

New Woman Phenomenon at the end of the 19th Century

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Abstract

The emergence of the New Woman phenomenon at the end of the nineteenth century brought considerable changes both into the cherished conventions of British and American society and the established norms of contemporary Victorian literature. No longer the angel in a house, the epitome of traditional femininity, the “New Woman” personalized the devil, a figure that introduced new codes of behaviour and a new way of thinking.

Keywords

identity, New Woman, dichotomy, fin de siècle, mentality

The emergence of the New Woman phenomenon at the end of the nineteenth century brought considerable changes both into the cherished conventions of British and American society and the established norms of contemporary Victorian literature. The very term “New Woman” appeared for the first time in its capitalized form in the 1865 issue of the *Westminster Review*, in which the heroine of a new sensational novel was no longer called the Angel in the House, the epitome of traditional femininity, but a “New Woman” who personalized “the Devil in the House” (Heilmann 2000: 22), a figure that introduced new codes of behaviour and a new way of thinking.

However, there is no unanimous theory. According to Michelle Elizabeth Tusan, “the term ‘New Woman’ was invented in the *fin-de-siècle* feminist press [...] where it named a utopian feminist vision of the future” (Schaffer 2001: 40). Notwithstanding, most books on the New Woman claim that the name for a “symbol of all that was most challenging and dangerous in advanced thinking” at the turn of the centuries (Cunningham 1978: 2) was launched and popularized in Ouida and Sarah Grand’s polemical essays in the *North American Review* of 1894, especially thanks to Grand’s article “The New Aspect of the Woman Question” (Schaffer 2001: 40). It was an attempt to label an already existing situation. This moment is perceived by critics as a real defining point of the literary phenomenon. From that time on, the term was adopted by the press

and creative writing; everyone knew how to name this embodiment of changing gender roles that rebelled against the established order. Still, both women writers wanted to emphasize that the real New Woman did not abolish her womanly attributes and obligations; they stressed her ability to combine the traits of a feminist, such as “independence, courage, truthfulness, self-respect, knowledge, intellect, education, strength of body and mind” and feminine features like “motherliness, domesticity, gentleness and purity” (Heilmann 2000: 33). They particularly disapproved of the New Woman’s refusal to bear children, as it was considered to be the primary goal in life, and her burning passion for travelling and freedom in every respect (Schaffer 2001: 46).

The movement started to be widespread both in Victorian England and the USA, a country which welcomed every alternation to the rigid system of society, in times of the *fin de siècle*. These were the years of rapid change at the turn of the nineteenth century, often called the decadent period, as they introduced the “crisis of the *ancien régime*” (Heilmann 2000: 1). Everything traditional, stabilized and connected with the Victorian past was no longer approved of and followed; on the other hand, there were more and more voices calling for moral regeneration (1). Every single value could then be challenged easily. As the established norms and rules which organized the society were gradually breaking down, every change to contemporary life was welcomed with great interest. Hence, these times mark the beginning of the new modern era, with its growing interest in the woman question; David Rubenstein claims that “never before had literature and fiction contributed so much to the feminist movement as it did at the *fin de siècle*” (Ledger 1997: 27). This period is generally associated with the first wave of feminism (Heilmann 2000: 13), which was a great novelty that aroused people’s interest both in the modernist movement, and in the problem of femininity, the New Woman being an “emblem of the shifting and conflicting conceptualisations of gender and sexuality at the *fin de siècle*” (19).

The rise of the New Woman posed a threat to homogenous traditional society. According to Sally Ledger there was one considerable reason why this movement was never supported by the establishment; since the main motto of women from that period was to reject motherhood, the British feared that by impoverishing the race, their national supremacy would cease. That would certainly threaten the economic status quo and bring social disruption, as the dominant

Victorian ideologies and codes of behaviour were supposed to be changed (Ledger 1997: 19). On the other hand, she claims, it is not the new womanhood which endangers society, but syphilis, a venereal disease spread by promiscuous men. This theme was discussed by Sarah Grand in her novel *The Heavenly Twins*, where the standardized gender roles were turned on their heads; hence it was the man and not a woman who polluted society (115).

It is easy now to imagine what challenge to the existing *status quo* the New Woman presented, a female who was speaking on her own behalf, disregarded all previous assumptions and countered old beliefs. One may encounter a variety of difficulties while striving to give a detailed description of a New Woman because her perception may vary from one writer to another; hence Victorian society could not find the frames to pin down the powerful woman who tried to put all the existing canons upside down.

