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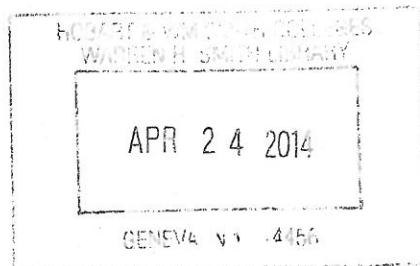
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THE VICTORIAN

NOVEL

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## THE VICTORIAN NOVEL AND THE NEW WOMAN

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TALIA SCHAFFER

The New Woman novel, like 'chick lit' novels a century later, was a wildly popular literary genre about middle-class women's daily lives, and critics have condemned both for their supposedly poor quality and commercial appeal to a female readership. Today, however, scholars recognize that the New Woman novel not only provides unparalleled insight into late-Victorian women's roles, but also marks significant stylistic shifts from the realist novel. The New Woman novel documents a fascinating period of transition away from Victorian separate spheres, recording the stresses, anxieties, and freedoms women experienced as they rebelled against traditional roles. In order to convey these inchoate feelings, New Women novelists invented innovative literary techniques that actually prefigured modernist texts. Moreover, the New Woman novel is a particularly fascinating subject, because it is not just a body of important texts, but also a case study of critical trends. By exploring the history of the New Woman novel's reception, we can see how literary critics' ideas of value, politics, and style have altered in the past century. This chapter, then, will read the New Women novel, but it will also read its readers, offering an account of how and why the movement achieved recognition, and suggesting where the field might be moving.

First, we need to understand how the New Woman novel fits with other women's novels in the 19th century. After all, one might well ask just what was 'new' about 19th-century women's writing. As Virginia Woolf wrote, 'towards the end of the eighteenth century a change came about which, if I were rewriting history, I should describe more fully and think of greater importance than the Crusades or the Wars of the Roses. The middle-class woman began to write.'<sup>1</sup> The 19th century was, of course, famous for its women's novels: *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Jane Eyre* (1847), and *Middlemarch* (1871–72). Not only did the 19th century see the work of the Brontë sisters, George

<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own; and, Three Guineas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 84.

Eliot, and Jane Austen, but also the highly respected writings of Harriet Martineau, Charlotte Yonge, Margaret Oliphant, and Elizabeth Gaskell, and the wildly popular fiction of Rhoda Broughton, Marie Corelli, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Ellen Woods, and Catherine Gore. So we may well ask how the late-Victorian New Woman novel relates to earlier women's novels.

The New Woman novel should not be treated as an entirely separate movement, but as the culmination of this history of women's fiction. The New Woman novel can be read for the same reasons we read Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria, or, The Wrongs of Women* (1798), Florence Nightingale's *Cassandra* (written 1852), or, of course, *Jane Eyre* (1847). Like these predecessors, the New Woman novel passionately exposes the oppression of middle-class women's lives and eloquently pleads for what Brontë called 'a power of vision that might overpass that limit'.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, two of the most popular examples of women's writing among college students, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper', are American New Women stories. The New Woman novel fits into a history of passionate outcries about injustice and desperate desires for a wider view. No history of women's writing can be complete without an example of the New Woman genre.

Along with depicting women's situations in their writing, New Women writers often worked for progressive causes. They resembled their mid-century predecessors, female activists like Frances Power Cobbe, Barbara Bodichon, Bessie Rayner Parkes, Jessie Boucherett, and Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, who fought for widespread social reform of major public issues (employment, education, and legal rights). But unlike these mid-century reformers, their New Women successors often agitated for alterations of individual feeling, especially regarding sexual behaviour. As I have noted elsewhere:

This dangerous 'New Woman' was a middle-class woman agitating for such 'dynamite' ideas as the right to walk without a chaperone, to hold a job, to live alone in a flat, to go to college, and to wear sensible clothing. Moreover, they wanted to remake Victorian marriage. New Women asked men to exercise sexual self-discipline, demanded women have access to honest sex education, and tried to popularize alternatives to marriage (ranging from free unions to easier divorces).<sup>3</sup>

New Women's emphasis on personal independence and marriage reform were key components of their mission. Their writing was linked to their activism in ways that were unusual for other 19th-century literary movements.

Technological and cultural changes in the late 19th century facilitated such changes. New forms of transportation, for instance, allowed women to move freely about a city that was increasingly safe, due to electric lighting and modern police presence. The

subway and the bicycle along with the typewriter, allowed what once was a place where handwriting would not go, now offered women the place, offering women the traditional occupations for the progressive girls' schools. One of these modern occupations was that meals were provided, or that a safe non-alcoholic alternative to the excitements and frustrations of an energetic, self-sufficient

It is important to remember that the Victorian etiquette of their middle-class sisters. Marriage rules were not entirely new in the labour market. Working-class and immigrant women, having to do with

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<sup>2</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 109.

<sup>3</sup> Talia Schaffer, 'The New Woman: Introduction', *Literature and Culture at the Fin de Siècle*, ed. Talia Schaffer (New York: Longman, 2007), 203–5, 203.

<sup>4</sup> Schaffer, 'Introduction'.

<sup>5</sup> Ouida, 'The New Woman', *The New Woman* (New York: Longman, 2007) 21.

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subway and the bicycle allowed women unprecedented freedom. That recent invention, the typewriter, allowed women to work as secretaries or clerks (now that their feminine handwriting would not give them away). Department stores consolidated goods in one place, offering women the chance to serve as shop clerks. Nursing and philanthropy were traditional occupations for women, but they were now becoming professionalized. And the progressive girls' schools required teachers. A young woman who wished to work in one of these modern occupations could rent a flat or a room in a boarding house where meals were provided, or eat at the Aerated Bread Company's cafeterias (designed to offer a safe non-alcoholic alternative to pubs). The literature of the New Woman described the excitements and frustrations of these young women's lives, popularizing the idea of an energetic, self-sufficient, hard-working woman.

