modernity is indeed singularly different from most of her modernist counterparts, prompting Katherine Mansfield (1959, p. 42) to underline the peculiarity of Sinclair's writings: "Is this, we wonder [...], to be the novel of the future? And if so, whence has it sprung? Who are its ancestors, its parents, its relations, its distant connections even? [...] It appears to us as a very orphan".

Sinclair, as it turns out, gives a rich and personal answer to Mansfield's questions, emphasising her interest for the specific heritage and complexity of modern aesthetics:

The modern poet requires a greater freedom of form and movements [...] because he has a larger heritage of emotions and ideas. It is not true that the stock of emotions or ideas can be exhausted; every age adds to it something of its own; and so far as these modern states of mind are subtler and more complex, they call for a subtler and more complex medium of expression. (Sinclair, 1921, p. 11)

Throughout her writing career, Sinclair aimed to explore the modern "emotions and ideas" that she discusses in the above extract in relation to F. S. Flint's poetry; she also constantly sought to develop the subsequent "more complex" medium of expression. What she produced, I would like to argue, is a new, hybrid, and personal formal experiment that is directly inspired by her reading of the psychoanalytical research of her time. More precisely, Sinclair's attempt at representing the specificities of her time owed a lot more to the case-based psychoanalytical research and reasoning of her time than to its longer, and more traditional research papers.

Lauren Berlant defines cases and case narratives as follows:

The case represents a problem or event that has animated some kind of judgment. Any enigma could do – a symptom, a situation, [...] or any irritating obstacle to clarity. What matters is the idiom of the judgment, [...] each domain with its vernacular and rule-based conventions for folding the singular into the general. Psychoanalysis mobilized the case-study genre to worry at questions of obscured causality, intention, and consent. (Berlant, 2007, p. 1)

Berlant's definition echoes several key modernist experimentations. Obscurity, perplexity, uncertainty, doubt, and "meta-literary or meta-disciplinary (...) commentary" have indeed been marked as central features of the modernist project (Highmore, 2009, p. 82; Eysteinnsson, 1992, p. 135). However, Sinclair engages with this aesthetics of uncertainty often highlighted in modernist texts, she submits it to a double prism: that of the open-ended case-based reasoning inspired by early psychoanalysis and that of her feminist reflections, which for instance relentlessly point at the lack of female representation in public discourses. As such, as Claire Drewery (2017, p. 229) suggests: "her stories resonate with the pertinent contemporary intellectual discourses of her era [...] and illustrate the value of her contribution to the radical contemporary shift in literary representations of the textual, corporeal and conscious forms of the modernist subject".

Indeed, Sinclair's modernism focuses on portraying the psychological singularity and "misfit femininity" (Wilson, 2000, p. 49) of her heroines, showing their maladaptation to public discourses, available research, or social groups and norms. Her fiction systematically conveys neglected feminine issues that actually challenged several of Freud's central theories, just as Freud's cases challenged the psychological and medical discourses of his time. In her long and short fiction, Sinclair's stylistic explorations (such as the shifts in pronouns or the emphasis on her characters' names as a means to show their irreducible individual singularity), her subject matters (such as the lesser-known questions of femininity, ranging from the sensuality of breastfeeding to the specificities of ageing in female characters), and her methodology (through the direct references to psychoanalysis, the constant questioning of the stabilised textual references or the systematic appeal to the reader's psychoanalytical skills) have indeed a lot in common with psychoanalytical case-based research. Sinclair's technical aesthetics of perplexity shows the complexity of the epistemological questions raised by modernism.

