**The New Woman**

A historical figure as well as a literary phenomenon, the New Woman was named in 1894 in an exchange between ‘Ouida’ (Marie Louise de la Ramée) and Sarah Grand in the pages of the *New American Review*. The New Woman was a ubiquitous presence in fin-de-siècle literature and journalism concerned with debates about the “woman question,” and influenced twentieth-century ideas about feminism and gender. The New Woman novel, with its mapping of female psychological space and emphasis on female consciousness, shaped modernist fiction.

New Women were often political activists as well as writers, and agitated for reform on political and domestic questions. Most New Woman fiction rejects aestheticism in favor of realism; it deals with sexuality with a frankness that departed from Victorian codes of propriety and takes up issues such as suffrage, marriage, domestic violence, and the emancipation of women. In its realism, New Woman fiction departs from the aestheticism of the period, although some writers, like George Egerton (Mary Chavelita Dunne Bright), used the techniques of aestheticism to examine women’s experience. Examples of New Woman novels include Sarah Grand’s *The Heavenly Twins* (1893) and *The Beth Book* (1897), Mona Caird’s *The Daughters of Danaus* (1894), Ella Hepworth Dixon’s *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894), Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm*, Iota’s (K.M. Caffyn) *A Yellow Aster* (1894), Mary Cholmondeley’s *Red Pottage* (1899), George Egerton’s *Keynotes* (1893)and *Discords* (1894), and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892). Although more than one hundred New Woman novels were published between 1880 and 1890, their writers did not agree on the issues presented in their fiction. The novels subvert the traditional Victorian narrative to create alternate possibilities for female characters. For example, rather than ending a narrative with a marriage, Sarah Grand’s *The Heavenly Twins* begins with a marriage and examines its consequences.

In general, the New Women were of the middle class and educated in the women’s colleges that emerged in the late nineteenth-century, such as Girton College at Cambridge and Somerville College at Oxford. With the new socialism and the rise of the Labour Party of the 1880s and 1890s, however, working-class women began to participate in campaigns for women’s suffrage in greater numbers. Several prominent New Woman socialists, notably Eleanor Marx, Annie Besant, Emmeline Pankhurst, and the novelists Olive Schreiner and Margaret Harkness, wrote about the intersections between feminism and socialism but found that the goals of the two movements were not always mutually supportive.

The New Woman is sometimes referred to in relation to the Decadence movement and compared to the figure of the dandy. Like the dandy, the New Woman was primarily an urban phenomenon. As a *flâneuse,* she transformed the ways in which middle class women inhabited urban spaces. A proponent of “sensible dress” she rode bicycles, smoked cigarettes, and made it increasingly socially acceptable for middle-class women to participate in the public life of the city. Although the dandy and the New Woman resisted Victorian sexual codes and ideas about reproduction, family, and marriage, they did not consider themselves linked in their struggles. Nineteenth-century discourses of degeneration also led to an association between the dandy and the New Woman in the mind of the British public. Some New Woman writers were influenced by theories of eugenics, but there was no consensus among writers on this question: whereas Sarah Grand believed women to be morally superior to men and therefore responsible for regenerating the nation, Mona Caird was critical of eugenicist beliefs and practices.

In the periodical press and in small magazines, the New Woman was often the subject of ridicule and derision. Constructed as the “wild woman,” the “Amazon,” or as an ascetic political activist, she became a target for a turn-of-the-century gender and class instability. Eliza Lynn Linton and other women writers who were critical of the New Woman accused her of being both overly masculine and overly feminine. Anti-feminists like Grant Allen disparaged the New Woman in his novel *The Woman Who Did* (1895), while George Gissing’s *The Odd Women* (1893) targets her as marginal and as deluded about her own importance.

An inspiration for the suffragette, the New Woman gradually disappeared with the coming of the First World War and the granting of suffrage to women. She is an important figure in the work of modernist writers such as George Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells, Henry James, and Rebecca West.

**Bibliography:**

Ardis, Ann. *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism*. New Brunswick

and London: Rutgers University Press, 1990.

Hager, Lisa. Embodying Agency: Ouida’s Sensational Shaping of the British New

Woman. London: Cambridge, 2013.

Heilmann, Ann. *New Woman Fiction: Women Writing First-Wave Feminism*. New York:

St. Martin’s Press, 2000.

Ledger, Sally. *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin-de-Siecle*. New York:

Manchester University Press, 1997.

Miller, Jane Eldridge. *Rebel Women: Feminism, Modernism and the Edwardian Novel*.

London: Virago Press, 1994. Richardson, Angelique and Chris Willis, eds. *The New Woman in Fiction and Fact: Fin- de-Siecle Feminisms.* New York: Palgrave, 2001.

Richardson, Angelique and Chris Willis, Eds. *The New Woman in Fiction and Fact: Fin de-Siècle* Feminisms. London: Palgrave, 2001.

Schaffer, Talia. *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian*

*England.* Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 2000.

Caroline Z. Krzakowski

New York University