It is important to remember that these were middle-class young women who felt stifled by Victorian etiquette. Working-class women already had many of the freedoms their middle-class sisters wanted; nobody felt it necessary to chaperone them, marriage rules were not enforced so strictly, and nobody was questioning their participation in the labour markets open to them, primarily factory work and domestic service. Working-class and impoverished women had a very different set of needs in the late 19th century, having to do with making workplaces safe and creating humane environments.

The idea of the New Woman was one of the great causes of the 1890s. Although the term 'New Woman' had previously been used in a rather affectionately self-deprecating manner in the feminist press, it seems to have entered public discourse as an opprobrious term in articles by Sarah Grand and Ouida (Mary Louise de Ramé) in the *North American Review* of 1894.<sup>4</sup> In this crucial article, Ouida began by grouching, 'the Workingman and the Woman, the New Woman, be it remembered, meet us at every page of literature written in the English tongue, and each is convinced that on its own especial W hangs the future of the world'.<sup>5</sup> Rapidly becoming a cultural stereotype, a media creation, pilloried in *Punch* and condemned in articles, the New Woman was a threateningly unattractive, aggressive figure, through which ambitious women of the period could be lampooned. While New Woman debates were played out most prominently in journalism and fiction, there were also poems, dramas, and art about this figure. And in the fin de siècle, the New Woman shows up in popular and canonical novels alike. From Mina in *Dracula* (1897) to Sue in *Jude the Obscure* (1895), we find the New Woman figure. Just as 1960s fiction is fascinated with the counter-cultural hippie figure, so too 1890s fiction interrogates the New Woman.

If we turn now to the specific genre of fiction designated 'New Women novels', we will be looking at texts centred on this controversial female figure. In 1999, Sally Mitchell pointed out that 'despite some twenty years of scholarship in the field, core questions such as "what is a New Woman?" and "what is New Woman fiction?" still remain vexed

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<sup>4</sup> Schaffer, 'Introduction'.

<sup>5</sup> Ouida, 'The New Woman' [1894], *Literature and Culture at the Fin de Si èle*, ed. Talia Schaffer (New York: Longman, 2007) 210–17, 210.



and all too often need more precise definition.<sup>6</sup> New Women novels used to be identified as those works by canonical male authors that interrogated the modern woman: Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, George Gissing's *The Odd Women*, and H.G. Wells's *Ann Veronica*. However, today the consensus seems to be that the most important New Woman novels and stories are those by Sarah Grand (Frances McFall), Olive Schreiner, George Egerton (Mary Chavelita Dunne Bright), and Mona Caird, while other New Women fiction worth examining includes work by George Paston (Emily Morse Symonds), Ella Hepworth Dixon, Elizabeth Robins, and Amy Levy. As Mitchell asked, however, what makes us identify these authors as 'New Women' and their work as 'New Woman fiction'?

Because the 1890s press used 'New Women' as an all-purpose accusation, it comes as no surprise that some women distanced themselves from the moniker, rendering it hard for us to get a sense of just how many people might have been real-life New Women. In Mitchell's words:

Like 'feminist' today, the term could mean just about anything the writer wanted it to mean. The New Woman was a seductive temptress and a man-hater, over-educated and empty-headed, mannishly athletic or languidly anorexic, poised to take over the House of Commons but hysterically unable to decide which necktie to wear.<sup>7</sup>

Such contradictions showed up in fictional depictions of New Women as well. In George Paston's *A Writer of Books*, Bess lures men to their doom to expose unfair marriage laws. Yet Bess's friend, the 'writer of books' Cosima Chudleigh, deplores Bess's vigilante activity. The conflicting impulses on display here, especially around female sexual freedom, appeared in journalism by New Woman activists too. Sarah Grand held the male sex drive accountable for prostitution, syphilis, and bad marriages, and depicted women as wise, high-minded guides to help man, who is 'morally, in his infancy'.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, George Egerton infamously described 'the eternal wildness, the untamed primitive savage temperament that lurks in the mildest, best woman'.<sup>9</sup> While Grand and Egerton disagreed about which sex was more savage, Mona Caird took the liberal position that women's sexual desires and vocational needs equalled men's and therefore deserved comparable outlets. It is, of course, possible—and true—to say that New Women thinking accommodated a wide range of attitudes towards female sexuality. But this wide range of ideas leaves us wondering whether it is really legitimate to lump them all

<sup>6</sup> Sally Mitchell, 'Review: New Women, Old and New', *Victorian Literature and Culture* 27, no. 2 (1999): 579–88, 579.

<sup>7</sup> Sally Mitchell, 'Review', 583.

<sup>8</sup> Sarah Grand, 'The New Aspect of the Woman Question' [1894], in *Literature and Culture at the Fin de Si ècle*, ed. Talia Schaffer (New York: Longman, 2007), 205–10, 207.

<sup>9</sup> George Egerton, 'A Cross Line' [1893], in *Literature and Culture at the Fin de Si ècle*, ed. Talia Schaffer (New York: Longman, 2007), 251–64, 259.

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Similarly, one would assume educational and vocational politics looked very different from that women had their own extend women's 'natural' abilities. Thus people might extend good feminine skill to nursing. Government in government was for instance, fought against and the medical profession sympathy, a strong woman Ouida and Eliza Lynn Linton novels with sympathetic self-supporting women. This set of beliefs as the definition establish an ideological New Woman club, it seems fair it must stand for some

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<sup>10</sup> Hugh E.M. Stutfield, *the 1890s*, ed. Carolyn Cl

together as New Woman notions. Can Egerton and Grand both be New Women? Can Bess and Cosima?