Case narratives and modernist short stories interestingly share quite a few determining characteristics. First, like case narratives, the short story as a genre might resist universal definition. Case narratives have also been equated to stated problems by Berlant as well as Jacques Revel and Jean-Claude Passeron (Berlant, 2007, p. 1 and Revel & Passeron, 2005, p. 2), while Drewery convincingly refers to modernist short stories as "elusive interface[s]" (Drewery, 2011, p. 4). In addition, we should note that both forms were actually renewed at the same time, in the late 1880s, i.e. shortly before the birth of modernism, as Dominic Head (1992, p.1) reminds us. Such rebirth may signal a need for this new form of investigation and expression that Sinclair had underlined and which "involved recent techniques, methods, or ideas", thereby following the definition of "modernity" edited by several dictionaries<sup>1</sup>. Like case narratives, "the traditional concern of the short story has

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance <https://www.merriam-webster.com>

been the portrayal of the experience of misfits, marginal figures of some kind” (Clare Hanson, 1990, p. 300), suggesting a focus on protagonists who do not quite fit in with traditional or established public discourses.

In order to explore Sinclair’s experimentation with social and scientific modernity through the influence of both the form and the content of case narratives, this chapter will first focus on the importance of deixis in the 1917 story “Portrait of My Uncle”. This will lead us to discuss Sinclair’s pretheorisation of the attachment theory in “The Intercessor”. Last, we will provide a study of Sinclair’s experiments with a hybrid form, half-case half-story, in her 1920 novella, *The Romantic*, which addresses the issues of gender in depicting the problematic expression of masculinity and virility of her protagonist.

As we shall see, these three texts point at the specificity and diversity of Sinclair’s modernist experimentations with short fiction and pose the question of the generic definition of short fiction, illustrating Marielle Macé’s analysis of the “generic relation”, i.e., the ways in which a text belongs to a generic category along with the evolution of the genre itself (Macé, 2004, p. 33 and p. 42).

#### ON THE ACT OF DEIXIS (« PORTRAIT OF MY UNCLE », 1917)

Ian Reid (1977, p. 38) underlined several essential qualities of the short story: from the obvious (and relative) brevity, to the unity of impression, and the single effect. But, Sinclair’s stories, because of the influence of case-based reasoning, have another, very specific quality, which we can name “the act of deixis” after Jacques Revel and Jean-Claude Passeron (2005, p. 3).

As such, “the act of deixis” is a distinct feature of case narratives that helps showing the irreducibility of the singularity of a particular case in calling for further analysis. This is precisely what is at stake in the 1917 “Portrait of my Uncle”, which draws a parallel between psychoanalytical cases and the visual arts. The uncle from the title suddenly (and very mysteriously) becomes blind and the text suggests a possible psychological explanation to his medical condition:

Dr Filson explained it all scientifically on some theory of the Subconscious. It seems that Freud, or Jung, or one of those johnnies, had a case exactly like my uncle's. He said my uncle could not see, and did not see, because he did not want to see. His blindness was the expression of a strong subconscious wish never to see his wife again, a wish which, of course, his conscious self had very properly suppressed. On the one side it was a laudable effort at self-preservation on the part of my uncle's psyche; on the other side, of course, it was just a morbid obsession. (Sinclair, 1930, p. 38)

The narration is of course ironical; yet, the point is clearly to link the uncle’s eye troubles with his refusal to see the world (and more particularly his wife, with whom he has a rather strained relationship). The narrator also mentions that “[they] had a case exactly like my uncle’s” (Sinclair, 1930, p. 37). But if there are only two isolated cases, no generic discourse can yet describe the questions raised by Simpson’s puzzling series of symptoms, which is precisely how Revel and Passeron consider particular cases:

