

New Woman

RIYA DAS 

Prairie View A&M University, Texas, United States

THE ideal of the British New Woman, variously representing feminist, activist, fashion reformer, and writer, has been the subject of renewed critical interest since the late twentieth century. Although symptomatic of its situation in the fin de siècle, which “names those things that were never quite assimilated into the high-Victorian moment,”¹ since the 1980s the New Woman has transcended its polemical Victorian conceptualization to represent “prequels to modernism as well as sequels to Victorianism.”² As Sally Ledger has argued, the New Woman, despite being largely a “discursive phenomenon,” was nonetheless historically significant and central to late Victorian literary culture.³

In fictional depictions, the New Woman is hardly represented as a singular phenomenon and is perhaps more accurately characterized as a pluralistic form of femininity, marked by its difference from the traditional mid-Victorian domestic angel. For example, Hadria in Mona Caird’s *The Daughters of Danaus* (1894) temporarily abandons her husband and biological sons for an alternative, feminist household in Paris, where she pursues music and adopts a daughter. Mary, in Ella Hepworth Dixon’s semi-autobiographical *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894), works as a struggling journalist in London and, at the conclusion of the novel, pragmatically chooses her difficult career over free love with a married man and inevitable social scandal. Some vocal proponents of the New Woman movement perhaps misleadingly projected themselves as New Women despite their more conventional personal circumstances as wives and mothers.⁴

Despite this well-noted difficulty in defining the New Woman, it is not difficult to identify that this ideal, as both discursive phenomenon and adopted political identity, is provocative and exciting. On this note, Tracy J. R. Collins has argued that representations of the New Woman, such as the satirical images in *Punch* magazine, reinforced the cause of feminist progress by depicting an attractive form of femininity

Riya Das is an assistant professor of English at Prairie View A&M University. She is currently working on her first monograph, on late Victorian literature and gender, with the support of an NEH fellowship.

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that was “fit, strong, skilled, and competitive.”⁵ Critics have made the notable choice to reserve New Woman status for controversial characters—the plain and boring (but financially independent) Meyrick sisters in the backdrop of George Eliot’s protofeminist *Daniel Deronda* (1876) are seldom regarded as proto-New-Women, in contrast to the outspoken Gwendolen. Eliot’s novel also portrays other women who have eluded consideration as proto-New-Women—because of race for the Jewish woman Mirah, who, like Gwendolen, seeks financial independence through artistic vocation, and because of morality for the fallen woman Lydia, who aggressively seeks and acquires financial independence despite her social precarity.

In fact, unconventional sexuality remained a discursive ideal as well, reinforcing traditional morality in practice for the New Woman. This is evidenced by writers such as Eleanor Marx and Olive Schreiner, who “promoted free love as part of a utopian socialist ideal” but also advocated for reform in, rather than the abolition of, the marital institution.⁶ Schreiner, for instance, “refused the symbolic surrender of women’s autonomy in names, and insisted that her husband . . . take her name.”⁷ In fictional representations, New Women, like the amusingly rigid Rhoda in George Gissing’s *The Odd Women* (1893), profess their support for free love but seldom succumb to it, because it evokes the familiar sense of doom inherited from fallen woman narratives. The implied doom of those who do practice free love, such as Lyndall in Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), is often spelled out through the predicament of death in childbirth at the conclusion of the narrative.

The New Woman, therefore, walks a complex tightrope, whereby she must be provocative enough to resist traditional gender structures but also circumscribed by her white, middle-class morality. Recent critical works have established the New Woman as an imperial figure, maintaining a calculated homophobic distance from the aesthetic movement,⁸ and advancing a white, middle-class eugenic agenda.⁹

Here, I propose to conceptualize the New Woman beyond merely thinking of her as a model of both white, middle-class feminist liberation and British imperialism at a time of rampant “sexual anarchy.” I suggest, instead, that we think of the New Woman in wider terms, as a precursor to the modern Western female professional, another ideal circumscribed by mores of race, class, and moral values that persist alongside the element of provocation.

There is considerable scholarly disagreement regarding the extent of the New Woman's triumph, as she is simultaneously independent of men for sustenance and yet objectified as a "Sexy Angel in the House."¹⁰ I argue that the portrayal of the New Woman as somewhat sexually provocative and the ideal's potential to engender feminist progress are not mutually exclusive. In representations of early female professionals, their capacity for intellectually contributing in a masculine space is provocation enough to hint at dysmorphia—Mina in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) famously has a "man's brain."¹¹ Mina channels her professional skills toward serving the novel's imperial quest to ward off foreign threats from English soil while adhering to racial, class, and moral codes. Conformity to these codes assure that the provocative element defining the white, middle-class New Woman reinforces the larger structure of the previously masculine workplace instead of dismantling it.

The New Woman, conceptualized in this way, is godmother to what we are now familiar with as female professionalism and emotional labor, eloquently described by Dixon as "an effort which completely prostrate[s] . . . —to look smiling, calm, imperturbable."¹² This, on one hand, propels women forward in the workforce. On the other hand, the New Woman's identity as white, middle-class, and ultimately sexually moral distances her from other women—ostracizing sexual/fallen and foreign women, and remaining unconcerned about working-class women's physical labor. New Woman novels navigate away from the marriage plot toward individualistic survival plots, where New Women seek pragmatic heterosexual partnerships while professionally serving imperial structures.

NOTES

1. Matthew Potolsky, "Fin de Siècle," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 46, nos. 3–4 (2018): 697.
2. Teresa Mangum, *Married, Middlebrow, and Militant: Sarah Grand and the New Woman Novel* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 5.
3. Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 1–2.
4. Mangum, *Married, Middlebrow, and Militant*, 6–7.
5. Tracy J. R. Collins, "Athletic Fashion, *Punch*, and the Creation of the New Woman," *Victorian Periodicals Review* 43, no. 3 (2010): 313.

6. Hilary Fawcett, "Romance, Glamour and the Exotic: Femininity and Fashion in Britain in the 1900s," in *New Woman Hybridities: Femininity, Feminism and International Consumer Culture, 1880–1930*, edited by Ann Heilmann and Margaret Beetham, 147 (London: Routledge, 2004); see also Ledger, *The New Woman*, 124.
7. Anne McClintock, "Olive (Emilie Albertina) Schreiner," in *British Writers. Supplement 2: Kingsley Amis to J. R. R. Tolkien*, edited by George Stade (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1992), <https://dept.english.wisc.edu/amclintock/schreiner.htm>.
8. See Ledger, *The New Woman*, 122–23; and Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (New York: Viking, 1990), 170.
9. See Iveta Jusová, *The New Woman and the Empire* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2005), 14–15, 18; and Angelique Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century: Rational Reproduction and the New Woman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 215.
10. Ann Heilmann, "Revolting Men? Sexual Fears and Fantasies in Writings by Old Men, 1880–1910," *Critical Survey* 15, no. 3 (2003): 56; see also Jordan Kistler, "Rethinking the New Woman in *Dracula*," *Gothic Studies* 20, nos. 1–2 (2018): 245; and Jessica Gray, "Typewriter Girls in Turn-of-the-Century Fiction: Feminism, Labor and Modernity," *English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920* 58, no. 4 (2015): 486–87.
11. Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 218, 316.
12. Ella Hepworth Dixon, *The Story of a Modern Woman* (London: Methuen, 1894), 172.

