

The Rebel Angel Reconsidered: New Woman Fiction and the Discursive Reconstruction of Gender in Late Victorian England, 1880–1900

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Abstract

The period between 1880 and 1900, during which the Victorian era was closing gradually, saw a shift in the way discussions were framed. Men who were dominant before (patriarchal male supremacy) and ideologies that kept women dependent on the household (female domestic dependence) were no longer the main topics. It seems that the discourse is starting to be less dominated by these elements. On its place has been the idea of female autonomy, albeit it is being discussed and contested very much. The chapter is a discourse-analytical, comparative study of gender roles as these roles are created and challenged in New Woman fiction of the fin-de-siècle in parallel with the works of Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895). Based on concepts and frameworks of various experts in the fields of feminist literary criticism and gender studies such as Elaine Showalter (gynocriticism), Judith Butler (performativity of gender) and Michel Foucault (power and discourse) the author states that female writers such as Sarah Grand, George Egerton, and Grant Allen used their transgressive heroines as a way to bring out, question, and explore the Woman Question, while Thomas Hardy portrayed women as strugglers and in the end as the casualties of the patriarchal system. In this article the author uses qualitative close reading, intertextual comparison, and historical contextualization, and also relates to the reforms such as the Married Women's Property Act (1882), to pose the question whether the revolution promoted under cover of a female figure reached the general public, a non-educated and a non-urban one, or whether it had been mainly the literature, that is a limited printed matter, it had concerned itself with. Therefore, the chapter concludes that even though New Woman fiction only had a partial impact socially and it was also limited by class, it provided feminist movements at a later period with a literary discourse model to which they could refer. Besides, in a narrative analysis the chapter identifies the textual strategies, multiple focalization, free indirect discourse, and symbolic interiority, for recording and conveying the gender politics that was being challenged with in that period.

Keywords: New Woman fiction, Victorian gender roles, feminist literary criticism, Thomas Hardy, gender performativity, discourse analysis

1. Introduction

The Victorian period is generally viewed as a gradual, irregular change from patriarchal dominance of the man by the man and the institutionalized female dependence to the current language of gender equality.

Nowhere was this transformation reflected better than in the literary culture of the last two decades of the nineteenth century. It is the time which gave birth to the New Woman fiction, a writing which was essentially about the "Woman Question" that was being discussed in various ways, in newspapers, pamphlets, and parliamentary debate (Ledger, 1997; Pykett, 1992).

The poetry of long narrative *The Angel in the House*, by Coventry Patmore, published first in serial form from 1854 to 1862, had given the Victorian world an enduring picture of ideal womanhood: humble, family-oriented, and morally uplifting very much due to the fact that she was restricted to the private sphere (Patmore, 1866/1891).

Novels written in the 1890s that portrayed the New Woman depicted the rejection of "The Angel in the House" and created a heroine who challenged the traditional roles by, for instance, smoking, cycling, questioning marriage, getting a higher education, and pursuing independence in terms of both sex and life (Ledger, 1997; Pykett, 1992).

Still the literary gender politics of the period were not only monolithic, but they are not the same kind of liberation, not always the same.

We have Thomas Hardy as one of the writers who was working with the same historical issue at the same time and through his two novels *Tess of the d'Urvilles* (1891) and *Jude of the Obscure* (1895) presents a quite opposite representation of the Victorian woman, a woman who struggles against, and is very often destroyed by, the very patriarchal norms that the New Woman fiction aims to get rid of (Hardy, 1891/2003, 1895/2008).

This chapter is a comparative reading of these two fictional traditions, the main question of which is a double-fold one: first, to what extent and in what ways is the New Woman character challenging Victorian standards of gender roles, and second, whether the extent of that challenge was allowed in real English social life beyond literature.

1.1 Research Questions

- How do New Woman characters challenge Victorian gender roles and expectations?
- How are New Woman fictions related to the wider discourse of the "Woman Question"?
- Did the New Woman revolution reach all parts of Victorian English society, or was it confined to particular social circles — as tested against Thomas Hardy's contrasting portrayal of women as strugglers within, and victims of, patriarchal norms?
- How did Victorian English society respond to New Woman fiction: was it a realistic social revolution, or one confined largely to the pages of books?
- What narrative techniques were preferred in New Woman novels, and to what discursive effect?