Le cas survient, et il pose en tant que tel des questions. Ce qui a toujours constitué la difficulté logique des descriptions de cas, en tant qu'aiguillons des débats scientifiques, c'est qu'ils opposaient d'emblée à la tentative pour les circonscrire par une description définie une liste ouverte de propriétés descriptibles, toutes hypothétiquement pertinentes pour rendre compte de leur agencement particulier dans une situation, (...) En ce sens, un cas n'est pas seulement un fait exceptionnel : il fait problème : il appelle une solution, c'est-à-dire l'instauration d'un cadre nouveau du raisonnement. Le cas doit être, sinon défini par rapport aux règles établies auxquelles il déroge, du moins mis en relation avec d'autres cas, réels ou fictifs, susceptibles de redéfinir avec lui une autre formulation de la normalité et de ses exceptions. (Revel & Passeron, 2005, p. 2)<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, and following almost to the letter Revel and Passeron's analysis, Uncle Simpson dies exactly a year after his wife, bringing yet another "property" to the open-ended list of his specific and particular symptoms. Simpson's death, the text says, was caused by "some obscure heart trouble brought on by fretting" (Sinclair, 1930, p. 40). Such fretting is absolutely unexpected: is it remorse? A broken heart? Or could it be Sinclair's intuitive representation of a repressive instance that would be akin to Freud's super-ego (a concept he developed later, in *The Ego and the Id* in 1923)? Literary interpretation takes over with questionings. The portrait of the title actually refers to a painting that represents Uncle Simpson and his wife: "this is a composite portrait - it's my uncle *and* my aunt. You could not separate their two faces" (Sinclair, 1930, p. 29). Right from the start, the portrait also announces the importance of the visual. The first features that the narrator describes in the portrait are the eyes, eyebrows and glare of his uncle. As such, the painting already contains most of the enigmas of the Simpson case, and it shows how the text relies on medical, but also on psychological and aesthetic analyses to shed new light on old dichotomies, such as the eye vs I.

Such concentration associated with the constant call for analysis brought by the deixis technique, is, I would argue, one of Sinclair's main ideas of what a modern text should be. Sinclair's fiction thus engages in a specific dialogue with contemporary scientific investigation but does not produce any stabilised formula. Quite on the contrary, Sinclair's stories, just like case-based reasoning, seem to rely on a form of "heuristic tension that one can never fully escape" (Carroy, 2005, p. 228 - my translation). In exposing the singularity and triggering perplexity, Sinclair's stories explore an aesthetics of scientific perplexity that calls for further aesthetic and scientific investigation.

#### SCIENTIFIC MODERNITY AND PRETHEORISATION ("THE INTERCESSOR", 1911)

Sinclair's stories often intuitively precede psychological research as her case-based approach to short fiction also enabled her to really "pretheorise" (Bayard, 2004, p. 143)

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<sup>2</sup> Cases arise and, as such, they raise questions. The persisting problem induced by case descriptions is that, as initiators of scientific debates, they do not attempt to delimit, fix or define these debates. Instead, they provide an open-ended list of describable properties that are all hypothetically relevant to account for their specific occurrences in a given situation (...). That is why a case is not only an exception : a case poses a problem and calls for a solution, i.e., for the creation of a new framework for reasoning. When not defined against the rules that it challenges, the case should be compared and contrasted with other cases, real or fictitious, that can contribute to an alternative formulation of norms and exceptions. (Revel & Passeron, 2005, p. 2 - my translation)

key psychological notions, i.e. to generate a new discourse on unchartered issues, especially concerning women and motherhood. As I have argued elsewhere (Bont, 2018), feminism and feminine clinical psychology are actually two of the main structuring dynamics of her 1911 ghost story, “The Intercessor” that tells the tale of Garvin, a historian, who encounters a child ghost that returns to his bedroom several nights in a row. The ghost, named Effy Falshaw, was his lodgers’ first born, and she had drowned three years before his arrival. Effy gradually becomes a “spectre”, à la Jacques Derrida (2002, p. 121), full of signs, symbols, and symptoms, which sets Garvin on a psychoanalytical quest. With Garvin, we realise that Effy’s haunting is caused by the difficult relation with her neglecting mother (named Sarah Falshaw) and works as a peculiar re-enactment of the mother-daughter failed link, as the ghost revisits several of the key places of her difficult relationship with her mother, who is actually pregnant again.