Let me now pass on to describing the most common real objectives which the typical New Woman wanted to achieve and present the basic characteristics of her persona. When Ainslie Meares, the author of the book *The New Woman*, wanted to explore similar questions, she enquired: "What are the basic characteristics of the New Woman? ... Above all she is striving for equality of opportunity with men to enjoy full life, and she seeks the right to make decisions for herself, the right to determine her own destiny" (Heilmann 2000: 1).

As the first step to determine her own destiny, the New Woman placed much emphasis on proper education; she sought all opportunities to fulfil her desire for knowledge and started her long-term struggle for getting legal and equal access to schooling. An early beginning may be marked by the campaign in the *Monthly Repository* which was initiated by the feminist journalist Harriet Martineau in 1823. She was crusading for "equal educational perspectives for girls." As the years passed, during the 1850s, there appeared a few informal organized groups of women who were struggling for educational reforms (Richardson and Willis 2001: 6). The first step towards higher education for girls was the establishment of two colleges in London; Queen's and Bedford in 1848 and 1849, which gave women direct access to higher education. The next ones, with a higher standard of teaching, were the North London Collegiate founded in 1850 and Cheltenham Ladies' College from 1854 (Cunningham 1978: 4). The crucial turning point in the history of

female tuition was the initiation of Girton College in Cambridge 1869, which became the hallmark of the educated young New Woman, who was then associated with the graduate of that place and simultaneously called the “Girton Girl” (Ledger 1997: 17). What is also worth noticing is the fact that attention was paid not only to higher education which was designed for middle and upper class girls, but also to primary education. A lot of elementary schools which girls could attend appeared in these years “provided and controlled by the state”; however, they “did not become compulsory until 1880” (Richardson and Willis 2001: 6).

Nevertheless, although higher education was no longer denied to women, the phenomenon of inequality and male dominance still existed. There were some courses which officially did not forbid women to take part in them, though in reality men outnumbered them (Matthews 2003: 37). What is more, voices opposing the female ideal for gaining knowledge were not rare; conservative thinkers such as Laura Marholm or Stanley Hall could still express their opinion in a straightforward way, for them “education (was) [...] an irrelevant external stimulus [...] diverting women from their true role and destiny in motherhood” (Marcus 2001: 146).

Proper education was not a clear ultimate aim in itself, rather a path which could lead to work, money and, as a consequence, to total autonomy from men and freedom in every respect. Young women were full of desire for self-development and personal fulfilment through work. The modern New Women wanted to cut off financial links which were holding them close to men and finally escape the economic dependency well established in the past. Only then could they understand that the moment one was self-supporting, marriage did not seem to be the only option in life. They fully realized that “love – rational or erotic – could not flourish in a situation where women were economically dependent upon men” (Richardson and Willis 2001: 9), and that is why the New Woman decided to provide for herself and lead an independent existence, away from rapacious fathers and husbands, most often in the metropolis, which was quite a new experience.

Living on one’s own in a big industrial city constituted a great change for a young girl, as urban life was abounding in multifarious pleasures, starting from “amusement parks, public dance halls, vaudeville, and the early movies” (Matthews 2003: 107) and ending with “hotels with public rooms, restaurants, cafés, nightclubs” (116)

which gave an up-to-date opportunity for both sexes to intermingle in the public sphere, where no action and no one was controlled by older traditional generation. This freedom enabled a woman to find a partner that would suit her; she would no longer have to wait for a proper match found by her parents. The New Woman demanded “to be treated as a reasonable adult able to determine her own destiny without undue parental intervention or supervision” (Heilmann 2000: 34). Meeting men in public was quite a modern occurrence; till then nearly every close contact with husbands-to-be took place at home, in a living room to which all members of the family had direct access. However, the twentieth century brought some considerable changes into the circumstances of getting acquainted.

The movement of emancipation was always leading in one direction: women craved the same treatment and rights men had. They demanded to be treated as reasonable human beings with their opportunities for self-development and expectations. The rebellious ones were often those who lived in close contact with their brothers and faced all the possibilities young men could entertain. No wonder that they were striving for “the same opportunities as boys to develop into healthy, autonomous, fulfilled individuals” (39). It was considered unfair that men were not constrained to marry either by families or by society, as women were; they had their own lives to spend in an independent way, be it on travelling, education or at work. However, young girls faced multifarious difficulties when they wanted to organize their existence in agreement with their desires; unfortunately they had “no chance of self-development, no work or pursuits of their own; their especial talents [were] to lie dormant, and their best powers [were] allowed no sphere of action” (40).