1.2 Research Objectives

- To evaluate the social expectations and structural limitations placed on women in the late nineteenth century.
- To analyze selected novels from a feminist literary-critical perspective and explore how they advocated for women's rights and autonomy.

- To assess the lasting impact of the New Woman novel on subsequent feminist literature and social movements.

2. Literature Review

Soon after its publication, Coventry Patmore's *"The Angel in the House,"* became a critical point of reference for other authors to draw their own portrayals of womanhood, favorably or oppositionally, from. The image of the house angel, a woman giving up her comfort to serve men, the only female figure confined at the private domain, provided ideologically the ground upon which New Woman fiction was launched.

The *Heavenly Twins* (1893) by Sarah Grand and *Keynotes* (1893) by George Egerton are seen as major novels of the genre which present female main characters who don't comply with getting married, ask for education, and express sexual views and the problem of venereal disease within marriage quite directly. (Grand, 1893/2018; Egerton, 1893/2003)

Grant Allen in his novel *The Woman Who Did* (1895) goes yet another mile by depicting a mother living unmarried, who rejects the whole institution of marriage in principle. (Allen, 1895/2004)

A critical method for reading the texts of the said genre has greatly relied upon Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), a book that describes separate literary traditions of women and classifies their writing into the "Feminine," "Feminist," and "Female" phases, locating the "Feminist" revolt against the social and legal status of women protest and advocacy as the phase of women's writing that gave rise to the New Woman movement. (Showalter, 1977)

Sally Ledger's, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* (1997) is a further continuation or development of that line of thought by placing the "New Woman" within the greater context of the Fin-de-Siècle culture which also consisted of a lot of things such as socialism, sexology and the imperialists anxiety, whereas the other side, Lyn Pykett's *The Improper Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the 'New Woman' Writing* (1992), traces a line of succession from the Victorian mid-nineteenth century's sensational novels to the New Woman literature. She makes the point that both the novels through their stories, transgressive plots, disturbed and upset the normative or ideal concept of being a woman. (Ledger, 1997; Pykett, 1992)

The Madwoman in the Attic (1979) by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, offers a psychoanalytic-literary reading of the women's writing of the nineteenth century that was constrained by the fear and struggle for authorship. Virginia Woolf's, *A Room of One's Own* (1929), on the other hand has never ceased to be one of the greatest feminist texts since it clearly pointed out the material and institution preconditions necessary for the existence of women writers. It is quite clear, that if one has to write, besides writing, one has to eat, and sleep, and be healthy. (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979; Woolf, 1929/2000)

In newspapers and magazines, the New Woman was generally presented in a humorous way: *The Punch* magazine, for instance, portrayed her in the form of a woman smoking cigarettes, riding a bicycle, and violating gender norms. This image on the one hand, publicized her existence, at least in the eyes of the general readers, to a certain degree, on the other hand, it reduced or trivialized her demands. (Ledger, 1997)

To the extent to which the satirical picture presented her as a rebel, and the satirical mode of representation was used at the same time as a means of exposure and reduction of the New Woman's ideals, this comic presentation of an alternative to the norms of femininity provided in turn by a more tragic view was offered by the novels of Thomas Hardy.

Hardy, in his *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895).

They, however, in their respective ways, make the argument that these women Tess D'Urbervilles and Sue Bridehead are in reality only the two of many women who have always

been at odds with patriarchal structures of society and in the end also paid dearly for it, rather than being depicted as the successful or the dominant agents of the change. (Hardy, 1891/2003, 1895/2008)

3.0 Theory

A good place to start is the idea of gynocriticism by Elaine Showalter. This term highlights issues of female authors, female literary tradition, and the uniqueness of women's writing. Showalter makes it very clear that it is distinct from analyses of male-authored representations of women.