Despite a few notable exceptions, pregnancy is often a complex, and somehow empowering experience for Sinclair’s maternal figures (Philips, 1996, p. 123-134; Bont, 2014, p. 10). By contrast, Sarah’s pregnancy seems a rather debilitating, if not threatening perspective, as she is also, figuratively, haunted by the possible death of her foetus – a terrifying event that eventually happens as “she was delivered of a dead child” (Sinclair, 1932, p. 191). If the passive voice tells a bit more than childbirth, the stillborn baby seems to induce extreme maternal behaviour in Sarah: she refuses to let it be buried and stays in bed with the corpse (the text says “it”, while interestingly Sarah refers to the new baby as “Effy”, Sinclair, 1932, p. 194).

Suzanne Raitt (2017, p. 27) and Luke Thurston (2017, p. 123) have shown that “The Intercessor” reworks Freud’s theories in exploring traumas “that engage with something outside and beyond signification and subjectivity”. The combination of Sarah’s reactions and Effy’s haunting could indeed be read as a pretheorisation of Cathy Caruth’s trauma theory: “In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth, 1996, 11).

Given the focus on the mother-daughter relation in the story, I would like to argue that Sinclair’s text also anticipates on John Bowlby’s attachment theory, which he developed in the 1950s. While Sigmund Freud does refer to the “tender current” of the sexual drive (which might have opened the way for Bowlby’s investigations), neither psychoanalysis nor Victorian and pre-Freudian psychologies mention attachment at all. Victorian psychologies do not study attachment, as Jenny Bourne Taylor and Sally Shuttleworth’s *Embodied Selves: An Anthology of Psychological Texts (1830-1890)* suggests. Similarly, Bowlby (1982, p. 228) notes that “both Sigmund and Anna Freud employ the term ‘attachment’”, but that their understanding of the term is deeply influenced by their psychoanalytical approach and thus refers to a different concept. If Bowlby’s formulation, as he himself explains, is clearly indebted to Freud, his approach is innovative in that it does not refer to psychoanalytical concepts:

My object appeared a limited one, namely, to discuss the theoretical implications of some observations of how young children respond to temporary loss of mother [...]. My furrows

had been started from a corner diametrically opposite to the one at which Freud had entered. (Bowlby, 1982, p. xxvi)

Rather, Bowlby's work paved the way for the elaboration of developmental psychology as an independent sub-discipline that focuses on the earliest stages of individual life. Indeed, Bowlby defines attachment as a crucial and formative bond that serves biological and evolutionary purposes:

The child's tie to his mother [can be] discussed without any reference to sexual or any other sort of social behaviour. Instead, attachment is presented as a system of behaviour having its own form of internal organisation and serving its own function. (Bowlby, 1982, p. 230)

Bowlby adds that attachment is characterized by specific behaviours, such as the child's seeking proximity with the attachment figures when upset or threatened. He also shows that attachment behaviour in adults towards the child includes responding sensitively and appropriately to the child's needs. In the story, the emphasis on the mother-daughter complex link, through the recurring use of adjectives such as "cruel" qualifying the mother's neglect of her child (Sinclair, 1932, p. 178-9) clearly suggests that this is where we should search for the reasons for Effy's haunting. Effy is indeed first seen crying in front of her mother's closed bedroom door as Garvin observes that "her suffering was somehow connected with the closing of Mrs Falshaw's door" (p. 147). Effy's haunting is represented as a form of longing for maternal proximity – and then, true to Bowlby's later theories, for any form of proximity (with other caretaking figures, first Rhoda, the servant, and then Garvin).