Similarly, one would assume that New Women would endorse extending the vote and educational and vocational opportunities to women. However, 19th-century gender politics looked very different from our own. Because 19th-century thinkers often believed that women had their own essential sphere, they could support activism that seemed to extend women's 'natural' abilities while fighting against activism that seemed to contradict it. Thus people might support women's right to become doctors (because it was a good feminine skill to nurse the sick), but deny women's right to vote (because involvement in government was seen as profoundly anti-feminine). The novelist Mary Ward, for instance, fought against votes for women—yet Ward demanded access to education and the medical profession for women, and her novel *Marcella* depicts, with powerful sympathy, a strong woman who works as a nurse and a socialist organizer. Similarly, Ouida and Eliza Lynn Linton published famous denunciations of New Women but wrote novels with sympathetic strong female characters and personally lived as independent, self-supporting women. This variety of positions makes it very hard to pin down one set of beliefs as the definitive marker of New Womanhood. While critics should not establish an ideological loyalty test that authors must pass to be admitted into the New Woman club, it seems fair to say that if the term 'New Woman' is to mean anything at all, it must stand for some core values with which we can identify its members.

It should also stand for a particular way of writing. As Lyn Pykett and Ann Ardis pointed out twenty years ago, New Women writers pioneered many of the stylistic experiments we associate with modernism. Working with fragmentation, dream sequences, non-realist narrative, streams of consciousness, shifting and multiple points of view, and narratives without conventional plot or closure, the New Women writers were trying out some very new ideas about literature indeed. Shifting the terms to style rather than personal politics also offers us a different cadre of New Woman writers. This definition allows us to include male writers like Hardy, Gissing, or Wells, who may have been indifferent or even inimical to feminist activism, but who employed these characteristically innovative techniques to depict strong women in their fiction. They form part of a generation of transitional writers between the 1880s and 1910s whose extent we are only now beginning to recognize. Although many modernists liked to portray themselves as brave rebels against hidebound Victorians, with a 'chasm' between the two periods, today the critical consensus is that Victorian style gradually evolved into modernist style, and we can now see that New Woman texts formed part of that transition.

One specific innovation is that many New Women incorporated non-fiction manifestos into their novels. Indeed, as Hugh E.M. Stutfield complained, New Women novels 'are for the most part merely pamphlets, sermons, or treatises in disguise'.<sup>10</sup> Because many New Women writers were orators and publishers of pamphlets and journalism,

<sup>10</sup> Hugh E.M. Stutfield, 'Tommyrotics' [1895], *A New Woman Reader: Fiction, Articles, and Drama of the 1890s*, ed. Carolyn Christensen Nelson (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2001), 234–43, 238.

they were accustomed to writing in a hortatory style. It can be disconcerting for readers to hit one of these manifestos in the midst of a fictional world. In Sarah Grand's *The Heavenly Twins*, a group cries, 'Make us a speech! Do!' to the American reformer Mr Price, which impels him to strike an attitude and deliver a two-page oration about true womanliness in its relation to reform.<sup>11</sup> Ella Hepworth Dixon's *The Story of a Modern Woman* proclaims, 'all we modern women mean to help each other now' and points out episodes in which characters live up to that slogan.<sup>12</sup> If one assumes the novel ought to be a realistic fictional world in which the reader is immersed, these examples of passionate argument seem to violate the novel's verisimilitude. They violently plunge the reader into a quite different reading experience.

New Woman novels could also use another disconcerting style embedded within the realist novel: the allegory. Schreiner is the most famous practitioner of this technique. In *The Story of an African Farm*, the section called 'Times and Seasons' describes the childhood of a universal 'we' who is and yet is not any of the characters in the novel (an example of its style: 'we cry as though our heart was broken. When one lifts our little body from the window we cannot tell what ails us').<sup>13</sup> Another chapter consists of a tale about a hunter's lifelong quest for Truth, told by a stranger. Schreiner prized this mode of writing, subsequently publishing a collection of allegorical tales called *Dreams*. But Sarah Grand also used it to talk about the music of the bells in *Morningquest*, in a Proem and a three-page dream sequence in which a character can proclaim 'I am Judith. I am Jael. I am Vashti. I am Godiva. I am all the heroic women of all the ages rolled into one, not for the shedding of blood, but for the saving of suffering.'<sup>14</sup> Her universalism contradicts the novel's usual work of establishing individuation. Lucas Malet (Mary St Leger Kingsley Harrison) studded *The Wages of Sin* with recurrent dreamlike descriptions of a character falling through endless space. As Patricia Murphy explains, 'the verbal art of allegory is particularly suggestive of monumental time in its departure from the realistic settings that tend to characterize nineteenth-century linear novels.'<sup>15</sup> Murphy reads New Women novels as particularly concerned with the desire to establish a cyclical sense of time, and reads allegory as one of the main tools such writers employed.

Allegorical language was particularly jarring because it contrasted with one of the main qualities of New Women prose, its journalistic immediacy. Famous for being contemporaneous, casual, swift, and transparent, New Women prose writers made no claims to high art, which differentiates them from their 1890s contemporaries, the aesthetes. Instead they aimed for readability, controversy, and popularity. Frequently, critics took them to task for poor writing. A.G.P. Sykes marvelled at how 'these apologies

for literature become "poor slipshod vernacular, psychological hypotheses and the usualness about intimate su-

What you may have noticed in this style—is that they read like a list, and often disorder the same function: to signal which to immerse oneself in, to convince, and override the attention to their writing language. New Women writers case their artistic skill like a gambler's, and had an immediate mission.

In rebelling against the norms of narrative, they flouted the novel, celebrated short stories, logical dramas, in the these feelings via plot explained bitterly about the talking of psychology, sensations, and they primary impulses"—especially in the era of Henry James (among others). But what was seen as morbid, where disturbed by the fact that the chance to marry, have a child that is pathetic in the sense of neurotic fiction.... But the vision of it in hysterical women for having such

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<sup>11</sup> Sarah Grand, *The Heavenly Twins* [1893] (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 196–98.

<sup>12</sup> Ella Hepworth Dixon, *The Story of a Modern Woman* (New York: Cassell Publishing Co., 1894), 304.

