

# Diplomarbeit

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The Subversion of Gender:  
Representations of New Women in Literature  
of the Fin de Siècle

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**FOR MY FAMILY**

**Josef, Herta, Martin, Christoph**

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## 1. Introduction

This thesis deals with a cultural icon of the fin de siècle, the New Woman, who was a highly popular and a much dreaded figure among Victorian critics. Taking into account that the New Woman was a fictive as well as real phenomenon, this thesis will be an analysis of selected New Woman novels and short stories written about women, for women and by women. The literary works that will be discussed concerning their treatment of certain issues of “the Woman Question”<sup>1</sup>, their critique of patriarchal society and their deconstruction of gender roles will be Sarah Grand’s *The Heavenly Twins* and *Ideala*, Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm*, Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* and George Egerton’s “The Cross Line”.

New Woman literature became very popular among readers towards the end of the Victorian age, the so-called fin de siècle, an era which was characterized by norms, rules and etiquette invading all areas of life. Normative categories and their inherent prejudices restricted people’s experiences by forcing them into a narrow-minded binary system of thought, in which dualities like ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, ‘proper’ or ‘improper’, ‘good’ or ‘bad’ dominated the understanding of the world and hardly left any space for acting beyond long-established categories without being marginalized or disparaged. Especially women were forced into the narrow role of the loving and caring mother and devoted housewife, which was seen as the only appropriate and natural position of a respectable Victorian woman, but which left women hardly any space of individuality.

The term New Woman, which was first coined by the feminist author Sarah Grand, became well-established towards the end of the nineteenth century and referred to women in fact and fancy who dared to rebel against the normative ideal of Woman as ‘the Angel in the House’<sup>2</sup> by striving for self-

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<sup>1</sup> Victorians used the term “The Woman Question” for referring to a large body of issues about the nature, role and rights of women in society.

<sup>2</sup> The expression ‘The Angel in the House’ refers to the popular image of the Victorian ideal woman possessing characteristics like marital devotion and submission, passivity, grace and so on and comes

realisation beyond the domestic sphere. New Women's attempt to broaden the feminine sphere was seen as hostile and unhealthy to the upholding and progress of a highly developed state and culture and thus they were often given disparaging attributes like mannish, revolting, shrieking, redundant and odd. Conventional critics did not hesitate to align them with the decadent movement and its masculine representation, the decadent dandy.

Although New Women did not agree on all aspects of life, this thesis will show that they shared some common grounds: They strove for greater equality between men and women and struggled for women's access to higher education and the professional field. Moreover, they criticized the Victorian institution of marriage for legalizing women's suppression and unquestioningly accepting double moral standards. They revolted against the naturalized role of women as childbearer and nurturer and strived for more freedom concerning social codes of behaviour. Though their stories mostly focused on the individual lives of middleclass women, they interestingly triggered national fears of apocalypse and moral decline among Victorian traditionalists. This can be explained by the wide-spread belief that 'woman was the inspiration and guardian of civilization, that upon the acquiescent feminine smile, [...] the whole fabric of civilisation rested' (Dowling, 48).

This thesis will demonstrate that New Woman literature caused a serious gender crisis by questioning long established gender norms and behaviours taken for granted and natural in the Victorian era. By deliberately reversing apparently fixed gender roles, New Women pointed at the constructedness and instability of the concept "gender", which has become one of the most fundamental organizing ideologies around which our social life rotates.

Drawing on Judith Butler's perception of gender as a performative act, I will investigate in which ways gender is performed by New Women and why their gender performance encounters strong opposition and causes national anxieties. I will analyse the discrepancy between Victorian expectations and views of proper femininity and the way New Women understand and establish their female identities and enact their own comprehension of new



womanhood. Moreover, I will explore how New Women use the power of fiction to criticize dominant patriarchal structures by questioning and subtly reversing patriarchal discourses to serve a feminist cause.

My investigation into New Women's potential to overcome traditional conceptions of gender roles will be based on theoretical ideas on sex, gender, power and sexuality put forward by the 20<sup>th</sup> century scholars Michael Foucault and Judith Butler, who have both significantly influenced the development of queer theory, a field of studies among whose main concerns is the destabilization of fixed identities. According to Foucault, power always produces and therefore encounters resistance, and in this sense New Woman literature can be seen as a warning sign of and an interference to a long era of suppression fostered by patriarchal structures and its 'institutional arrangements of power' (Gauntlett, 118). This thesis will rely on Foucault's and Butler's assumption of the constructedness and hence flexibility of gender identities in the analysis of New Women's potential of gender subversion.

## 2. “Thinking and Rethinking Gender”

### 2.1 Biological Determinism versus Cultural Construction

In order to be able to understand the numerous debates concerning the category “gender” in Feminist Theory, it is necessary to explain two different but interrelated terms, namely “sex” and “gender”.<sup>3</sup> Sex usually refers to the anatomical apparatus of a person, in particular to the sexual organs of the body, and has often been seen as a stable physical construct, which is usually fixed from birth onwards in modern Western society. This strong belief in the existence of two, and only two sexes, is also manifested in the language, which in turn restricts our freedom of thought.<sup>4</sup> Not surprisingly, authors who want to refer to androgynous or sexless characters often face difficulties due to limitations in our language.<sup>5</sup>

Once born, a person is unambiguously classified as either male or female<sup>6</sup> and generally remains in this sexed category for the rest of his/her life. However, the devotion to this binary concept of humans that draws a clear-cut line between the male and the female sex, also exercises regulatory force onto people who show physical traits that violate the conventional dichotomy of the sexes.<sup>7</sup> This becomes obvious if we take a look at the procedural

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<sup>3</sup> For the distinction between the terms sex and gender see also for example Gianoulis, Tina “Androgyny”, n.p. and Kimmel, Michael S. *The Gendered Society*, 2-3.

<sup>4</sup> In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler argues that language works on bodies and shapes them into a seemingly natural form. Cf. Butler, 145. According to feminist critic Spender, language needs to be changed as it renders women invisible. In *Man Made Language*, she argues, ‘For women to become visible, it is necessary that they become linguistically visible [...] New symbols will need to be created and old symbols will need to be recycled and invested with new images if the model of language is to be broken.’ (Spender, 162)

<sup>5</sup> In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, for instance, Ursula Le Guin failed to convey the idea of androgynous characters, representing “menwomen”, who only adopt a particular sexed identity exceptionally during phases of reproduction, by referring to the intersex persons with the common generic pronoun ‘he’, ‘his’, ‘him’. Consequently, the readers are trapped to think that the characters are rather male than female although they are actually sexless.

<sup>6</sup> In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir explains that throughout history woman has been seen as ‘the Other’ of man: ‘Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him’ (Beauvoir, 16). In *Gender Blending: Confronting the Limits of Duality* Holly Devor points out how sex is understood in contemporary Western society: ‘males are defined by what they are, while females are defined by what they lack by comparison to males. The male sex is seen by most people as a baseline against which the female sex is seen as an incomplete version of the male’ (Devor, vii). Thus, sex not only serves as a marker of bodily difference but also as a source of gender inequality.

<sup>7</sup> In *Gender Trouble* Judith Butler notes that the process of categorisation into male or female “humanizes” the physical body of a person. If infants do not fit into the binary system, they ‘fall

method carried out if a person's sex is ambiguous at the time of birth as is the case with so-called "intersex" people. The fact that the person's sex cannot easily be defined by means of his/her physical appearance is either hidden or changed by hormonal or surgical treatment in order to categorize sexually ambiguous people in one of the two existing and socially accepted categories of male and female.<sup>8</sup>

While sex marks the distinction between a man and a woman's body, gender refers to the social role of an individual, based on the person's sex. In other words, gender relates to the meanings that are attached to the anatomical configuration of men and women within a culture. Not only physical reality but a whole set of outward and hence historical and social factors determine gender, as Jane Flax observes:

Gender is a category meant to capture a complex set of social relations. Gender is not one or many things, but refers to a changing set of historically social processes. Gender both as an analytical category and social process is relational. That is, gender is a complex whole constituted by and through interrelated processes. (Flax, 40)

Feminist scholars have made clear that gender is one of the fundamental organizing ideologies around which social life rotates. In *The Gendered Society*, Michael Kimmel points at the changes in thinking about gender that have occurred over the last decades and the realisation of the crucial influence of gender to an individual's life:

Until the 1970s, social scientists would have listed only class and race as the master statuses that defined and proscribed social life. [...] But today, gender has joined race and class in our understanding of the foundations of an individual's identity. Gender, we now know, is one of the axes around which social life is organized and through which we understand our own experiences. (Kimmel, 5)

Biological models claim that sex determines gender and that innate physical differences result in cognitive and behavioural differences, which in turn

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outside the human' and thus they 'constitute the domain of the dehumanized and the abject against which the human itself is constituted.' (Butler, 111)

<sup>8</sup>In *Gender Blending: Confronting the Limits of Duality* Holly Devor examines the treatment of babies whose bodies show both female and male characteristics due to chromosomal abnormalities, known as Turner's Syndrome, Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome or Klinefelter's Syndrome. Despite their chromosomal abnormalities, these children are unquestioningly assigned to one sex and reared in accordance with that assignment. In these cases sex is determined on the basis of the genitals at the time of birth. Cf. Devor, 7-10.

result in social and political constitutions.<sup>9</sup> This idea is also rendered in Sigmund Freud's famous statement 'anatomy is destiny' (Freud quoted in Kimmel, 21). According to Michael Kimmel, this destiny varies enormously in different cultural, historical or social contexts:

What it means to possess the anatomical configuration of male or female means very different things depending on where you are, who you are and when you are living. (Kimmel, 3)

Gender is commonly believed to be congruent with sex and implies a whole set of norms and moral codes. More and more feminists like Judith Butler, Monique Wittig and Julia Kristeva have tried to escape and overthrow those stifling and limiting rules governing gender identity by deconstructing the gendered and sexed categories and thus revealing their constructedness and artificiality. Recently, the term gender has been actively applied and its meaning has been contested impetuously among scholars. According to Glover and Kaplan, '[it] is now one of the busiest, most restless terms in the English language' (Glover and Kaplan, Introduction ix). New terms like '*gender-bending*', '*gender-blending*' (Glover and Kaplan, ix) 'gender trouble', or 'gender performativity'<sup>10</sup> have come into existence and are the evidence for new attempts to challenge the marked difference between the female and male sex by means of bodily destabilization.

That gender does not necessarily correlate with sex becomes obvious in the phenomenon of transsexuality and the emotional and physical dilemmas that are mostly embedded. Transsexual people often speak of themselves as persons mistakenly trapped in the wrong body.<sup>11</sup> They either feel "feminine" despite the fact that they possess male sexual organs or they think of themselves as men despite their female appearance.<sup>12</sup> Examples of intersex or transsexual people and their reports of their physical<sup>13</sup> and emotional

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Kimmel, Michael S. *The Gendered Society*, 21-22.

<sup>10</sup> The term 'gender performativity' was coined by Judith Butler in her work *Gender Trouble*. This concept will be elaborated on in the course of this paper.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Devor, Holly, 19.

<sup>12</sup> In *The Gendered Society* the case of Agnes, a person with female breasts and a male penis is given as an example of an intersex person. Agnes is reported to have felt feminine despite her male sexual organs from the beginning of her life and remembers the emotional sufferings of her childhood when she was treated like a boy and compelled to join masculine activities like for example sports. Cf. Kimmel, 104.

<sup>13</sup> Apart from the physical pains a plastic surgery involves, Kimmel explains that people who fall out of the neatly defined 'gender boxes' are often regarded as monsters and are exposed to the risk of

sufferings due to their social non-conformity invite us to rethink and destabilize our concepts of sex and gender.

## 2.2 The “Invention” of Sex: Sexing the Body

In *Genders*, David Glover and Kora Kaplan trace the different meanings and models of sex and gender and the manifold attempts to differentiate men and women in the course of history. They point out that our modern two-sexed concept, which separates all humans indisputable into either women or men, and which is seen as a scientifically-proven fact by most people in our society, did not become prominent until the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>14</sup>

Before our unquestioned two-sex model was established, men and women were believed to consist of one body or one sex, an idea which can be traced back to ancient times, where Aristoteles saw the difference between the sexes in the degree of perfection gained through the bodily amount of heat.<sup>15</sup> The male body was distinguished by heat and drought, whereas the female body was characterized by cold and moisture. Women were believed to have the same genitals as men, only located differently, in the inside of their bodies. That the woman's body was regarded as fundamentally equal to the man's body becomes more obvious through the non-existence of different terms for the male and female genitals.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the bodily difference between the sexes was seen as conquerable as scientists believed in the possibility of women changing into men by externalising their sexual organs.<sup>17</sup> Supposedly, this process of sex change was propelled by nature's striving for greater perfection, which was then seen to be personified by the male sex.<sup>18</sup> Although females were regarded inferior in this one-sex model, the hierarchical difference between men and women was a gradual one and

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being attacked or even murdered by people who become violent due to a feeling of ‘gender disruption’ in an encounter with transsexuals or intersexed people. Cf. Kimmel, *ibid.*, 104.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Glover and Kaplan, *Genders*, xiii.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Fellner, Astrid. *Bodily Sensations: The Female Body in Late-Eighteenth Century American Culture*, 45.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Fellner, 44-45.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Glover and Kaplan, xiii.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Glover and Kaplan, xiii.

hence allowed for more flexibility than the essential anatomical difference of the two-sex model implies.<sup>19</sup>

Following Laqueur, Astrid Fellner has investigated the social and historical processes involved in “making” the sexed body during the American Revolution, which gave the category “woman” an ontological status. In *Bodily Sensations*, she points at the reversal of the present gender-based-on-sex model in former times: ‘Until the late eighteenth century, biologic sex was an epiphenomenon to gender and not its foundation’ (Fellner, 46). To be regarded as either man or woman was rather *having* a certain role in society or rank in the hierarchical order than *being* a biologically-fixed sex.<sup>20</sup> By the Victorian age, various processes and ideologies had contributed to the naturalization of sex. To put it in Foucault’s words, sex came to be regarded as ‘being “by nature”’ (Foucault, 68). A significant contributor to the consolidation of the ontological status of sex and the politics of gender difference based on perceived bodily differences was the focus on women’s reproductive role.<sup>21</sup> The human body became a source of knowledge. In particular, the female body became an object of scientific interest because of its procreative function that had to be preserved for the health of the whole nation. New sciences like sexology or psychoanalysis arose and ignited heated debates on sex and sexuality. Ideas about sexuality began to affect all aspects of life. Sex was seen as “cause of any and everything” (Foucault, 65) and hence was discussed, scrutinized, and recorded in detail:

The most discrete event in one’s sexual behavior - whether an accident or a deviation, a deficit or an excess - was deemed capable of entailing the most varied consequences throughout one’s existence; there was scarcely a malady or physical disturbance to which the nineteenth century did not impute at least some degree of sexual etiology. From the bad habits of children to the phthises of adults, the apoplexies of old people, nervous maladies, and the degeneration of the race, the medicine of that era wove an entire network of sexual causality to explain them. (Foucault, 65)

Scholarly fields like biology, psychology, psychoanalysis and medicine provided arguments and explanations for women’s biological and mental

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Fellner, 43-45.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Fellner, 46.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Fellner, 12.

inferiority based on nature. At the same time, these scientific discourses provided the ground for feminist counter-discourses, which eventually led to the distinction of sex and gender in the twentieth century.

The modern concept of gender locates sexual differences in the cultural field and thus tries to undo discourses that emphasize the inescapability of women's subordination by referring to anatomical facts.<sup>22</sup> One significant attempt to deconstruct "natural" femininity and masculinity was done by Gayle Rubin in her essay "The Traffic in Women", in which she explores the sex/gender system based on the nature/culture opposition as is widespread today.<sup>23</sup> According to Rubin, sex is biologically determined by genital differences, whereas gender is the cultural transformation of sex, which is done by conventional processes of relegation and suppression causing perceivable differences between men and women. Thus, far from being natural, gender identity is the outcome of bizarre and unstable cultural constructions that are deliberately applied to keep the sexes apart by forcing on them artificial "feminine" and "masculine" traits and thus annihilating their homogeneity:

The idea that men and women are more different from one another than either is from anything else must come from somewhere other than nature. [...] Far from being an expression of natural differences, exclusive gender identity is the suppression of natural similarities. It requires repression: in men, of whatever is the local version of 'feminine' traits; in women, of the local definition of 'masculine' traits; The division of the sexes has the effect of repressing some of the personality characteristics of virtually everyone, men and women. (Rubin, 179 -80)

Whereas Rubin acknowledges the biological anatomy of a human being as something fixed and maintains the inevitable interrelatedness of sex and gender, Judith Butler even goes further in unmeshing gender identity by questioning the "gender-based-on-sex model" of Western society. In *Gender Trouble*, she claims that sex does not necessitate gender as both sex and gender are socially constructed artefacts. Far from being the essence of one's identity, she argues, gender is rather a performance, like a cloth or mask you put on. Likewise, Foucault would not agree with Rubin's words

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Glover and Kaplan, xxiii.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Glover and Kaplan, xxiii-xxiv.

‘sex is sex’ (Rubin, 165), as one of his main arguments in *The History of Sexuality* is that sex and sexuality came into existence through discourses fostered by people’s drive to find out the “obscure secret” of sex. For Foucault, sex is not a natural or fixed entity but it changes its meaning and connotations according to cultural and historical values and codes. The next chapter will provide an overview of Foucault’s and Butler’s ideas on sex and gender, which have significantly contributed to the destabilization of rigid binarisms in Western civilization and thus provided the ground for more individual freedom and choice. As Sara Salih points out, both Michel Foucault and Judith Butler follow a ‘politics of discomfort’ by questioning and genealogizing taken-for-granted assumptions and regulative norms of social behaviour and thus they ‘create possibilities for radical difference’ (Salih, 151). Starting from and referring to the theoretical framework of Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* and Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, I will examine the New Women’s potential of challenging and subverting stereotyped thinking by ‘driving norms and universals into productive crisis’ (Salih, 151).

## 2.3 Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*<sup>24</sup>

### 2.3.1 Seeing the world differently

The historian and poststructuralist thinker Michel Foucault set a milestone in the discussion of the nature of sex and sexuality by revolutionizing prevailing ideas on sex, identity and power relations.<sup>25</sup> He is often seen as a pioneer of Queer Theory<sup>26</sup>, an area of studies whose main concern is the deconstruction of identity categories and the invalidation of normative binarisms like heterosexual/ homosexual, licit/illicit, man/woman or masculine/feminine.<sup>27</sup> Queer Theory rejects the notion of the existence of an

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<sup>24</sup> This chapter on Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* also relies on the analysis of his work in “The History of Sexuality” *Sparknotes*. 10. January 2008. <<http://www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/histofsex.html>>

<sup>25</sup> For a detailed analysis of Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* see also Dorner, Elisabeth. *The Deconstruction of Binarism in Feminist Science Fiction*. 9-30.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Gauntlett, David. “Michel Foucault” *Media, Gender, Identity Resources*: 18. January 2008. <<http://www.theory.org.uk/ctr-fou1.htm>>

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Dorner, Elisabeth. *The Deconstruction of Binarism in Feminist Science Fiction*, 9.



inner essence of the self, i. e. a fixed, stable and real identity within the person's self. Even more, it dismisses any attempt to define, categorize and confine any identity, even its own, in order to avoid 'exclusionary and reifying effects' (Jagose, n.p.). As Annamarie Jagose argues,

[...] queer has been produced largely outside the registers of recognition, truthfulness and self-identity. [...] [It] is an identity category that has no interest in consolidating or even stabilizing itself. [...] Acknowledging the inevitable violence of identity politics and having no stake in its own hegemony, queer is less an identity than a critique of identity. (Jagose, n.p.)

Although Foucault certainly did not aim at establishing the academic discipline of Queer theory and its credo for diversity, unboundedness, and unconventionality, one can certainly find parallels that seem to prove his contribution to this field of study in *The History of Sexuality*, in which he analyses sexuality and the multiple discourses on it. His provocative thesis on sexuality, identity, power and its interrelations challenges the view that there is an "inner truth" of sexuality and conveys the idea that sexuality is itself a result of discourses that fragment sex into dichotomies like normal/perverse, legitimate and illegitimate or male/female. Foucault's work has undoubtedly triggered many debates on gender and identity and many thinkers and feminist critics, like Judith Butler, Gayle Rubin and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick followed Foucault in his critique of society's system of regulating laws that controls, directs and hence constructs people's sexuality while, at the same time, hiding its constructedness. Thus Foucault has initiated a new and critical way of looking at apparently "natural" identity categories.

### **2.3.2 Unsettling the 'Repressive Hypothesis'**

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault explains that the Victorian age has generally been presented as an area of repression, strict regulations, taboos and prudishness. Before the Victorian regime and its practices of concealment, confinement and prohibitions began to dominate people's lives, 'a certain frankness was still common, it would seem' (Foucault, 3). According to Foucault, the eighteenth century is regarded as the historical era which eventually put an end to the tolerances of illicit practices and the

freedoms of sexual activities common in precedent centuries. Instead, sexuality was tabooed, silenced and confined to reproductive purposes. Since then, so the common belief, sexuality beyond the purpose of procreation and beyond the bedroom of the married couple was disapproved of.<sup>28</sup>

Foucault questions this 'repressive hypothesis', which upholds the theory that sexuality has been oppressed and banned from speech by institutions of power since the rise of bourgeois society. On the contrary, Foucault argues that instead of having been silenced by taboos and concealments, there was a real increase of discussions concerning sex and sexuality, which had the opposite effect of what it was aiming at, namely, positioning sex at the centre of people's life and making it an omnipresent phenomenon.<sup>29</sup> Paradoxically, the intention to avoid certain ways of talking about sex produced new terminologies and multiplied ways of articulating what was seen as morally unacceptable and hence unspeakable. Foucault pinpoints the irony underlying the endeavours of a society which produces multiple discourses on sex by its desire to conceal the very same. As he puts it, 'a society [...] which speaks verbosely of its own silence, takes great pains to relate in detail the things it does not say' (Foucault, 8). By declaring sex as a ubiquitous danger and thus raising people's awareness, institutions like pedagogy and medicine provided an incentive for new discourses on sex.<sup>30</sup> While the discourse on sex in the Middle Ages consistently rotated around Christian ideas of penitence and fleshly sin, Foucault states that there was a real multiplication of discourses appearing in all kinds of areas like psychiatry, psychology, demography, biology and medicine in the eighteenth century.<sup>31</sup> The 'will to knowledge' induced great efforts of screening, analysing and revealing sexual truths and thus established a 'science of sexuality' (Foucault, 12, 13). Foucault underlines that he does not deny that sexuality has been obscured, banned and misconceived in the last centuries and that he does not want to provide a counter argument against the Repressive Hypothesis. However, he aims at distancing his analysis of sexuality from 'negative elements' and 'principles of rarefaction' (Foucault, 12), which have

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, 3.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Foucault, 6-13.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Foucault, 31.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Foucault, 33.

been the focus of critical attention in recent years, and instead, concentrating on the productive elements of sexuality that have contributed to the diversification and proliferation of discourses.<sup>32</sup> In this spirit he persists:

Rather than the uniform concern to hide sex, rather than a general prudishness of language, what distinguishes these last three centuries is the variety, the wide dispersion of devices that were invented for speaking about it, for having it be spoken about, for inducing it to speak of itself, for listening, recording, transcribing, and redistributing what is said about it: around sex, a whole network of varying, specific, and coercive transpositions into discourse. Rather than a massive censorship, beginning with the verbal properties imposed by the Age of Reason, what was involved was a regulated and polymorphous incitement to discourse. (Foucault, 34)

Foucault argues how this 'incitement to discourse' has created a multiplicity of sexuality.<sup>33</sup> He points out that in the eighteenth century the focus of interest shifted from the bedroom of the married couple to realms outside marriage. Analyses of different sexualities were encouraged by the will to sort out those that were not 'economically useful' (Foucault, 37). People took great pains to notice, distinguish and classify the unnatural and the perverse and thus they intensified the discourses on sexuality in different scientific fields. This dedication to the subject of sexuality was motivated by the desire to gain knowledge and thus be able to exert power of regulation. According to Foucault, however, the power exercised in this scrutiny of sexuality did not repress or prohibit extra-marital relationships but, in contrast, lead to the proliferation of different sexual forms:

[W]hat came under scrutiny was the sexuality of children, mad men and women, and criminals; the sensuality of those who did not like the opposite sex, reveries, obsession, petty manias, or great transports of rage. It was time for all these figures, scarcely noticed in the past, to step forward and speak, to make the difficult confession of what they were. (Foucault, 38-39)

Moreover, sexuality came to be regarded not only in terms of sexual acts but was seen to constitute the self of a person.<sup>34</sup> Hence, to find out the truth of a person's sexuality was to hold the key to his/her identity. How sexuality was

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. Foucault, 12-13.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Foucault, 36-49.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Foucault, 43, or Foucault, 68.

constructed as an essence of identity will be further explored in the following chapters.

### 2.3.3 Confessions of 'Scientia Sexualis'

As elaborated in the previous chapter, Foucault challenges the repressive hypothesis by showing that since the eighteenth century discourses on sexuality have been reinforced instead of rarefied by society's purpose to conceal. The multiplication of the discourses on sex and the following establishment of a '*scientia sexualis*' (Foucault, 58) in Western society were grounded in society's devotion to find out the "truth", or in Foucault's words, its 'immense will to knowledge' (Foucault, 55). Thus, sexuality was constructed as an issue of "truth":

[Doctors] constructed around and apropos of sex an immense apparatus for producing truth even if this truth was to be masked at the last moment. The essential point is that sex was not only a matter of sensation and pleasure, of laws and taboo, but also of truth and falsehood. [...] in short, that sex was constituted as a problem of truth. (Foucault, 56)

Foucault distinguishes two different ways of how the truth about sexuality has been constructed throughout history.<sup>35</sup> He mentions that Eastern societies like China, Japan, India, Arabic Countries and also the Roman Empire used to see sex as an erotic art. This erotic art was primarily concerned with evading the truth about sexual pleasure, not in relation to its usefulness but in relation to itself, i.e. people wanted to know everything about the experience of pleasure, how it could be achieved, intensified and prolonged and how it affected body and soul. It was assumed that the knowledge of sensual pleasures had to be kept secret and passed on by a master of the erotic art so that it will not lose its effectiveness. In contrast to this concept of erotic art, Western societies have created a so-called "*scientia sexualis*", a form of science that relies on confessions for gaining knowledge. Initiated by the Christian tradition of penance, confessions have taken root in all realms of societal life, as Foucault explains:

The Confession has spread its effects far and wide. It plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in the most solemn rites; one confesses one's crimes, one's

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. Foucault, 57-58.

sins, one's thoughts and desires , one's illnesses and troubles; [...] One confesses - or is forced to confess. (Foucault, 59)

According to Foucault, confessions have come to present the key to the truth about sex.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, they were accredited purifying and liberating power in our civilization.<sup>37</sup> Foucault argues that the idea that confessional procedures have a healing effect is not based on facts but is a cultural construction that exerts repressive power on people at the same time as it promises to free people from it. The thorough inquisition of people's erotic life and sexual practises by the way of eliciting confessions was justified by the immanent need for knowledge about dangers inherent in sexuality.<sup>38</sup> Sexuality was constructed as a secret that had to be elicited and examined in detail to find traces of sin. The thorough analysis of people's sexuality caused a proliferation of scientific strategies concerned with revealing what seemed to be hidden. Foucault points out that the incorporation of confessional techniques into scientific methods provided a 'complex machinery for producing true discourses on sex' (Foucault, 68). Sex was then placed at the intersection of procedures of confessions and scientific discourses.<sup>39</sup>

The stance people took towards sexuality was certainly ambivalent. On the one hand people saw in it a secret that had to be elicited as it presented a permanent threat, on the other hand it also served as a site of enjoyment as people were fascinated with finding out the truth which was paradoxically also obscured at the same time as it was elicited by mechanisms of power. Foucault argues that Western society gained pleasure in the process of noticing, discovering and divulging truth. In this respect this "pleasure of analysis" (Foucault, 71) can be regarded as a refined form of the '*ars erotica*' (Foucault, 70) of Eastern societies.<sup>40</sup>

Following Foucault's argument, it seems obvious that sexuality has not been marginalized but instead has become the focus of attention. In the last three centuries, Foucault argues, it has become 'a general signification, a universal secret, an omnipresent cause, a fear that never ends' (Foucault, 69) affecting

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. Foucault, 58.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Foucault, 62.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Foucault, 66.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Foucault, 64-69.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Foucault, 71.

and guiding social, political and economic issues. Moreover, sex was granted an ontological status, i.e. sexuality was defined as “naturally being” and thus to find out the truth about sex was to gain access to the truth about one’s identity.<sup>41</sup> Foucault points out:

And so, in this “question” of sex [...] two processes emerge, the one always conditioning the other: we demand that sex speak the truth (but, since it is the secret and is oblivious to its own nature, we reserve for ourselves the function of telling the truth of its truth, revealed and deciphered at last), and we demand that it tell us our truth, or rather, the deeply buried truth about ourselves which we think we possess in our immediate consciousness. (Foucault, 69)

### 2.3.4 Polyvalent Power Relations

The previous chapters have explored Foucault’s theory that Western society has transformed sex into discourse. The immense will to gain knowledge, to find out the truth of sex has reinforced the dispersion of discourses on sex in all areas of life. We have come to believe that through a thorough analysis of sex we will arrive at a deepened understanding of our own nature, in Foucault’s words, ‘a certain inclination has led us to direct the question of what we are, to sex’ (Foucault, 78).