What is interesting is that this haunting for contact is presented from the young child's point of view:

It [Effy] advanced, solicitous, adventurous. It put out its hand and, with a touch that must have fallen light as thistle-down, it stroked its mother's face. Mrs Falshaw shrank slightly and put up her hands to ward it off, and the child slid back again. Garvin cried out. 'Don't send her away – don't, for God's sake, send her away!' (Sinclair, 1932, p. 190)

The adjective "solicitous" as well as the threatening hand that also evokes the hand of a killer are actually used to introduce her need for cuddling and stroking (indeed not for being cuddled or stroked, but for actively engaging in the contact, as if she were simultaneously the reassuring mother and the child needing reassurance, suggesting some forty years before Bowlby, the importance and the complexity of mother-and-child interactions. Here, Effy is no longer haunted by her mother's neglect and the following paragraph lifts the ambiguity:

Garvin saw the child approach again fearlessly. It smiled, as with an unearthly pity and comprehension [...]. The look was superhuman. Urged by the persistence of its passion, the child hovered for a moment, divinely coercing, divinely caressing; its touch fell on its mother's hair, now on her cheeks, now on her lips, and lingered there. And then the woman writhed and flung herself backwards in her chair away from it. Her face was convulsed with a hideous agony of fear. [...] That night Mrs Falshaw was delivered of a dead child. (Sinclair, 1932, p. 190-1)

Effy's vengeful presence (made perceptible through her gestures and through the term "coercing" for instance), her power ("superhuman"), and, more importantly, her effects on her mother ("writhed, convulsed with agony" etc.) and on the possible death of her sibling are rather horrific.

Like most of the psychologists and psychoanalysts of her time, May Sinclair hardly ever uses the term attachment. However, she published rather extensively on C. G. Jung's theory of individuation through one's appropriation of the symbolic forces at stake in the fantasy of a return to the mother (See for instance Sinclair's "The Way of Sublimation" (1915), "Clinical Lecture on Symbolism and Sublimation I and II" (1916) and "Psychological Types" (1923)). In her psychoanalytical papers, Sinclair describes the conflict between child and mother that arises from the child's need to construct an independent relation to his mother; and in 1915, she claims that "the child must win this conflict or remain forever immature" (Sinclair, 1915, p. 39). The story offers an interesting variation as Effy, the forever immature child must return from the tank she drowned in so as to confront her mother and reach (post-mortem) individuation, i.e. to find peace and disappear. Because many of the dynamics of the attachment process are sketched in "The Intercessor", Sinclair appears not a science-fiction writer, but, as Laurel Forster argues, as a psychic-fiction novelist<sup>3</sup> who anticipated and prolonged the psychological research of her time through supernatural scenarios based on her own projections. Effy's return to the mother also suggests something of the specificity of the mother-daughter relation that also echoes another of C. G. Jung's theory, first described in his 1912 *Psychology of the Unconscious* – the Elektra complex, a female version of Oedipus and a secondary concept in Sinclair's time as well as ours (Jung, 1915, p. 69-70, Jung, 1916, p. 240 and Freud, 1991, p. 375).

The haunting return of the little girl looking for her mother is a typically feminine situation, informed by Sinclair's intuitive (and feminist) approach to psychology. Such form of social and scientific modernity is at stake in most of Sinclair's stories. George Johnson argues that she is the first to represent sessions of bibliotherapy in her 1901 story "Superseded", fifteen years before the term was even coined and the practice theorised (Johnson, 2004, p. 4; Beatty, 1962, p. 106-117). "Superseded" also represents several specific issues related to ageing in old women, while its companion piece, "The Cosmopolitan" is built on the question of the independence of young girls.

#### EXPERIMENTS IN FORMAL HYBRIDITY (*THE ROMANTIC*, 1920)

But it is not femininity nor the female condition that the 1920 novella *The Romantic* explores, rather, it is the expectations linked to masculinity. As Philippa Martindale (2004, p. 181) suggests, *The Romantic* possibly draws from a case that is described by Alfred Adler in 1907, but the plot also shares puzzling common points with several other cases investigated in the Medico-Psychological Clinic in London, of which Sinclair was a founding member.

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<sup>3</sup> Laurel Forster (2000, p. 186) uses the expressions "psychic fiction" and "science fiction of the mind" to explain Sinclair's exploratory interest into psychical research.