<sup>13</sup> Olive Schreiner, *The Story of an African Farm* [1883], ed. Patricia O'Neill (Peterborough: Broadview, 2003), 138.

<sup>14</sup> Grand, *The Heavenly Twins*, 296.

<sup>15</sup> Patricia Murphy, *Time is of the Essence: Temporality, Gender, and the New Woman* (New York: SUNY Press, 2001), 210.

<sup>16</sup> A.G.P. Sykes, 'The F Schaffer (New York: Lon

<sup>17</sup> Stutfield, 'Tommyr

<sup>18</sup> Hugh E.M. Stutfield and Drama of the 1890s, 251.



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for literature become "popular novels" despite their illiteracy, faultology, slovenliness, slipshod vernacular, profanity, and reckless, not to say repulsive, exposure of psychological hypotheses and the errors of humanity.<sup>16</sup> For Sykes, New Women's appalling casualness about intimate subjects was connected to their carelessness in matters of style.

What you may have noticed in all these criteria—manifestos, allegories, and journalistic style—is that they rebel against high Victorian realism. Wildly different from each other, and often disorientingly clashing in the same text, they nonetheless perform the same function: to signal the reader that this is no longer a detailed fictional universe in which to immerse oneself, but rather, a highly constructed text that aims to argue, convince, and override the reader. In the 1890s, aesthetes were writing in ways that drew attention to their writing as a craft, using epigrammatic and archaic and fantasized language. New Women were not so dissimilar. While their writing did not intend to showcase their artistic skill like aesthetic texts, it did draw attention to itself as writing that had an immediate mission.

In rebelling against high Victorian realism, New Women writers also revolted against the norms of narrative structure. They ignored conventions about introducing characters, they flouted the normal marriage plot, and they violated closure. George Egerton's celebrated short stories provided glimpses of intense emotions, often internal psychological dramas, in the midst of obviously complex lives. Yet she often did not situate these feelings via plot events, settings, or characters' names. Hence 1890s critics complained bitterly about characters who were 'dreadfully introspective. When they are not talking of psychology, they are discussing physiology. They search for new thrills and sensations, and they possess a maddening faculty of dissecting and probing their "primary impulses"—especially the sexual ones.'<sup>17</sup> The New Women were, of course, writing in the era of Henry James (who was a friend of Elizabeth Robins and Lucas Malet, among others). But when women focused on female characters' internal feelings it was seen as morbid, whereas James could do it in the name of art. Critics were especially disturbed by the fact that, in New Woman fiction, writers often represented women's reluctance to marry, have sex, or care for her family. One critic commented, 'There is much that is pathetic in the self-questioning and the cravings of the type of women depicted in neurotic fiction.... But while their dolefulness may command our sympathy, the expression of it in hysterical or squalid stories is not to be encouraged.'<sup>18</sup> While one might pity women for having such repulsive feelings, one did not want to read about it.

What we have in New Women fiction, then, is intensive analysis of a woman's discontent, a psychological state of misery and frustration and thwarted ambition, closely limned. Distressingly, this analysis requires forthright discussion of her sexual

igan Press, 1992), 196–98.  
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<sup>16</sup> A.G.P. Sykes, 'The Evolution of Sex' [1895], *Literature and Culture at the Fin de Si ècle*, ed. Talia Schaffer (New York: Longman, 2007), 230–33, 231.

<sup>17</sup> Stutfield, 'Tommyrotics', 236.

<sup>18</sup> Hugh E.M. Stutfield, 'The Psychology of Feminism' [1897], *A New Woman Reader: Fiction, Articles, and Drama of the 1890s*, ed. Carolyn Christensen Nelson (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2001), 243–53, 251.



feelings—a subject that there is really no safe way to treat in the 19th century. The sexual frankness of New Women fiction affiliated them with French fiction, Ibsen's controversial dramas, or even pornographic publications. It was shocking enough to have sexually explicit fiction, but it was even worse when Englishwomen wrote such scenes and ascribed such feelings to all Englishwomen.

No wonder, then, that these novels met critical outrage. Satirical poems and cartoons in *Punch* perpetuated the image of the New Woman as a bespectacled, angular, ridiculous spinster, making fun of her supposed mannishness, her propensity for riding bicycles, her bad taste in dress, and her humourlessness. This trend supposedly marked a serious threat to British culture. In 1894, the critic W.F. Barry warned dramatically, 'The New Woman ought to be aware that her condition is morbid, or, at least, hysterical; that the true name of science falsely so-called may be 'brain-poisoning'; that 'ideas' and love affairs, when mixed in unequal proportions, may explode like dynamite'.<sup>19</sup> Not only did the defenders of moral high culture attack these upstart women, but the women also fought publically with each other. Most famously, Sarah Grand and Ouida exchanged a series of tart rebuttals in the *North American Review* in 1894 over the identity and value of the New Woman. *The Nineteenth Century* ran a series of ardent debates between mothers and 'revolting daughters', initiated by an article by B.A. Crackanthorpe. Tempers ran high; strong accusations were made; the New Women's internal wranglings amused readers and sold papers and books, but did not conduce to a sense of the movement's coherence.

Other factors contributed to the New Women novelists' low reputation. The number of their novels and their sales worked against them, as Lyn Pykett explains.<sup>20</sup> By producing best-sellers, they gave the impression that they were catering to mass entertainment and did not care about literary quality. They might have found natural allies in the aesthetes, since aestheticism and decadence also (controversially) challenged accepted gender norms. Linda Dowling even claims that 'to most late Victorians the decadent was new and the New Woman decadent'.<sup>21</sup> But aesthetes saw themselves as artists, whereas the New Women writers positioned themselves as popular entertainers. If aesthetes like Oscar Wilde or John Gray issued limited editions bound in vellum with handmade bindings, New Women like Sarah Grand or Mona Caird published cheap paper-covered editions, rushed into print to meet the latest newspaper controversy and sold by the thousands at railroad bookstalls; and such productions affronted the artistic elite. Moreover, New Women tended to write few novels, because they were active in other fields (especially journalistic writing). That meant that they did not accumulate enough work to build a literary reputation. They were seen as dabblers, not serious writers.

