The New Woman Fiction
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Introduction

The final two decades of the Victorian era witnessed the beginning of a shift in social attitudes regarding gender relations, which is marked by a steady move away from the pattern of patriarchal male supremacy and female dependence towards the modern pattern of gender equality. One of the manifestations of this movement is the emergence of the New Woman fiction.

The Woman Question

The Woman Question, raised by Mary Wollstonecraft in her pamphlet, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), influenced the mid- and late-Victorian feminists. In the 1850s, Harriet Martineau continued vigorously the Woman Question debate in her polemical writings. She urged upper-class women to obtain a proper education and profession in order to make themselves financially independent. Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna dealt with the Woman Question in her book *The Wrongs of Woman*. She condemned women’s industrial employment and propagated domestic feminism. Frances Trollope and Elizabeth Gaskell urged upper-class women to become active in the public sphere. Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot criticised social marginalisation of women.

A number of Victorian feminists, including Emily Davies, Frances Power Cobbe, Josephine Butler, Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon and Millicent Garrett Fawcett, revived the Woman Question debate in their campaign for women’s rights, including the right to higher education, property, employment and suffrage. The effects of the campaign were positive although gradual and delayed in time. In 1857, the *Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act* permitted women limited divorce, and an act of 1891 denied men conjugal rights to their wives’ bodies without their wives’ consent. The Married Women’s Property Acts of 1870 allowed married women to retain and control their earned income, and in 1882 they gained the right to own and control their property. In 1878, the University of London began to grant B.A. to women and in the next two years the first women colleges were established at Oxford: Lady Margaret Hall and Somerville. In the 1880s and 1890s, the Woman Question became a vital issue in British newspapers and periodicals. Militant female activists (suffragists), writers, artists and educators expressed their polemical views on the condition of women.

The Odd Women

Single women at marriageable age were perceived as a growing social problem in mid- and late-Victorian England. The phenomenon was noticed and described by William Rathbone Greg, who published in 1862 an essay “Why Are Women Redundant?”. The
author argued with genuine concern that according to statistics “[t]here were, in England and Wales, in 1851, 1,248,00 women in the prime of their life, i.e. between the ages of twenty and forty years, who were unmarried, out of a total number of rather less than 3,000,000.” (12). Greg predicted a miserable life of “celibacy, struggle and privation” to those women and, as a remedy, he proposed their massive shipment to the British colonies, where single men supposedly waited for wives.

To transport the half million from where they are redundant to where they are wanted, at an average rate of fifty passengers in each ship, would require 10,000 vessels, or at least 10,000 voyages. Still, as 350,000 emigrants have left our shores in a single year before now, and as we do not need and do not wish to expatriate the whole number at once, or with any great rapidity, the undertaking, though difficult, would seem to be quite possible. [15]

However, Greg signalled a serious obstacle to his plan. The colonies mostly needed marriageable women from the working-class and the lower ranks of the middle class, but the majority of “redundant” women in England who would not find husbands were from the middle- and upper-class. Greg remarked with dismay that an increasing number of young upper-class English women “really and deliberately prefer the unsatisfying pleasures of luxury and splendour to the possible sacrifices of married life.” (21)

One cause of female celibacy was that the rate of marriage declined steadily in the second half of the nineteenth century while the age of newly married women was continually rising. Besides, a growing number of educated and liberated women, who were later to be called “New Women”, began to question the foundations of paternalistic society and the supposed bliss of the traditional Victorian marriage.

The New Woman

The term “New Woman” was coined by the writer and public speaker Sarah Grand in 1894 (271). It soon became a popular catch-phrase in newspapers and books. The New Woman, a significant cultural icon of the of the fin de siècle, departed from the stereotypical Victorian woman. She was intelligent, educated, emancipated, independent and self-supporting. The New Women were not only middle-class female radicals, but also factory and office workers. As Sally Ledger wrote:

The New Woman was a very fin-de-siecle phenomenon. Contemporary with the new socialism, the new imperialism, the new fiction and the new journalism, she was part of cultural novelties which manifested itself in the 1880s and 1890s. [1]
At the end of the nineteenth century, New Woman ideology began to play a significant part in complex social changes that led to the redefining gender roles, consolidating women’s rights, and overcoming masculine supremacy. The discourse on gender relations took place alongside developments in labour relations (increased feminisation of the labour force), divorce legislation, education for women, single motherhood, sanitation and epidemiology as well as female consumer culture. The New Woman soon found advocates among the aesthetes and decadents.