Another way to interpret gender is to understand it as a performance rather than a fixed trait. Judith Butler, through *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), presents gender as performed and not biologically determined. Femininity and masculinity are seen as repeated acts through discursive power that become naturalized. By using this analytical tool, the thesis reveals how the rebellious behaviors (like attire, walking freely, and talking candidly) of the "New Woman" heroine are performed against the gendered expectations.

Foucault's theory of discourse and power, especially in *The History of Sexuality* (1978) and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), is the last approach, offering a perspective by which the study of how "New Woman" is shaped via power is possible. This method explains that the image of "New Woman" is at the same time enabled and restricted through discourses on the medical, legal, and literary fields (Foucault, 1972; Foucault, 1978).

4. Methodology

The research relies on a qualitative, content-based approach and incorporates the following five techniques: Textual analysis helps understand the plot, the language, and the narrative features through the close reading of each text. Intertextual comparison of male-authored and female-authored fiction is another method; here, the comparison is primarily about Hardy's realist tragic fiction and the more polemical New Woman novel.

Women's literary theory and criticism act as the interpretative framework for gender analysis.

Historical context helps to identify connections between fictional works and major social and legal issues such as the Married Women's Property Act (1882) and the opening of higher education to women (mainly through the founding of Girton College (1869) and Newnham College (1871)). The New Woman's fictional and social appearance was made possible by these material changes.

At the end of this section, the use of a few digital tools such as corpus linguistics (the analysis of recurring vocabulary patterns across texts) can add a broader distributional view of Victorian gender discourse to the close reading analysis of the texts.

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Female Writers Challenging Victorian Norms of Gender

Grand Sarah's Heavenly Twins is a novel which openly critiques marital arrangements through the character of Evadne who expresses dissatisfaction with the double standard of sexual morality and the spread of venereal diseases among married couples (Grand, 1893/2018).

Keynotes by Egerton is in line with this rejection of the traditional marriage plot and highlights female internal state sexual desire, indecision, restless mind as a topic of narrative that needs no justification (Egerton, 1893/2003).

Allen's *The Woman Who Did* takes the challenge further by portraying its heroine, Herminia Barton, as a woman who rejects legal marriage entirely as a tool for controlling women, opting for

motherhood outside of marriage consciously and ideologically, thus, choosing an anti-normative lifestyle (Allen, 1895/2004).

Viewed from Butler's viewpoint (1990) of a continuous act (a performance), these acts of the main characters against norms such as moving without chaperone, talking freely about sexuality, or getting out of the confines of home can be recognized as their gender performances that are meant to break down the structure of Victorian femininity, taking out a mask to show that what had been represented by ideology as women's inherent traits was just a social construct (Butler, 1990).

5.2 The Counter-Narrative from Hardy: Strugglers and the Down-Trodden

The literary works of Thomas Hardy present a situation where it is difficult to have a pure narrative of the New Woman winning over. Tess Durbeyfield of "*Tess of the d'Urbervilles*", repeatedly, is depicted as an entity of male desire and the social judgment of her surroundings without her being considered an independent agent; the drama of her seduction, her being isolated, and finally her hanging are all elements that highlight how a sexual double standard, which new woman novels aim to reveal and condemn, can be fatal to the person at its receiving end (Hardy, 1891/2003).

Sue Bridehead of "*Jude the Obscure*" comes very close to a New Woman mindset, she has unconventional views about intellectual matters and is against getting married through a religious ceremony, but the work finally portrays her regressing into a traditional religious mode of submission, pushed by both social and psychological pressures (Hardy, 1895/2008).

Together, Tess and Sue illustrate the fact that compared to Grand, Egerton or Allen, Hardy focused more on showing the harsh realist situation of the consequences of women's non-conformity with patriarchal norms (deviant, whether willingly or not, from these norms) rather than fantasizing about their liberation. This reading that is done comparing the two characters helps in supporting the answer to the paper's third research question: the fictional triumph of the New Woman's discourse of the New Woman in Grand and Allen's works runs side-by-side with a literary decade in which the only thing from Hardy's side is to underline that women still struggled or, very often, were victimized by an unreformed society.