Foucault has argued persuasively against the repressive hypothesis which upholds the view that sex has been repressed by power in the last centuries. Opposing psychoanalysts’ prevalent assumption that ‘sexuality is a surging hydraulic force that Western culture struggles to repress’ (Bristow, 171), Foucault claims that desire is linked to power in a very complex way and does not exist independently as ‘the law is what constitutes both desire and the lack on which it is predicated’ (Foucault, 81). Foucault emphasises that power in the form of repression is not the effect of desire but is already present when desire appears.<sup>42</sup> There is no chance to avoid power relations as they appear in all kinds of interactions: ‘There is no escaping from power, that it is always-already present, constituting that very thing which one attempts to counter it with’ (Foucault, 82). Foucault criticizes that Western society embraces the “juridico-discursive”(Foucault, 82) conception of

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<sup>41</sup> Cf. Foucault, 68-69.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Foucault, 81.

power, i.e. power is constituted either as an instrument of law or a means of prohibition. Foucault specifies how power is usually presented in Western theories:<sup>43</sup> Power is believed to exert negative force on sex, that is, it represses, denies, rejects, excludes or conceals and leaves the feeling of suppression and deficit. It places sex in a binary system of legitimate/illegitimate and hence it rules it according to its law. Moreover, power operates on sex on all levels according to a uniform apparatus of rules and interdiction. It may vary in the amount of power it exerts but there is always a law-making force that opposes a submissive subject. Foucault ironically points at the contradiction of this negative representation of power, 'it is incapable of doing anything, except to render what it dominates incapable of doing anything either, except for what this power allows it to do' (Foucault, 85).

Foucault traces the 'juridico-discursive' construction of power that limits power to its repressive force, to the Middle Ages, where Western monarchies assured their power by manifesting it in the form of laws.<sup>44</sup> He points out that power was exercised and simultaneously hidden by institutions of law and although attempts were made to criticize monarchic exercises of power in the course of history, the legal system itself and its assumption that power is consistently exerted according to rules of justice, was not questioned. Hence, the juridico-discursive conception of power is still prevalent in Western theories and limits our view.<sup>45</sup> Foucault distances his analysis of power from the law-enforcing mechanisms and instead looks beyond the negative framework of interdiction and also includes the creative force of power.<sup>46</sup> He maintains that in order to gain a comprehensive picture of human sexuality, desire and the power relations at work, '[w]e must at the same time conceive of sex without the law, and power without the king' (Foucault, 91).

In the chapter "Method", Foucault then develops his theory of power that contrasts the juridico-discursive power concept prevalent and taken for granted in Western society. He explains that multi-faceted and shifting power

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. Foucault, 83-85.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Foucault, 87.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Foucault, 88.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Foucault, 89-91.

relations support and direct discourses on sexuality and vice versa. Hence, it would be one-sided just to discuss sexuality in terms of a 'unique form of a great Power' (Foucault, 98). To get a more realistic picture of sexuality, he maintains, it is necessary to deconstruct the diverse relations which have seemingly resulted in a uniform and fixed politics of sexuality.<sup>47</sup>

Foucault emphasises that his analysis of power will not reduce power to its law-enforcing capacity but that it will capture its multifarious and complex nature:

It seems to me that power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organizations; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose, general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies. (Foucault, 92-93)

Thus Foucault's concept of power is 'relational' (Foucault, 95) and 'polyvalent'.<sup>48</sup> Power does not only appear in the form of a repressive authoritarian law but also has a productive function as it generates resistance in the form of a 'reverse' discourse (Foucault, 101) at the same time as it makes use of repressive force.<sup>49</sup>

To Foucault, power is ubiquitous: it can appear everywhere, at every moment, and emanate from all objects or subjects.<sup>50</sup> Foucault specifies his concept of power by the following statements:<sup>51</sup> First, power is not held or possessed by an individual but is exercised from different sources and in different relations. Second, power is not exerted from the outside on relationships of power, sex and knowledge but is an intrinsic and creative force in those relationships. Third, Foucault also rejects the dual system of power, which holds the view that there is a suppressive force that exerts

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. Foucault, 92-93.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Bristow, Joseph. *Sexuality*, 179.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Foucault, 95, Bristow, 176.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Foucault, 93.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Foucault, 94-95.



power and a submissive subject that is compelled and guided by it. Rather, power is something that takes form everywhere in society, operates on all levels with different effects like separation, repositioning, homogenization or domination. Moreover, power is always used to achieve certain objectives but there does not necessarily have to be an individual subject which decides on the aims or directs the power relations. Finally, power always arouses resistance, which can be seen as an interior aspect of power relations.

Foucault explores in detail that power relationships depend on a 'multiplicity of points of resistance [that] play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle in power relations' (Foucault, 95). He explains:

[T]hese points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network. Hence there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial; by definition, they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations. But this does not mean that they are only a reaction or rebound, forming with respect to the basic domination an underside that is in the end always passive, doomed to perpetual defeat. (Foucault, 95, 96)

This elaborate passage about resistance makes clear that Foucault rejects earlier binary political models of master against slave or capitalists against proletariat (as for example put forward by Marx and Friedrich Engels in the *Communist Manifesto*) by emphasising the polyvalent and relational nature of power.<sup>52</sup>

In contrast to other theories<sup>53</sup> that see power as something stable and in the hand of a hegemonic group of people, Foucault's concept of power proves to be enabling for feminism, as he claims that power is reversible. According to Foucault, power is mobile and floats through relationships<sup>54</sup> and thus it

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<sup>52</sup> Cf. Bristow, 177.

<sup>53</sup> Kimmel points out that theories of power prove to be controversial as they have to provide an explanation for gender difference as well as domination. On the one hand, some theories claim that gender differences result in different power distribution, that is, in male domination. On the other hand, constructivist theories see gender difference as a consequence or product of unequal power distribution. Cf. Kimmel, 92.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Gauntlett, David. *Media, Gender and Identity*, 117, Cf. Dorner, 21.

changes them as power is given, taken away and redistributed. This means that people cannot be categorized in those who possess power and those who do not. Subduers will rather find themselves in situations and relationships where they are suppressed and vice versa, people usually lacking in power will be able to dominate and subjugate others.<sup>55</sup>

In “New Woman Literature”, it is obvious that men and women have different access to power according to the institutional arrangements of a patriarchal society. Men are usually presented to exert power on women and women are generally seen as lacking in power. However, the one-sided distribution of power is not perceived as a result of different traits or characteristics inherent in the sexes, but is presented as culturally and socially constructed and therefore unstable und changeable. New Woman Literature tells the story of women who do not accept their powerless position but, in line with Foucault’s claim that power always generates resistance, rebel against the domination of the male sex. New Woman authors point at the artificiality of power relations that became to be obscured by so-called scientific discourses that claim the “natural” powerlessness and weakness of women. Although New Women protagonists do not always succeed in ultimately reversing power, they nevertheless show that power can be inverted by means of resistance.

The novels discussed in this thesis investigate how discourses are regulated by power relations to serve those who are in power. They illustrate how power is exercised with certain objectives, namely to bind women to a supposedly “womanly” role that attends the male sex and leaves the female sex in a marginalized and inferior state in society. It could be argued that New Woman novels and New Women in fiction and in fact are forms or materializations of resistance that are ‘possible’ and ‘necessary’, ‘savage’, ‘violent’ as well as ‘sacrificial’ (Foucault, 96). Foucault claims that power and resistance are interrelated and power can never be exercised without awakening resistance. This effect can be seen as a positive and creative aspect of power. Ironically, the rise and the dispersion of feminist literature and the subject positions of New Women were actually generated by forces which were meant to silence them. Discourses that were aimed at

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<sup>55</sup> Cf. Dorner, 21.

marginalizing and disparaging the new type of woman at the fin de siècle gave her a voice and an identity of her own that allowed her to strengthen her resistance. This supports Foucault's theory of the polyvalent nature of discourses, which postulates that discourses 'can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy' (Foucault, 101).

Following Foucault, it can be asserted that prevalent discourses in the nineteenth century that tried to control women, their bodies and their sexuality, certainly triggered counter discourses that opposed and resisted the progress of the regulating forces. The New Woman became known and was scathed for her sexual outspokenness, her focus on sexuality and sensuality beyond the productive function of her body, her unwomanly and improper behaviour, her disapproval of the well-established Victorian institution of marriage, her striving for occupations outside the domestic sphere and her searching for fulfilment beyond the duties as wife and mother. This means that New Woman representatives in literature as well as in real life and New Woman novels present a 'reverse discourse' (Foucault, 101) that was produced and made possible by discourses that tried to dismiss it as perverse, unnatural and unsound. As Foucault would express it, '[the New Woman] began to speak on [her] own behalf, to demand that her legitimacy or 'naturalness' be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which she was [scientifically and socially] disqualified (Foucault, 101).

In the course of this paper, I will show how New Women reverse dominating patriarchal discourses to support their own arguments and thus escape the narrowing postulations of Victorian society.

### **2.3.5 The Cultural Construction of Sex and Sexuality**

In the nineteenth century, biased ideas of sex and sexuality particularly narrowed women's scope of experiences. Accepting Michel Foucault's assumption that sex and sexuality are cultural constructs, it is possible to deconstruct sex and sexuality or act out presumably natural roles differently to show their artificiality. This thesis argues that New Women perform gender

counter to society's expectations of natural feminine behaviour and thus they destabilize the seemingly fixed gender roles assigned to the sexes according to their physical anatomy.

One of Foucault's striking ideas that inspired many theorists was that sexuality and sex are not natural phenomena determined by biological facts but are social and historical constructions. As already pointed out in the previous chapter on confessions, the Christian idea of sexuality as something sinful that had to be confessed was transformed to fit into more rational discourses of sciences. These scientific discourses of for example pedagogy, medicine or psychoanalysis, which were initiated by institutions of power, examined, analysed, and eventually tried to regulate sexuality and sexual conduct. They pressed sexual activities into the binary categories "natural" and "unnatural" or "legitimate" and "illegitimate" or "moral" and "immoral" and took great pains to oppress any aberrations from the norm. Paradoxically, power that was exercised to control perverse sexual activities for "the health" of the nation, multiplied sexual forms. In this process, sexuality became more than an attribute or feature of human life. It was constructed as the essence of one's identity. Thus new identities and forms of sexuality were created that did not exist before. For instance, Foucault maintains that the homosexual was specified as a new individual in the nineteenth century. Before constructive discourses interpreted it as a fundamental feature of identity, homosexuality was seen as something that could be committed or acted out from time to time:

Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphrodism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species. (Foucault, 43)

Foucault describes sexuality as an 'especially dense transfer point for relations of power' (Foucault, 102) appearing everywhere, where there is difference, and as a highly effective instrument of power employing a variety of strategies. He identifies four mechanisms that linked knowledge and

power to form moral standards concerning sexuality in the nineteenth century:<sup>56</sup>

First, the '*hysterization of women's bodies*' (Foucault, 104) made us think of women as sexualized objects and as objects for medical analysis. Women were regarded as the child bearers of the nation and as such, their bodies with their reproductive functions were of particular interest for the health of society. Hysteria was then constructed as a disease inherent in women's bodies and caused by sexual problems.

Second, the '*pedagogization of children's sex*' (Foucault, 104) regards children as highly sexual beings. Although children's sexuality was seen as grounded in nature, it nevertheless had to be regulated and controlled, the common belief suggested. Otherwise, it would pose a threat for the adolescents themselves and for other people. Especially the act of masturbation was seen as highly dangerous by teachers, parents and doctors who tried to repress this immanent drive by regulative education.

Third, a '*socialization of procreative behaviour*' (Foucault, 104) emphasises the importance of men's and women's reproductive function for the growth of population. Sexuality was recognized as having an important social role and should serve the whole nation and not individual pleasures.

Fourth, the '*psychiatrization of perverse pleasures*' (Foucault, 105) aimed to analyse human sexuality and identify all abnormal behaviours. Forms of aberrations were seen as dangerous and people thought to be able to control these "perversions" by developing a corrective clinical apparatus.

Foucault emphasises that these mechanisms or moral codes, and not as the widespread belief suggests, natural given factors, lead to the production of sexuality. He points out:

[Sexuality] is the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power. (Foucault, 105, 106)

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<sup>56</sup> Cf. Foucault, 104 -105.

Foucault makes clear that our concept of sexuality is an artificial and unstable concept that is created by discourses. What is regarded as morally-acceptable, changes over time according to prevalent social and cultural power relations. Foucault's constructivist view conceives of sexuality not as something determined by biology or anatomy, i.e. a part of human being independently from cultural and historical influences but he seems to say that without discourses and their constructive and regulating forces, there is no sexuality, at least not with the meaning it has now.

Moreover, he points out that our binary sex model, that is the separation of humans into men and women, is not grounded in nature or anatomical facts but also a constructed idea:

[...] the notion of "sex" made it possible to group together, in an artificial unity, anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensation, and pleasures, and it enabled one to make use of this fictitious unity as a causal principle, an omnipresent meaning, a secret to be discovered everywhere: sex was thus able to function as a unique signifier and as a universal signified. (Foucault, 154)

New Women in fact and fancy destabilize patriarchal discourses by showing the constructed nature of femininity. Riding bicycles, smoking cigarettes, wearing "unwomanly" clothes or joining political debates are only a few of the numerous examples of how women revolt against stereotypical clichés. Moreover, New Women reverse the mechanisms at work that link power and knowledge to produce a certain concept of sexuality.

Take for example the assertion that women's bodies have a natural inclination to hysteria because of their sexuality and their reproductive function: I will show in the course of this paper that New Woman novels like *The Heavenly Twins*, *Ideala* and *The Awakening* take up the theme of hysteria to show that this pathology is not a widespread phenomenon whose roots lie in the woman's physical apparatus but is an effect of cultural restrictions that compel women to find an escape in illness. That is, hysteria is depicted as a symptom of a society that forces women to lead unfulfilling and shallow lives narrowed by numerous conventions and expectations of appropriate womanly behaviour. In this way, New Woman literature reverses

the story of the natural female proneness to hysteria and places it in the realm of culture and society instead of the body and sexuality. Moreover, New Woman novels broach the issue of women as objects of science or sexology. They depict how women are examined, analysed, and unsealed by the “scientific” medical gaze that emerges as the suppressive male gaze<sup>57</sup>.

The topic of reproduction and its crucial influence on population growth and the maintenance of a healthy society is taken up by the New Woman author Sarah Grand, who ascribes a very important role to women concerning the perfection of genetic qualities as she sees women as morally superior and therefore in the responsible position to choose the right men. As an advocate of eugenics, she promotes the education of women and warns against the dangers of female ignorance, which can jeopardize not only themselves but also their offspring and hence the whole nation. I will examine how Grand takes up and at the same time subverts patriarchal discourses on eugenics and the purity of the nation to support her feminist standpoint. Other New Woman authors rebel against the moral code of reproduction that restricts women to their birthing function by emphasising and celebrating their protagonists’ pleasure in sexuality and desire that does not serve procreative purposes. For example, in *The Awakening*, Kate Chopin portrays Edna Pontellier’s rejection of her domestic role as mother and wife and her gradual awakening of her sensual and sexual senses that takes form in passionate love affairs and artistic creativity. New Woman Literature also discusses the pedagogization of children’s sexuality and depicts how society channels and guides the growing up of boys and girls so that as men and women they are grown apart and are subject to different moral standards. Women’s sexuality and nature were expected to be passive, decent and reserved. By tracing the development of the twins Angelica and Diavolo in *The Heavenly Twins*, Grand makes obvious that the conventional education of children often runs counter to their natural disposition and that sex and sexuality, which has come to mean identity, are rather culturally produced than naturally developed.

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<sup>57</sup> The term “male gaze” is often used in feminist film criticism and refers to the objectification of women in the media through the lens of the camera which is mostly in the hand of men. Feminists have analysed how women are presented and commodified in the media to serve voyeuristic male pleasures. Here I use the term male gaze to refer to the objectification of women in medical discourses under the cover of scholarship that aims at upholding male dominance and power over women.

In *The History of Sexuality* Foucault successfully argues that sexuality was produced by discursive practises and regulated by moral codes and he provides an innovative concept of power. Nevertheless, he was criticized for his problematic thoughtlessness towards gender and sexual difference.<sup>58</sup> By discussing the distribution of power, critics argued, he neglected the existing inequalities between men and women that cannot be denied in Western societies.

The next chapter of my thesis will provide an insight into Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, which elaborates on many of Foucault's ideas and pays attention to gender and the cultural construction of masculinity and femininity.

## 2.4 Troubling Gender

### 2.4.1 Butler and Feminist Theory

Criticizing, developing, extending and subverting ideas of, among others, Michel Foucault, Monique Wittig, Sigmund Freud, and Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler establishes her critique of the 'heterosexual matrix' in her most famous book *Gender Trouble*, first published in 1990, which destabilizes the taken-for-granted interrelations between sex, gender and desire of Western society.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, she collapses essentialist views of identity and coins the term 'gender performativity', a concept that has proven to be crucial for the advance of feminist thought and the formation of Queer theory as an academic field in the twentieth century.<sup>60</sup> By emphasizing the transitivity of both gender and identity, *Gender Trouble* attempts to eliminate gender inequality based on strict divisions of the male and female sex that are reinforced and maintained by heteropatriarchal power structures. Thus, as Sara Salih puts it, 'reading *Gender Trouble* will call for new and radical ways of looking at (or perhaps looking *for*) gender identity' (Salih, 45).

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<sup>58</sup> Cf. Bristow, 190.

<sup>59</sup> For a detailed analysis of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* see also Dorner, 30-52.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. "Gender Trouble". *Gender Studies Literature* 18 January 2008.

<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender\\_Trouble](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender_Trouble)>



In line with Foucault's argument that institutions of power construct the subjects they later present as natural, Judith Butler rejects the notion of the existence of subjects that are essentially grounded in nature. Therefore, she also disapproves of 'the category of women' (Butler, 1), which was used by feminist theory as a representative unit for political activism.<sup>61</sup> By creating a homogeneous identity category "women", she argues, feminists assume that there is a uniform identity behind women of different cultural, ethnical, historical and social backgrounds and thus they neglect the existing heterogeneity between female individuals:

If one "is" a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered "person" transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out "gender" from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariable produced and maintained. (Butler, 3)

According to Butler, the process of categorisation subverts the actual aim of feminism as it reinforces the binary division that splits the sexes and diminishes the individuals' choices and the chance of equality between men and women.<sup>62</sup> To disclose a greater scope of possibilities for women, she maintains, one has to deconstruct the category 'woman' and its inherent power relations:

Feminist critique ought also to understand how the category of "women", the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought. (Butler, 2)

Drawing on Foucault, she argues that, in order to deconstruct the sexed categories, it is necessary to investigate the prevailing discourses that are established to serve certain political objectives. Instead of concentrating on the patriarchal power and the subsequent subordination of women, that is, on the negative elements of power that limit and regulate women, Butler promotes 'a feminist genealogy' (Butler, 9) that analyses and illuminates the

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<sup>61</sup> Cf. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 1-6, Cf. Salih, 44-46.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Gauntlett, David. "Judith Butler". *Media, Gender, Identity Resources* 18 January 2008. <<http://www.theory.org.uk/ctr-butl.htm>>

processes involved in giving women a unifying identity.<sup>63</sup> She writes, ‘a genealogical critique refuses to search for the origins of gender, the inner truth of female desire, a genuine or authentic sexual identity that repression has kept from view’ and instead ‘investigates the political stakes in designating as an origin and cause those identity categories that are in fact the effects of institutions, practices, and discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin’ (Butler, x-xi). Thus, she has advocated a new form of feminist theory that defies the idea of any fixed identity or ontological essence.

When we take a closer look at the term “New Woman”, it becomes obvious that this category involves a wide scope of heterogeneities. Taking into account Butler’s claim that the category of women cannot grasp the wide scope of femininities and is therefore exclusionary, we should rather focus on individual experiences, opinions, and concerns than try to press women of a certain period and class into a homogeneous group. In the course of this thesis, it will be shown that New Women, involving both protagonists in fiction and in fact, were constructed by the contemporary press and by antifeminist critics as a uniform group of women displaying socially unacceptable and unnatural traits and behaviours so that they can be effectively attacked and scoped. Giving “modern” women a uniting name with a disputable reputation was an attempt to take away their power by means of social pressure and to compel them to their supposedly right place in society, namely that of a devoted mother and wife. The popular as well as notorious figure of the New Woman of the fin de siècle was commonly characterised in a ridiculous, exaggerated and threatening way in the media. This mode of representation nurtured the ground for national fears and thus conservative critics had a walk-over in making the New Woman the scapegoat of the Victorian age that could be charged for all kinds of perceived social degeneration and economic decline. Moreover, the negative portrayal of New Women in the press and in literary reviews had the effect that New Woman writers and readers distanced themselves from associations with this popular universalizing label

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<sup>63</sup> In her essay “Revisiting Bodies and Pleasures”, Butler explains the term genealogy: “Genealogy“ is not the history of events, but the enquiry into the conditions of emergence (Entstehung) of what is called history, a moment of emergence that is not finally distinguishable from fabrication’ (Butler, quoted in Salih, 10).

and instead, tried to create their own constructive image counter to the unsympathetic picture that was created in the press.<sup>64</sup>

Although New Women share many ideologies and beliefs, discrepancies among them about issues of 'the Woman Question' like marriage, motherhood, identity and sexuality call for a differentiated reading. Carolyn Christenson Nelson illustrates:

Although portrayed by hostile critics as united by a similar agenda for social change and in revolt against established beliefs, women writers of the 1890s were never a monolithic group. Even though they pursued many common goals for women, these writers did not agree on how to achieve these goals. (Nelson, 6)

Thus, it should be taken into account that the term New Woman does not stand for a homogeneous group of literary and socio-political activists but has to be conceived of as a complex term, integrating individual subjects that have come into being and eventually to represent New Women through certain attitudes, performances as well as discursive practises. Often, the very same discourses that created the scandalous figure of the New Woman aimed at taking away her voice to uphold the patriarchal hegemony.

#### **2.4.2 Denaturalizing the Heterosexual Matrix**

In New Woman literature, it becomes obvious that women are trapped in the compulsory heterosexuality of Victorian society, in which marriage seems the only objective and only choice for women. This can be explained with regard to the binary structure of sex, gender and desire that has been uncontested in Western society and frames our way of thinking.

As already pointed out in a previous chapter, the binary division into which our bodies are cast functions as the stable frame for the formation of gender. Judith Butler explains that the body is regarded as a static marker of sexual difference, which then results in gender through cultural inscriptions, and gender in turn results in desires towards the opposite sex.<sup>65</sup> She makes clear

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<sup>64</sup> Cf. Pykett, Lyn. "Foreword". *The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact: Fin-de-Siècle Feminisms*, xi.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Gauntlett, David. *Media, Gender and Identity*, 137.

that heterosexuality lies at the heart of our understanding of the causal relation between sex, gender and desire. It serves as a normative binary frame, as a 'heterosexual matrix'<sup>66</sup> that creates and reinforces itself:

Gender can denote a unity of experience, of sex, of gender, and desire, only when sex can be understood in some sense to necessitate gender – where gender is a psychic and/ or cultural designation of the self – and desire – where desire is heterosexual and therefore differentiates itself through an oppositional relation to that other gender it desires. The internal coherence or unity of either gender, man or woman, thereby requires both stable and oppositional heterosexuality. That institutional heterosexuality both requires and produces the univocity of each of the gendered terms that constitute the limit of gendered possibilities within an oppositional, binary gender system. This conception of gender presupposes not only a causal relation among sex, gender, and desire, but suggests as well that desire reflects or expresses gender and that gender reflects or expresses desire. (Butler, 30)

Butler here elucidates how male/female and masculine/feminine are both constructed as oppositional and complementary terms that result in oppositional desire so that they fit neatly into the binary structure of heterosexuality. Gender and desire gain such a mutually reinforcing power so that it seems that heterosexual desire is a natural given. Consequently, any deviations from the norm such as homosexual or bisexual attractions are seen as unnatural and odd.<sup>67</sup>

In her essay "Thinking Sex", Gayle Rubin points out how Western societies construct monogamous heterosexuality, i.e. sexuality that serves reproductive purposes within marriage as the best, divine, healthy and hence ideal form of sexuality, to which all people should aspire.<sup>68</sup> Heterosexual love in varied forms is regarded as good and normal, opposed to abnormal, immoral and bad sexualities that include for example homosexual relationships, especially promiscuous homosexuality, transsexual love and sadomasochistic sex. Rubin points at the double moral standard and the superiority heterosexuality is granted among other "deviant" relationships.

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<sup>66</sup> Sara Salih illustrates Butler's use of the term 'heterosexual matrix' in *Gender Trouble*. The term 'matrix', she explains, invokes the idea of a 'grid' or a 'mould' in which gender identity is 'cast'. According to Butler, this matrix is itself produced and reinforced in Western societies. Cf. Salih, 51.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Bristow, Joseph. *Sexuality*, 213.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Bristow, 200-201.