<sup>19</sup> W.F. Barry, cited in Talia Schaffer, ed., *Literature and Culture at the Fin de Si ècle* (New York: Longman, 2007), 203.

<sup>20</sup> Lyn Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 142–43.

<sup>21</sup> Linda Dowling, 'The Decadent and the New Woman in the 1890's', *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 33 (1979): 434–53, 436.

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<sup>22</sup> Elaine Showalter, *A l*

<sup>23</sup> Showalter, *A Literati*

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not serious writers.

Finally, New Women writers had no interest in conveying moral lessons, sentimental uplift, or timeless truths. Rather, they used their fiction to agitate for immediate social reform. They cited contemporary legislation, they wrote thinly disguised satires of real people, and they alluded to events that were still in the headlines. In other words, New Women hit a number of cultural hot buttons, writing about matters that readers feared and despised, without generating the signs of literary seriousness that might have excused it.

For decades, New Women fiction could not recover from this critical drubbing. These texts are virtually unmentioned in literary criticism until the 1970s. New Women do not appear in the great critical summation of the Victorian era, Jerome Hamilton Buckley's 1951 *The Victorian Temper: A Study in Literary Culture*. The MLA Index lists only one or two publications before 1970 about New Women novels, and none at all about Sarah Grand (to take the most popular New Woman author). After 1970 there are forty-nine articles about Sarah Grand alone. As Elaine Showalter later recalled, 'feminist criticism did not exist' when she began her dissertation research in 1965.<sup>22</sup> Deterred from researching women writers, it took years of radicalization and political action before Showalter felt ready to publish in this field. She remembers attempting to research New Women: 'When I was writing *A Literature of Their Own*, most of these women were completely unknown. In 1971, I went to Bath in search of Sarah Grand, and, on a rainy winter day, opened the cartons in the Municipal Library which had sat untouched since her death.'<sup>23</sup> Showalter thus literally and figuratively opened up Sarah Grand for study.

As Showalter's reminiscences make clear, the rediscovery of New Woman writers was part of the feminist work of the 1970s. And Showalter was not alone; her 1977 *A Literature of Their Own* was matched by Gail Cunningham's 1978 *The New Woman and the Victorian Novel* and Lloyd Fernando's 1977 'New Women' in the *Late-Victorian Novel*. Other fields within Victorian fiction—the realist novel, Dickens studies, the Brontës—had a long evolution from the 19th century to the present. But New Women studies is different. It began in the 1970s, as feminists tore open cardboard boxes, eager to find lost foremothers.

Ever since, New Women criticism has been indelibly marked by its origin in second-wave feminism. As a result, New Women critics have tended to assume three points. First, it was a matter for celebration that women were able to publish these novels against overwhelming patriarchal indifference/hostility. Second, the novels must be expressing barely-controlled rage, rebelliousness, or reformist zeal in the form of feminist manifestos. Third, the novels unfortunately do not constitute truly great literature, a problem that must be acknowledged sombrely, but excused due to the novels' other qualities.

These assumptions are all true. But they are not all that is true.

<sup>22</sup> Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* [1977] (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), xi.  
<sup>23</sup> Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, xxvii–xxviii.

First, in spite of the obstacles against women's publishing, some New Women were highly successful. Sarah Grand and Mona Caird, for instance, were canny self-publicists, accomplished public speakers, self-promoters, and prolific authors of articles and manifestos. They knew exactly what they were doing in marketing their writing; this was not a case of women awakening at dawn to scribble secretly before the family was awake. This image of a successful public celebrity who deliberately fostered public disputes in order to capitalize on the Woman Question is something feminist criticism still has some trouble digesting, because of our attachment to narratives of private women painfully overcoming obstacles to express themselves.

Second, while many of the novels did express recognizably feminist positions, many did not. Some even make apparently anti-feminist arguments. For instance, how do we read Elizabeth Robins's *George Mandeville's Husband* (1894), in which an overbearing literary wife supporting women's causes must eventually acknowledge the superior merits of her neglected husband? It reads like a vicious satire of a New Woman and a passionate defence of beleaguered males. Yet Elizabeth Robins herself was probably the most famous female representative of Ibsen's plays in England. As an actress, she starred in *Hedda Gabler*, *A Doll's House*, and *The Master Builder*. She was a suffragette and a lifelong advocate of women's rights. It is hard to figure out how to reconcile this activist with the apparent message of *George Mandeville's Husband*. Does one simply discount *George Mandeville's Husband* from Robins's corpus? If so, aren't we using a political litmus test to determine what 'counts'—a technique we do not employ for male writers—and misrepresenting the truth about her career?

Because New Woman criticism is still centrally concerned with demonstrating the feminism of a text there are many historical phenomena with which it simply cannot deal. Not only do we have the apparently antifeminist work of supposed feminists, like Robins, but we also have writings by women that show virtually no interest in feminism. Robins's *The Open Question* (1898) is about the urgent question of whether or not cousins in love ought to kill themselves so as not to have a potentially diseased child. Lucas Malet wrote a strong New Woman novel in 1890, the story of a female art student living on her own, *The Wages of Sin*. However, her next two novels, *The Carissima* (1893) and *The Gateless Barrier* (1900), were ghost stories manifesting more interest in spiritual haunting after death than in feminist agitation. Is Malet only a New Woman writer in 1890, but not before or after 1890?