Unlike her longer war novels, the story depicts, or rather deconstructs the unfair, yet commonly accepted relation between shell-shock and cowardice. The two very enthusiastic protagonists, Charlotte and John, join, like Sinclair in 1915, an ambulance team on the Belgian front. Yet John is described as a “savage” in both the story and in Sinclair’s workbook: “The war had brought out his latent savagery and brutality. His frustrated sex avenges itself in cruelty to (Charlotte). To himself, he blames her for his own break-down. (He) tries to draw courage from the other girls as he drew it from [Charlotte]”<sup>4</sup>.

War works as a catalyst for John’s savagery, which is acted out as cruelty towards Charlotte (with aggressive language, deliberate manipulation, and hypocrisy): John lies and abandons her in a war zone, and constantly criticizes her lack of courage, while he turns out to be the one who suffers from cowardice. The story actually ends on Charlotte’s conversation with Dr McClane, who elaborates a diagnosis about John, whose “savage” behaviour is described as a result of his imbalanced masculinity:

John jumped at everything that helped him to get compensation, to get power. He jumped at your feeling for him because it gave him power. He jumped at the war because the thrill he got out of it gave him the sense of power. He sucked manhood out of you. He sucked it out of everything – out of blood and wounds ... He'd have been faithful to you forever, Charlotte, if you hadn't found him out. *That* upset all his delicate adjustments. The war upset him. I think the sight of blood and wounds whipped up the naked savage in him. (Sinclair, 1920, p. 142-3)

The “jumped” and “sucked” anaphors first point at John’s opportunism, who would seize every occasion to compensate and gain “a sense of power” but they also suggest his vampirical need to “suck manhood out of Charlotte”. Various reviews have hinted at John’s repressed homosexuality, but he may also be Sinclair’s illustration of a case, studied by Alfred Adler, that Sinclair alludes to in her 1915 essay *The Way of Sublimation*:

Dr Alfred Adler of Vienna finds the source of the Neuroses in the “feeling of insufficiency” (*Gefühl der Minderwertigkeit* or Janet’s *sentiment de l'incomplétude*). This feeling arises from a real organic insufficiency which may even have begun before birth. [...] Sensations of organic insufficiency become for the individual a permanent impelling in the development of his psyche. [...] According to Adler, the neuroses are the heroic efforts of the humiliated ego to assert himself, to redress the balance of his insufficiency. Compensation is the end towards which the neurotic blindly and not altogether impotently strives. (Sinclair, 1915, p. 37-8)

We should compare Sinclair’s reading of Adler with her depiction of John’s afflictions:

John Conway was an out and out degenerate. He couldn’t help *that*. He suffered from some physical disability. It went through everything. It made him so that he couldn’t live a man’s life. He was afraid to enter a profession. He was afraid of women. (Sinclair, 1920, p. 142)

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<sup>4</sup> *Workbook: The Romantic*, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania, Box 39, Workbook 4, 80. We should note that this extract is also partially quoted in Andrew Kunka’s “Gender, Cowardice and Shell Shock in *The Romantic* and *Anne Severn*” (Kunka, 2006, p. 248).

The constant alternation between actions and speech on the one hand, and analyses, diagnoses and the profusion of technical terms on the other creates this hybrid form that many contemporary reviewers commented upon. Among others, Frederic Cooper (1915, p. 556), in “Some Novelist of the Month” described Sinclair’s short story “The Flaw in the Crystal” (1911) as “not wholly allegory and not wholly a study in insanity, but an uncomfortable blending of both” while Raymond Mortimer (1922, p. 531) refers to Sinclair’s 1922 short novel *Life and Death of Harriet Freaan* as “a study of the psychopathology of Peter Pan”. Accordingly, Sinclair’s texts are often more of a “modulation” or “restructuring” than an “exemplification” of short fiction (Macé, 2004, p. 34 – my translation) as they simultaneously challenge and highlight generic boundaries.