She argues that “abnormal” sexual behaviours are presented as primitive and uncultured acts without deeper emotional feelings:

Only sex acts on the good side of the line are accorded moral complexity. For instance, heterosexual encounters may be sublime or disgusting, free or forced, healing or destructive, romantic or mercenary. As long as it does not violate other rules, heterosexuality is acknowledged to represent the full range of human experience. In contrast, all sex acts on the bad side of the line are considered utterly repulsive and devoid of all emotional nuance. The further from the line sex act is, the more it is depicted as uniformly bad experience. (Rubin, quoted in Bristow, 201)

Hence, sexuality invokes the duality good/bad, which is so common in Western culture and frequently restricts our freedom of choice and the heterogeneities of relationships by stigmatizing those relationships considered to be bad. According to Adrienne Rich, our fixed idea of an interrelation between sex, gender and desire makes heterosexuality compulsory and thus exerts oppressive force upon women.<sup>69</sup> In “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”, she maintains that human heterosexuality is not a natural given but a construction of powerful institutions of politics, religion and the media, which aim at disempowering women.<sup>70</sup> As heterosexuality is installed as the unquestionable norm, women see marriage and sexual desire towards men as unavoidable in their lives and they unquestionably accept the oppression that is inherent in those relationships.<sup>71</sup> In line with this thought, Catharine Mac Kinnon blames the heterosexual matrix for the subordination of women, ‘[...] inequality is built into the social conceptions of male and female, sexuality of masculinity and femininity, of sexiness and heterosexual attractiveness’ (Mac Kinnon in Rich, 43).

In the novels discussed, the New Women’s sexual attraction towards the opposite sex is not presented as personal fulfilment but is usually shown to end in personal disaster, either in unfulfilled desires or oppressive marital lives. Although New Woman protagonists try to free themselves from the bounds of marriage by rebelling against conventional expectations of how women within marital relationships should behave, they eventually have to

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<sup>69</sup> Cf. Dorner, 33.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. Rich, Adrienne. “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”. *Blood, Bread and Poetry*, 23-75.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Rich, 39.

resign under the heavy burden of social duties and pressures. This becomes obvious in following examples of New Women experiencing marriage in the novels:

In *The Heavenly Twins*, Evadne gives in to marry a future husband of whose dishonourable past she knows and disapproves of in order to save the honour of her family. Angelica, after “unfeminine” escapades and adventures, promises her fatherly husband to behave “properly” in the way the etiquette requires a married Victorian woman to act. Both women obey the will of their husbands not to follow any public engagement or profession and consequently, struggle and suffer to come to terms with a futile and idle life that is counter to their natural disposition to activity. In *Ideala*, the female protagonist finds herself trapped in a violent relationship to an adulterous husband who uses his power to enslave and humiliate her. Although she could take legal steps to free her from this unacceptable bondage, Ideala stays with her immoral husband to keep up appearances for the sake of his position in society. In *The Awakening*, Mme Edna Pontellier finds herself objectified by her patronizing husband who regards her as his private property. Fleeing from the marital bonds and searching for free love, she soon has to realize that her sensual attraction to Robert Lebrun has to remain unfulfilled as he, like her husband, is unable to love her as a free individual that cannot be made a personal property within the institution of marriage. In *The Story of an African Farm*, Lyndall is fully aware of the restricting and possessive love of a heterosexual relationship and that is why, against all social pressures, she refuses to marry her lover from whom she expects a baby. Rather than giving up her freedom and marrying the man she is attracted to, she is prepared to marry an unmanly and foolish man she does not respect. So, when Gregory Rose promises her to serve her and expect nothing in return, Lyndall consents to marry him to guarantee her social and economic survival without having to give up her individual freedom. However, one day later, she flees with her lover and similar to Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*, she experiences that her ideal of a free love union between men and women without the constraints of marriage is not achievable in the society she lives.

These examples of how New Woman protagonists experience desire towards the opposite sex confirm that the heterosexual matrix distributes power unequally among men and women. The marriage plots in New Woman Literature provide evidence for the argument that heterosexual relationships subordinate women and enable men to gain power over women. To flee compulsory heterosexuality and the inequality between the sexes, Butler suggests an alternative model to the normative heterosexuality of Western society, namely the concept of melancholic heterosexuality that challenges the notion of heterosexist naturalness. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler refutes the idea that heterosexuality is a natural given and thus has to be accepted as the norm. Instead, she perceives homosexuality as the primary innate desire. She draws on Freud and his theory of desire, loss and ego formation to develop her idea of melancholic heterosexuality that constructs heterosexuality as the effect of abandoned homosexual attraction.<sup>72</sup>

According to Freud, the infant experiences an innate desire for one of its parents, which has to be abandoned because of the incest taboo. This loss of initial desires (so called 'dispositions') results in melancholia, a kind of depression, which can be described as the reaction to a loss that remains unaware. The melancholic infant then incorporates the abandoned desire, that is, preserves the lost object on its body by identifying with it. Butler mistrusts Freud's postulation of dispositions, that is, the claim that the infant's desires for its father or mother are innate. However, she points out, these dispositions are the consequence and not the cause of the process of identification:

[...] the dispositions that Freud assumes to be primary or constitutive facts of sexual life are effects of a law which, internalized, produces and regulates discrete gender identity and heterosexuality. (Butler, 82)

She further argues that 'the taboo against homosexuality must *precede* the heterosexual incest taboo', which implies that the primary desire is homosexual and thus, heterosexual gender identity derives from initial homosexual desire that was prohibited.<sup>73</sup> To put it in other words, all

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<sup>72</sup> Cf. Salih, 52-58.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. Salih, 55.

heterosexual people were primarily homosexual. This denied homosexual attraction then results in 'melancholic heterosexuality':

If feminine and masculine dispositions are the result of the effective internalization of [forbidden homosexuality], and if the melancholic answer to the loss of the same-sexed object is to incorporate and, indeed, to become that object through the construction of the ego-ideal, then gender identity appears primarily to be the internalization of a prohibition that proves to be formative of identity. (Butler, 63)

Furthermore, Butler argues that not only gender but also sex is the effect of the incest taboo as

identity is constructed and maintained by the consistent application of this taboo, not only in the stylization of the body in compliance with discrete categories of sex but in the production and 'dispositions' of sexual desire. (Butler, 63-64)

Thus forbidden homosexual desire results in identification with the lost object that becomes incorporated, that is, it appears as an inscription on the body. To put it plainly, you are what you have initially desired as the desires you are forced to oppress materialize in bodily symptoms.<sup>74</sup>

### **2.4.3 The Performative Nature of Gender**

As the previous chapter has illustrated, Judith Butler aimed at denaturalizing heterosexual desires by showing that they are, far from being natural, produced by the law. Furthermore, Butler aims at destabilizing the heterosexual matrix and the inherent binary structure by developing her concept of gender performativity that abolishes normative links between sex, gender and desire so that gender is independent from the body and the sexual orientation is something chosen and not determined. This means, that independently from your body, you 'may perform an identity' and unconnectedly from your identity performance, 'you may have desires' (Gauntlett, 137).

In the discussion of New Woman novels, I will portray how the female protagonists Evadne, Lyndall, Angelica, Edna and Ideala subvert the general

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<sup>74</sup> Cf. Salih, 57-58.



assumption that the female body results in particular feminine traits and behaviours so that gender becomes free-floating and independent from the sexed body. The protagonists' potential of gender subversion as well as their confinement will be examined. In order to comprehend the liberating effects as well as the limits of gender performance in New Woman Literature, I will first discuss Butler's idea of the performative nature of gender in greater detail.

According to Butler, there is no subject that exists "a priori" but subjects are in a process of becoming, in other words, they gain their meaning through performances and acts.<sup>75</sup> Hence, subjects can be seen rather as effects than causes of actions. Butler draws on Beauvoir's famous statement 'one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one' (Butler, 3) to develop and support her theory that gender identity is not determined by biological factors but relies on cultural discourses to be formed. She maintains:

[...] woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification. Even when gender congeals into the most reified forms, 'the congealing is itself an insistent and insidious practice, sustained and regulated by various social means. It is, for Beauvoir, never possible finally to become a woman, as if there were a *telos* that governs the process of acculturation and construction. (Butler, 33)

For Butler, the category woman has been, is being, and will be created and reinvented by discourses so that it seems inevitable to us, as we believe that femaleness is grounded in nature. However, Butler emphasizes, woman is not a natural being but a cultural construct that hides its constructedness through repetitive performances that evoke the illusion of naturalness after a certain time. She maintains:

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of natural sort of being. (Butler, 33)

For Butler, gender is something we *do* or perform and not something we *are*. So a person's gender is not a fixed and stable aspect of one's identity but is a

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<sup>75</sup> Cf. Salih, 44 - 47.

product of actions and interactions with others in which we create or recreate, define or redefine our gender role.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, quoting Nietzsche's statement that 'there is no "being" behind doing, acting, becoming; "the doer" is merely a fiction imposed on the doing – the doing itself is everything' (Nietzsche in Butler, 25), she explains the concept of gender performativity<sup>77</sup> that postulates that performances do not necessarily require the existence of a subject before the deed, that is, a doer behind the deed. That means that gender identity can be expressed without performers as 'gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be' (Butler, 25). She maintains that 'there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender: that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expression" that are said to be its results' (Butler, 25).

In this sense, Butler argues that identities cannot exist outside language as subjects do not cause actions and discourses but are caused and given form by discursive practises.<sup>78</sup>

As already stated in the chapter "The Invention of Sex", feminist theorists like Gayle Rubin have challenged the view that 'anatomy is destiny' by establishing the distinction between sex as biological entity and gender as cultural construction. Butler furthers the view that sex is biologically determined and gender is culturally constructed on the basis of sex by claiming that the female body does not inevitably generate femininity and the male body does not necessarily result in masculinity.<sup>79</sup> She claims that if sex is grounded in nature and gender is constructed by culture, they are not interrelated due to different sources and thus gender does not derive from sex but 'becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one' (Butler, 6). Moreover, Butler not only questions the binary system of sex and gender but

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<sup>76</sup> Cf. Kimmel, 106.

<sup>77</sup> In an interview, Judith Butler emphasizes the distinction between "performance" and "performativity". Whereas performance requires an actor who does the performance, performativity describes a performance without the pre-existence of a subject. However, in *Gender Trouble* both terms seem to melt at times. Cf. Salih, 63. Moreover, the concept of performativity was heavily criticized by philosophers and feminists who fear that performativity prohibits progress as there is no self that can initiate change and so women's struggle for autonomy seems to be futile. Cf. Salih, 68-69.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. Salih, 64.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. Bristow, 211-212.

she also questions the 'metaphysics of substance' (Butler, 23) that sees sex and the body as natural entities.<sup>80</sup>

If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called "sex" is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turn out to be no distinction at all. (Butler, 7)

Butler insists that the meaning of sex as a natural and inevitable marker of the distinction between male and female was established by cultural factors. In *Gender Trouble* Butler challenges the belief that the body is a 'taken-for-granted ground or surface upon which gender significations are inscribed, a mere facticity, devoid of value, prior to significance' (Butler, 129). Instead, she argues that the 'naturalized notion of "the" body is itself a consequence of taboos that render that body discrete by virtue of its stable boundaries' (Butler, 132-133). Following Wittig, she explains that the form of the body is produced by a 'system of significations' (Butler, 113), which successfully draws the contours of the body. Hence, sexed bodies have no signification without gender, as they cannot exist before discursive practices apply meaning to them, as Salih points out:

All bodies are gendered from the beginning of their social existence (and there is no existence that is not social), which means that there is no 'natural body' that pre-exists its cultural inscription. (Salih, 62)

In short, sex like gender is culturally produced. Butler even extends Wittig's idea that 'language casts sheaves of reality upon the social body, stamping it and violently shaping it' (Wittig, in Salih, 61) by challenging the belief in a physical body that pre-exists language. Instead, she argues that the approved category sex only disunites and fragments the physical body and does not grasp the pluralism of forms:

Is there a "physical" body prior to the perceptually perceived body? An impossible question to decide' Not only is the gathering of attributes under the category of sex suspect, but so is the very discrimination of the "features" [...] Indeed, the "unity" imposed upon the body by the category of sex is a "disunity", a fragmentation and compartmentalization, and a reduction of heterogeneity. (Butler, 114)

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<sup>80</sup> Cf. Salih, 49.

The question remains then, why do we continue to see sex and gender as natural and inevitable categories? Butler accuses the heterosexual matrix of Western society, in which heterosexuality is constructed as the compulsory norm, of reinforcing the split between males and females and upholding the coherence between the categories male/female and masculine/feminine.<sup>81</sup> To escape this compulsory heterosexuality, she promotes gender trouble, i.e. subversive acts that destabilize the rigid binary categories and advocate a radical reorganization of the description of bodies and sexualities' (Butler, 113).

#### 2.4.4 From Parody and Drag to New Woman Literature

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler effectively denies the existence of a 'true gender' (Butler, 136) and instead argues that genders 'are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity' (Butler, 136). Thus, it is impossible to do one's gender wrongly. However, she argues, there are ways of performing gender that reveal the constructedness and artificiality of sex and gender.<sup>82</sup> In order to destabilize the seemingly fixed boundaries of the body and undo the hegemonic status of heterosexual identities, Butler suggests parodic performances like drag. Drag artists create a dissonance between their bodies and the gender they perform and thus it becomes obvious that 'gender is a fabrication' and 'true gender is a fantasy' (Butler, 136)<sup>83</sup> She maintains, 'In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself –as well as its contingency' (Butler, 137). However, Butler does not suggest that there is an original gender that is copied by drag artists but she emphasizes that drag parodies the very idea of an original.<sup>84</sup> By revealing and accentuating its genealogy, drag shows that all "natural" gender identities are as unnatural and artificial as their imitations:

[...] gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin. To be more precise, it is a production which, in effect – that is, in its effect – postures as an imitation. This perpetual displacement constitutes a fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to

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<sup>81</sup> Cf. Bristow, 212.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. Salih, 65-68.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. Salih, 65.

<sup>84</sup> Cf. Salih, 66.

resignification and recontextualization: parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities. (Butler, 138)

Thus, parodic performances show that gender identities are rather fluid and imitative, stylized by repetitions and reinterpretations in different forms of interactions than static and fixed as claimed by essentialist views. Significantly, Butler notes that although all forms of gender are subversive, not all forms of parodic acts are subversive and there are even drag performances that reinforce the existing binary pairs like homosexual/heterosexual, feminine/masculine or female/male of Western civilization.<sup>85</sup> According to Butler, drag performances are only subversive if they 'reveal the ontological possibilities that are currently restricted by foundationalist models<sup>86</sup> of identity' (Salih, 67). Hence, the question of how the repetition of gender is done is important. As all gender identities are a 'regulated process of repetition' (Butler, 145), Butler emphasizes, it is only possible to modify the repetition:

[...] it is only within the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible.[...]There is only a taking up of the tools where they lie, where the very "taking up" is enabled by the tool lying there. (Butler, 145)

Butler's concept of gender performativity and the subversion of the binary structure of gender through parodic gender performances like drag prove to have a very liberating effect. They make room for a multiplicity of genders so that we cannot only choose to be either feminine or masculine but have access to a wide range of 'gendered styles' (Bristow, 212) and thus are able to perform various forms of femininities and masculinities.<sup>87</sup> It seems then that Butler assumes that we can choose gender freely according to our moods and appetites as we choose clothes in a wardrobe. However, she makes clear that our choice is limited by cultural and social factors: Institutions of authority, laws and rules constrain our freedom of performance by declaring styles as acceptable or unacceptable, legitimate and illegitimate.<sup>88</sup> Bristow points at effeminate men and butch lesbians and the

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<sup>85</sup> Cf. Salih, 67.

<sup>86</sup> Foundationalist models regard identity as something natural and fixed and thus unalterable. Cf. Salih, 67.

<sup>87</sup> Cf. Bristow, 212.

<sup>88</sup> Cf. Salih, 50.

contempt with which these representations are treated in our society to make clear that our repertoire of gendered performances is regulated and narrowed to fit into acceptable norms.<sup>89</sup> Similarly, New Women were ridiculed and scorned as mannish women as their gendered style did not correlate with the sexed bodies and the expectations of gender identity they implied. Behaviours that are nowadays accepted as appropriate and feminine, like wearing trousers, riding bikes or following a professional career, exploded the frame of feminine acceptability in the Victorian era and thus New Women were treated with disdain. This makes clear that the freedom of choice depends on and varies according to culture, time and place. New Women who chose their gender identity outside the Victorian “wardrobe of approved styles”, that is, who performed gender counter to Victorian expectations of proper femininity, had to face a high risk, namely to lose their status and social prestige.

The thesis will look at how New Woman literature reveals the performative and imitative nature of gender by discussing the practise of cross-dressing. Specifically, the instance of gender masquerade in *The Heavenly Twins* in which the protagonist Angelica dresses as her brother Diavolo and thus tries to escape the narrowing confines of her social role as a woman, will be examined. Another interesting example of gender subversion, which will be dealt with, is the androgynous character Gregory Rose in *The Story of an African Farm*, who masquerades as a female nurse to be able to mother and tend the woman he loves. The thesis will show that ambiguous and incoherent gender performances are embraced in New Woman novels because of their chance to overcome rigid binary gender-constructions. Following Butler, Kimmel points out,

Gender is a performance, a form of drag, by which, through the successful manipulation of props, signs, symbols, behaviour, and emotions, we attempt to convince others of our successful acquisition of masculinity or femininity. (Kimmel, 103)

In this sense, New Woman Novels play on female cross-dressers and androgynous characters and ‘subversively cite ostensibly natural heterosexual signs, eschewing the notion that sexuality can be directly read

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<sup>89</sup> Cf. Bristow, 212.

off the body' (Fellner, 327). By destabilizing the interrelations between sex, gender and desire, they reveal the artifice of these seemingly natural and fixed links.

Although short interludes of androgyny or drag seem to have a liberating power for women, it becomes obvious in the novels discussed that the protagonists' escape from their confined gender roles by gender masquerades can only be temporary. Social pressure in the form of moral codes, laws and institutions force the female protagonists to accept normative gender identities at the high price of individual freedom and fulfilment.

### 3. The New Woman in Historical and Cultural Context

#### 3.1 The Fin de Siècle

The New Woman can be regarded as a symptom of and an intervention to the repressive Victorian era. Emblematic of instability, upheaval and revolt, she reflects the cultural and historical state of the fin de siècle, by which she was formed and inspired. In *Ideala*, the New Woman protagonist hints at the interrelatedness between the altering state of women and the changing climate at the end of the nineteenth century:

The women of my time are in an unsettled state, it may be a state of transition. Much that made life worth having has lost its charm for them. The old interests pall upon them. Occupations that used to be the great business of their lives are now thought trivial [...] Principles accepted since the beginning of time have been called in question. (*Ideala*, 20)

Hence, in order to understand the term New Woman and its complex connotations, it is necessary to grasp the mood of the time in which she emerged, the end of the Victorian reign and the herald of a new epoch: the fin de siècle.

The French term fin de siècle is commonly used to describe the turn of the century between the nineteenth and the twentieth century.<sup>90</sup> It usually spans the period between the 1880s, in which economic decline heralded the end of Britain's supremacy among the world empires and the beginning of the First World War in 1914, which presented the definite collapse of the imperial power.<sup>91</sup> Literally, the era of the fin de siècle is often described as a period of transition, a kind of interlude that can be placed between two grand narratives, namely that of the Victorian era and the postmodernism of the twentieth century.<sup>92</sup> The term itself is usually associated with instability and changing attitudes towards many aspects of life like sexuality, moral

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<sup>90</sup> The term "fin de siècle" is used in this thesis to refer to both Britain and the U.S.

<sup>91</sup> Cf. Ledger, Sally and McCracken, Scott. *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle*, 1.

<sup>92</sup> Cf. Ledger and McCracken, 1.



standards and personal values.<sup>93</sup> Despite general economic progress, imperial expansion, material wealth and a feeling of superiority concerning social and moral standards that characterised the Victorian age, people became particularly anxious about decadence and decline towards the end of the era.<sup>94</sup> As pointed out by Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, the growing industrial cities, which have slowly replaced the agrarian landscape of the United States, were seen as incubators of anarchy, chaos vice and alienation:

The world of large cities, threatening to its own inhabitants, assumed monstrous proportions when viewed from afar by small-town Americans. The giant cities seemed to violate every small-town value. Sodoms and Gomorrahs of sexual excess and sybaritic indulgence, Babels of conflicting languages, religions, and customs, chaotic, ungovernable, the great cities epitomized the foreign, the unknown, and the dangerous. Plutocracy and anarchy became, in the imagination of rural and small-town America, the warring deities of a new world. (Smith-Rosenberg, 172)

Although wealthy people like landowners and capitalists experienced a general economic progress in Europe and the United States, this material wealth did not affect all people equally. Farmers and the masses of industrial workers in the cities were excluded from the luxury and ease of the economic benefits of the Industrial Age.<sup>95</sup> This inequality in living standards led to the proliferation of political and social activism at the fin de siècle. The rise of mass culture that was associated with the fall of the ancient regime and the beginning of the modern age caused fears among the privileged middle classes that felt menaced by the power of the seemingly ‘uncontrollable and irrational ‘masses’ (Caine and Sluga, 118).<sup>96</sup>

Unease about population growth, fears about the immanent corruption of the Victorian bourgeoisie and its superior social and moral standards through the rise of the “low masses” triggered a proliferation of scientific research and discourses in areas like family life, human sexuality and above all, women’s role and situation in society.<sup>97</sup> New scientific fields like sexology,

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<sup>93</sup> Cf. Caine, Barbara and Glenda Sluga. *Gendering European History 1780 – 1920*, 117.

<sup>94</sup> Cf. Caine and Sluga, 118-119.

<sup>95</sup> Cf. Caine and Sluga, 118.

<sup>96</sup> Cf. Caine and Sluga, 118.

<sup>97</sup> Cf. Caine and Sluga, 119.

psychoanalysis and eugenics developed out of the need to control the changes threatening the Victorian order and to preserve the physical strength and intellectual superiority of the nation. When declining birth rates were noted among the middle classes opposed to the increasing birth figures of the working classes and immigrants, eugenic theories began to blossom and were embraced by the educated upper-middle class that saw in them a way to stop the degeneration of the race.<sup>98</sup>

Due to demographic concerns, the individual's sexuality came under close scrutiny, as sexuality was seen to contribute to the health of the whole nation.<sup>99</sup> Especially women's sexuality became the focus of attention of the medical sciences. The eugenic concern with 'social engineering' that aimed at providing a selection of the best and fittest people saw the role of women in their function as mothers as crucial to the health of the race.<sup>100</sup> Extra-domestic activities for women were disapproved of as they were said to distract them from their actual function as child bearers and domestic keepers. Thus, it comes as no surprise that the social decline of the nation was prominently ascribed to the changing role of women in society. Despite laws that excluded women from political activism, women's increased involvement in public life could not be held up. According to Elaine Showalter, the question of gender became one of the dominant ideological battles that were seen as most subverting and devastating to the well-established Victorian order. In *Sexual Anarchy*, she illustrates that the experienced cultural crisis of the fin de siècle was prominently a gender crisis that triggered fears of sexual anarchy.<sup>101</sup>

In *Disorderly Conduct*, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg traces the changing role of women in nineteenth-century America. She points out that parallel to the growing American urbanization a 'new managerial bourgeoisie' like lawyers, social workers and architects developed, who felt at home in the expanding cities and were mistrusted by America's older bourgeois society. Importantly,

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<sup>98</sup> Cf. Caine and Sluga, 123.

<sup>99</sup> Compare chapter 2.

<sup>100</sup> Cf. Caine and Sluga, 124.

<sup>101</sup> Cf. Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, Cf. Ledger, "The New Woman and the Crisis of Victorianism", 22.

women began to assume a major role in this new society.<sup>102</sup> Having been forced to leave their domestic space to provide social services during the Civil War, women rejected to return to the confined world of homebound wife, and instead, asserted themselves in new roles that aimed at ameliorating the living conditions of workingwomen in the cities.<sup>103</sup> Smith-Rosenberg points at the new positioning of the 'bourgeois matrons' that reinterpreted the Victorian 'Cult of True Womanhood' to serve their own aims (Rosenberg, 173):

They moved into America's corrupt unjust cities not as self-conscious feminists but as "True Women". They were, they told husbands, politicians, and industrialists, the conscience and the housekeepers of America. (Smith-Rosenberg, 173)

Thus, by the final decades of the nineteenth century, a new type of woman had materialized, who demanded equality for women in the professional and public field, and who strove for, among others, fair wages, access to education, and the right to vote. Whereas the socially and politically committed bourgeois woman of the new economy did not question the assumptions of feminine domesticity, her daughter, the New Woman, did.<sup>104</sup> Smith-Rosenberg pinpoints the increased radicalism of the fin de siècle New Woman figure: 'If the urban bourgeois matron of the 1860s and 1870s alarmed, her daughter frightened' (Smith-Rosenberg, 176). The "rebellious" daughters rejected traditional roles, often were college-educated, strove for a professional career and discarded marriage as woman's port of destination. Due to their mothers' spadework, they already found a network of urban institutions like women's clubs or women's colleges that supported women's social emancipation and political visions.<sup>105</sup> As Carroll Smith-Rosenberg asserts, 'They inherited a consciousness of women's new role possibilities almost as their birthright' (Smith-Rosenberg, 176). Typically, New Women refused to be confined to traditional gender roles. However, their bourgeois roots still remained visible in traditional values like candour, purity and social service.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Cf. Smith-Rosenberg, 173.

<sup>103</sup> Cf. Smith-Rosenberg, 173.

<sup>104</sup> Cf. Smith-Rosenberg, 176.

<sup>105</sup> Cf. Smith-Rosenberg, 176.

<sup>106</sup> Cf. Smith-Rosenberg, 177.

The maintenance of middle class values in New Woman literature becomes particularly obvious in Sarah Grand's novels *Ideala* and *The Heavenly Twins*. Both New Woman heroines Ideala and Evadne Frayling display a morally superb character and also demand moral purity from the people they befriend. They engage in social service, which they see as their duty to society but also as a meaningful task that interrupts and distracts from the idleness of their domestic lives. When Evadne volunteers as a nurse during a small-pox epidemic she explains her motive to Dr. Galbraith, 'Oh, because it is such a relief' (*Heavenly Twins*, 596). Furthermore, Dr. Galbraith hints at her strength of will and readiness to service for people in need:

Yet when it came to be a question of facing absolute horrors in the interests of the sufferers, she was the first to volunteer, and she did so with a quiet determination there was no resisting, and every trace of inward emotion so carefully obliterated that one might have been forgiven for supposing her to be altogether callous. (*Heavenly Twins*, 595)

Similarly, Ideala blossoms while she devotes her life to the improvement of women's situation in *Ideala*. Significantly, the novel traces her progress in questions of morality and ends with a long praise of her outstanding ability of supporting other women and raising their moral standards. Ideala is convinced of the necessity of 'working for everybody else' (*Ideala*, 186) and of the necessity of a feminist union in order to achieve a change for the better. She points at the past shortfall, 'Women have never yet united to use their influence steadily and all together against that of which they disapprove' (*Ideala*, 185).

Sarah Grand's portrayal of women who find fulfilment in social service and political engagement emphasizes the necessity of a feminine sphere of action beyond household and childcare. In the voice of Ideala in *The Heavenly Twins*, Grand even equalises woman's activism with a new religion that will supersede the exploitative and oppressive Christian Church that complies with patriarchal and capitalist domination.<sup>107</sup>

As will be shown in this thesis, the appraisal of traditional feminine roles and values like social service and purity is often combined with progressive and

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<sup>107</sup> Cf. Grand. *The Heavenly Twins*, 267. Cf. Heilmann. *New Woman Strategies*, 53.

revolutionary ideas of gender in New Woman literature. This apparent contradiction enables New Woman authors to use the force of dominating patriarchal discourses for the creation of their own ideals of femininity.