Third, it is true that New Women novels did not obey the rules of good literature popularized by the New Critics (the rules that that second-wave feminists had to work with), but today scholars understand that New Women writers might have followed alternative criteria. *The Heavenly Twins* is a failure by New Critical standards. It is a loosely constructed narrative stuffed full of irrelevancies, caricatures, anomalous materials (dreams, allegories, a whole section lifted from a separately published short story and stuck into the novel). It is not at all realistic, and its characters have little psychological depth. Yet, as we have seen, *The Heavenly Twins* does all this as part of its radical exploration of literary style. New Women were not necessarily interested in psychological depth, realist stories, and narrative logic, but instead in developing a newly fragmented

and non-realist style the modern age.

It was in the 1990s that New Women differed. In *'Improper' Feminine*: 1991, Ann Ardis published (Recently, Ardis remembered fifteen years ago, then in one hand. Moreover, the periodical press made unprecedentedly they presented a very New Women novels for work rather than novels, and catalogued mining her bibliography. Thanks to Ardis and a robust alternative came off in the 1990s. Be a New Woman novel.

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<sup>24</sup> Ann Ardis, 'Lancashire Field,' and 'the author issue32/roundtable.htm'

<sup>25</sup> Mitchell, 'Review



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It was in the 1990s that feminist critics first began to take on the challenge of reading New Women differently from the 1970s pioneers. In 1992, Lyn Pykett published *The 'Improper' Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* and in 1991, Ann Ardis published *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism*. (Recently, Ardis reminisced that 'when Rutgers published *New Women, New Novels* seventeen years ago, the scholarship on New Women fiction could quite literally be held in one hand. Moreover, almost all of the primary works and the voluminous fin de siècle periodical press writings about New Women were out of print.')<sup>24</sup> Pykett and Ardis made unprecedented claims for the significance of New Women fiction, and together, they presented a very strong case indeed. Pykett showed that it was possible to read New Women novels for their innovative style, and to appreciate them as proto-modernist work rather than inept Victorian writing. Ardis recovered over 150 heretofore lost novels, and catalogued the major elements of the genre for the first time. Scholars are still mining her bibliography, and the terms she set out have shaped New Women criticism. Thanks to Ardis and Pykett, critics had a way to read New Women novels according to a robust alternative criteria of quality. As a result, modern New Woman scholarship took off in the 1990s. Before 1990, an MLA Index search brings up only one article on the New Woman novel. Between 1990 and 2000, however, there are thirty-five.

In 1999, at the end of this notable decade of New Women criticism, Sally Mitchell summed up the state of the field and suggested new directions. Mitchell identified several problems. First, she noted the lack of accessible texts, which not only inhibited criticism, but also meant that too much space was taken up with plot synopses because the critic could never assume any familiarity with the novel on the reader's part. Second, she pointed out that critics still needed to clarify what feminist or New Women meant, including how they related to the previous generation of Victorian female activists in the 1850s–1880s.<sup>25</sup> Mitchell called for more work on race and empire, same-sex relationships, analysis of popular women writers (who may or may not have been New Women), working-class and socialist narratives, more historical and biographical information, and more attention to publishing history.

I have listed Mitchell's ideas at some length, because they predicted, with an almost uncanny accuracy, what New Women critics would pursue in the following decade, 2000–10. In recent New Women criticism, many of her hopes have been realized.

Today, important theoretical developments have made new kinds of readings of New Women texts possible. Above all, the canon no longer holds the power it once did. Indeed, the very idea of sorting texts into 'canonical' and 'non-canonical' categories seems somewhat quaint today. Rather, critics are reading shifting, flexible bodies of work, based on

<sup>24</sup> Ann Ardis, 'Landscape for a New Woman, or Recovering Katharine St. John Conway, "Michael Field," and "the author of *Borgia*"', *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* 3, no. 2, <<http://ncgsjournal.com/issue32/roundtable.htm>>.

<sup>25</sup> Mitchell, 'Review', 581–83.



the particular cultural formation they want to pursue. Thus if one is interested in the figure of the shop girl, it makes sense to spend a lot of time on Amy Levy's *The Romance of a Shop*, which depicts the kind of labour involved in opening and operating a shop, regardless of how well known it may be. This new emphasis on reading texts for relevance, not status, has liberated scholars. No longer does the New Woman critic need to defend her subject before even discussing it. No longer does the New Women critic have to commence by insisting on the value of the texts, excoriating the literary establishment for ignoring them, pleading for reconsideration, or compensating for perceived deficiencies. That space can be used for more substantive matters. While these concerns do continue to haunt New Women criticism, they are certainly subsiding.

As recent criticism has opened up to non-canonical texts, it has also opened up to non-British readings. New Womanism seems to have been an international movement, with representatives in Italy, Japan, Germany, and America, amongst other places, and scholars are beginning to perform comparative studies. Moreover, a global awareness seems to have shaped the New Women movement from its inception. As Teresa Mangum provocatively suggests, 'the New Woman materialized from uneven cultural exchanges among the British Isles, India, Africa, and other parts of the world'.<sup>26</sup> It was cultural contact, cultural hybridity, and the work of empire that provided alternative ideas of female identity. Some New Women travelled to colonial spaces, accompanying husbands in the civil service, and used this new point of view to reassess domestic and marital life (Flora Annie Steel, Laurence Hope [Adela Florence Nicolson]). Many New Women texts locate a smouldering female sensuality in an Orientalized East (Egerton's 'A Cross Line', Victoria Cross [Annie Sophie Cory]'s 'Theodora: A Fragment'). Female travellers' narratives insisted on women's resilience, courage, and determination. These include Mary Kingsley's justly celebrated *Travels in West Africa* and Isabella Bird's *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains*. Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*, arguably the first New Woman novel, places its female character's thwarted drive to self-realization on a rural South African farm run by the labour of unnamed Africans, creating an ironic tension of which Schreiner may have been only intermittently aware. Mangum reminds us that our own criticism has political effects:

As studies like Lee Ann Richardson's *New Woman and Colonial Adventure Fiction in Victorian Britain* and Iveta Jusová's *The New Woman and the Empire* have followed the New Woman into the places and politics of empire, the consequences of our interpretations of this icon become even more ethically as well as aesthetically insistent. These studies invite scholars to ask whether we can justify building research careers on a figure embedded in all we find most objectionable about Victorian global domination.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Teresa Mangum, 'Review: Iveta Jusová, *The New Woman and the Empire*', *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 61, no. 2 (September 2006): 255–69, 256.