5.3 Reactions: A Realistic Revolution or the Revolution Limited to the Literature?

Limited by class, geography and knowledge, it was not possible to change socially by the New Woman's novel. With its continuous portrayal of the New Woman as a cigarette-smoking cyclist, punch magazine at the same time served as advertising and also as limiting the content, turning a politically serious matter into a comic figure for the general population to laugh at (Ledger, 1997). Besides that, both the public and the writers of the literary pieces dealing with the figure of the New Woman were educated individuals, living in the city, and belonging to the middle-class, which gives rise to the thought of whether the dream-like changes of the New Woman movement touched the women of working-and farming classes whose way of life, as Hardy's rural Wessex novels constantly show, remained dependent on financial insecurity and gender-related customs which were almost exclusively untouched by the discussions happening in the cities (Hardy, 1891/2003; Ledger, 1997).

Parallel with that, the legal changes such as the Married Women's Property Act (1882) that gave married women an opportunity for the separate legal ownership of their property and the women's gradual access to higher education at that time showed that the novels claiming to speak on behalf of the New Woman were connected with the change in the system to some extent, even though probably slower and to lesser extent was the actual change in society.

5.4 Narrative Technique and Discursive Strategy

Contemporary women novelists employed plot devices, such as free indirect discourse that permitted heroines' secret reflections on marriage and courtship, and fragmented, or episodic structures that, like Egerton's collection, refused to be limited by the traditional marriage plot. These were narrative methods which destabilized the ending of the story and, thereby, foregrounded a woman's private world. They also resorted to authorial or narrator comment that openly broke the fictional frame, for instance, as in Allen's *The Woman Who Did*, where the narrative itself was turned into an argument, and the frame of the novel was not just destroyed but also the author was present. The only difference in the case of Hardy is that his tragic realistic style continues on the grandest scale, the symbolic countryside and plotting fate, the author who intervenes philosophically, etc., that is, the narrative style that overrides female agency and puts it beneath the determinism of the wider social forces is one that is in line with the theme that he presents in his stories of women not being winners but rather struggling through life (Hardy, 1891/2003, 1895/2008). Both sets of authors' technical approaches become discursive interventions when it comes to the question of female voice when you get into it with Foucault, the New Woman novel as a whole aims at getting new positions of enunciation for women's subjectivity whereas Hardy's tragic structure reveals the mechanisms of discipline, law, religion, etc., through which those women were restricted practically (Foucault, 1972, 1978).

6. Conclusion

There has been no doubt that the period of turn-of-the-century in literature has been marked by the development of the gender-related topic. By pointing out how the period's gender discourse was not only at a new place in history but also an old one where the debates were very much alive; that is, the author has shown that it was a contentious field in which New Woman polemic and Hardy's tragedy acted as a mutual illumination in their confrontation of the identical social forces. Besides giving a new light to the understanding of gender, genre, and narrative form by reading these literary forms together, the chapter also suggests future ways of comparative studying by showing how they can be connected to gender and gender relations.

6.1 Implications

In this paper it is shown how the New Women stories from 1880 to 1900 period created a novel form of the narrative of female subjectivity. It was a structure of mobility, sex-fulness and fight against the establishment of an official marriage, a structure which directly opposed the image of the angel of the house drawn by Patmore. However at the same time, Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure* also prove that this opposition was possible alongside a tragedy that continued to tell women as mere stragglers, even though the author did not give it as much space as he gave his protagonists' downfall. We have to admit that there was not just a woman revolution but a revolution of the whole genre in the sense that it has not only influenced the representation of women in literature but also, to some extent, it has become such a part of the female identity that it still inspires Woolf's work in the form of modernist feminist criticism and, finally, reaches second- and third- wave feminist literary criticism. This revolution, however, is a partial one, as it was a literary revolution but also the immediate effect of it remained tied to geography, class, and also the power of institutions which the New Woman literature could name but not get rid of on its own.

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