### 3.2 Feminism and the Woman Question

Many New Woman authors fought for the emancipation of women by writing didactic novels and publishing political and socio-critical essays in the press. The fact that they wrote novels with a purpose rather than producing literary art for art's sake was the reason for numerous literary attacks of conservative critics who vilified New Woman authors for writing political novels without any sense for high art. In fact, New Woman novels called for action and change and thus played a crucial role in reaching feminist targets. Rita Kranidis points out in *Subversive Discourse*:

The novel was used by feminists as a medium through which to engage their readers' sympathies and to sway popular opinion concerning gender relations. Feminist fiction was thus both an extension of and a substitute for feminist social activism. (Kranidis, 70)

Through writing stories that focused on the suffering of women in contemporary society, New Women wanted to raise people's awareness of unequal gender relations and thus improve women's position in society.

Apart from spreading issues of "the Woman Question"<sup>108</sup> among readers, many New Woman authors joined political unions, as did Sarah Grand, Olive Schreiner and Mona Caird, who were all members of the Women Writers' Suffrage League. Grand even became vice-president of the Woman's Suffrage Society and Schreiner co-founded and occupied the leading position of the South African Women's Enfranchisement League.<sup>109</sup> Thus, although

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<sup>108</sup> The "Woman Question" comprises various concerns about women's nature and role in society. According to Theresa DeFrancis, issues of the "Woman Question" have been tackled in various epochs. However, at the turn of the nineteenth century, the "Woman Question" became a particular focus of interest, correlating with theories on sex and gender that challenged long-established assumptions of fixed gender identities. Cf. De Francisc, Theresa. "The Woman Question: A Multi-Faceted Debate, 165.

<sup>109</sup> Cf. Heilmann. *New Woman Strategies*, 4-5.

New Women cannot be categorised as a political union of feminists, they nevertheless played an important part in spreading and furthering the feminist cause. The figure of the New Woman emerged when feminist activity hit its peak at the turn of the nineteenth century, after more than one century of political activism in Britain and America. Thus, New Woman could draw on pioneering feminist efforts and accomplishments.

In Britain, the first-wave feminist<sup>110</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft set a milestone for the progress of feminism in her political argument *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, published in 1792, in which she blames society for the state of economic and psychological degradation of women, for excluding women from the public sphere and for making them dependent on men.<sup>111</sup> In her feminist treatise she ridicules dominant images of women as helpless domestic angels and instead promotes education for women that she saw as the key to emancipation and to a new female role beyond her function as household adornment.<sup>112</sup> Apart from discussions about woman's suffrage that followed Mary Wollstonecraft's feminist argument, there was little feminist progress until the mid of the nineteenth century when feminism became acknowledged in the politics of the British nation.<sup>113</sup> In the period from the 1850s until the turn of the century numerous political campaigns were led like the Married Women's Property Act<sup>114</sup> or the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Act<sup>115</sup> and feminist unions were founded like the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies and the Women's Social Political Union.<sup>116</sup> In America, feminism, which had grown out of anti-slavery and temperance campaigns, gained its political strength in the 1840s, when

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<sup>110</sup> In *Feminisms: A Reader*, Maggie Humm dates first-wave feminism between the early beginnings of feminism before Mary Wollstonecraft's political argument in the eighteenth century and the militant feminism of the Edwardian era. She differentiates first wave feminism, which includes suffragists, old and new feminists and welfare feminists and which is mainly concerned with women's material differences from men, women's individual and conjoint socio-political interests and their right of self-determination, and second-wave feminism, which focuses on woman's identity based on difference to undermine the legitimacy of the patriarchal order. Cf. Humm, 5-12.

<sup>111</sup> Humm, 4.

<sup>112</sup> Cf. Simkin, John. Mary Wollstonecraft. *Spartacus Educational*. 19 April 2008.

<<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/Wollstonecraft.htm>>

<sup>113</sup> Cf. Humm, 4.

<sup>114</sup> The Married Women's Property Act was passed in 1882 and enabled women to retain and control their property within marriage. Cf. for example Kranidis, Rita S. *Subversive Discourse*, 15

<sup>115</sup> The Contagious Diseases Act was passed in 1864 in order to protect men from venereal disease. The law enabled policemen to arrest prostitutes who were suspected to be infected. Cf. Kranidis, 15.

<sup>116</sup> Cf. Humm, 5.

women fought to claim the values and doctrines of the American Declaration of Independence also for themselves.<sup>117</sup> In 1888, the oldest and biggest feminist organisation in the world originated in the United States, the International Council of Women, which later became the National American Woman's Suffrage Association.<sup>118</sup>

Although feminist organisations flourished in Europe and America from the mid nineteenth century onwards, the terms "feminism" and "feminists" were only introduced and spread in England and France in the 1890s.<sup>119</sup> The first use of the terms feminism and feminists in Britain was in an article of *The Westminster Review* in 1898, in which the author portrayed feminists as women who demanded intellectual challenge in the form of education and as women who depended on other female relatives.<sup>120</sup> Although the first definition of feminism certainly differed from today's understanding of the term, Barbara Caine notes that it was also conceived of as a "zeitgeist", a new life style involving a large body of ideas that created a feminist identity.<sup>121</sup> According to Caine, it was the prominence and proliferation of issues concerning sex, gender and sexuality that raised people's awareness of the interrelatedness of personal and intellectual freedom and socio-political activism.<sup>122</sup> However, the introduction of the term feminism does not point at a consensus among feminists. On the contrary, terms for feminist activity were created and heavily contested and hence rather served as a means of differentiating those fighting for the emancipation of women. As pointed out by Caine,

[...] the enormous energy that went into defining and debating the meaning of the terms 'new woman', 'feminist', and 'suffragette' serve, then, not so much to centralize feminist ideas as to exhibit their range, diversity, and complexity. (Caine, *English Feminism*, 144)

In this line of argument, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg notes that successive generations of feminists were extremely critical towards each other and differed significantly as can be seen for example in the first and second

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<sup>117</sup> Cf. Humm, 2.

<sup>118</sup> Cf. Humm, 3.

<sup>119</sup> Cf. Caine and Sluga, 135.

<sup>120</sup> Cf. Caine, Barbara. *English Feminism*, 143.

<sup>121</sup> Cf. Caine, 143.

<sup>122</sup> Cf. Caine, 143.

generation of New Women. Whereas the first was concerned with virtue and the woman's social duty towards the underprivileged of society, the second focused on self-representation and self-fulfilment.<sup>123</sup> This battlefield of feminist ideologies was mirrored in extensive public discussions and visual representations like banners, plays, marches and press coverage.<sup>124</sup> As a consequence of the persistent visual and public presence of topics on women's nature and status, issues of "the Woman Question" became manifested in the popular imagination. Nicola Diane Thompson hints at the centrality and complication of "the Woman Question" at the fin de siècle:

It was impossible for educated people not to be aware of such developments and not to form opinions and take a stance. In fact, the complexity and multifariousness of the debates about women's nature, role, and literary status, in Victorian and twentieth-century discussions, make it more appropriate to pluralize the term "woman question", changing it to "woman questions." (Thompson, 3)

Furthermore, the nature of "the Woman Question" experienced increasing radicalizations towards the turn of the century and discussions about sexuality and marriage that were held in privacy until then appeared before the public.<sup>125</sup> In her article "The New Aspect of the Woman Question" Sarah Grand pinpoints the main focus of "the woman question" at the end of the nineteenth century, 'The Woman Question is the Marriage Question [...]' (Grand, 276).<sup>126</sup> Marriage was seen as contributing essentially to women's confinement and suppression and thus it was also taken as the starting point of the struggle for women's freedom in the real as well as literary world.<sup>127</sup>

Whereas one can find a consistency in their critique of marriage, the theme of sexuality was a controversial issue among New Woman authors. From a conviction of sexual purity to an emphasis of sexual liberty, New Woman writers' discussion of female sexuality was oppositional and manifold. However, this diversity was neglected by their critics. As Ledger and McCracken point out, although most feminine activists distanced themselves from sexual decadence, the image of New Women as having an insatiable

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<sup>123</sup> Cf. Smith-Rosenberg, 177.

<sup>124</sup> Cf. Caine, 131.

<sup>125</sup> Cf. Caine, 131.

<sup>126</sup> Grand, Sarah. "The New Aspect of the Woman Question", 276.

<sup>127</sup> Cf. Heilmann, Ann. *The Late-Victorian Marriage Question: A Collection of Key New Woman Texts. Volume 1*. London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1998.xiii-xiv.



sexual appetite was widespread in the popular press.<sup>128</sup> The association of New Woman with sexual excesses was also one of the main factors that linked New Women authors to the male decadent movement.<sup>129</sup>

The multiple and often contradictory constructions of the cultural phenomenon “New Woman” in the press and in literary reviews will be focused on in the next chapter. I will examine the critics’ conception of New Woman literature, the traditionalists’ attempts of disparaging and disempowering New Women in order to maintain the Victorian patriarchal order and the counter-strategies of New Woman authors who tried to reclaim a more favourable identity for themselves and for their fictive characters in order to strengthen their agency of reform.

### 3.3 The New Woman in Fact and Fiction

In Britain, the term New Woman was first coined by Sarah Grand in a discussion with Quida in the *North American Review*.<sup>130</sup> Ironically, It was the anti-feminist Quida, who gave the term the significant capital letters, by stating:<sup>131</sup>

[...] in the English language there are conspicuous at the present moment two words which designate two unmitigated bores: [...] The Workingman and the Woman, the New Woman, be it remembered, meet us at every page of literature written in the English tongue; and each is convinced that on its own especial W hangs the future of the world (Quida, “The New Woman”, 610).

Soon the term was widely used by both conventional and feminist critics who, as Ardis points out, tried to define the New Woman by means of differentiation with ideological counterparts like the Victorian female “angel in the house”.<sup>132</sup> The identification process of the figure of the New Woman eventually culminated in a heated discussion of the New Woman’s sphere of

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<sup>128</sup> Cf. Ledger, “The New Woman and the Crisis of Victorianism”, 30.

<sup>129</sup> Cf. Dowling, Linda. “The Decadent and the New Woman in the 1890s” for a detailed discussion of the interlacement of the decadent movement and the New Woman phenomenon. 47-63.

<sup>130</sup> Cf. Ardis, 10, Cf. Ledger, “The New Woman and the Crisis of Victorianism”, 32.

<sup>131</sup> Cf. Ardis, 10.

<sup>132</sup> Cf. Ardis, 13.

action and influence. Critics were eager to differentiate between fiction and fact and some even claimed that the New Woman only existed in the literary realm. So did Eastwood in an essay in which she diminished the New Woman as 'thankfully unreal', and in this line of thought, Morgan-Dockrell called the New Woman a 'figment of the journalistic imagination' (quoted in Ardis, 12-13). Ann Ardis explains that the denial of the New Woman's real existence was an attempt to 'isolate it in a special corner of life' (Ardis, 12), to quarantine it so that she cannot be encountered in society.<sup>133</sup> Declaring the New Woman non-existent in fact, did not make her wholly ineffective. Many reviewers feared her corrupting influence on young and "innocent" readers as the following reaction towards Chopin's *The Awakening* reveals:

The worst of such stories is that they will come into the hands of youth, leading them to dwell on things that only matured persons can understand, and promoting unholy imaginations and unclean desires. (quoted in Knights, Pamela, "Introduction" to *The Awakening*, ix)

Whether she was regarded as literary or real, the figure of the New Woman certainly dominated the social and cultural landscape of the fin de siècle and her name resounded throughout the land. In *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle*, Ledger and McCracken point at the fragmentation and plurality of the image of the New Woman.

The elusive quality of the New Woman of the fin de siècle clearly marks her as a problem, as a challenge to the apparently self-identical culture of Victorianism which could not find a consistent language by which she could be categorized and dealt with. All that was certain was that she was dangerous, a threat to the status quo. (Ledger, 24)

The New Woman's resistance to definition, on the one hand, and the 'Victorian's obsession with taxonomy' (Ledger, 25) on the other hand, even further multiplied the images and representations of the threatening figure of the New Woman. Hence, numerous epithets were attached to her name: "the odd woman", "the redundant spinster", "the militant woman", "the wild woman" and "the hysteric" are only a few of numerous associations. The images of the New Woman were so manifold and ambiguous, because they not only mirrored the often conflicting views and attitudes of the New Woman protagonists but also the diverse attitudes of their critics. Lyn Pykett

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<sup>133</sup> Ardis, 12.

felicitously pinpoints the seemingly endless flexibility of the stereotypical images of this fin de siècle phenomenon:

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 antidomestic, or she sought to make domestic values prevail; she was reactionary and conservative; she was the agent of social and/or racial regeneration, or symptom and agent of decline. (Pykett, "Foreword", xii)

The impossibility of categorization that is revealed by those contradictory descriptions support Foucault's and Butler's claim that there is no fixed and stable identity but that identities are constructed and reconstructed through performances and discourses. In this sense, the figure of the New Woman was invented and reinvented and provided manifold images for its advocates and opponents.

Whether in the mask of a supermotherly figure or the role of an oversexed Amazon, the figure of the New Woman apparently had a common ground: She certainly stood for revolution, protest and change. Through her call for reform in intellectual, social and economic areas, the New Woman nurtured the hostility and aggression of critics who attempted to restore and sustain the high values of the "golden" Victorian age. The much-quoted anti-feminist and conservative Eliza Lynn Linton, who was a spokesperson for the traditional division of gender roles, became one of the New Woman's most persevering critics. Linton equated society with nature and perceived any forced social change – such as epitomized by the figure of the New Woman - unnatural.<sup>134</sup> In "The Wild Women as Social Insurgents", Linton equates emancipated women with primitive savages of colonial cultures and portrays them as unwomanly creatures with extremely repulsive looks and practices. Furthermore, she argues, modern women are a main threat to the British imperialist power as they provoke disorder and opposition among the colonial subjects and introduce uncultured practises in the refined and superior culture of the British nation.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Cf. Ardis, 23.

<sup>135</sup> Cf. Jusová Iveta. *The New Woman and the Empire*, 5.

Jusova points out that the dissemination of disquiet and anxiety through exaggerations was a popular strategy among opponents of women's emancipation, who tried to diminish the New Woman's influence and preserve the status quo of the Victorian ideal of femininity.<sup>136</sup> In consequence, the New Woman became a much-maligned figure in public discourse, a source of numerous mockeries, parodies and satires. Cartoons and periodicals profited from the New Woman's unconventional and disorderly conduct. Her preference for rational dresses, physical activities like cycling, apparently "masculine" behaviour like smoking, and following a professional occupation provided visual motifs for the social disruption for which she was held responsible.<sup>137</sup> As stated by Richardson and Willis, caricatures of the New Woman often visualized the cultural fragmentation of the Victorian age.<sup>138</sup> Thus, the figure of the New Woman appeared as an emblem of weakness and decay in the form 'a bespectacled, physically degenerate walking or as an emblem of extraordinary strength and power in the form of 'a strapping Amazon who could outwalk, outcycle, and outshoot any man' (Richardson and Willis, 13). Due to the primarily negative image of modern women in the public debate, even New Woman authors themselves labelled the New Woman an imaginary rather than real phenomenon. Sarah Grand writes:

Who is this New Woman, this epicene creature, this Gorgon set up by the snarly who impute to her the faults of both sexes while denying her the charm of either – where is she to be found if she exists at all? For my own part, until I make her acquaintance I shall believe her to be the finest work of the imagination which the newspapers have yet produced. (Grand quoted in Richardson, 13)

In her essay "Nothing But Foolscap and Ink: Inventing the New Woman", Talia Schaffer explores the strategic devices that feminists and New Woman authors employed to reinvent the New Woman counter to the prevailing negative image. She points out that by fictionalizing the New Woman, Sarah Grand (among others) invested her with more power. As fiction leaves space for the author to construct the fictive protagonists according to their will,

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<sup>136</sup> Cf. Jusová, 5.

<sup>137</sup> Cf. Richardson and Willis, "Introduction", 12-13.

<sup>138</sup> Cf. Richardson and Willis, 13.

Grand is able to idealize the New Woman and thus support her feminist cause.<sup>139</sup> As can be seen in *The Heavenly Twins* and *Ideala*, the New Woman characters of Grand's novels appear in the forms of idealized heroines with incontestable moral conduct and high standards of purity. They suffer from neurasthenia because of the oppression in society but nevertheless, they dedicate their lives to social services and the salvation of mankind. Thus, attacking the popular but negative image in public and declaring the New Woman a fictive phenomenon did not serve to push New Women to the margins of society. However, it enabled Grand to draw a more favourable picture of the New Woman protagonists counter to the mainstream press and thus underline her power of change in society.<sup>140</sup>

In *British Women Fiction Writers of the 1890s*, Nelson illustrates that not only the New Woman was encountered with enmity but also her literary works.<sup>141</sup> Often New Woman novels and short stories were dismissed as polemic pamphlets that were badly written, lacking in form, style and artistic subtlety. Ignoring the immense success of the publication of *The Heavenly Twins*, reviewers unmercifully attacked Grand for her artistic failures: 'It was a bad novel – artistically vicious in its crudity, violence, unfairness, literary indecorum, improbability, impossibility [...]' (quoted in Senf, "Introduction" to *The Heavenly Twins*, xxi). Likewise *Ideala* was seen as poorly written and badly organized.<sup>142</sup> Similarly, George Egerton's experimenting with narrative techniques like stream-of-consciousness method or shifting points of view did not fit into the dominantly male-defined literary world of the nineteenth century and thus was regarded as deficiencies in grammar and style. The contemporary hostility towards New Woman writing can be mainly explained by two factors: first, by the reviewer's disapproval of the ideology expressed in the stories and second, by the male writer's fear of a 'feminisation, or emasculation of art and the broader culture' (Pykett, 9) which was believed to trigger not only the 'death of familiar structures, [but] even the death of literature' (Showalter, xviii). Some critics even conceive of the literary history

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<sup>139</sup> Cf. Schaffer, 44-45.

<sup>140</sup> Cf. Schaffer, 45.

<sup>141</sup> Cf. Nelson, 5.

<sup>142</sup> Cf. Senf, "Introduction". *Heavenly Twins*, xx.

of the nineteenth century as a combat of the sexes, that is, a battle between innovative feminine forms of writing and masculine norms and traditions.<sup>143</sup>

Despite negative publicity, the success of literary works written by New Women at the end of the nineteenth century cannot be denied. As Showalter remarks, 'not only as heroines of drama, but also as competitors in the marketplace, women were a major presence in the new literary world of the 1880s and 1890s' (Showalter, vii). Novels written by women about women like Sarah Grand's *The Heavenly Twins* and Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*, which was published in 1883 and is considered to be the first New Woman novel, were best-selling novels in England and the United States.<sup>144</sup> In *Subversive Discourse*, Kranidis confirms the prominence of female writing at the fin de siècle, 'women produced more novels in the last twenty years of the nineteenth century than in all of the history of English literature until then' (Kranidis, 59). It is even more surprising then that New Woman literature almost disappeared from the literary marketplace for almost one century. In her essay "The Cause of Women and the Course of Fiction: The Case of Mona Caird", Lyn Pykett gives an explanation for the expulsion of novels written by female authors at the fin de siècle. She blames misogynistic views and unquestioned masculine authority in the literary field for the negligence of women writers:

[...] almost from the moment of its production, the New Woman writing was being consigned to the dustbin of history by the hostile judgements of a literary criticism whose canons of value were constructed around a series of gendered concepts in which *the feminine invariably represented the negative term*. (my emphasis, Pykett, 128-129)

She points out that the prevalent conviction that true art has to be masculine, objective and timeless did not correlate with the topicality and subjectivity of New Woman fiction and thus New Woman fiction was banished to 'the Sargasso Sea of uncanonized literature' (Ardis, 7).<sup>145</sup>

<sup>143</sup> Pykett, Lyn, *The Improper Feminine*, 36.

<sup>144</sup> Cf. "Note". *The Story of an African Farm*, iii. Cf. Pykett, 7. In *New Woman Strategies*, Heilmann notes that Grand's and Schreiner's novels on New Women were acclaimed by contemporary readers, especially women, as their stories were said to convey accurately what many women felt but were not able to express. Cf. Heilmann, 4.

<sup>145</sup> Cf. Pykett, "The Cause of Women and the Course of Fiction: The Case of Mona Caird", 129.

It was not until the 1970s that New Woman fiction was rediscovered by second-wave feminists, who tried to reclaim the literary canon and establish female writing as an academic discipline. However, even Elaine Showalter, who is seen as one of the pioneers in feminist criticism, did not give an exclusively favourable account of the feminist contribution of New Woman writings in *A Literature of Their Own*, as the following lines show.

In retrospect, it looks as if all the feminists had but one story to tell, and exhausted themselves in its narration. [...] Beginning with a sense of unity and a sense of mission, a real concern for the future of womanhood, an interest in the “precious speciality” of the female novelist, they ended, like Sarah Grand, with the dream that by withdrawing from the world they would find a higher female truth. Given the freedom to experience, they rejected it, or at least they tried to deny it (Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, 215)

Although Showalter acknowledges New Women’s contribution to the evolution of modernism and the progress of women’s writing in her statement that ‘they are the missing links between the great women writers of the Victorian novels and the modern fiction of Mansfield, Woolf, and Stein (Showalter, viii), she accuses the New Woman writers of being stuck in narrative discourses without being successful in their attempts to realize their feminist vision of equality.

In regard of the rather negative and often morbid endings of the New Woman stories discussed in this thesis, Elaine Showalter’s objection seems justifiable. In *The Heavenly Twins*, Grand fails to allow for a positive reading of the futuristic prospects of her New Woman protagonists. Both protagonists, Evadne, weakened by nervous disorders and Angelica, disappointed by the outcome of her disorderly conduct, deny their own nature and conform to society’s expectations of proper femininity. Likewise, George Egerton’s “The Cross Line”, closes with a surprisingly conventional ending. After the female character was rather nauseated by the view of childbirth, the story ends with the woman’s complying with her biological femininity. In *The Story of an African Farm*, the New Woman protagonist Lyndall diminishes her own endeavours to challenge the Victorian sex and gender system as mere unavailing, childish illusions:

But what does it help? A little bitterness, a little longing when we are young, a little futile searching for work, a little passionate

striving for room for the exercise of our powers, - and then we go with the drove. (*African Farm*, 136)

Lyndall's words when she imagines a state of gender equality 'Then, but not now' and her negative reply 'I am not so sure of that' to Waldo's conviction that other people will listen to her (*African Farm*, 141) mirror her incapacity to believe in her own power of agency and change for the better.<sup>146</sup> Disillusioned with women's chances of equality and emancipation, Lyndall crouches self-destructively in the pouring rain and consequently falls incurably ill. Death instead of reward for the New Woman heroines, as critics have argued, seems to restore the traditional Victorian order at the end of the novels.<sup>147</sup>

The general tone of hopelessness and conformity that is so often found in New Woman literature make clear that New Woman novelists are fully aware of society's premises and restricting laws and the consequent hardships a woman has to face when she chooses an alternative and independent lifestyle. Loneliness in an outcast position and financial difficulties are only a few of numerous obstacles the protagonists in the New Woman stories have to face in search of independence and self-fulfilment.

New Woman authors are aware of the necessity of individual self-sacrifices, aligning with the narrator in *Ideala*, who affirms '[...] it is clearly the duty of individuals to sacrifice themselves for the good of the community at large' [...] we none of us stand alone, that we are all part of this great system [...] individuals must suffer, must even be sacrificed for the good of the rest' (*Ideala*, 158). However, by focusing on individual failures of New Woman heroines, New Woman authors also seem to warn against 'feminist resistance which remains detached from the wider political framework' (Heilmann, *New Woman Strategies*, 46). The apparent impossibility of success despite individual endeavours also reinforces the critique of Victorian society and the need for a holistic change of its faulty value system. The next chapter will centralize New Woman's call for change towards gender equality in different areas of life like marriage, motherhood, sexuality,

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<sup>146</sup> Cf. Ardis, 67.

<sup>147</sup> Cf. Ardis, 66.



education and art. It will investigate how New Women performed gender against the grain so that they triggered fears of moral and physical degeneration. Furthermore, the New Woman's positioning as a natural ally of the decadent dandy, the female pendant to the male incorporation of aestheticism, decadence and revolt will be called into question. The chapter will search for reasons why these fin de siècle figures were so often misleadingly connected by Victorian conservative critics.

## 4. Representations of Decadence

### 4.1 The New Woman and the Dandy

As already illustrated in this thesis, the fin de siècle was a period of upheaval, transition and instability. During this era, two cultural figures emerged that became the personified symbols of anarchy, destruction and degeneration: The New Woman and the decadent dandy<sup>148</sup>. As advocates of revolution and reform, the New Woman and the decadent dandy were seen as profoundly threatening to Victorian social order. Conventional critics saw in these real and literary avant-gardes a union that aimed at transforming well-established cultural norms and values that eventually would lead to a collapse of society and culture and thus they were met with alarm, anger and contempt, as Linda Dowling points out:

To most late Victorians the decadent was new and the New Woman decadent. The origins, tendencies, even the appearance of the New Woman and the decadent – as portrayed in the popular press and periodicals – confirmed their near, their unhealthily near relationship. Both inspired reactions ranging from hilarity to disgust and outrage, and both raised as well profound fears for the future of sex, class, and race. (Dowling, 49)

From a modern reader's point of view, a near relationship or affinity between these fin de siècle phenomena is questionable as the decadent writer and the New Woman author were rather hostile to each other and treated each other with contempt. According to Showalter, the art of Decadence flourishing at the end of the nineteenth century excluded female artists, and decadent writers perceptibly assumed an anti-feminist viewpoint:

[...] the decadent artist was invariably male, and decadence, as a hyper-aesthetic movement, defined itself against the feminine and biological creativity of women. (Showalter, *Decadence*, x).

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<sup>148</sup> The stereotype of the Decadent dandy of the fin de siècle was a bohemian aristocrat that distinguished himself by a revolutionary philosophy of life and accordingly to this, an elegant, eccentric and immaculate dress code. As pointed out by MacLeod, 'High, stiff collars, gloves, silk top hats, canes, boutonnieres, frock coats, and tapered trousers were the key elements of the dandy's wardrobe' (MacLeod, Kirsten. *Fiction of British Decadence*, 12).

Concerned with the cultivation of art and the self, fascinated with artificiality and unconventionality, the decadent writer saw in women the opposite of culture and fine art, namely representatives of natures, who - uncultivated and prone to their primitive instincts – did not have access to higher spiritual or intellectual fields.<sup>149</sup> Thus, the male decadent writer usually joined in the Victorian misogynistic discourse of women's mental inferiority and limited capacity that made them unfit for "male" preoccupations like politics, writing novels or following a career. This can be illustrated when we take a closer look at two famous and representative novels of the decadent and aesthetic movement at the turn of the century, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde and *Against Nature* by Joris-Karl Huysmans.<sup>150</sup>

In Wilde's novel about a young aristocrat dedicating his life to art, beauty and pleasure and his final downfall, Henry Wotton teaches his pupil Dorian a lesson about the limited potential of women and their incapability of achieving higher art:

My dear boy, no woman is a genius. Women are a decorative sex. They never have anything to say, but they say it charmingly. Women represent the triumph of matter over mind, just as men represent the triumph of mind over morals. (*Dorian Gray*, 47-48)

That the nature of women is seen as low and primitive by decadent men evaluating art and aestheticism as their religion, is further conveyed in the love affair between the dandy Dorian and the actress Sybille. At the beginning of their encounter, Dorian is fascinated with the young lady because of her brilliant performances on the theatre stage. However, it soon becomes clear that he does not see her as a human being, let alone admire her as a woman, but is fond of her artificiality and decoration with which she masks her true self on stage. When Sybille seizes to be an actress and faces Dorian as a "natural" woman in love, he is disgusted with her dullness and primitiveness and abandons her immediately. The descriptions of women in *Against Nature* provide further evidence for the disparagement of women in fin de siècle male literature. The aesthete Des Esseintes, untiring in his

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<sup>149</sup> Showalter. *Daughters of Decadence*, x.