The New Woman, a tempting object of ridicule in the press and popular fiction, was generally middle-class, and New Women included social reformers, popular novelists, suffragists, female students and professional women. The contemporary satirical representations of the New Woman usually pictured her riding a bicycle in bloomers and smoking a cigarette. Lyn Pykett has observed the ambivalent representations of the New Woman in the late-Victorian discourse:

The New Woman was by turns: a mannish amazon and a Womanly woman; she was oversexed, undersexed, or same sex identified; she was anti-maternal, or a racial supermother; she was male-identified, or manhating and/or man-eating or self-appointed saviour of benighted masculinity; she was anti-domestic or she sought to make domestic values prevail; she was radical, socialist or revolutionary, or she was reactionary and conservative; she was the agent of social and/or racial regeneration, or symptom and agent of decline. [Richardson and Willis, xii]

The New Woman phenomenon found an interesting representation in late Victorian fiction and anticipated various discourses of a new womanhood in the twentieth century.

**The New Woman in Late Victorian Fiction**

The New Woman fiction that appeared in the 1880s and 1890s, does not constitute a single literary genre but rather multiple ones with a woman as a central character. According to Lyn Pykett’s definition, the New Woman fiction consists mainly of works which fit W. T. Stead’s (1894) description of the ‘novel of the modern woman’; they are novels ‘by a woman about women from the standpoint of Woman’ (5).

New Woman novels often expressed dissatisfaction with the contemporary position of women in marriage and in society. The novels about nonconformist or rebellious women became a springboard for a public debate about gender relations that had previously been taboo. The New Woman novels represented female heroines who fought against the traditional Victorian male perception of woman as ‘angel in the house’ and challenged the old codes of conduct and morality. The late Victorian New Woman fiction anticipated feminist writing of the twentieth century. Contemporary critics attacked the sexual content of the New Woman novels, and twentieth-century feminist criticism has
identified undercurrent of innovative views on gender and society in many New Woman novels. According to Lyn Pykett,

The New Woman novels […] were much more directly linked to contemporary controversies surrounding the Woman Question, and to the various discourses within which they were produced and mediated. Many of the New Woman novelists were also prominent contributors to the debates on ‘woman’ in the newspaper and periodical press, and the New Woman fiction was sometimes reviewed alongside sociological and other polemical works, as if it were part of a seamless discourse on the Woman Question. [7]

New Woman fiction dealt frankly with sex and marriage as well as women’s desires for independence and fulfilment. Many New Woman novels strongly opposed the idea that home is woman’s only proper sphere. The female authors revealed the traps of conventional Victorian marriage, including the condition of marriage which tolerated marital rape, compulsory or enforced motherhood, and the double standard of sexual morality. Many female protagonists of the New Woman fiction experienced conventional marriage as a degrading and oppressive institution because women suffered inferior status and were often victims of domestic violence and other threats. As Barbara Caine has pointed out,

In their novels, innocent and ignorant women faced the terrible suffering which came from venereal disease and which was a result both of their own sexual ignorance and of the past sexual excesses of their husbands. Constant ill health for themselves — and the even greater horror of giving birth to children with congenital syphilis – served for them, as for many others in the course of the 1890s, to show why existing marriage was impossible and why masculine sexual privilege and female sexual ignorance had to stop. [136]

The New Woman writers indicated three major areas in which women felt oppressed: marriage, labour market and suffrage. Some female writers (Olive Schreiner) advocated free love. Others proposed celibacy for strong-willed and independent women who wanted to enter the public sphere (Gissing). A. R. Cunningham has distinguished two main types of the New Woman novels: the “purity school” novels and the Sue Bridehead type novels. (179, 180) The former were less radical and emulated bold and independent women characters, like Benjamin Disraeli’s Sybil, Charlotte Brontë’s Shirley and Elizabeth Gaskell’s Margaret Hale. The latter presented the intellectual, emancipated, and androgynous women with a number of modern neuroses, like Sue Bridehead in Thomas Hardy’s Jude the Obscure.

Both types of novels exposed the victimisation of women in marriage and society, the major difference between them being the attitude to a monogamous relationship. The
“purity school” novels did not reject the value of matrimony although its novels strongly criticised the traditional Victorian marriage as being oppressive to women. The second type of the New Woman fiction depicted the traditional Victorian marriage as repugnant and emphasised the sexual double standard and male degeneration.