Added to their insistence on the scientific characteristics of Sinclair’s short prose, several new concepts also play a central role in her text, echoing the epistemology of early psychoanalytical research. John’s aggressive language might indeed evoke Freud’s later “reaction formation”, which refers to one’s way of putting on socially acceptable acts in order to mask an underlying and antithetic neurosis (Freud, 1896, p. 157-185). Similarly, we can note that John becomes “a savage”, as the text has it, whenever he feels that Charlotte is aware of his overwhelming fear. Such situation might be read as an early illustration of Freud’s comment on resistance and homeostasis, according to which an interpretation that comes too soon (which is what Charlotte does) is often perceived by a patient as words that threaten the psychic balance he constructed with reaction formation. Sinclair strikes us as one of the first writers to have represented and confronted, with an assumed realism, the wrongly-named cowardice of shell-shocked soldiers: through constant references to psychoanalysis, she deconstructs a contemporary myth and sets out to suggest instead that there might be a pathological dimension (as illustrated by John’s savagery), to the expected war-behaviour in men.

In doing so, Sinclair actually also deconstructs what social psychology calls today the prescribed gender role expectations, which she also does for femininity in her other stories. Just like here, where this is John speaking, or rather pretending to be attracted to war-like violence: “It’s not the peace of it I want, Charlotte. It’s the fight. Fighting with things that would kill you if you didn’t. Wounding the earth. Ploughing, Charlotte. Feeling the thrust and the drive through. Seeing the steel blade shine, and the long wounds coming in rows, hundreds of wounds, wet and shining” (Sinclair, 1920, p. 26).

This very early scene takes place in June 1914, i.e. just a few weeks before Britain enters the First World War. However here, John already associates the stereotypical English countryside to a violent battle. John’s language perverts, if not sexualizes (especially through the [s-] and [sh-] alliterations as well as through the eerie repetition in the last sentence) a setting, that would constitute a “paradise lost” for the readers in 1920.

Similarly, John’s body is a contradiction in terms, as Charlotte later notices that: “his eyes were feverish behind a glaze of water, and red-rimmed [...]. She thought: it’s awful for him” (p. 65). There lies yet another gap in John: the discrepancy between his mind and his body, which is already suffering. And it shows how John’s body circumvents social censorship and expresses itself through tears, a supposedly female attribute. The importance of body language in Sinclair is all the more central to her approach since it prolongs her reading and analysis of Spinoza but also of her contemporary colleague,

pioneer psychologist William McDougall (Sinclair, 1917b, p. 116) as well as of Pierre Janet's work on dissociation.

Claire Drewery (2011, p. 7) described Sinclair's stories as "experimental, cryptic, and characteristically modernist". Sinclair's short stories show indeed the large scope of the aesthetic experimentations conducted in the early modernist era. In many ways, we might argue that Sinclair's stories already contain the answer to one of her later interrogations raised in her first major philosophical essay: "I want to know what, if anything, lies behind or at the bottom of multiplicity and change" (Sinclair, 1917b, p. 344). Precisely, Sinclair's stories focus on change and multiplicity, which enables her to constantly integrate her innovative approach to contemporary research to her explorative short fiction writing. True to the modernist project, Sinclairian short prose is thus used as a sort of pre-test that challenges, like several other experimentations with generic definitions, the "internal lines as well as the external boundaries of literature" (Macé, 2004, p. 46). In this paper, I have indeed tried to show how Sinclair uses her short fiction to represent contemporary research questions that are investigated in contemporary settings. But Sinclair's scientific modernity also includes the uncharted territory of gender and lesser-known feminine issues. When Ian Reid (1977, p. 38) talks of the short story tradition as "mixed mode", I would like to argue that Sinclair uses this generic label a new approach that synthesizes case-based research and aesthetic explorations. As a result, her short texts display a sort of technical aesthetic of perplexity that stands out among modernist writings and that will actually be the cornerstone of both her transdisciplinary research and of her later *Bildungsromane*.

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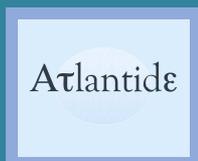
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