<sup>150</sup> *Against Nature* was regarded as 'the breviary of the Decadence' (Symons, in MacLeod, 3) and it did not only inspire Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* but also influenced the British Decadent movement crucially. Cf. MacLeod, 3.

attempts of excluding nature, immerses in a totally artificial life and regards women as both murderous and lustful or as ugly beasts that violate any aesthetic imagination. In a nightmare scene, he describes a woman who crosses his way and shocks him with her repulsive und uncultivated appearance:

[...] she was skinny, with pale yellow hair, a face like a bulldog, freckled cheeks, irregular teeth that jutted out beneath a snub nose. She wore a servant's white apron, a long kerchief crossed over her breast, Prussian military half-boots, and a black bonnet trimmed with ruching and a rosette. She had the appearance of a stall-keeper at a fair, or of a member of a travelling circus. (*Against Nature*, 78)

In another scene, Des Esseintes enthuses about the diamonds-covered dancer Salome, portraying her as 'monstrous, indiscriminate, irresponsible, unfeeling Beast who [...] poisons everything that comes near her, everything that sees her, everything that she touches' (*Against Nature*, 46). The love affair between Dorian and Sybille Vane (even her naming that alludes to the word "vain" points at the contempt with which the author treats the female character) and Des Esseintes' obsession with the beautiful femme fatale Salome that demands the beheading of a man after her sensual dance, supports Elaine's Showalter's argument that women 'appear as objects of value only when they are aestheticised or phallicised as *femmes fatales*' (Showalter, x) in decadent male writing.

Similarly to the male authors' negative attitude towards their female colleagues, many New Woman writers did not feel close to their apparent male pendant but rather distanced themselves from the perverse and purely aesthetic pleasures of the decadent dandy. Like conventional critics, many New Woman authors feared the immanent dangers of the dandy's infinite strivings for sensual and aesthetic delights. Olive Schreiner conceived of the decadent man because of his boundless admiration and sensibility of aestheticism as 'the most degraded type of the human creature I have ever known' (Schreiner, quoted in Showalter, xi). As an advocate of the purity movement, the New Woman author Sarah Grand warns against the lower forms of sensual pleasures in her novels *Ideala* and *The Heavenly Twins*. In contrast to the male decadent's credo of art and pleasure, she conveys her belief in the superiority of high morals over physical sensations by rewarding

the fictive characters that distance themselves from fleshly lusts. Vice versa, she traces the doom of those who seek pleasures in morally objectionable ways.

In *Ideala*, the New Woman protagonist Ideala falls in love with the physician Lorrimer and fancies a free love relationship without the legal sanction of a marriage contract. However, her friend hints at her immanent moral degradation, 'He may be everything to you, but he has lowered you, Ideala' (*Ideala*, 140) and advises her to leave Lorrimer to save her reputation. Consequently, Ideala suppresses her attraction to the handsome Lorrimer to pursue a morally-higher occupation that does not serve individual purposes but the health of a whole nation. Eventually, she is saved from the degraded fate of an outcast of society and instead, is rewarded by the high social status she is able to keep in society despite the failure of her marriage. Moreover, the narrator describes Ideala enthusiastically as a highly bred, cultivated, and refined' (*Ideala*, 25) woman who could feel the 'scent of flowers, the song of the thrushes in the spring; colour, and beautiful forms [...] in a greater degree than lower natures do.' However, he is also quickly in hinting at the inherent hazard that lies in the cultivation of 'sensuous pleasures':

'There was danger, however, in the over-education of the senses which made their ready response inevitable, but neither limited the subjects, nor regulated the degree, to which they should respond. (*Ideala*, 25)

In *The Heavenly Twins*, Evadne fights against her fleshly lusts and denies associating with Colonel Colquhoun intimately because of moral reasons. She confesses to her husband the first sensual arousing triggered by his good looks but makes clear that morality has triumphed over aesthetic values and destroyed any initial passionate feelings that she ascribes to her naivety and ignorance:

I think my passion for *you* was blinder and more headlong, if anything, than is usually the case in very young girls. It possessed me from the moment I saw you in church that first time. You pleased my eyes as no other man has ever done, and I was only too glad to take it for granted that your career and your character were all that they ought to have been. But of course I did not love you, for passion, you know, is only the introduction to love. It is a flame that may be blown out at any

time by a difference of opinion, and mine went out the moment I learnt that your past had been objectionable. (*Heavenly Twins*, 339-340)

In this passage, it becomes obvious that Sarah Grand does not deny women's sexuality but addresses it directly. At the same time, she warns women from "blind" passion that can lead to wrong and misjudged impressions. She makes clear that thanks to her high moral standards, Evadne saves herself from the same fatal destiny that overtook her friend Edith, who, as a consequence of the depraved behaviour of her husband, bears a disabled child and eventually dies of syphilis in a mentally-degraded state. The fatal ending of the pursuit of physical pleasures is also exemplified by Evadne's husband, who dies of a heart attack, the consequence of his 'habit of filling up every interval of life with brandy and soda water' (*Heavenly Twins*, 566). Similarly to Edith's tragic end, Grand's novel *Ideala* depicts the miserable death of a young girl that has engaged in a love affair with Ideala's husband and consequently has been infected by venereal disease. In short, the decadent world of pleasures leaves destruction in Sarah Grand's novels *The Heavenly Twins* and *Ideala*. It seems then as if New Women rather addressed the inherent dangers of physical and aesthetic joys than celebrated and aggrandized the experience of pleasure as a new life-style as the decadent writer did. As Debbie Hayfield argues, instead of demanding greater sexual freedom for themselves, New Women often postulated that men should rise to women's higher moral standards.<sup>151</sup>

Moral purity of both men and women who want to enter the stage of marriage is also the pre-condition for Evadne in *The Heavenly Twins*. As her husband does not prove to be her moral equal, a fact she finds out shortly after the wedding ceremony, she rejects to consummate her marriage. Discarding the widespread Victorian credo of femininity that postulates that women have to sacrifice themselves for saving men from depravity, she declares to her aunt Mrs. Orton Beg that women have to be fastidious with respect to the selection of their male fellows. Instead of tolerating male vices, Evadne

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<sup>151</sup> Cf. Hayfield, Debbie. "Daughters of Decadence: George Egerton, Kate Chopin and the New Woman". *Humanities at Newi*. 03.April 2007.  
<[www.newi.ac.uk/humanities/dir5/daughter.htm](http://www.newi.ac.uk/humanities/dir5/daughter.htm)>

insists, they should demand high moral standards. Otherwise they would serve as accomplices in the moral degeneration of society:

“That is the mistake you good women all make,” said Evadne. “You set a detestably bad example. So long as women like you will forgive anything, men will do anything. You have it in your power to set up a high standard of excellence for men to reach in order to have the privilege of associating with you. [...] Instead of punishing them for their depravity, you encourage them in it by overlooking it; and besides, “she added, “you must know that there is no past in the matter of vice. The consequences become hereditary, and continue from generation to generation.” (*Heavenly Twins*, 79-80)

It can be concluded that moral vices that are accepted as contributing to a highly aestheticized life-style in decadent male literature, are not approved of in New Woman literature. Rather, as is shown in the works of Sarah Grand, New Woman literature often presents a moral imperative for the female as well as male readers.

## 4.2 The Sexual Revolt

Considering the hostility with which women are treated in decadent literature or the New Woman’ scepticism towards purely sensual or immoral pleasures that becomes obvious in their writings, the contemporary perception of the decadent and the New Woman as ‘twin apostles of social apocalypse’ (Dowling, 57) needs further investigation. In “The Decadent and the New Woman in the 1890s” Linda Dowling explores the parallels that seemed to align New Women with the decadent writer and notices a crucial feature that was shared by both novelists and seriously alarmed the Victorian conservative critics: the sexual outspokenness and expressiveness of their fictive characters. As Dowling points out:

[...] the loosening of sexual controls apparently encouraged by literary decadence and New Woman fiction was almost universally believed by late-Victorian critics to threaten the vital bonds of state and culture. (Dowling, 50)

Dowling explains that both the New Woman author and the decadent writer rebelled against Victorian norms through sexual means and this fundamental similarity disposed critics to see a close union between them.<sup>152</sup> The decadent and aesthetic writer's fascination with sensual and perverse pleasures and rejection of procreative sex and the New Woman's insistence on free female sexuality beyond reproductive purposes and equal sexual standards were seen as threatening to the survival of the race as these features seemed to 'isolate them both in a chilly realm of sterility, asceticism, or cerebral lechery, cut off from the springs of instinctive reproductive life' (Dowling, 56).

The demand of equal sexual rights by New Woman authors was perceived as revolutionary and threatening, even more so because of the fact that woman's sexuality had been tabooed before. Women's sexuality was seen as an exclusionary procreative function and thus was, if it was mentioned at all, always connected with childbirth. Thus, Ardis points out that in the Victorian age a proper lady was supposed to deny her sexual appetite.<sup>153</sup> As Smith-Rosenberg notes, even medical discourse emphasized woman's "natural" frigidity and absence of sexual desire.<sup>154</sup> The pursuit of sexual satisfaction was only granted the male sex and was seen as unnatural and even pathological in women. According to this line of argument, Victorian conservatives feared that the depiction of women's sexuality as erotic pleasure instead of procreative function would spoil the readers (who were mainly women) and as a further consequence, endanger the whole population of the nation.

It comes as no surprise then that *The Awakening*, tracing Edna Pontellier's sensual arousing which finds its form in "futile" love affairs and disregard of her womanly duties, was heavily criticized for its sexual outspokenness and rejection of motherhood. In this novel, Kate Chopin creates a New Woman heroine who follows her emotional and sexual urges, disregarding the social conventions she is subjected as mother and wife. The New Woman character Edna Pontellier has abandoned her juvenile infatuations and passions for the

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<sup>152</sup> Cf. Dowling, Linda, 52.

<sup>153</sup> Cf. Ardis, 14.

<sup>154</sup> Cf. Rosenberg-Smith, 23.



sake of a respectable and responsible position in society by having become Léonce Pontellier's wife. However, her latent sensuality reappears after the summer residence on Grand Isle where she is inspired by the Creoles' easiness and freedom of expression. Ignoring the wishes and needs of her husband and her children, Edna begins to follow her emotional and sexual urges. She becomes intimate with Robert Lebrun, who has been known for his various summer flirtations. Becoming aware of the impossibility of their love, Robert escapes to Mexico, leaving Edna in a state of unfulfilled longing. In contrast to Robert, who cannot close the eyes to the rules of society, Edna is willing to overthrow any conventions in order to fulfil her emotional and sexual needs. This becomes obvious when she refuses to attend her sister Janet's wedding in New York and instead engages in a love affair with Alcée Arobin while her family is away. Notably, she does not feel any remorse for her husband's sake when she answers Alcée's caresses by becoming 'supple to his gentle, seductive entreaties' but she felt 'a dull pang of regret because it was not the kiss of love which had inflamed her' (Chopin, 103, 93). The fact that she does not show any dread of diverging from the socially acceptable road is further illustrated in her rebuke of Robert's unrealizable dream that Léonce will set Edna free to become his wife.

You have been a very, very foolish boy, wasting your time dreaming of impossible things when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free! I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. (*Awakening*, 119)

While Edna believes in a form of true love that ignores traditional expectations and allows her to be an independent and self-fulfilled woman, Robert cannot imagine an unconventional, mutually independent and sensuous relationship. He is distraught by Edna's claim of sexual freedom and personal fulfilment.

Kate Chopin reveals that Edna abandons her duties as mother and wife without any remorse. Her portrayal of Edna's liberation from the trammels of femininity and awakening to the manifold prospects of life beyond Victorian ideals of propriety does not place any critique on the protagonist's egoistical conduct. Thus, Chopin seems to approve of the power of woman's sexuality even if it asks for sacrifices.

*The Awakening* was acknowledged by friendly reviewers for its psychological insight. However, less modern critics tartly commented that the female protagonist should have gallivanted less and instead cared for her children more.<sup>155</sup> A similar reaction may have been triggered by George Egerton's short story "A Cross Line", which is allusive of sensuality and erotic descriptions. It portrays a woman craving for freedom and danger, preferring a life full of passion, excitement and change instead of domestic security. While fly-fishing, the female protagonist indulges in a daydream in which she 'sails off somewhere' escaping 'life with its tame duties and virtuous monotony' ("Cross Line", 18-19) She fancies herself in Arabia, riding on a strong and graceful horse surrounded by hungry eyes and 'a song to the untamed spirit that dwells in her' ("Cross Line", 19). Later on she finds herself on a theatre stage performing an erotic and seductive dance which fixes men's eyes on her and makes them crave for her. The scene she conjures up reminds of the breathtaking, beguiling dance of Salome described in Huysmans' *Against Nature*:

Her arms are clasped by jewelled snakes, and one with quivering diamond fangs coils round her hips. [...] She bounds forward and dances, bends her lissom waist, and curves her slender arms, and gives to the soul of each man what he craves, be it good or evil. [...] She can see herself with parted lips and panting, rounded breasts, and a dancing devil in each glowing eye, sway voluptuously to the wild music that rises, now slow, now fast, now deliriously wild, seductive, intoxicating, with a human note of passion in its strain. She can feel the answering shiver of feeling that quivers up to her from the dense audience, spellbound by the motion of her glancing feet [...] ("Cross Line", 20-21)

By emphasising the character's passion and wild temperament, "A Cross Line" challenges the image of the naturally modest, passive and passionless woman that was prevailing in the mind of Victorian men.

The acknowledgement of woman's sexuality as a source of erotic pleasure, autonomy and self-fulfilment in New Woman novels provided the press with stereotypical pictures of the New Woman as man-devouring Amazon. The stereotype of the sexually hyperactive New Woman was confusingly

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<sup>155</sup> Cf. Knights, Pamela. "Introduction", ix.

contradicted by another stereotypical image of the New Woman that was popularized in the press: the independent, frigid and unattractive spinster. Like the New Woman who enjoyed her sexuality outside the bond of marriage and beyond the purpose of reproduction, the “sterile” spinster posed a threat to the Victorian social system and its idealization of family life. Grant Allen expresses his contempt for women who abstain from sexuality in his essay “Plain Words on the Woman Question”.<sup>156</sup> He describes spinsters as abnormal appearances symptomatic of a degenerated age that have failed in their natural functions:

Instead of boasting of their sexlessness as a matter of pride, they ought to keep it [in the] dark. [...] They ought to feel they have fallen short of the healthy instincts of their kind, instead of posing as in some sense the cream of the universe, on the strength of what is really a functional aberration. (Allen quoted in Ardis, 23)

In *The Awakening*, Chopin depicts the hardships a woman has to face if she denies the prescribed career of devoted mother and wife. She shows how autonomously living women are put down as egoistic and eccentric spinsters who are avoided by socially respectable people. Being an outsider is the fate of the character Mademoiselle Reisz, an individualist who is confronted with hostile glances and depreciative remarks wherever she appears due to her unadjusted and independent lifestyle. By portraying the outcast position of Edna’s artistic friend, Chopin forwards the lonely position Edna herself will encounter as a consequence of her social rebellion.

Summing up, whether the New Woman denied or expressed her sexual feelings, her sexuality was seen as problematic as it transgressed the rigid Victorian social and sexual prescriptions that demanded of women to be passive and chaste as well as willing and fertile.

### 4.3 Against Nature

Apart from the theme of sexuality that occupied an important part of both female and male literary works at the end of the nineteenth century and burst

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<sup>156</sup> Cf. Ardis, Ann. L. *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism*, 23-24.

the Victorian's scope of social acceptability, another striking similarity can be identified: For Victorian critics, both the New Woman and the Decadent dandy presented a violation of nature, albeit by different means.<sup>157</sup>

In *Against Nature*, the rejection of nature is perfectly epitomized by the protagonist Des Esseintes, who creates his own artificial realm of art and literature, totally isolated from civilization as he is convinced that 'he can overthrow civilization or acquiesce in its overthrow because he himself is all the culture he needs' (Dowling, 60). In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the young Dorian successfully locks nature out of his life and manages to live beyond conventions and well-established cultural codes. Whereas the painted picture of Dorian mirrors the cruelty and viciousness of his life, he himself remains beautiful and young, untouched by the perishableness of nature.

While the decadent's revolt against nature was seen in his cultivation and glorification of art and contempt of nature, the evidence for the New Woman's revolt against nature was found in her rejection of motherhood that was seen as typical characteristic of her novels. In the nineteenth century, maternal instinct was seen as a healthy and natural feminine property. It comes as no surprise that the fear of a sterile nation was heightened among traditionalist Victorians in consideration of the ambiguous and often dismissive stance on motherhood taken up in many New Woman stories. Indeed, motherhood was not embraced uncritically as a natural female role that pervades a woman's life with happiness and meaning in New Woman novels but often it was presented as hindering and weakening and demanding too much of women.

In *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier's lack of motherly feelings towards her children contrasts with the overwhelming motherliness of her creole friend Adèle Ratignolle, who expects her fourth child with anticipation and flourishes in her role as mother and wife. Edna's intermittent indifference towards her offspring becomes clear when she does not notice that her young son Raoul suffers from a high fever and is rebuked by her husband for neglecting her children or in the fact that she did not miss them in the summer months while they were at their grandmother's home: Her affection for her offspring is

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<sup>157</sup> Cf. Dowling, Linda, 59.

described as 'uneven' and 'impulsive' by the narrator: 'She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forget them' (*Awakening*, 21). Her lack of maternal feelings is further underlined by her friend Adèle's overwhelming solicitousness she not only displays towards her children but also towards her adult friends. In a heated argument with Madame Ratignolle, Edna makes clear that she would give almost everything for her children, even her life, but she is not prepared to sacrifice herself. 'I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself' (*Awakening*, 53). She encounters only misapprehension from her friend, who cannot comprehend that society's sanctioned motherly figure can thwart a woman's striving for individuality and fulfilment. When the doctor comes to see her to speak about her despondency, Edna becomes aware that she cannot entirely be free because of her children, who she feels indebted to. Her striving for self-fulfilment is thwarted by pangs of conscience because of her sons. She explains that she wants to be free to act according to her own wish, even at the expense of other people. However, her inner conflict between her responsibilities as mother she has been unquestionably accepting for so long and her sense of freedom that has gradually got the upper hand, is revealed in this utterance:

[...] I'm not going to be forced into doing things. I don't want to go abroad. I want to be let alone. Nobody has any right – except children, perhaps – and even then, it seems to me – or it did seem [...] I don't want anything but my own way. That is wanting a good deal, of course, when you have to trample upon the lives, the hearts, the prejudices of others – but no matter – still, I shouldn't want to trample upon the little lives. (*Awakening*, 123)

In the end of the novel, she realizes that she will never be free because of her offspring. She visions her children as enemies who deprive her of her strength of resistance by filling her heart with guilt and thus force her into a life-long slavery:

The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days. (*Awakening*, 127)

In "A Cross Line", the female protagonist sickens at the sight of just-hatched chicks. Her disgust of newborns and the fact that she is in good condition herself disprove the prevailing notion of a natural maternal instinct believed to

characterise femininity. Ironically, her husband enthuses about the freshly-born chicks, 'Isn't it funny?' and 'Aren't they beauties ?' ("Cross Line", 9). George Egerton's mockery of traditional gender roles is heightened in further scenes in which the woman's husband is presented as caring and full of "feminine" affection. Thus, the husband takes off his wife's boots and services her swollen feet carefully and he brings her biscuits and whiskey without being asked when she feels sick. Moreover, he is not ashamed to speak about his overwhelming affection for a horse: 'I had a filly once, she turned out a lovely mare! I cried when I had to sell her, I wouldn't have let any one in God's world mount her' ("Cross Line", 9-10).

Similarly to the character in "A Cross Line", Lyndall is not looking forward to the prospect of becoming a mother in *The Story of an African Farm*. She regards motherhood as a terrible, life-long burden:

"It must be a terrible thing to bring a human being into the world" [...] If it lived to be eighty it would always hang like a millstone around my neck, have the right to demand good from me, and curse me for its sorrow. (*African Farm*, 153)

For Lyndall, having a baby means surrendering her freedom and independence and being bound to a man's will, 'I am not in so great a hurry to put my neck beneath any man's foot; and I do not so greatly admire the crying of babies [...] There are other women glad of such work' (*African Farm*, 131). Nevertheless, she has a baby that dies shortly after its birth. When Lyndall speaks to her nurse Gregory about the dead baby for the first time, she reveals her ambiguous and dismissive feelings, the sorrow for the helpless, innocent little creature she held in her arms and the love she could not feel:

"It was so small," she said; "it lived such a little while – only three hours. They laid it close by me, but I never saw it; I could feel it by me. [...] Its feet were so cold; I took them in my hand to make them warm, and my hand closed right over them, they were so little. It crept close to me; it wanted to drink, it wanted to be warm." She hardened herself "I did not love it; its father was not my prince; I did not care for it; but it was little. (*African Farm*, 213)

Similar to "Three Dreams in a Desert", where Schreiner evokes the scene of a woman, lying in the sand of a desert, unable to move because of the weight of her baby, *The Story of an African Farm* conveys the idea that women will

not succeed in revolting against their subjugation in society and gaining freedom as long as they are hindered by their children.

In *The Heavenly Twins*, the idea of motherhood as all-fulfilling role that leads to happiness and meaning in a woman's life is clearly rejected. The expectation of a baby could neither lower Evadne's despair nor prevent her from a suicide attempt. In contrast to her husband's expectation, her mental condition grows worse during her pregnancy. Heilmann finds the reason for this deterioration of Evadne's state in the additional control her husband is able to exert over her body due to her pregnancy. Although she is very fond of her children, the role as a mother cannot compensate Evadne for the idleness she feels in her life because of the lack of intellectual occupation and activity. Notably, while Evadne eventually suffers from ill-health and resigns in her social rebellion, Grand's childless heroine in *Idealia* blossoms as a successful and powerful social activist. This shows that although Grand believed in maternity as a woman's natural role, she is also aware of the further victimization and conventionalisation a woman with children is subjected.

As these examples show, Victorian conservative readers that demanded of women to be devotional and self-forgetful for the sake of their children, and in a broader sense, for the sake of the nation, could find evidence for the rejection of motherhood in New Woman literature. The questioning of the natural maternal instinct by New Woman authors became a thorn in the Victorian conservative's side as any aberrations from the motherly and self-sacrificing prototype of the Victorian woman were seen as evidence of deficiency and abnormality.

A further and equally threatening complot against nature was also seen in the blurring of gender lines that was apparently effected by both "sons and daughters" of Decadence. The dandy's effeminate manners and looks and the New Woman's "masculine" appearance and performances triggered fears among conservatives that the "natural" difference of the sexes, believed to

guarantee the health of the nation, would disappear.<sup>158</sup> Indeed, the New Woman threatened the gender order by her unconventional appearance, behaviour, attitude and life style. She destabilized the traditional belief in the rigidity of the binary sex division by her intrusion into male domains like politics, professions and art, her eagerness for higher education and scientific knowledge, her preference of more rational clothes to restricting corsets and frocks, her engagement in political and social discussions and her pleasure in smoking cigarettes and physical activities like riding bicycles. A famous and much quoted line in the magazine *Punch* expresses the prevalent horror of gender blurring and the following eugenic dangers:

a new fear my bosom vexes;  
 Tomorrow there may be no sexes!  
 Unless, as end to all pother,  
 Each one in fact becomes the other.  
 E'en then perhaps they'll start amain  
 A-trying to change back again!  
 Woman was woman, man was man,  
 When Adam delved and Eve span,  
 Now he can't dig and she won't spin,  
 Unless 'tis tales all slang the sin!

(27 April 1895, p. 203 in  
 Dowling, 55)

The inviolability of gender was even scientifically questioned by Havelock Ellis's *The Psychology of Sex*, first published in 1879, which hypothesized that gender division was fluid and there were different stages through which a man can change into a woman.<sup>159</sup>

Whereas the blurring of the distinction between the sexes alarmed the Victorian critics, New Women promised themselves greater equality and freedom from the dissolution of the binary split between the sexes. Thus, the female protagonist of "A Cross Line" is bored with the dullness of her confined female role and imagines that her life would be more exciting and fun if she could slip in a man's position: 'I wish I were a man' [...] I'd go on a jolly old spree' ("Cross Line", 15). Similarly, in *The Heavenly Twins*, Angelica cross-dresses as her brother Diavolo to experience more liberty and

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<sup>158</sup> Cf. Dowling, 55.

<sup>159</sup> Cf. Pykett. *The Improper Feminine*, 138.



adventures as the male gender role allows. By masquerading as a boy, she is able to meet the Tenor with a freedom of conduct she is denied as a woman. When her imposture was detected by the Tenor, she confesses her motive:

I was tired of doing nothing and very sorry for myself, and I wanted an object in life more than ever; and then a great longing seized me: I thought it an aspiration. I wanted to go out there and then. I wanted to be free to go and come as I would. I felt a galling sense of restraint all at once, and I determined to break the law that imposed it; and that alone was a satisfaction – the finding of one law that I could break [...] I should be amused, and that was something; and I should see the world as men see it, which would be from a new point of view for me, and that would be interesting. (*Heavenly Twins*, 451)

In *The Story of an African Farm* Linda experiences a free spiritual union of friendship between Waldo and herself in which she does not have to function as a woman but can simply be a human. She tells Waldo “When I am with you I never know that I am a woman and you are a man; I only know that we are both things that think’ (*African Farm*, 154).

It can be concluded that many New Woman protagonists see a life without the narrowing constrictions of artificial gender roles, where sex stops to exist as a means of differentiating between humans, as an ideal state. In contrast, a blurring of feminine and masculine roles means social chaos and moral degeneration to Victorian critics who regard gender roles as biologically determined and therefore inevitable.

## **4.5 Beyond Culture**

### **4.5.1 Education as Empowering Tool**

According to Linda Dowling, the desire to live beyond nature, which characterizes New Woman protagonists as well as advocates of aestheticism and decadence, is in a broader sense, the desire to live beyond culture as notions of nature are established by culture. Ironically, the decadent and the

New Woman attempted to transcend culture by cultural means.<sup>160</sup> This becomes explicit in the decadents' preference for literary study to practical or real-life experiences and the New Woman's belief in a proper education as key to her emancipation.<sup>161</sup>

Indeed, it was in the second half of the nineteenth century that education had become a major area of reform in Britain and America.<sup>162</sup> The numerous campaigns for a woman's right of education eventually resulted in educational reforms that provided access to secondary education for middle and upper-class girls. However, the new schools were under the heavy influence of middle-class values and women were mainly taught in "feminine" occupations like household management.<sup>163</sup> Despite access to university education for women, which was gradually granted by distinguished university colleges like the Owens College in Manchester and the University of London, the way to knowledge was a hard and burdensome one, as illustrated by the college woman M. Carey Thomas:

There is much that is very hard for a *lady* in a mixed university and I should not subject any girl to it unless she were determined to have it. The educational problem is a terrible one girls' colleges are inferior and its seems impossible to get the most illustrious men to fill their chars, and on the other hand it is a fiery ordeal to educate a lady by coeducation – it is impossible to make one who has not felt it understand the living on a volcano or on a house top [...] yet it is the only way and learning *is worth it*. (Thomas quoted in Smith-Rosenberg, 250)

In consideration of the prevailing misogynistic discourses of that time, it becomes even more obvious that women had to overcome many obstacles on their way to education. According to Jane Wood, numerous scientists like Spencer, Maudsley and Crichton-Browne provided arguments against women seeking equal opportunities in the nineteenth century. They found that the female brain weighed less than the male one and deferred that women would be at a lower point on the evolutionary ladder.<sup>164</sup> Moreover, prevailing scientific discourses perpetuated that due to women's physical disadvantages, extensive studies could lead to nervous disorders like

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<sup>160</sup> Cf. Dowling, 59.