The New Woman Novelists

The New Woman novelists were mostly women, although a few male authors also contributed to the genre. They all called for a redefinition of women’s roles in marriage and society, and opposed the social norms imposed on women. In literature, they criticised the representation of the Ideal Womanhood epitomised at mid-century by William Makepeace Thackeray’s Amelia Sedley in Vanity Fair (1847) and Charles Dickens’s Esther Summerson in The Bleak House (1852-53) (Mangum, 2). They also challenged the traditional patriarchal society and the view that marriage and motherhood were the most suitable occupations for women. The New Woman novelists tried to redefine the relations between the sexes and called for honesty in sexual matters. They also supported professional aspirations of women.

Some of the most prominent female New Woman novelists, now almost forgotten, include Olive Schreiner, Sarah Grand, and George Egerton, who were violently criticised and praised by both female and male readers.

Olive Schreiner (1855-1920) is regarded as a pioneer of the New Woman fiction. Her feminist bildungsroman, Story of an African Farm (1883), which inspired other New Woman writers, criticises the traditional gender roles and promotes an assertive heroine who can shape her life. The novel also deals with sexual initiation, premarital sex, freethinking, transvestitism and gender identity, rejection of marriage, women’s inequality and search for personal freedom.

Sarah Grand (pseudonym of Frances Elizabeth Clarke, 1854-1943) was a member of the Woman Writer’s Suffrage League and an active feminist. Her novels, Ideala (1888), The Heavenly Twins (1893) and The Beth Book (1897), tell the stories of women who have been trapped into a bad marriage. In principle, Grand supported the institution of marriage, but she deplored women’s sexual ignorance and men’s hypocrisy. She argued that venereal diseases in marriage were mainly due to men’s unbridled promiscuity and licentiousness.

Mona Caird (Mona Alison, 1854?-1932) exposed the failure of mismatched marriage and criticised the patriarchal ideal of male dominance and female submission in an article “Marriage” published in the Westminster Review in 1888. Her novel, The Wing of Azrael (1889), dealt with husband’s cruelty and marital rape.

George Egerton (Mary Chavelita Dunne, 1859-1945) is called by Elaine Showalter “the paradigmatic figure among the New Woman writers” (xii). In 1893, she published a

The male authors who dealt with the New Woman theme include George Meredith, George Gissing, Grant Allen and Thomas Hardy.

George Meredith wrote a significant New Woman novel, *Diana of Crossways* (1885) about a passionate and intelligent upper-class young woman who is trapped into an abusive and degrading marriage. The novel became an inspiration for a number of New Women in their struggle for emancipation at the turn of the century.

George Gissing’s (1857-1903) *Odd Women* (1893) takes up the theme of redundant women in the 1880s. The novel focuses on the fates of single women and demonstrates that the patriarchal and male dominated society is unable to accept the increasing presence of new independent women in the public sphere.

Grant Allen (1848-1899) wrote one of the most hotly discussed novels, *The Woman Who Did* (1895), which combines the free-love theme with an anti-marriage message. The Cambridge-educated heroine of the novel refuses to marry her lover, but gives birth to her illegitimate daughter. The novel prompted Lucas Cleeve (Adelina G. I. Kingscote, 1868-1908) to write *The Woman Who Wouldn’t*, and Victoria Cross(e) (Annie Sophie Cory, 1868-1952), *The Woman Who Didn’t*.

Thomas Hardy, who praised some of the New Woman writers (Sarah Grand, George Egerton and Grant Allen), created a memorable and tragic female character in his last novel, *Jude the Obscure* (1896). Sue Bridehead, an enlightened liberal New Woman, is a victim of oppressive Victorian double moral standard. Like the New Woman female authors, Hardy objects to the Victorian view of the sacredness of the institution of marriage. In *Jude* he proposes the abolition of conventional marriage because it is not in harmony with human nature.

**Conclusion**

The New Woman fiction emerged out of Victorian feminist rebellion and boosted debates on such issues as women’s education, women’s suffrage, sex and women’s autonomy. It disappeared with the first-wave feminism after World War One. However, it made a lasting impact on popular imagination and perhaps on the lives of many women in England and elsewhere. The New Woman fiction contributed to major changes in women’s lives, including their increased mobility away from family scrutiny (riding a bicycle, travelling alone), shorter and lighter clothing and interest in gynecology, resistance to enforced marital sex, insistence on the availability of birth control.
information, and the right to vote. One of the most important values of the New Woman fiction was an attempt to renegotiate sexual relations between the sexes, and gendered behaviour. The weakness of many New Woman novels was the representation of one-dimensional characters and melodramatic plots.

Related Material

- The New Woman Fiction
- Slum Fiction

Bibliography

- The New Woman Fiction — Primary Sources
- The New Woman Fiction — Secondary Sources

References