<sup>27</sup> Teresa Mangum, 'New Strategies for New (Academic) Women', <<http://ncgsjournal.com/issue32/roundtable.htm>>.

Mangum's reminder in second-wave feminism the grain of jubilation (self)-inquiry about writers.

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Mangum's reminder is especially welcome because New Women criticism's roots in second-wave feminism tend to lend it a celebratory tone. It is hard to work against the grain of jubilation at recovering a lost woman's text, in order to perform a serious (self)-inquiry about the larger effects of placing our academic capital behind certain writers.

Queer theory and gender studies have given critics new methods for reading some of the characters in New Women fiction. In *The Heavenly Twins* and in *The Story of an African Farm*, key chapters involve cross-dressing; characters do not perceive themselves as performing another gender, however, but as uncovering the gender that is really theirs. As Angelica puts on boys' clothes and dances down to the river, or Gregory Rose dons a woman's bonnet in order to nurse the sick, we encounter texts that drastically displace the Victorian assumption that biological bodies link with essential traits. Contemporary critics can use Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity to examine how these characters take on the other sex's qualities through masquerade. We also now have ways of reading these novels' passionate same-sex relationships, as in Edith Johnstone's *A Sunless Heart* (1894) or Eliza Lynn Linton's *The Rebel of the Family* (1880). Sharon Marcus's theory of female friendship, and work on lesbian relationships by writers like Terry Castle and Martha Vicinus, help us understand relations between women in this period.

Moreover, contemporary criticism's interest in material and economic history has led to new ways of reading New Woman fiction. Women's ability to produce fiction, and to have that fiction reach readers, depends far less on abstract notions of 'quality' than on material networks of editors, marketing strategies, publishing contracts, and remuneration. The unforgettable scene of Mary Erle seeking a job on a lady's magazine in *The Story of a Modern Woman* teaches us how many impalpable but important obstacles confronted women who wished to publish. Key criticism here includes Margaret Stetz's lively histories of late-Victorian publishing practices. Mary Ann Gillies's exploration of what the rise of the literary agent meant for women writers, Peter Keating's account of the Society of Authors, and the burgeoning field of Victorian periodical studies.

One publishing development of our own times has also played an enormous role in the burgeoning of the field of New Women criticism. The Internet has made it possible, for the first time, to access rare and obscure women's writing. Websites like the Indiana University Women Writers' Project, Project Gutenberg, archive.org, and Google Books have massively expanded the number of people who can access New Women texts, and search engines now enable scholars to do highly specific searches over a vast quantity of text. As Patrick Leary discusses in 'Googling the Victorians', electronic publication and searching have transformed the field, enabling new forms of research and transforming scholars' techniques for performing matters like annotations or cross-references. We can now find New Women texts, and we can find material about them, that was previously inaccessible except to those few scholars who lived near a major archive.

No matter how much is available online, however, teachers generally prefer to assign hard copies, and Broadview Press has emerged as the press that has made it possible to teach an entire course on New Women writers. Broadview has published two

excellent sources for short prose readings (Carolyn Christensen Nelson's *A New Woman Reader* and Susan Hamilton's *Criminals, Idiots, Women, and Minors*). Broadview also offers excellent editions of novels by Ouida, Sara Jeannette Duncan, Mary Ward, Eliza Lynn Linton, Amy Levy, Ella Hepworth Dixon, Olive Schreiner, and Edith Johnstone. Its policy of reprinting very rare books is especially welcome. Take, for instance, that case of Edith Johnstone's *A Sunless Heart*. Before Constance Harsh republished it with Broadview, there were only two surviving copies of the novel (at least according to Worldcat), one in the National Library of Scotland, one in Flinders University Library in Australia. Ever since Carol Poster pointed out that 'Oxidation is a Feminist Issue', critics have recognized that the greatest threat to recovering neglected Victorian women writers might be the physical disintegration of the few surviving copies. Thanks to far-seeing publishers, scanners, and databases, one can hope that this particular anxiety is beginning to be alleviated.

The result is that today's New Women criticism is wide-ranging indeed. Two larger studies deserve special note. Chris Willis's and Angelique Richardson's *The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact*, a much-cited collection, pulls together work on everything from bicycling to Utopian fiction; and Patricia Murphy's innovative *Time is of the Essence: Temporality, Gender, and the New Woman* explores temporality, arguing that New Women fiction obeys a cyclical sense of time rather than a linear masculine chronology. However, one sure sign that New Women criticism has come of age is that scholars are beginning to publish specific studies of particular types: Angelique Richardson analyses New Women's interest in the eugenic movement, Kristine Swenson discusses female doctors, and Lise Shapiro Sanders addresses shop girls. A one-woman New Women criticism industry is Ann Heilmann, author or editor of at least four books on the topic as well as editor of several multi-volume series and special journal issues on the New Woman, all within the past ten years. Heilmann has perhaps done more than anyone else to publicize the New Woman and shape the field. Finally, writers are beginning to break through the history of celebrating New Women as subversive rebels, by paying attention to women whose politics challenge any easy attempt to identify them as feminist. *Anti-Feminism and the Victorian Novel*, edited by Tamara Silvia Wagner, importantly declares that anti-feminist writers are well worth studying. To sum it all up, let me quote Ann Ardis's evaluation:

I would even venture to suggest that the Victorian fin de siècle has emerged as one of the most exciting arenas of study within Victorian studies, and that scholarship on the New Woman has played no inconsiderable role in a re-valuation of late-nineteenth-century debates about gender, race, national identity, and the 'progress' of modernity that has transformed the way we think about and teach the entire Victorian period, not just the fin de siècle.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Ardis, 'Landscape'.