<sup>161</sup> Cf. Dowling, 59-60.

<sup>162</sup> Cf. Richardson and Willis, 6.

<sup>163</sup> Cf. Richardson and Willis, 6-7.

<sup>164</sup> Cf. Wood, 171.

depression and hysteria or even lead to fatal diseases in women.<sup>165</sup> In *Ideala*, the feminist activist Ideala sarcastically challenges this misogynistic myth of woman's "natural" mental inferiority:

They say that our brains are lighter, and that therefore we must not be taught too much. But why not educate us to the limit of our capacity, and leave it there? Why, if we are inferior, should there be any fear of making us superior? (*Ideala*, 183)

The irony in these lines reveals the hidden dread behind the general practice of withholding higher education for women under the disguise of health concerns, namely the fear that women become superior to men and displace them in areas which were formerly exclusively male.

New Woman authors see education as a mode of cultural transcendence, a means of gaining independence and freedom. They call for equal education of men and women in their fiction and challenge contemporary scientific discourses that warn against the higher education of girls. The New Woman novels discussed in this thesis undermine the importance of knowledge as an empowering tool for women and show the hindrances a woman is confronted with in a society that rather prefers women to be beautiful than intelligent, as sarcastically pinpointed by Lyndall in *The Story of an African Farm*, 'The less a woman has in her head the lighter she is for climbing' (*African Farm*, 135).

In Olive Schreiner's feminist novel, Lyndall flees from her aunt's farm to satisfy her wish she has had since early childhood: to get a good education. Gaining knowledge is for her the door to independence and wealth: 'I must learn. [...] I want things of my own. When I am grown up, [...] there will be nothing that I do not know. I shall be rich, very rich' (*African Farm*, 11). In contrast to her eagerness to gain knowledge of life to gain wealth, power and 'help everything that is weak' (*African Farm*, 51), Lyndall is left badly disappointed and disillusioned by the education services provided for girls in her society:

[...] I have discovered that of all cursed places under the sun, where the hungriest soul can hardly pick up a few grains of knowledge, a girl's boarding school is the worst. They are called

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<sup>165</sup> Cf. Wood, 169-171.

finishing schools, and the name tells accurately what they are. They finish everything but imbecility and weakness, and that they cultivate. They are nicely adapted machines for experimenting on the question, 'Into how little space can a human soul be crushed?' (*African Farm*, 132)

Schreiner accuses the patriarchal system of consciously weakening women through wrong premises. In the voice of Lyndall, she explains that the misogynistic system of society systematically manipulates women so that they rather crave for beauty than knowledge and therefore succeeds in subjugating women: 'I once heard an old man say that he never saw intellect help a woman so much as a pretty ankle; and it was the truth. They began to shape us to our cursed end [...]' (*African Farm*, 135).

In *The Heavenly Twins*, gaining "forbidden" knowledge that is usually only reserved for the male sex, also becomes a challenge for the New Woman protagonists. As the general opinion was that the higher education of women would destroy the well-established order of society and eventually trigger degeneration and decay, Evadne and Angelica have to rely on deception and cunning tricks to gain access to educational opportunities. Acquiring infinite knowledge by self-study becomes Evadne's principal preoccupation, true to her conviction that '[w]ithholding education from women was the original sin of man' (Grand, *HT*, 14). Averting suspicion by conforming to her father's views and uttering no objectionable opinions publicly, Evadne manages to trick her educators who curtail her liberty of conduct considerably but miss to supervise her mental and intellectual pursuits.<sup>166</sup> Likewise, Angelica and her brother Diavolo decide to trick their educators to be able to obtain co-education. Swapping her lessons with Diavolo, Angelica explains to the tutor

[...] there must have been some mistake. Diavolo and I find that we were mixed somehow wrong, and I got his mind and he got mine. I can do his lessons quite easily, but I can't do my own [...]. (*Heavenly Twins*, 124)

Determinedly, she explains her desire to be educated in mathematics: 'Men are always jeering at women in books for not being able to reason, and I'm going to learn, if there's any help in mathematics' (*Heavenly Twins*, 125). Angelica succeeds in overthrowing the traditional Victorian principal to hide

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<sup>166</sup> Cf. Grand, *The Heavenly Twins*, 24-25.

any “unpleasant” knowledge from women to keep them “pure-minded” and disproves her grandfather’s claim that ‘women mature earlier [...] but their minds never get far beyond the first point at which they arrive’ (*Heavenly Twins*, 259). Angelica becomes particularly known for her intelligence and keen perception, which outnumber her twin brother Diavolo’s cleverness and which culminate in cunning pranks and “unwomanly” courage.

Through the depiction of the female protagonists’ intellectual superiority, Grand challenges the prevailing misogynistic discourses that claim women’s mental incapacity. Moreover, in tracing the lives of the New Woman Evadne and the “old woman” Edith Beale, Sarah Grand emphasises the importance of education and knowledge as a tool of protection. In *The Heavenly Twins*, the character Lady Adeline becomes her mouthpiece when she warns against female ignorance and the immanent deception of “innocent” girls on the point of marrying:

I cannot agree, for instance, that it is either right or wise to keep a girl in ignorance of the laws of her own being, and of the state of the community in which she will have to pass her existence. [...] and my experience is that what you call ‘beautiful innocence’, and what I consider *dangerous ignorance*, is not a safe state in which to begin the battle of life. In the matter of marriage especially an ignorant girl may be fatally deceived, and indeed I know cases in which the man who was liked well enough as a companion was found to be objectionable in an unendurable degree as soon as he became a husband. (*Heavenly Twins*, 41)

In *Sexual Anarchy*, Elaine Showalter confirms the dangers of this gendered lack of knowledge. She explains that whereas boys were thoroughly informed and warned and even bulldozed about venereal disease, girls in a sheltered upbringing were deliberately kept in ignorance about the existence of such dangers in the nineteenth century. Only by chance, became women aware of syphilis by reading medical texts they were not supposed to read.<sup>167</sup> That unequal access to sexual education can become a matter of death and life for women is illustrated in *The Heavenly Twins*, in which Evadne’s ability to reason through the acquisition of profound and broad knowledge by self-study, even of unpleasant facts, will later on in the novel turn out to be her

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<sup>167</sup> Cf. Showalter, Elaine. *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle*. 196.

protection from a fatal ending triggered by a feminine state of ignorance like that of her friend Edith. In contrast to Evadne's acquisition of knowledge by reading "unfeminine" scientific works, Edith Beale has been reared in ignorance of the dangers of the world. Her determination to keep herself from 'all knowledge of unholy things' (*Heavenly Twins*, 157) in order to keep her mind pure, sealed her fate as innocent Victorian victim:<sup>168</sup>

She might have done great good in the world had she known of the evil; she would have fought for the right in defiance of every prejudice, as women do. But she had never been allowed to see the enemy. She had been fitted by education to move in the society of saints and angels only, and so rendered as unsuited as she was unprepared to cope with the world she would have to meet in that state of life to which, as she herself would have phrased it, it had pleased God to call her. (*Heavenly Twins*, 158-159)

Here, Grand criticizes the unequal education system of Victorian society for endangering women by deliberately denying women access to knowledge. This faulty patriarchal structure broadens the opportunities for depraved men as exemplified by Edith's husband Sir Mosley Menteith, who betrays his wife unscrupulously due to his certitude of his wife's unawareness. That women's naivety contributes to men's misconduct is conveyed in a scene where Mosley Menteith animates a flirtation with a girl in Edith's presence without being detected. Thus, Grand clearly states that women can only serve the improvement of society when they are aware of the vice and evil of the world.

#### 4.5.2 Cultural Transcendence through Art, Love and Death

As in male decadent's writing, a revolt against culture by culture in New Woman literature manifests itself also in the protagonists' quest for artistic creativity. In "Portraits of the artists as a young woman" Lyn Pykett points at the reasons why the female artist was a popular figure in New Woman fiction.<sup>169</sup> According to Pykett, women artists invade the traditionally male sphere of art and demand it for themselves. Thus, they are able to subvert

<sup>168</sup> Cf. Senf Carol A. "Introduction". *The Heavenly Twins*, vii.

<sup>169</sup> Cf. Pykett, Lyn. "Portraits of the Artist as a Young Woman: Representations of the Female Artists in the New Woman Fiction of the 1890s", 138-139.

male definitions of art and culture and create their own feminine aesthetics. Besides, by employing the figure of the female artist, New Woman novels illustrate the difficulty women have to face when they enter the male sphere of art and literature.<sup>170</sup> The novels discussed in this thesis explore the conflicts and discrepancy between society's ideal image of women that demands self-sacrifices, on the one hand, and women's pursuit of self-expression through creativity, on the other hand.

In *The Awakening* Edna Pontellier tries to claim her own private domain through her love for music and painting that ignores any conventions of social acceptability. Apart from sexual means, it is through art that Edna tries to liberate herself from the social constraints of femininity and find the key to her real self. Despite the low repudiation of Mademoiselle Reisz, who is regarded as most disagreeable because of her unconventional and unfeminine behaviour, Edna engages in a friendship with the genius musician, whose musical performances on the piano stir Edna's awakening to her passionate and sensual self that no longer accepts to be confined to Victorian notions of true womanhood. After the light-hearted, inspiring summer in Grand Isle, Edna rejects her socially prescribed roles as wife, mother and representative host that would play up to her husband's and her own social repudiation. Instead, she devotes her time painting in her atelier, in which she finds pleasure and fulfilment. The sale of her luxurious house, which is known as the pride of her husband and the withdrawal in her private pigeon house, where she spends her time drawing, support Edna's attempt to escape from marital subjugation and instead create her own feminine sphere beyond the dominating male culture. That the practise of female art conflicts with male expectations is illustrated by her husband who rebukes her for neglecting her feminine duties:

It seems to me the utmost folly for a woman at the head of a household, and the mother of children, to spend in an atelier days which would be better employed contriving for the comfort of her family. [...] Then in God's name paint! But don't let the family go to the devil. (*Awakening*, 63-64)

The ambiguity of a woman's experience of art is further conveyed in Edna's guilt she feels for neglecting her children and the loneliness she suffers when

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<sup>170</sup> Cf. Mattes, *Novels with a Purpose: New Woman Fiction in Great Britain in the 1890s*, 112.

she is confronted with a general lack of understanding of the people she is engaged with. The further she self-actualizes through her passionate devotion to art, the further she neglects the desires and wishes of the people she loves. Edna becomes aware that her personal freedom and artistic expression impair her social respectability: 'There was with her a feeling of having descended in the social scale, with a corresponding sense of having risen in the spiritual' (*Awakening*, 104). In the end, she has to realize that she does not possess 'the courageous soul that dares and defies' (*Awakening*, 128) a female artist needs to survive in a patriarchal value system.

In *The Heavenly Twins* the protagonists' artistic ambitions are thwarted by male interference. Angelica wants to pursue a career as a violinist and Evadne sees in writing and publishing a possibility to escape the narrow and idle space of a Victorian wife. However, both are prevented to achieve their aims by their husbands who make them promise not to follow any artistic career or express their views on social matters publicly.

Another attempt to transcend culture by writing was made by the minor character Mrs Malcolmson in *The Heavenly Twins*. However, like Evadne and Angelica, she fails to be successful due to prevailing misogynistic views and instead, is punished by a harsh critique of her neighbourhood that hastily denounces her as immoral because of her writing:

It was said, among other things, that she evidently could not be moral at heart, whatever her conduct might be, because she made mention of immorality in her book. Her manner of mentioning the subject was not taken into consideration, because such sheep cannot consider; they can only criticise. The next thing they did, therefore, was to take out the incident in the book which was most likely to damage her reputation, and declare that it was autobiographical. (*Heavenly Twins*, 334)

Likewise, Grand's heroine Ideala comments mockingly on the reception of art dependent on the gender of the author:

It is far more likely to be *she*. Do you read the reviews? You will find that the most objectionable books are written by women – and condemned by men who lift up their voices now, as the have done from time immemorial, and insist that we should do as they say and not as they do. (*Ideala*, 62)



These passages reveals Grand's awareness of the harsh criticism female writers are confronted with and the often wrong conclusions that are drawn in order to take away their voice. Her bitter words 'such sheep cannot consider' with which she comments upon the unfair treatment of the fictive author demonstrate her anger at the malevolent critics. In fact, the contempt with which the fictive character Mrs Malcomson who 'was too independent to be conventional' (*Heavenly Twins*, 334) is treated mirrors the real life experiences of many New Woman authors. Indeed, female authors were more likely to be related to their fictive protagonists than their male colleagues at the turn of the century.<sup>171</sup> The destiny of Evadne, Angelica and Mrs Malcolmson stand for the manifold difficulties and struggles female artists had to face in a society that tried to silence women by excluding them from artistic creativity. Often female authors had to publish under a pseudonym to claim a status in the literary realm and avoid the harsh and prejudiced critique of the male colleagues who set the aesthetic standards. Indeed, adopting male identities was a common strategy among female narrators who thus widened their scope of experience. As pointed out by Nelson:

The masking of female literary identity through the adoption of a male pseudonym or by the use of a male narrator also legitimized women's appropriation of traditionally male narrative techniques and literary styles. (Nelson, 3)

Summing up, despite their knowledge of the numerous obstacles for female artists, art is seen as a liberating act by New Woman authors, a way of gaining 'strength and expansion as an individual' (*Awakening*, 104) and transcending the suppressive patriarchal culture and its imperatives of feminine behaviour. By opposing women's artistic genius with the often thwarted ambitions of female artists, they undermine the male claim of artistic superiority and call for a feminine sphere of art.

Besides art as feminist device, Linda Dowling identifies love relationships as another means of cultural transcendence that characterizes New Woman literature.<sup>172</sup> Often, New Woman protagonists try to escape from narrow gender role by engaging in unusual love affairs. In *The Story of an African*

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<sup>171</sup> Nelson, Carolyn Christensen. *British Women Fiction Writers of the 1890s*, 35.

<sup>172</sup> Cf. Dowling, 61.

*Farm*, Lyndall indulges in the manifold comprehensions of love and reveals that, though sceptical of the existence of an all-encompassing form of love, she is still hoping for love that fulfils all her desires:

There are as many kinds of loves as there are flowers; everlastings that never wither; speedwells that wait for the wind to fan them out of life; blood-red mountain lilies that pour their voluptuous sweetness out for one day, and lie in the dust at night. There is no flower that has the charm of all – the speedwell's purity, the everlasting's strength, the mountain lily's warmth; *but who knows whether there is no love that holds all – friendship, passion, worship?* (my emphasis, *African Farm*, 170)

Her belief in an unconventional love union that can exist beyond culture and beyond society is confirmed in her wish she utters to her lover, 'I will not go to Europe. You must take me to the Transvaal. That is out of the world. People we meet there we need not see again in our future lives' (Schreiner, 178). Although she believes in the ideal of a free love union, Lyndall knows that this is only possible outside of well-established classes of society, somewhere where she does not have to marry and 'can say good-bye' (*African Farm*, 178) when the feeling of love ends. Similarly, in Sarah Grand's *Ideala*, the protagonist hopes to transcend culture through love. So Ideala does not stop loving Lorrimer after their separation but explains that she is prepared to wait as she wants 'his soul - purified, strengthened, ennobled – nothing less will satisfy me' (*Ideala*, 168) She accepts that she cannot stay with him in the present society that would disapprove of their union and lower them socially but imagines that they will turn to a higher and more ennobled love in a world and life beyond the here and now.

Like Ideala, who sees the ultimate love union after death, Edna Pontellier embraces death as a mode of cultural transcendence in *The Awakening*. For Edna, who is bound to her husband, Robert Lebrun personifies the free "unconventional" love she is longing for. However, she soon realizes Robert's possessiveness that again would remove her autonomy and ostracise her into the conformity of matrimony. Eventually, she sees no other option of gaining freedom than committing suicide by swimming out into the ocean. The fact that Edna chooses the sea for her ultimate destination can be interpreted as an act of liberation from the chains of femininity that she was not able to achieve in society. '[Leónce and the children] were part of her. But

they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul' (*Awakening*, 127-128). These lines are the last thoughts of her rebellion. While she was afraid of the ocean and had troubles with learning to swim at the beginning of the novel, she has eventually managed to overcome the ocean in the end. Thus, the earlier statement 'She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before' (*Awakening*, 31) has become a self-fulfilling prophecy and affirms the idea of a positive reading of Edna's suicide as final feminist victory. Another optimistic reading of the fatal ending of Chopin's heroine is given by Antony H. Harris in *Gender and Discourse in Victorian Literature and Art*. Harris interprets Edna's suicide in the ocean as the fulfilment of the romantic love she longed for and which was destroyed by the dominating patriarchal forces:<sup>173</sup>

A surrogate for the beloved, the sea is represented as a realm of transvalued existence, a transcendent escape from the constraints and contingencies of the social world. It is a realm where attainment of the ideal of bliss associated with the beloved is assured, a posthumous utopia of fulfilled love. (Harris, 190)

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<sup>173</sup> Cf. Antony H. Harrison, "Swinburne and the Critique of Ideology in *The Awakening*", 189-190.

## 5. The Subversion of Patriarchal Discourses

### 5.1 Deadlock through Wedlock: New Woman's Critique of Marriage

It was impossible that the demands of women for freedom should become a feature of modern life without the marriage relation, as at present understood, being called into question. (Caird, quoted in Pykett, *The Improper Feminine*)

The New Woman author Mona Caird became known as one of the most radical combatants of matrimony. She compared the present state of marriage to a legalised form of enslavement whose origin can be found in the barbaric and inhuman practice of slavery by which women were bought and sold in order to place them entirely into men's service.<sup>174</sup> Many New Woman writers aligned with Caird in her fierce critique of marriage. Equally radical was Olive Schreiner's attitude. She asserted she would rather die than marry and give away her freedom.<sup>175</sup> In more or less drastic ways, New Woman authors used the marriage plot in their stories to show that the source for female miseries was to be found in unequal marriage relations that provided the arena for male beneficiaries and female subjugation. The centrality of the marriage theme becomes obvious in all the New Woman novels discussed in this thesis. Unlike traditional Victorian novels that close with marriage as a happy ending and as a secure port of destination every woman aspires to reach, the novels present marriage as a starting point for male vice, female suppression and exploitation, mental and physical degeneration and resistance.

Although not all New Woman writers dismissed the idea of marriage as such, they all agreed that the present state of marriage served the maintenance of patriarchal hegemony. In what they diverged, as Heilmann writes, was the accent and importance they placed on particular issues and symptoms of patriarchal subjugation.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Cf. Caine, *English Feminism*, 136.

<sup>175</sup> Cf. Heilmann, *New Woman Strategies*, 123.

<sup>176</sup> Cf. Heilmann, *New Woman Strategies*, 5.

Grand's novels *The Heavenly Twins* and *Ideala* trace the marital lives of the major protagonists Evadne, Angelica, Edith and Ideala and thus reveal insights into female experiences of matrimony that have been tabooed before. By illuminating the moral double standard within the sanctioned institution of marriage, Sarah Grand presents marriage as the reason for women's endangerment and blames society for supporting men's immoral conduct. Likewise, Chopin's *The Awakening* and Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* confront the reader with a disillusioned picture of marital lives that are characterized by economic dependence and absence of personal freedom, love and devotion. Schreiner draws parallels between marriage and business contracts and Chopin focuses on marriage as the perpetuator of a capitalist value system that victimizes women for the sake of money and reputation.

The next chapters will analyse the different strategies New Woman authors imply to show that marriage is 'a symptom of all that was wrong with society' (Nelson, 10). It will be examined how novelists subvert patriarchal discourses by illustrating the fundamental reasons that lie behind the miserable state of marriage. Moreover, it will be illustrated that the 'focus on disease brought a new sharpness and bitterness to the whole feminist critique of marriage' (Caine, *English Feminism*, 137).

## 5.2 Shattered Illusions of Marriage

"For better for worse". How many young creatures repeat these word, unthinkingly, or thinking that the future will be all better and no worse – that marriage is a kind of earthly paradise, and those only are to be pitied who stand without the gate. They are; for a single life is necessarily an imperfect life. *But a perfect married life, though there is such a thing, is the rarest thing under the sun.* (Dinah M. Mulock, 570, my emphasis)

In this line of thought, the New Woman author Sarah Grand illustrates the huge gap between the ideals and illusions of marriage that are presented and maintained to "trap" girls into marriage and the miserable conditions and sufferings a married woman has to endure. By painting a portrait of "the

before and after” conditions of the female protagonists, Grand acknowledges that it is marriage, institutionalised for the maintenance of patriarchal hegemony, that is responsible for the mental and physical degeneration of women.

In *The Heavenly Twins*, the reader is introduced to Evadne as a healthy, beautiful and well-dressed woman with a mind ‘always full of beautiful thoughts’ (*Heavenly Twins*, 57). Raised to believe in men’s integrity, she expects her marriage with visible impatience and childlike excitement. In a letter to her mother, Evadne describes marriage as the ‘closest bond, [...] the holiest relationship in life, and one which should only be entered upon with the greatest care, and in the most reverent spirit’ (*Heavenly Twins*, 89). Thus, she is even more disappointed when she finds her future husband a morally disputable person lacking her ‘strong convictions [...] on the subject of the sanctity and responsibilities of marriage’ (*Heavenly Twins*, 89). Giving in to the requirements of her parents and of society in general, Evadne returns to Colonel Colquhoun and consents to live with him as his wife. This arrangement that serves ‘to keep up appearances’ (*Heavenly Twins*, 109) leaves a life-long damage on Evadne who cannot recover from this unhappy relationship, not even when she is later married to a man who proves her morally equal. Grand presents Evadne’s second husband Dr. Galbraith as acknowledging Evadne’s ‘large intelligence’ and her capability of ‘acquitting [herself] creditably both in domestic and public life’ (*Heavenly Twins*, 645), which have been repressed in her former unhappy marriage. However, it soon becomes obvious that his patronizing way (He calls her ‘my poor little lady’ and ‘child’ (*Heavenly Twins*, 644, 675) further contribute to Evadne’s self-alienation and regression into childlike helplessness and feminine conformity. Instead of being radiant with health and vitality, she retreats into ill-health, indifference and inertia.

Likewise, ‘Ideala grew paler and thinner, and more nervous. She was oftenest depressed, but occasionally had unnatural bursts of hilarity that would end suddenly in long fits of brooding’ (*Ideala*, 132). By the time the reader is informed about Ideala’s breakdown, the reason for it has been fully acknowledged by the narrator: her unhappy marriage to a ‘low brute’ (*Ideala*,

115). While Ideala's natural disposition was 'to do as well as to be', she is chained by her husband's jealousy and envy. Despite the absence of any affection or loss of 'any remnant of respect she may still have felt' (*Ideala*, 83) for her husband, Ideala submissively endures the tyranny and violence he displays towards her without any complaint.

Ideala's oppressive experience of marriage is "starkly juxtaposed with her principle of true marriage which she utters to her friends: 'Your husband isn't properly your husband if you don't love him, love being the only possible sanctification – in fact, the only true marriage' (*Ideala*, 63). Grand gives an answer to the question why there is such a seemingly insurmountable gap between real and expected experiences of marriage. In the voice of Ideala's friend Claudia, she accuses the wrong education system of nurturing the illusions of young girls:

[...] it would be better, after all, if women were taught to expect to find themselves their husbands' equals - the disappointment would not be so great if the husband proved inferior; but when a woman has been led to look for so much, her imagination is full of dreams in which he figures as an infallible being, she expects him to be her refuge, support, and comfort at all times; (*Ideala*, 184)

That Ideala has been raised to trust in the moral integrity of men becomes obvious when she witnesses her husband's interaction with a woman of the 'demimonde' (*Ideala*, 96) without realizing the foil of this association. Informed by her friends about her husband's depraved conduct, she is terribly shocked and disgusted. The narrator explains to the reader, 'Her ignorance of this phase of life had been so complete and her faith in those about her so perfect, that the shock of this dreadful revelation was almost too much for her' (*Ideala*, 97).

Unsurprisingly, misconception was also one of the main reasons for Ideala's momentous decision to marry. She confesses that ignorance, 'I was very young at the time. Very young girls know nothing of love and marriage' (*Ideala*, 106) and the fact that she 'was not happy at home' (107) lead her into the arms of an adulterous and violent husband. By making Ideala's motives for marriage explicit, Grand further conveys the idea that women

have no alternatives to marriage. Whereas a man has the promising options of a professional career combined – according to his free choice - with a matrimonial or bachelor life without having to fear marginalization or poverty, financial dependence and social pressure often force women to leave their destiny in men's hands. Sally Ledger affirms this 'demoralising choice' (Ledger, 21) women had in the nineteenth century. She explains that women either had to come to terms with a 'mercenary marriage' or they had to face the 'penury as a single woman trying to earn a living' (Ledger, 21).<sup>177</sup>

The prospect of a secure financial position was also the force for Edna Pontellier's decision to marry. That she chose Léonce Pontellier 'was purely an accident' (Chopin, 21) and a sign of rebellion against her family who violently opposed her marriage with a Catholic. However, Edna's economic security and rebellious triumph over her patriarchal father took their toll:

The acme of bliss, which would have been a marriage with the tragedian, was not for her in this world. As the devoted wife of a man who worshiped her, she felt she would take her place with a certain dignity in the world of reality, closing the portals forever behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams. (*The Awakening*, 21)

In *The Awakening*, it is Doctor Mandelet, who identifies the life-long bond of marriage and motherhood to which Edna has obligated herself since her youth without having realized the dimension of her suffering and self-denial, as the origin of her mental troubles:

The trouble is [...] that youth is given up to illusions. It seems to be a provision of Nature; a decoy to secure mothers for the race. And Nature takes no account of moral consequences, of arbitrary conditions which we create, and which we feel obliged to maintain at any cost. (*The Awakening*, 123)

Similarly to Grand's heroines, Schreiner's protagonist Em has become a victim of blind illusions when she trusts Gregory's exuberant declarations of love and passion in *The Story of an African Farm*. Manipulated by his sweet words of blandishment, Em thinks him to be superior: 'But he – no one is

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<sup>177</sup> Cf. Ledger, Sally. *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle*, 21. The pressing hardship of poverty and disparagement an unmarried woman has to face in the nineteenth-century is convincingly illustrated in the bestselling Victorian novel *The Woman Who Did* by Grant Allen. By emphasizing the suffering and misfortune of his New Woman heroine, Allen seems to suggest that marriage is the lesser of two evils. Similarly, *The Odd Women* by George Gissing pictures the inequalities and starkly limited opportunities "redundant" women have to cope with.



worthy of his love. I am not. It is so great and pure' (Schreiner, 130). Soon Gregory's oaths of love sound like utter mockery in a reader's ears when he shortly afterwards falls in love with Em's cousin Lyndall, confessing to her in a burst of overwhelming adoration, 'She [Em] is not half so good as you are' (Schreiner, 172). When Gregory eventually returns to Em, after he has serviced Lyndall until her death, she is totally disillusioned about her future marital life but accepts it as her only choice. In a conversation with Waldo, she compares marriage to a 'work-box full of coloured reels' (Schreiner, 230) she longed for desperately as a child and for which she would have given everything as she was made to believe that the content was worth it. When she eventually got the box, she found it was empty.<sup>178</sup> In this comparison, Schreiner alludes to the wrong illusions of romantic love with which women are duped into unequal and therefore questionable marriage relations.