The next issue to analyze is the problem of gender-biased professions and the question if such a phenomenon can be really done away with. The New Woman opted for the claim that sex should not predicate a person’s abilities and capacities; rather, his or her innate faculties ought to determine the work. According to her, there were no characteristic inborn traits of behaviour that are indispensable for particular professions; hence, every one with sufficient capacities and knowledge should be able to perform all duties. Men, however, formed a totally different opinion; male lawyers emphasized that

“(p)rofessional work [...] required the capacity for objectivity—a strictly gendered quality. The more intellectual the work, the more it

seems men were anxious to see the capacity to fearlessly face 'cold, hard facts', without flinching or personal bias, as requiring a positively soldierly fortitude that only men possessed" (Matthews 2003: 44-45).

Forming such opinions was definitely suggesting fear not to lose the respected position. Nevertheless, men were powerful enough to exclude women from male-dominated working circles; they could always state that females should not work, as they are not adjusted to certain professions. The same arguments were frequent at homes, when men flinched from all household duties and mundane tasks because they were not made to perform them.

The lawyers' opinion was countered by a graduate student from Chicago, who in 1912 wrote his dissertation on social psychology of women and arrived at a conclusion that "boys and girls learned from an early age the behaviour and personal traits" of the feminine and masculine, as those who surrounded them had a direct influence on their character development (92). Thus, women were not recommended to certain jobs or professions; it was only society who made them behave in an ascribed way and act in particular areas of life.

As soon as women started to appear in the public sphere of labour, there emerged opposing voices with a new argument against women's new roles, stating that long working hours would incapacitate females as future mothers, as too much drudgery could impair their future reproductive capacities. The opinions were sometimes really strong ones; Henry Maudsley announced his claim in which he believed that "laborious days of intellectual exercise and production" will not pass without any consequences concerning female functions as "conceivers, mothers and nurses of children." What is even more crucial, society will get "the advantages of a quantity of female intellectual work at the price of a puny, enfeebled and sickly race" (Ledger 1997: 18). Soon after this argument there were more standpoints against the New Woman who wanted to fulfil her professional ambitions; Charles Harper, in 1894, even dared to sum up that female work will finally lead to an "ultimate extinction of the race" (18). Thus, women who wanted to be modern and become self-supporting had a hard nut to crack, as many influential men did not support this novelty and did their best to make the rest think in their way. Women, on the other hand, could not agree with that view;

they formed an opinion that it is not work that is dangerous both to their physical and mental health, but rather pure nothingness, idleness, lack of responsibility and everyday thrill. How could one be happy if the only duties were the domestic mundane ones that repeated every day with no hope for a change in the quotidian routine? Women craved for a metamorphosis in their existence and considered work to a helpful means to achieve their aim.

Fortunately, the turn of the century brought new employment opportunities for women in which they could finally experience their professional fulfilment. Along with professions which were traditionally ascribed to women owing to their female capacities such as patience, empathy and need to help others, there were constantly more female workers in previously male domains. Richardson and Willis claim that “in the second half of the nineteenth century the social and economic position of women underwent accelerated change. [...] (B)etween 1851 and 1901 the total number of women in the workforce increased from 2 832 000 to 4 751 000” (Richardson and Willis 2001: 5). Thanks to the invention of the typewriter, schools teaching typing started to appear, which was a real breakthrough in professional training. Thus, middle-class girls gained a new opportunity; many of them became typists and performed secretarial work in offices which seemed very attractive, as wages were not low and working conditions, including hours spent at work, appeared to be reasonable. The creation of the telephone caused the rise of telephone companies, which hired women as telephone operators; “by the early twentieth century Bell Telephone was the largest single employer of women in the United States” (Matthews 2003: 50). Also women could find employment at the post office as it “was the first and largest government office to employ women” (Richardson and Willis 2001: 5). In brief, the number of female clerks was constantly rising; the census “of 1861 and 1871 show no female clerks at all; by 1881 there were nearly 6000 and by 1891 the number had almost trebled to 17, 859” (Cunningham 1978: 4).