Ardis's point is imposing of the entire period to learn how to articulate political ambiv

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There are a few exceptional success offset *Beth Book*, the female judging by the tradition they love, their marriage Cosima has just recalled as an orator. render their person:



elson's *A New Woman* (1854). Broadview also has an edition of Mary Ward, Eliza and Edith Johnstone. Like, for instance, that which was republished it with (at least according to the University Library in the Feminist Issue, critics of Victorian women writers. Thanks to far-seeing scholarship, anxiety is begin-

ing indeed. Two larger issues in the New Woman novel on everything from time to the essence of womanhood, arguing that New Womanhood is a masculine chronology. The issue is that scholars are beginning to see Richardson analyze the female New Woman. Our books on the topic deal with the New Woman's issues on the New Woman more than anyone else. Writers are beginning to resist rebels, by paying attention to identify them as feminist. Silvia Wagner, important. To sum it all up, let me

has emerged as one of the most important and that scholarship has a re-valuation of the New Woman's identity, and the New Woman about and teach the

Ardis's point is important; when New Women scholarship flourishes, our understanding of the entire period benefits. We expand our sense of the whole century when we learn how to articulate the complications of New Women novels' racial and sexual tensions, political ambivalence, and material publishing conditions.

However, there is one last aspect of New Women writing that poses a great problem for modern readers. Ever since New Women were rediscovered in the 1970s, critics have desperately wanted to find triumphant stories of women triumphing over Victorian patriarchy. But in New Women fiction, that does not happen.

New Women had trouble imagining an ending. They could depict the moving distress of a woman entrapped in a loveless marriage that stymied every attempt at self-expression. They could show how social and familial pressures left women no option but marriage, no matter whether or not they were suited to the marital state. But what they could not do, very often, was imagine an alternative.

Ardis has pointed out that virtually all New Women novels end with failure. The woman's brief attempt at freedom backfires, and she is forced to return to her domestic enslavement. Sometimes, in what Ardis dubs 'boomerang books', the woman's failure reinforces the notion that female independence is doomed, extolling the virtues of traditional domesticity instead. The tragic endings of New Women fiction raise the question: what kind of future was there for the New Woman? In *The Heavenly Twins*, of the three main female characters, one dies (horribly) of syphilis, infected by her husband; one ends the novel as a nearly catatonic, suicidal figure subjected to a controlling psychologist's instructions; and the only one with any sort of happy ending is stuck in a marriage to a man she calls 'Daddy'. The best she can do to fulfil her brilliant potential is to ghost-write his parliamentary speeches—no better than the fate Margaret Oliphant had imagined a generation earlier in *Phoebe Junior* (1876) and *Miss Marjoribanks* (1865–66). In *The Story of a Modern Woman*, Mary Erle ends by looking hopelessly out over a dingy, grim London cityscape, foreseeing (no doubt accurately) a future of exhausting hack-work without love or rest. In *The Daughters of Danaus*, the sensitive, brilliant, talented composer Hadria is forced to come home to take care of her family, giving up her musical career. Male-authored depictions of New Women are no happier. Thomas Hardy's *Sue Bridehead* ends up in a kind of 'fanatic prostitution', literally bowed under the shadow of the cross; Grant Allen's *Herminia* dies; and of George Gissing's three 'Odd Women', one dies in a loveless, abusive marriage while the other two become alcoholics and nearly starve to death. Writers of New Women fiction could diagnose what was wrong—but quite often they could not imagine an alternative.

There are a few exceptions, however, in which the writer was able to imagine a professional success offsetting the character's romantic failure. In *A Writer of Books* and *The Beth Book*, the female character seems to be in a desperate state at the end of the novel, judging by the traditional rules of the marriage plot. Cosima and Beth have lost the men they love, their marriages have disintegrated, and they are alone. Yet at the same time, Cosima has just reached a peak of successful authorship, and Beth has found her true calling as an orator. The shining delight they take in their professional achievements render their personal tragedies irrelevant. In writing a vocational plot of triumph, then,



Paston and Grand begin to imagine a different shape for women's lives. As Virginia Woolf would write a generation later, 'Chloe liked Olivia. They shared a laboratory together.'<sup>29</sup> When women can have jobs, and collegial relationships made possible by those jobs, other forms of closure become possible beyond marriage, marriage achieved or marriage denied. Yet with the exception of those very few vocational stories, most New Women novels are tragic.

The truncated, disappointing endings of New Women fiction mirror what happened to the New Woman movement itself. Flourishing for not even two decades—arguably from Olive Schreiner's *Story of an African Farm* (1883) through Mary Cholmondeley's *Red Pottage* (1899)—this brief movement received a vast amount of media attention, provoked outraged criticism, and was incessantly mocked. Yet, like any New Woman heroine, the movement bravely faced all this disapprobation to insist on what it felt was right. New Woman fiction expressed the discontent of middle-class women, their frustration at their curtailed lives, their misery at their inability to escape. For a few years in the 1890s, that voice was heard. But just as the New Woman heroine 'boomeranged' back, so too did New Woman fiction disappear in the earliest years of the 20th century, women's discontent subsiding into silence. For the last couple of decades, New Women criticism has been embattled, fighting to represent late-Victorian gender complexities with the broad tools of 1970s feminism and then fighting to move out of 1970s feminist assumptions into a more accommodating framework. The story of the New Women novel's critical fortunes is far from over, and we do not know how it will end. Like New Women fiction itself, it defies closure. But perhaps we can hope that the ending of Grand's *The Beth Book* speaks for the future of New Woman criticism as well. 'Beth was one of the first swallows of the woman's summer. She was strange to the race when she arrived, and uncharitably commented upon; but now the type is known, and has ceased to surprise.'<sup>30</sup>

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