In addition to ignorance, illusions and economic necessity that drive women into unhappy marriages, Grand identifies the social pressure as insurmountable for young girls. That women are expected to marry and are socialised and prepared from early years for the only role supposed to be suitable for a woman is expressed by Angelica when she explains the Tenor the reasons for her unintended marriage:

Oh, yes, I married. That was what was expected of me. Now my brother when he grew up was asked with the most earnest solicitude what he would like to be or to do; everything was made easy for him to enter upon any career he might choose but nobody thought of giving *me* a chance. It was taken for granted that I should be content to marry, and only to marry, and when I expressed my objection to being so limited no-body believed I was in earnest. (*Heavenly Twins*, 460)

By exploring the unequal treatment and education of the twins Angelica and Diavolo based on their biological sex and ignorant of their capabilities and character, Grand highlights that unequal gender expectations and the consequent unequal gender socialisation, which deny women any freedom of choice, contribute to women's misery in marital bonds. In Ideala's voice, she even compares marriage to a modern form of slavery from which women have no chance to escape:

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<sup>178</sup> Cf. Schreiner, *The Story of an African Farm*, 230.

I can assure you that both women and men, fathers, husbands, and brothers, of the same class in England, do sell their young girls - I can prove it [...] Have you never seen a girl who won't marry when she is wanted to, wincing from covert stabs, mourning over cold looks, and made to feel outside everything – suffering a small martyrdom. (*Ideala*, 179)

Grand makes explicit that parents who should protect their children, partake of the enslavement of their own daughters. This becomes particularly obvious in the case of Evadne Frayling, and even more tragic, in the case of Edith Beale. The immanent disgrace and the fear of scandal make Mrs Frayling beg Evadne to return to her husband even at the cost of her daughter's happiness and health. Stalemated by her mother's insistent imploration and by her father's embargo on seeing her family and friends, Evadne returns to Colonel Colquhoun and signs a contract of life-long misery triggered by the atrophy of her intellectual pursuits. Similar to Evadne's persons of trust, Edith's parents, the Bishop of Morningquest and Mrs Beale, close their eyes to the objectionable facts of Sir Mosley Menteith's nature and past and thus set the seal on their daughter's cruel death.

In her novels, Grand makes clear that it is the responsibility of the parents to provide their children with enough knowledge of the world, also of unpleasant facts, so that they are able to choose the right husband. She particularly stresses women's complicity in the maintenance of men's immoral conduct and the consequent endangerment and subjugation of women.

Notably, Evadne adheres to a marriage relation that is contrary to her firm conviction in order to protect her mother, "I consent, mother, for your sake – to keep up appearances" (*Heavenly Twins*, 109). Heilmann notes, Grand blames older women for serving as 'patriarchal gatekeeper' instead of 'providing a positive role model' (Heilmann, *New Woman Strategies*, 28). Thus, Evadne attacks Edith's mother, 'It is you good women who make marriage a lottery for us' (*Heavenly Twins*, 233). In the following passage, Grand hints at the fallacy 'gentle mannered, pure-minded women' (*Heavenly Twins*, 155) make by unquestioningly accepting the Victorian ideal of feminine innocence:

They seemed to think that by ignoring the existence of sin, by refusing to obtain any knowledge of it, they somehow helped to check it; and they could not have conceived that their attitude made it safe to sin, so that when they refused to know and to resist, they were actually countenancing evil and encouraging it. (*Heavenly Twins*, 156)

Evadne's insistent warning of her friend not to marry a man about whose depraved past is rumoured only meets resistance. Edith repeats the words she has been taught and a proper Victorian woman is supposed to say, '[i]f he is bad, I will make him good; if he is lost, I will save him! (*Heavenly Twins*, 134).

Likewise, Ideala's willingness of self-sacrifice meets the Victorian expectations of feminine duty. Although her husband has proven to be morally depraved and 'did lower her insensibly' (*Ideala*, 47), Ideala does not consider divorce as a 'means to put an end to her misery' (*Ideala*, 84), giving the following reason: I don't mean to try for a separation. I can't leave him entirely to his own devices. If I did, he would certainly go from bad to worse' (*Ideala*, 100). By emphasising the endless and futile sufferings of the heroines in her novels and by stressing the further moral degradation of men due to their freedom of conduct, Grand hints at the absurdity and futility of female self-sacrifices for the good of men. In the voice of Ideala's friend Claudia, she expresses her view on the 'covert tyranny of the ideology of self-sacrificial motherhood' (Pykett, '*Improper*' *Feminine*, 146) and postulates 'to sacrifice the man instead of the woman' (*Heavenly Twins*, 80):

Loyalty is all very well; but I don't see much merit in a life-long devotion to a bad cause. If there were any good to be done by it, it would be different, of course; but, as it is, Ideala is simply sacrificing herself for nothing. – and worse, she is setting a bad example by showing men they need not mend their manners since wives will endure anything. It is immoral for a woman to live with such a husband. (*Ideala*, 51)

### 5.3 The Impossibility of Marriage and the Quest for Alternatives

In *British Women Fiction Writers of the 1890s*, Nelson points at Grand's inner conflict that leads to contradictions in her novels: Although Grand rejects the idea of female self-sacrifice and questions the validity of the marriage

contract in case the man proves to be a morally disputable person, she does not create heroines who consider divorce as a possible escape from their miserable marriage situation. Nelson identifies Grand's 'strong belief in the marriage bond' (Nelson, 16) as the reason for her reservation.<sup>179</sup> Many modern critics regard the impossibility of escape from marital relationships as shortcomings in New Woman fictions.<sup>180</sup> Sally Ledger blames the authors' impotence to abandon the concept of heterosexual relationships for the often morbid and pessimistic tone of New Woman novels.<sup>181</sup> Indeed, Grand does not try to desert entirely the concept of marriage but she postulates an all-encompassing reform of the contemporary gender relations. She seeks for alternatives in her novels by exploring unconventional marriage bonds like those of Evadne and Angelica but has to conclude that it is the whole social system and its gendered politics that must be changed in order to make marriage a happy experience for both sexes.

In *The Heavenly Twins*, Evadne tries to make the best of an unworthy marital bond by proposing a platonic relationship that abstains from any physical intimacy. Though the unconventionality of this marriage relation could protect the protagonist from syphilis, it could not prevent her mental suffering triggered by the waste of her intellectual pursuits, her sexual self-restrictions and the forced ignorance of her high moral standards. In the end, Evadne seems to conform to the Victorian idea of "true womanhood", however, at the cost of her mental health.

Comparable to Evadne's attempt to "make the best of a bad job", Angelica does not want to risk her health by a marriage to a promiscuous husband and therefore decides not to be chosen as a wife but to choose the right husband herself. In an impertinent manner, she proposes to her old friend Mr Kilroy, whom she has befriended since her early childhood: "Marry me!" said Angelica, stamping her foot at him – "Marry me, and let me do as I like" (*Heavenly Twins*, 321). Grand's portrayal of Mr. Kilroy rather meets the image of a protecting, patient and good-natured father figure than that of a lover and husband. Despite the absence of sexual attraction, Grand seems to

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<sup>179</sup> Cf. Nelson, 17.

<sup>180</sup> Cf. Heilmann, *New Woman Fiction*, 77.

<sup>181</sup> Cf. Ledger, Sally. *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle*, 23.

approve of Angelica's choice when she highlights the benefits of her rational engagement to the twenty-year older husband:

She was sure of his sympathy, sure of his devotion, and she respected him as sincerely as she trusted him. In fact, had there been any outlet for her superfluous mental energy, any satisfactory purpose to which the motive power of it might have been applied, she would have made Mr. Kilroy an excellent wife. She was not in love with him, but she probably liked him all the better on that account, for she must have been disappointed in him sooner or later had she ever discovered in him those marvellous fascinations which passion projects from itself on to the personality of the most commonplace person. (*Heavenly Twins*, 467)

Grand suggests that in face of the contemporary marriage situation and the inherent risks for women, Angelica has made the right decision by choosing a man about whose flawless past and high moral values she can be sure. She makes clear that the Victorian ideal of femininity, which denies Angelica the possibility to channel her exuberant intellectual energy in meaningful tasks, must be blamed for thwarting the couple's perfect bliss.

The unconventional marriage condition spares Angelica a terrible disappointment as experienced by other New Woman heroines. Instead, as pointed out by Pykett, she is able to expand her limited feminine scope of experiences beyond bothersome household duties.<sup>182</sup> In a cross-dressing escapade, she can annihilate the trammels of femininity and experience 'a dream-world where gender boundaries dissolve and reform in disconcerting ways' (Pykett, *The Improper Feminine*, 159). However, Angelica's freedom is short-lived when she is unmasked and indirectly responsible for the fatal disease of a male friend, the Tenor. She returns to her husband remorsefully with a new appreciation of his kindness, 'I am grateful for the blessing of a good man's love' (*Heavenly Twins*, 551). It seems then as if Angelica, like Evadne, had returned from 'the wilder shores of unwomanly eccentricity' (Pykett, 160) to the acceptance of her womanly role. However, as Pykett explains, Grand presents Angelica's acceptance of "true womanhood" in an exaggerated, parodic form and thus rather mocks than approves of the popular recuperative plot of Victorian writers.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Cf. Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine*, 159.

<sup>183</sup> Cf. Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine*, 158-159.

In *Ideala*, Grand rewrites the 'recuperative narrative' (Pykett, 159) by returning her heroine from the position of an enduring but mentally-unstable woman that adheres to the Victorian idea of womanhood to a feminist activist who, while fighting against gender equality, teems with health and energy. Grand's heroine Ideala has been badly shattered by a depraving marriage relation and consequential nervous disorders. Seeking help at a hospital, she gains not only advice but also love from the helping doctor Lorrimer. However, Ideala does not run off with Lorrimer but chooses to go to China as a social and feminist activist. After her return, she devotes her life uncompromisingly to the improvement of women's situation in England. Ideala's rejection of heterosexual relationships in favour of the feminist cause not only saves her from the fate of a fallen woman but also enables her to disengage herself from the control of her male friend who turns out to be her manipulative and silent adorer. Thus, Ideala presents a convincing case of a successful escape from the oppressive heterosexual matrix and a new interpretation of womanhood beyond the male-defined idea of femininity.

While Grand continues to believe in the possibility of marriage under changed conditions, Schreiner's definite and more radical rejection of marriage is obvious in her novel *The Story of an African Farm*. For her, marriage provides the arena for power game, oppression, exploitation and enslavement. She makes clear that as long as power is not distributed equally among the sexes, marriage for love remains an impossible case. In "Woman's Dream", Schreiner emphasizes that love can only blossom when gender equality is established and men and women meet on equal terms:

Always in our dreams we hear the turn of the key that shall close the door of the last brothel; the clink of the last coin that pays for the body and soul of a woman; the falling of the last wall that encloses artificially the activity of woman and divides her from man; always we picture the love of the sexes, as, once a dull, slow, creeping worm; then a torpid, earthly chrysalis; at last the full-winged insect, glorious in the sunshine of the future. (Schreiner, "Woman's Dream", 89)

Schreiner's heroine Lyndall knows that this free state of mutual love between men and women is not plausible in the contemporary patriarchal society that perpetuates the subordination of women through the institution of marriage. Thus she states, 'marriage without [love] is the uncleanliest traffic that defiles

the world' (*African Farm*, 136). Lyndall's complete denial of marriage is juxtaposed with her cousin's blind infatuation and romantic notion of love. While Em indulges herself in pleasant anticipation of her wedding, Lyndall is terrified by the thought of marriage as she regards it as a loss of freedom through self-denial and conformity to the sanctioned mother role.<sup>184</sup>

Her mockery of marriage relations becomes obvious when she promises to give her ring to 'the first man who tells [her] he would like to be a woman' (Schreiner, 133). Ironically, the dull character Gregory Rose is prepared to slip into the traditionally womanly role of obedience, service and submission, 'if I might but always be near you to serve you, I would be utterly, utterly happy. I would ask nothing in return [...] I want nothing but to be of use to you' (*African Farm*, 173). Stalemated by the anticipation of a child and the knowledge of society's disrespect of children born outside wedlock<sup>185</sup>, Lyndall agrees to become his wife, emphasizing that it is 'plain, matter-of-fact business' (*African Farm*, 173). To her lover, she explains her motives for rather marrying a fool than him, 'Because if once you have me you would hold me fast. I shall never be free again' and 'I cannot marry you, because I cannot be tied' (*African Farm*, 176, 178).

Although Lyndall rejects marriage as she sees it as a deprivation of her freedom and individuality, she is also aware that women have no other choice if they do not want to perish at the margins of society. This becomes clear when she comments on the inescapability of matrimony:

"They say that we complain of woman's being compelled to look upon marriage as a profession; but that she is free to enter upon it or leave it as she pleases. "Yes - and a cat set afloat in a pond is free to sit in the tub until it dies there, it is under no obligation to wet its feet; and a drowning man may catch at a straw or not, just as he likes - it is a glorious liberty! Let any man think for five minutes of what old maidenhood means to a woman - and then let him be silent. Is it easy to bear through life a name that in itself signifies defeat? (Schreiner, 139-140)

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<sup>184</sup> Cf. Ardis, Ann. *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism*, 63.

<sup>185</sup> Lyndall ironically pinpoints society's double moral standard concerning motherhood, "[...]when people are married, though they should have sixty children, they throw the whole onus on God. When they are not, we hear nothing about God's having sent them. When there has been no legal contract between the parents, who sends the little children then? The Devil perhaps!" (*African Farm*, 153)

Furthermore, Lyndall is disillusioned by her wish to break out of the prison of femininity, 'A woman must march with her regiment. In the end she must be trodden down or go with it; and if she is wise she goes' (*African Farm*, 136).

Though Schreiner seems disenchanted about alternatives beyond marital lives, she regards marriage as such a dreadful condition for women that she makes her heroine Lyndall prefer death to marrying the father of her child. Olive Schreiner's objection to marriage not only finds its voice in the character Lyndall but also in her portrayal of marriage as a mere business contract as is represented by the character Tant' Sannie. The Boer woman 'buries husbands one after another' (*African Farm*, 140) and thus becomes the owner of a farm. Although Em's aunt is presented as a highly disagreeable brutal and ugly woman, she has many suitors as 'the men know where sheep [...] and money in the bank are to be found' (*African Farm*, 145). When aunt Sannie accepts the marriage offer of her young cousin Little Piet Vander Walt, the reader is informed that it is because of his good financial situation, that is 'two farms, twelve thousand sheep' (*African Farm*, 145). Likewise, the young man proposes to aunt Sannie on grounds of economic calculations: 'And pa said I ought to get married before shearing time. It is bad if there's no one to see after things then; and the maids waste such a lot of fat' (*African Farm*, 149).

## **5.4 The Diseased Woman**

### **5.4.1 Double Moral Standard and Venereal Disease**

In her novels, Grand makes explicit what has been tabooed before, or at least what has not supposed to be a part of female knowledge: venereal disease. Barbara Caine points out that in the mid of the nineteenth century venereal disease was primarily discussed with regard to men's health. Men were presented as victims who were infected by fallen women or prostitutes. The Contagious Diseases Act that was passed in 1864 was the legal sanctioning of this misogynistic discourse and should primarily serve the



protection of men in military services.<sup>186</sup> In the course of this law, many women supposed to be prostitutes were arrested by the police and then tested for infection. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Josephine Butler became one of the leading feminists that launched powerful campaigns against this act that humiliated and criminalized prostitutes and left their male clients unmolested.<sup>187</sup>

In her novels *Ideala* and *The Heavenly Twins*, Grand uses the formerly patriarchal discourse on venereal disease to reverse it for feminist purposes and mount a fierce critique of the double moral standard that was maintained and supported by the Victorian interpretation of marital life. She “tells the other side of the story” about syphilis and presents women and innocent children as the victims of profligate men. By vividly portraying the mental and physical degeneration of clueless women and innocent children infected with syphilis, she not only hints at the terrible suffering triggered by a defective value system that accepts male immoral conduct but also raises awareness of the immanent jeopardy for the health of future generations.

As illustrated in former chapters, the New Woman was accused of rejecting her natural role and duty as mother and nurturer of the nation. In *Ideala* and *The Heavenly Twins*, Sarah Grand heralds maternity as a higher feminine vocation that is jeopardized by a faulty patriarchal system. She presents women as morally superb mothers of the nation, who not only are responsible for the upbringing of their children, but also are in charge of the moral education and social engineering of the whole civilization. As *Ideala* states:

The future of the race has come to be a question of morality and a question of health. Perhaps I should reverse it, and say a question of health and morality, since the latter is so dependent on the former. We want grander minds, and we must have grander bodies to contain them. And it all rest with us women. (*Ideala*, 182)

Here Grand uses the eugenic concern on the development of the race that emphasizes women’s crucial role as “mothers of the nation” to attack the

<sup>186</sup> Cf. Caine, *English Feminism*, 136.

<sup>187</sup> Cf. n.a. “Contagious Diseases Act”. *Wikipedia: Die freie Enzyklopädie*. 05 October 2008. <[http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Contagious\\_Diseases\\_Acts](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Contagious_Diseases_Acts)>

sexual double standard. She convincingly argues that by accepting lower moral standards in men, society encourages and propagates the vices of men that are transferred like a hereditary disease and thus endangers the health of the whole nation. Childbirth will then rather be a disaster and an immanent danger than a blessing for the race as is shown by Edith Beale's experience.

Infected with syphilis, Edith has degenerated from a 'radiantly healthy and beautiful' woman to a 'wreck' (*Heavenly Twins*, 288, 277). Instead of fulfilling 'the one hope of happiness left for Edith', the born child 'proved to be another whip to scourge her' (*Heavenly Twins*, 277). The author's description of Edith as a woman who can only be happy in her nursery is effectively contrasted with the outline of the misery of Edith's maternity:

The puzzled, pathetic expression was again in her eyes as she watched the child. She had no smile for him, and uttered no baby words to him – nor had he a smile for her. He was old, old already, and exhausted with suffering, and as his gaze wandered from one to the other it was easy to believe that he was asking each dumbly why had he ever been born? (*Heavenly Twins*, 289)

By portraying the female protagonists as naturally affectionate and loving mothers, Grand challenges the Victorian indictment of New Woman's rejection of their natural role and instead puts the blame on the male sex that makes motherhood and nurturing an impossible task as it jeopardizes both mother and child. The prohibition of motherhood is also illustrated by Ideala's fate. Ideala is presented as a woman who regards maternity as a higher blessing and the 'long-delayed hope of her life' (*Ideala*, 49). Her high estimation of maternity as a natural feminine vocation also becomes obvious when she tries to comfort a woman who has lost her baby by telling her, 'But you are better off than I am, for I never knew what it was to be a mother' (*Ideala*, 36). The narrator further verifies Ideala's desperate longing for a child: 'She would have thought it a privilege to have experienced even the sorrows of maternity' (*Ideala*, 36). Ideala's devotion to her motherly role highlights the cruelty of her husband's act. Driven by jealousy and joy of experimenting, he orders Ideala to stop nursing her baby. Shortly afterwards, the baby dies of diphtheria. That male freedom of immoral conduct is

responsible for the disease of innocent children and women is further underlined by the portrayal of a young girl who, after having been sexually used by Ideala's husband, dies of scarlet fever.

Similarly to Ideala's hindrance of maternal fulfilment, Evadne's motherly role is thwarted by her knowledge and experience of male vice and congenital disease. Instead of delight, she only feels disquiet and desperation when she expects a baby. In a letter to Dr. Galbraith, she confesses her horror of inheritable vice which ultimately climaxes in a suicide attempt:

I am haunted by a terrible fear, she wrote. I have tried again and again to tell you, but I never could. You would not see that it is prophetic, as Edith's fate – better both die at once. (*Heavenly Twins*, 665)

Grand's use of eugenic arguments helps her to mount a powerful critique on the double moral standard and to support her ideals of social purity feminism. She suggests that the maintenance of the nation's health can only be guaranteed if the high moral standards and sexual purity that are taken for granted of women are also demanded of men in and outside wedlock. Grand's call for sexual purity is again linked to women's responsibility as expressed by Ideala who elevates social purity to the new female religion: As soon as our own 'higher education is secure we shall begin to clamour for the higher education of men (*Ideala*, 183)'.

#### **5.4.2 Hysteria and the Subversion of Medical Discourses**

In *The 'Improper' Feminine*, Pykett explains that the equation of femininity with feeling lead to contradictory images in nineteenth century literature. Women were either seen as irrational, childlike beings close to nature and in need of directions or they were regarded as 'supra-rational', spiritual creatures that transcended nature, rationality and sexuality. These images, Pykett argues, helped to nurture the ideology of feminine domesticity and regenerative power.<sup>188</sup> Moreover, Victorian psychoanalytical and medical discourses at the end of the nineteenth century usually associated feminine

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<sup>188</sup> Cf. Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine*, 164-165.

affectivity and in consequence femininity itself, with deficiency.<sup>189</sup> Thus, as pointed out by Jane Wood, women were supposed to be “naturally” prone to mental illnesses:

[...] if all the socio-medical theories were to be believed, she was already, by nature, predisposed to psychosomatic illness by virtue of the alleged morbid connection between her mental organization and physiology. (Wood, 12)

In the nineteenth century, the term hysteria served as an all-encompassing illness that included all symptoms that could not be categorized easily.<sup>190</sup> Moreover, it was used to conceal the often contradictory theories and ideologies of the prevailing scientific discourses. According to Ilza Veith, the symptoms of the diagnosis hysteria have over centuries been adapted to the respective expectations, values and ideas of a society.<sup>191</sup> Hence, Victorian medical discourse focused on hysteria as an exclusively female illness.<sup>192</sup> Wood explains that the superiority of men in medical professions guaranteed that men perpetuated the control over women's body and their allegedly disorderly functions.<sup>193</sup> Thus, hysteria was prominently ascribed to behaviours that burst the scope of feminine respectability. Occupations that thwarted women's primary function as mother and domestic keeper were seen as major catalysts for mental disorders.<sup>194</sup> As Wood states, ‘women's nervous illnesses were increasingly seen as the physiological consequence of their reluctance to comply with prescribed social and sexual roles’ (Wood, 163). It comes as no surprise then that New Women who demanded more freedom than the rigid notions of proper femininity would have allowed, were regarded as particularly endangered.

In fact, hysteria occupies a central theme in New Woman literature. Sarah Grand's *The Heavenly Twins* and *Ideala* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* present New Woman heroines who suffer from mental disorders. However, Grand and Chopin seize the prominence of hysteria to reverse the prevailing medical discourses and mount a powerful feminist critique. By illustrating the

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<sup>189</sup> Cf. Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine*, 165.

<sup>190</sup> Cf. Wood, 12.

<sup>191</sup> Cf. Wood, 12.

<sup>192</sup> Cf. Heilmann, “Narrating the Hysteric“, 123.

<sup>193</sup> Cf. Wood, 9.

<sup>194</sup> Cf. Wood, 163, 170.

reasons of the mental breakdowns of their heroines, they make clear that it is not their 'problematic physiology' (Wood, 11) that is to blame but patriarchal society and 'its destructive impact on female identity' (Heilmann, "Narrating the Hysteric", 123).

Thus, Edith's madness is a direct consequence of her sexual relationship with her promiscuous husband. Infected with syphilis, her physical and mental state gradually becomes worse. Edith's hysterical outbreak serves as a last exclamation of rebellion against her tantalizer:

"I am quite, quite mad!" she said, "Do you know what I have been doing? I've been murdering him! I've been creeping, creeping, with bare feet, to surprise him in his sleep; and I had a tiny knife – very sharp – and I felt for the artery [...] and then stabbed quickly! And he awoke, and knew he must die-and cowered! And it was all a pleasure to me. Oh, yes! I am quite, quite mad! (*Heavenly Twins*, 304)

This passage reveals that Edith's hysteria has a liberating effect, as it allows her to retreat into a dream world where she is able to free herself from her misery by murdering the source of it: her husband Mosley Menteith. Whereas Edith was reared to be docile, obedient and silent, hysteria helps her to regain her own voice. This becomes explicit when she summons the people responsible for her state. For the first time in her life, it seems, she is able to defend herself:

"That is why I sent for you all, " she was saying feebly - "to tell you, you who represent the arrangement of society which has made it possible for me and my child to be sacrificed in this way. [...] - she sat up in bed suddenly, and addressed her husband in scathing tones [...] Go! Go! Father! Turn him out of the house. Don't let me ever see that dreadful man again. (*Heavenly Twins*, 300)

Similarly to Edith's fate, the origin of Evadne's suffering and retreat into nervous disorders can be traced to her husband Colonel Colquhoun. He enforces Evadne the promise 'to do nothing' (Grand, 349) as long as he lives in order to save his reputation. Grand makes clear that this pledge was the drastic moment that triggered Evadne's sudden loss of her mental health. Deprived of 'an outlet for her superfluous vitality', 'her mind grew sluggish, her bodily health decreased' and eventually she becomes 'morbid and hysterical' (*Heavenly Twins*, 350). In contrast to Edith who directs her

madness against her tormentor and cries out her negative energy, Evadne's mental disorder render her silent and submissive, resembling Edith's docile and ignorant state before she was empowered by insanity. Eventually, she destroys herself to a degree that leaves no hope for recovery as realized by her husband Dr. Galbraith:

I could not believe that the balance of her fine intelligence had been too rudely shaken ever to be perfectly restored; but now at last it seemed as if her confidence in her fellow-creatures, the source of all mental health, had been destroyed forever, and with that confidence her sense of the value of life and of her own obligations had been also injured or distorted. (*Heavenly Twins*, 678)

Dr. Galbraith is aware that his wife's mental breakdown cannot be ascribed to a weak organisation of body and mind as many of his colleagues would have claimed. Grand makes explicit that Evadne's experience of evil and her awareness that society functions as gatekeeper for male immoral behaviour combined with her strong belief in hereditary vice have eventually destroyed Evadne's health. Unfortunately, Evadne's retreat into hysteria proves to be useless as she is unable to externalize it. As Heilmann explains:

[...] while hysteria dramatized the clash between patriarchal law and female experience, thus marking the transition from internalized conflicted to externalized anger, its liberating potential was lost unless this externalization did in fact take place. (Heilmann, "Narrating the Hysteric", 123)

Angelica's statement 'I think it dangerous to leave an energetic woman without a single strong interest or object in life. Trouble is sure to come of it sooner or later' (*Heavenly Twins*, 453) not only detects one of the major reasons for Evadne's retreat into hysteria but also serves as a prognostic illusion to her own marriage experience. However, unlike Edith and Evadne, Angelica finds ways of dealing with periods of anger and depression. She relieves herself from the superfluous energy by channelling it constructively into unconventional activities that violate the social etiquette of her time.<sup>195</sup> Thus, she writes political speeches for her husband in parliament, slips into her brother's clothes and disguises as a boy to experience 'the perfect freedom from restraint' (Grand, 530), and last but not least, thinks of

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<sup>195</sup> Cf. Heilmann, "Narrating the Hysteric", 124.

numerous plans and tricks how to keep her husband and her parents at a fair distance to be undisturbed in her “unwomanly” adventures. Angelica’s expressive and revolting nature helps her to regain her mental integrity quickly when she falls into states of anger, despair or lethargy.

In contrast to Evadne, who represses her negative energy as she is afraid of its destructive potential and who therefore destroys herself, Angelica externalizes her negative feelings and thus is able to hurt other people. This is shown in a scene, in which she throws a book at Edith’s oppressor, Sir Mosley Menteith and breaks his nose. It seems then as if Angelica’s way of channelling her negative feelings into actions had the power to fight patriarchal oppression.