A lot of women were also involved in dressmaking and worked as shop girls. This appeared to be a modern profession specifically for women because taste in clothes and knowledge of fashion was crucial. Although they worked long hours, women were satisfied with that sort of labour; new and modern department stores lured and were definitely ranked higher than factory work. The New Woman novelists also portrayed many female shop attendants as

happy and contented beings, as for example Monica from George Gissing's *The Odd Women*.

A great deal of the educated graduates from colleges became writers, often marginal ones, concentrating on novels, romantic and popular fiction for masses, and teachers in primary and secondary schooling. According to Patricia Hollis "(i)n 1861, of 110 000 teachers in the UK, 80 000 were women; by 1901 the figure had risen to 172 000 women out of a total of 230 000" (Richardson and Willis 2001: 5). One can infer from these numbers that the phenomenon of female teachers started to be a widespread one; education enabled the New Woman to earn her living. Yet, women were still marginal as far as higher education was concerned; men still outnumbered them in this area (Matthews 2003: 47).

Medicine offered a new opportunity for the New Woman; many of them found employment as nurses both in hospitals and in the private environment of rich estates. Again, women were suitable for that sort of job, and men did not even try to compete in that sphere. On the other hand, men would never let a woman perform doctor's duties, as they were reserved for males. Those females who eventually managed to be doctors in hospitals were still under oppression when surrounded by men (47).

In spite of new job opportunities a lot of women stayed in traditionally ascribed employment, such as social work, charity and domestic service, which were definitely less prestigious, less well-paid and with not so much autonomy; however, these options still offered a chance to get out of the control of fathers and husbands, an escape from the duty to perform all family commitments.

Since the moment women entered the public male sphere, men became threatened, because they started losing their jobs, as well as places which previously belonged only to them. From that time on they had to learn how to share their lives with women. Men, however, did not surrender without a fight; the New Women sometimes had to struggle with the label of the public woman, who, if unaccompanied by any men, was taken for a prostitute. Nevertheless, she managed to appear in more and more spheres of public life, starting from local councils, music hall performances and the Salvation Army through journalism and charity work. But most important of all was the newly gained freedom to take active part in all urban entertainments, like concerts, art exhibitions, theatres, libraries (Ledger 1997: 154-155). The creation of huge department stores, boulevards, cafés, teashops,

eating places suddenly gave women the space to stroll freely, spending their leisure time outside domestic surroundings, which also offered a possibility of meeting other women and men – a new experience of public life (156).

The New Woman, as a new social phenomenon, became a source of inspiration for writers and started to be presented in literature; the period of the 1890's was full of novels dealing with independent women who stoutly and confidently lived their lives, disregarding all that was connected with tradition, social custom, establishment and convention. This was a living figure transferred into literary realm. Like life itself, historical changes and literature were always interwoven, the "emancipation of women and the emancipation of the English novel advanced together" (Cunningham 1978: 3). Those were the times of female writing and concentration on the fight for new conventions. The critic Elaine Showalter states that "in the 1880s and 1890s, women writers played a central role in the formulation and popularization of feminist ideology" (Richardson and Willis 2001: 24).

However, the novels that presented the New Woman theme adopted a new mode of writing which was directed at female audiences. It has been suggested by Lyn Pykett that the "attempts of the New Woman writers to write for women, to write about women and, in some cases, to write woman herself, led them to use the available forms in new ways and to look for new...ways of writing" (Heilmann 2000: 69). These new ways often boiled down to autobiographical forms of writing, providing a full picture of life or based on detailed facts. Charlotte Perkins Gilman did this when she wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper" (69). According to Heilmann, New Woman writing was very close to naturalist writing as it examined the "devastating effect of sexuality and madness" (56). She shares the same opinion which Thomas Hardy expressed in "Candour in English Fiction" in 1890 that these new novels had to tackle the theme of sexual and extramarital intercourse if it was to describe the reality, otherwise it would be "false colouring" (qtd. in Cunningham 1978: 45). In order to do justice to the world, the new novels threatened the established order of domesticity, such as marriage, which used to be the destination of the plot of Victorian fiction. New Woman writing revitalized that theme by making a synthesis of "old" and "new" qualities and desires. Nonetheless, Victorian literature was a strong basis to work on; it was a fertile background for the New Woman

writers, as fundamental assumptions of the Victorian novel were still forceful and valid. Themes like love as women's main concern, home and family did not vanish from the books when the new century was approaching; simply the attitude was radically different.

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