Summing up, portrayals of hysteric women in *The Heavenly Twins* illustrate that women’s disease is caused by denial of self-determination, double sexual standard and limited intellectual pursuits. This is also shown in Grand’s novel *Ideala*. Leading the constrained life of a middle class Victorian wife who is imprisoned by a dictatorial and promiscuous husband, Ideala is overcome with boredom and a feeling of uselessness and yearns for meaningful tasks as she confesses to her friend:

So you see I have no obligations of consequence, and therefore, nothing in my life to inspire a sense of responsibility. And all this seems to me a grievous waste of Me. [...] I always feel as if I *could* do something-teach something-or help others in a small way with some work of importance. I never believe I was born just to live and die. (*Ideala*, 35)

Devoid of significant duties and activities, Ideala is unable to deal with her superfluous power and reacts with mental instability, ‘Her bursts of enthusiasm were followed by fits of depression, and these again by periods of indifference, when it was hard to rouse her to interest in anything’ (*Ideala*, 25). When Ideala finds a new meaning in her life in the devotion to ‘Woman’s Rights business’ (*Ideala*, 183), she blossoms and regains her mental stability. Thus, Ideala provides a compelling case for the necessity of female activities beyond domesticity and family life. Heilmann states that contemporary medicine regarded women’s quest for an active public role as a sign of lunacy as a woman’s biologically predestined place was supposed to be at

home with her children and at her husband's service. Rest cures should return women to their "natural" role and in this way, restore their sanity.<sup>196</sup> By curing Ideala through socio-political engagement and a new feminist challenge outside the approved woman's sphere, Grand questions the common medical practice of prescribing rest cures for women who suffer from nervous disorders. Through highlighting society's negative influence on women's health, she postulates that society should cure itself from double moral standards and gender inequality instead of finding faults in women's connection of body and brain.

Similar to Grand, who blames the faulty social system and illusions for ruining women's health and happiness in her novels, Chopin regards the capitalist value system 'with its soul-eroding materialism' that is maintained at the expense of women's freedom and 'the false promises of the traditional ideology of romantic love' (Harris, 191) as responsible for women's dreadful mental conditions. In *The Awakening*, the New Woman heroine Edna Pontellier is robbed of her identity as a human being and degraded to one of many valuable objects in her husband's life. Chopin makes explicit that capitalist notions of propriety are concealed behind the caring and loving façade of Mr. Pontellier's action. He cares and looks after Edna as he regards her as one of his possessions, which becomes obvious in the following statement that conveys his disapproval of his wife's sunbathing: "You are burnt beyond recognition," he added, looking his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage' (Chopin, 4). In several scenes, Chopin constructs Mr. Pontellier as representative of a capitalist society who values money, possession and status more than individual content and happiness. And he is in good company, as Antony Harrison explains, 'Léonce appears pompous but secure as the exponent of a uniformly capitalist values system and of the conventional modes of behaviour that sustain and protect it' (Harrison, 192). That he adheres to the dominant ideology and is supported by it becomes obvious when he is described as a favourite of society and, without a dissentient vote, 'the best husband in the world' (Chopin, 9).<sup>197</sup> Thus, when

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<sup>196</sup> Cf. Heilmann, "Narrating the Hysteric", 125.

<sup>197</sup> Cf. Harrison, Antony. "Swinburne and the Critique of Ideology in *The Awakening*", 192.



Edna gradually realizes and rebels against her objectification in her marriage relation to Léonce that she has never dared to question before, she not only revolts against her husband but, as it seems, against the whole society that conforms to his materialist ideology of possession, decorum and propriety. Léonce is supported by Edna's father, another exponent of patriarchal hegemony, who advises him to stop his daughter's 'incomprehensible action' (*Awakening*, 79) authoritatively:

"You are too lenient, too lenient by far, Léonce," asserted the Colonel. "Authority, coercion are what is needed. Put your foot down good and hard; the only way to manage a wife. Take my word for it." (*Awakening*, 79)

Harrison notes that the domination of the capitalist and patriarchal value system is so absolute that people who dare to swim against the current are labelled mentally unstable.<sup>198</sup> So, the individualist and unconventional Mde Reisz is characterized as 'partially demented' (*Awakening*, 92) due to her unconventional behaviour and Mr. Pontellier thinks of his wife as mentally unbalanced when she neglects her domestic duties and spends her time painting. Chopin comments on Léonce's wrong estimation of his wife's real condition that is obscured by the social mask she is enforced to wear:

He could see plainly that she was not herself. That is, he could not see that she was becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world (*Awakening*, 64)

Edna is not only misunderstood by her best friend Adèle Ratignolle, who 'fully accepts, embodies, and enacts the "illusions" thrust upon her by a pervasively materialist culture' (Harris, 194) but also by her male adorers Alcée Arobin and Robert Lebrun, who, like her husband, can only think of her in terms of convenience and possession. Eventually, Edna's shattered illusions of romantic love and freedom ultimately dissolve in a feeling of impotence and depression:

There were days when she was unhappy, she did not know why, - when it did not seem worth while to be glad or sorry, to be alive or dead; when life appeared to her like a grotesque pandemonium and humanity like worms struggling blindly toward in evitable annihilation. She could not work on such a day, nor weave fancies to stir her pulses and warm her blood. (*Awakening*, 65)

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<sup>198</sup> Cf. Harrison, 191.

## 5.5 Subverting Gender

### 5.5.1 Androgyny and the Destabilization of the Sex Dichotomy

[...] indeed, for the time being, she seemed to vacillate; she was man; she was woman; she knew the secrets, shared the weaknesses of each. It was a most bewildering and whirligig state of mind to be in. (*Orlando*, 113)

Virginia Woolf's description of the androgynous character Orlando, who combines both sexes within one person, could have been a portrayal of the figure of the New Woman who was often caricatured as a mannish woman in the literary press. While sexual ambiguity alarmed conservative critics, New Woman writers welcomed androgyny as a chance of greater gender equality. In the New Woman novels discussed in this thesis, female protagonists are often presented as masculine and, vice versa, male protagonists display feminine characteristics. This "androgynous" nature of the characters represents a counter-discourse to the general Victorian credo that biological differences result in clear-cut gender identities. The following chapter will show that, by embracing the concept of androgyny, New Woman writers destabilized the rigid sex binary that limits an individual's life dramatically.

The word androgyny derives from Greek and is a combination of the words "andros" (man) and "gynaika" (woman).<sup>199</sup> As already suggested by the origin of the word, androgyny generally describes the fusion of feminine and masculine traits within one person.<sup>200</sup> Nowadays, androgyny is mostly understood as being a psychological mixing of gender.<sup>201</sup>

By presenting a chronology of representations of androgyny in her work *Androgyny in Modern Literature*, Tracy Hargreaves shows that the meaning of androgyny depends on its function in a given discourse. She points out

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<sup>199</sup> Cf. Gianoulis, Tina. "Androgyny". *The Queer Encyclopaedia of Film and Television*. 9 Oktober 2008. <http://www.glbtq.com/social-sciences/androgyny.html>

Cf. Gianoulis, n.p.

<sup>201</sup> Cf. Gianoulis, n.p.

that during second-wave feminism, androgyny has been embraced by many feminist scholars as a chance to overcome the binary gender constructions and as a powerful trope to disrupt hetero-normative relationships.<sup>202</sup> In this line of thought, I will analyze New Woman's 'flight into androgyny' (Showalter quoted in Hargreaves, 68).

In *The Story of an African Farm*, Olive Schreiner convincingly portrays the "masculine" nature of the New Woman heroine Lyndall. At the same time she highlights her heroine's femininity, conjuring up the image of a psychological androgyne.<sup>203</sup>

As a child, Lyndall displays characteristics and behaviours that are usually associated with boys. She is courageous, fearless, rebellious, independent, and eager to possess knowledge and power, and she puts words into action. Her power of resistance and action becomes obvious when she chases the imposter and tormentor Bonaparte from the farm or when she leaves the classroom without any words of explanation. In contrast to her cousin Em and her friend Waldo, who are victimized by the Boer woman's violent break-outs, Lyndall is able to resist Aunt Sannie's violent behaviour. This becomes apparent in the following scene in which Lyndall holds the Boer woman off from beating Em:

For one instant Lyndall looked on, then she laid her small fingers on the Boer woman's arm. With the exertion of half its strength Tant' Sannie might have flung the girl back upon the stones. It was not the power of the slight fingers, tightly though they clinched her broad wrist - so tightly that at bedtime the marks were still there - but the Boer woman looked into the clear eyes and at the quivering white lips, and with a half-surprised curse, relaxed her hold. (*African Farm*, 49-50)

Moreover, Lyndall shows that she is in perfect control of her emotions and hence she vitiates the assumption that women are characterized by over-reaching emotionality. She never cries when she experiences injustice but rationally and stoically makes a plan how to free herself and her friends from

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<sup>202</sup> Cf. Hargreaves, Tracy. *Androgyny in Modern Literature*, 97-98.

<sup>203</sup> In *Where the Meanings Are*, Catharine Stimpson deals with the linguistic indeterminacy of androgyny. She tries to categorize the different meanings that are ascribed to the word "androgyne" and comes up with five different references: The androgyne may stand for a bisexual person, an effeminated man, a physical hermaphrodite, a mental hermaphrodite or a psychological hermaphrodite, who displays feminine and masculine characteristics independent of his anatomical configuration. Cf. Stimpson, 54-55.

the miserable situation. Thus, she is able to soothe Em's and Waldo's suffering when they are tormented by Bonaparte and Aunt Sannie, who have the power to suppress.

Lyndall's willpower is depicted in her conversation with Em in which she reveals to go to school despite the Boer woman's resistance: "I intend to go to school. – "And if she won't let you?" "I shall make her" (*African Farm*, 10). Her virile character is further underlined by her refusal of feminine occupations and trainings thought to be appropriate for her sex. In a conversation with Waldo in which she recalls her experience in a girl's boarding school, she expresses her contempt of the practice of female cultivation and refinement through futile occupations like handicraft, embroidery and music:

[...] but I made them give me room. [...] I did not learn music, because I had no talent; and when the drove made cushions, and hideous flowers that the roses laughed at, and a footstool in six weeks that a machine would have made better in five minutes, I went to my room. (*African Farm*, 133)

Lyndall's unfeminine traits are further emphasized by the portrayal of her cousin Em's allegedly womanly nature. Em is portrayed as an emotional, modest and passive woman whose 'idea of love was only service' (*African Farm*, 127). When she is in serious trouble, she breaks out in tears instead of channelling her emotions into useful action as Lyndall does. Moreover, Lyndall's "masculine" courage is juxtaposed to the cowardice and timidity of the character Bonaparte, a nebbish that abuses his power to agonize 'everything that is weak' (*African Farm*, 51).

Although Lyndall is presented as a woman whose mental traits and actions are usually associated with masculinity, her body and looks meet the contemporary expectations of feminine beauty. This is revealed in Em's admiration of her cousin's appearance:

SHE was more like a princess, yes, far more like a princess, than the lady who still hung on the wall in Tant' Sannie's bedroom. So Em thought. She leaned back in the little armchair; she wore a grey dressing gown, and her long hair was combed out and hung to the ground. Em, sitting before her, looked up with mingled respect and admiration. (*African Farm*, 130)

In a similar way, Waldo marvels at Lyndall's feminine grace as is revealed in the following lines: 'She wore a dress of a simple cotton fabric, but very fashionably made, and on her head was a broad white hat. To Waldo she seemed superbly attired' (*African Farm*, 132).

In short, Lyndall's sex and physical appearance diverge from the gender role she displays. This implies that sex does not necessitate gender but, as Butler has argued, gender becomes free-floating and independent from the body. This is also portrayed by the character Gregory Rose. While Lyndall represents the 'virile woman', Gregory Rose is the personification of 'feminine manhood' (Heilmann, 139): He is vain, affected, jealous, clinging, timid, precautious and sentimental. When Schreiner introduces the character Gregory Rose, she pictures him in a womanly posture, with 'his legs crossed, and a profound melancholy seeming to rest over his soul' (*African Farm*, 121). The feminine surname that alludes to a flower and the masculine forename already hint at his androgynous personality. Ironically, Gregory is the embodiment of the Victorian stereotype of true womanliness, which is expressed by Lyndall, 'How happy he would be sewing frill into his little girls' frocks, and how pretty he would look sitting in a parlour, with a rough man making love to him!' (*African Farm*).<sup>204</sup> Moreover, Lyndall conjures up the picture of a baby girl when she is reminded of Gregory's looks:

"He must have been a fine baby", said Lyndall [...] There are some men, said Lyndall, whom you never can believe were babies at all; and others you never see without thinking how very nice they must have looked when they wore socks and pink sashes." (*African Farm*, 130)

Gregory's effeminate nature is also mirrored by his 'scrupulously neat and clean' room with press cuttings of 'female faces and figures' (*African Farm*, 121) and the way he copies his mother's domestic habits:

[...] Gregory kept a little duster folded in the corner of his table drawer, just as he had seen his mother do, and every morning before he went out he said his prayers, and made his bed, and dusted the table and the legs of the chairs, and even the pictures on the wall and the gun rack. (*African Farm*, 121)

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<sup>204</sup> Cf. Heilmann, *New Woman Strategies*, 140.

The gun rack that reminds of his biological manhood is eclipsed by his feminine character illustrated in a scene in which he dwells on his own reflection in the mirror, 'a youthful face' [...] with curling brown beard and hair' and 'dark blue eyes' with a 'look of languid longing' (*African Farm*, 122). According to Heilmann, the mirror scene which alludes to both masculine and feminine features, is 'the site of an endless narcissistic reenactment of his double-genderedness' (Heilmann, *New Woman Strategies*, 140). Gregory's emasculation is furthered in his decision to take a pink sheet for writing a letter to his sister, as he regarded the colour 'more suitable to the state of his feelings' (*African Farm*, 122).

Like Olive Schreiner in *The Story of an African Farm*, Grand challenges the notion of true womanhood by her portrayal of the twins Angelica and Diavolo whose gender identities and roles seem to be inverted. While Angelica is a bossy, impatient, provocative, hands-on girl with 'wicked ways' (*Heavenly Twins*, 142) who initiates the cunning tricks she plays with the assistance of her brother, Diavolo is a good-natured boy who smoothes his sister's 'sharpness of temper' (*Heavenly Twins*, 142) and outbursts of fury but also supports her in her unwomanly conduct. By giving names to the twins that allude to devil and angel, Grand mocks traditional gender roles as it is Angelica who, with her black hair and ferocious behaviour, rather evokes the picture of a devilish child than her brother Diavolo with his gentleness and curly, blonde hair.

Other characters like Evadne, who seem to support the notion of inherent differences of men and women, are not naturally feminine, but, as pointed out by Heilmann, just perform gender to meet the expectations of womanhood.

In her own quiet way, Evadne is engaged in the performance of gender just as much as the twins are, the only difference being that she mimics normative expectations whereas they explode them. (Heilmann, *New Woman Strategies*, 62)

It becomes clear that the womanly women Evadne and Edith do not naturally meet society's expectations of womanhood but have been socialized, cultivated, manipulated and eventually defeated to fit into the narrow Victorian space of femininity. In *The Story of an African farm*, Lyndall explains the consequences of unequal gender socialization that forces

women into conform and artificial gender roles that gradually displace their own identities. Eventually, Lyndall argues, gender differentiation succeeds in making socially constructed gender identities appear natural:

Then the curse begins to act on us. It finishes its work when we are grown women, who no more look out wistfully at a more healthy life; we are contented. We fit our sphere as a Chinese woman's foot fits her shoe, exactly, as thought God had made both – and yet He knows nothing of either. (*African Farm*, 135)

Likewise, Egerton conveys the idea that gender is a performance, a kind of mask with which women conceal their real self from men<sup>205</sup>, so that

[e]ach one of them sets about solving the riddle of the *ewig weibliche* [the eternal feminine] – and well it is that the workings of our hearts are closed to them, that we are cunning enough or great enough to seem to be what they would have us, rather than be what we are. [...] and every woman is an unconscious liar, for so man loves her. ("A Cross Line", 22)

The heroine in "A Cross Line" is characterized by a seemingly contradictory nature. On the one hand, she has masculine preferences like fly-fishing and smoking cigarettes, a soft spot for wild adventures, is sexually active and rejects maternity. Moreover, her husband compares her with a male companion, which is revealed when he tells her, 'But you are a good [...], a real good chum! [...] Why (enthusiastically), being married to you is like chumming with a chap! ("A Cross Line", 16-17). On the other hand, she is pictured as untameable, savage, 'handicapped by her affection' and with 'the need to love' ("A Cross Line", 4, 28), confirming the traditional equation of women with nature, emotionality and irrationality. The androgynous nature of the heroine's character is further illustrated in her looks: Her perfect, slim hands and delicate figure clad in feminine clothes are overshadowed by 'decidedly brown' and 'duskily foreign' looking skin ("A Cross Line", 6, 7).

### 5.5.2 Border Crossing through Cross-Dressing

Thus, there is much to support the view that it is clothes that wear us and not we them; we may make them take the mould of arm or breast, but they mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking. (*Orlando*, 132)

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<sup>205</sup> Cf. Hayfield, 3.

As this passage implies, clothes have a crucial impact on the identity of a person. Through clothes, Woolf suggests in *Orlando*, people cannot only change their appearance but also their identity. Thus, it could be argued, 'costume, not anatomy, is destiny' (Heilmann, *New Woman Fiction*, 123). According to Marjorie Garber, clothes have become more essential for gender differentiation in the last century. While in former times, young boys and girls were dressed in frocks regardless of their sex, even baby clothes have become gender-coded nowadays so that pink and frocks are reserved for girls and the colour blue and pants imply manliness.<sup>206</sup>

In New Woman literature, protagonists use the apparently crucial influence of clothes to the perception of gender to explode the rigid gender constructions of Victorian society. By making aware that a change of clothes can change the perceived gender of a person, New Woman writers show the artificiality and changeability of seemingly fixed sex and gender identities.

In *The Heavenly Twins* and *The African Farm*, Angelica and Gregory use the practice of cross-dressing to transgress social boundaries and reach a seemingly de-gendered state where ideas of appropriateness no longer confine their freedom of conduct.

While Angelica grows up, she has to experience that gender differentiation more and more limits her scope of experiences and suppresses her personality to fit into prevailing notions of true womanhood while her twin brother relishes the benevolences and liberties common for the male sex. Angelica gives an account of the imprisonment she experienced as a young woman:

There was no latitude allowed for my individuality. I was a girl, and therefore I was not supposed to have any bent. I found a big groove ready waiting for me when I grew up, and in that I was expected to live whether it suited me or not. It did not suit me. (*Heavenly Twins*, 450)

The awareness of her personal restriction and the desire to challenge social norms and find a 'room to move' lead to her masquerade as a boy: 'I felt a

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<sup>206</sup> Cf. Garber, Marjorie. *Vested Interest. Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*. 1-2.



galling sense of restraint all at once, and I determined to break the law that imposed it; and that alone was a satisfaction – the finding of one law that I could break' (*Heavenly Twins*, 451). Angelica is aware of the influence of clothes on the perception of gender and thus she is not afraid of being detected: 'I knew I should be mistaken for my brother. Our own parents do not know us apart when we are dressed alike' (*Heavenly Twins*, 452). Besides, she thought it more dangerous to oppress her energy and desire for purposeful activities than being unmasked as a woman in a boy's costume. Angelica exposes the gender roles that are rigidly assigned to the sexes as unnatural and therefore hindering to women's fulfilment:

They used to lecture me and give me good advice, as if they were able to judge, and it made me rage. I had none of the domestic virtues, and yet they would insist upon domesticating me. (*Heavenly Twins*, 450)

Through Angelica's voice, Grand hints at the hypocrisy of a society that tries to silence women under wrong pretensions. She unmaskes socio-medical discourses that emphasize women's natural domesticity and limited intellectual capacities for a public life as wrong assumptions that are maintained to guarantee patriarchal hegemony.

Cross-dressing as a boy allows Angelica to rise in the social hierarchy and to gain respect from men she would have been denied just on grounds of her sex. She notes:

I should see the world as men see it, which would be from a new point of view for me, and that would be interesting. [...] Because I was a woman I knew I should be insulted, or at all events hindered, however, inoffensive my conduct; and so I prepared the disguise. (*Heavenly Twins*, 451)

Grand explicitly blames the wrong education system for keeping the male and female sex apart so that gender masquerade serves as the only bridge on which men and women can meet on equal terms. This is implied in the following passage in which Angelica explains that social training makes a free and unbiased relationship between men and women impossible:

Had you known that I was a woman – even you – the pleasure of your companionship would have been spoilt for me, so unwholesomely is the imagination of a man affected by ideas of sex. The fault is in your training; you are all of you educated

deliberately to think of women chiefly as the opposite sex.  
(*Heavenly Twins*, 458)

According to Bogiatzis, Angelica enjoys 'the freedom from restraint' (*Heavenly Twins*, 456) a male perspective allows. Instead of experiencing an identity crisis, she has internalized her newly adopted male identity as she assures the Tenor:<sup>207</sup> 'I tell you I was a genuine boy; I was my own brother in very truth. Mentally and morally, I was exactly what you thought me [...]' (*Heavenly Twins*, 456). It seems then that masquerade helps Angelica to act out her androgynous nature, that is, the male part hidden in her feminine costume.

Apart from challenging stereotypical gender roles, Grand denaturalizes the heterosexual matrix by conjuring up the image of a homoerotic attraction between Angelica and the Tenor.<sup>208</sup> She leaves open if the Tenor is attracted to Angelica disguised in men's clothes or if her boyish manners are appealing to him. Through this ambiguity, as Bogiatzis argues, Grand subtly propagates a 'revisionist outlook on sexual norms' (Bogiatzis, 49).

Moreover, Grand suggests that cross-dressing has curing and empowering effects on women. Thus, masquerading as a boy helps Angelica to restore her health after a phase of lethargy and mental instability triggered by the Tenor's death. This becomes clear when she liberates herself from her constraining feminine costume, slips into her brother's clothes and thus regains her strength and vitality as the following lines imply:

She stood a moment, breathing deeply in pure enjoyment of the air [...]. Then she threw up her arms and stretched every limb in the joy of perfect freedom from restraint; and then with strong bounds she cleared the grassy space, dashed down a rocky step, and found herself a substance amongst the shadows out in the murmuring woods. (*Heavenly Twins*, 530)

In addition to the positive influence on her health, cross-dressing also enables Angelica to immerse herself into overall knowledge usually reserved for the male sex and thus empower herself for self help.

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<sup>207</sup> Cf. Bogiatzis, Demetris: "Sexuality and Gender: "The Interlude" of Sarah Grand's *The Heavenly Twins*", 55.

<sup>208</sup> Cf. Bogiatzis, 48.

The crucial impact of clothes on women's status and health is also foregrounded in *Ideala*. Notably, Ideala starts her feminist campaign in England after having been inspired by Chinese women who rebel against the torturing practice of foot-binding.<sup>209</sup> Heilmann explains that in the Victorian age, dress reform was a central concern among feminists who fought against restrictive gender roles:<sup>210</sup>

By throwing into relief the disfigurement cause by corseting, feminists were able to draw analogies between women's bodily imprisonment in unnatural, unhealthy and cramping garments and their confinement to mentally and physically disabling roles. (Heilmann, *New Woman Fiction*, 122)

Similar to Angelica, who annihilates gender boundaries through cross-dressing, Gregory is able to transgress his socially constructed masculinity and slip into the role of 'a true woman – one born for the sphere that some women have to fill without being born for it' (*African Farm*, 142-143). In the course of the novel, Gregory develops from a man with patriarchal ideas of male superiority to a womanly man that meets the expectations of Victorian notions of feminine obedience and service. Gregory's metamorphosis from socially constructed masculinity to his new re-constructed self is best illustrated by "before and after" statements that mirror his altering attitudes. Before he is infatuated with Lyndall, he keeps up ideas of male domination:

If I had a wife with pride I'd make her give it up, *sharp*. I don't believe in a man who can't make a woman obey him. [...] If a man lets a woman do what he doesn't like he's a *muff*. (*African Farm*, 151)

These misogynistic utterances are ironically contrasted with Gregory's deliberate subordination to Lyndall's will, "I only want to be of some use to you," (*African Farm*, 173). Schreiner ironically comments on Gregory's mental transformation, 'He had forgotten that it is man's right to rule' (*African Farm*, 184).

Masqueraded as a nurse, Gregory Rose is able to be with the diseased Lyndall, even much closer than he could have imagined as a man. Like in the

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<sup>209</sup> Cf. Heilmann, *New Woman Fiction*, 122.

<sup>210</sup> Cf. Heilmann, *New Woman Fiction*, 122.

case of Angelica in *The Heavenly Twins*, it becomes obvious that Gregory identifies with his feminine role. His delight in his feminine occupation is reflected in his excellent nursing skills that are noted by the doctor, “She is the most experienced nurse I ever came in contact with” (African Farm, 209). By juxtaposing Lyndall’s rejection of motherhood to Gregory’s watchful and motherly care of his patient, Schreiner challenges the traditional equation of femininity and motherhood. Interestingly, Schreiner parallels Gregory’s awakening to womanhood with Lyndall’s gradual loss of femininity.<sup>211</sup> While Gregory blossoms in his maternal role, Lyndall’s body is unsexed by the cutting of her long hair and the deformation of her body through anorexia.<sup>212</sup> Through Gregory’s masquerade as a woman, Schreiner implies that rigid notions of sex and gender not only restrain women but also prevent men’s happiness and self-fulfilment.

As Schreiner’s and Grand’s novels demonstrate, cross-dressing has a liberating and empowering effect for the protagonists. Through changing their gender-coded costumes, Angelica and Gregory are able to find the key to their real selves beyond the restraining social constructions of gender. However, it becomes also clear that cross-dressing is not a steady solution to destabilize gender norms and the politics of separated spheres. Both protagonists return to traditionally feminine and masculine roles after their cross-dressing escapades. After Lyndall’s death, Gregory returns to the farm and becomes Em’s husband and after the tragic accident that took her friend’s life, Angelica accepts her conventional role as Mrs. Kilroys’ wife. Nevertheless, their traditional gender roles are only new performances that emphasize the flexibility and changeability of sex and gender.

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<sup>211</sup> Cf. Heilmann, *New Woman Strategies*, 143.

<sup>212</sup> Cf. Heilmann, *New Woman Strategies*, 143.

## 6. Conclusion

In the course of my thesis, I have explored the destructive impact of patriarchal hegemony on women at the fin de siècle and the hence ensuing countermovement of New Women who tried to destabilize patriarchy and its institutions of power and suppression. Although it has become clear that the term “New Woman” as a category is itself questionable, this thesis has attempted to work out the most prominent thematic aspects and strategies of New Women. These women obviously had one common purpose, namely to improve the situation of women in a cultural epoch that is generally known for its rigid notions of sex and sexuality. I have explored the most prominent topics of representative New Woman fiction written by the feminist authors Sarah Grand, Olive Schreiner, Kate Chopin and George Egerton. I found some striking similarities but also diverging attitudes in their attack of society and its politics of separate spheres. All of these writers mount a powerful feminist critique by focusing on the unequal marriage relations and the consequential distress, unhappiness and physical and mental destruction to which women are exposed. The emphasis of their critique, however, slightly diverges:

In *The Heavenly Twins* and *Ideala*, Grand focuses on the double moral standard and the consequent male vices and female diseases that propagate and thus endanger the health and future of the whole nation. In *The Awakening*, Kate Chopin highlights the self-alienation of her protagonist in a marriage relation that is formed by capitalist exploitation. In *The Story of an African Farm*, Schreiner puts her emphasis on the unequal distribution of power that leads to suppression and submission. While Grand postulates a revision of the existing marriage institution, Chopin and Schreiner repudiate the concept of marriage as a modern form of slavery. The impossibility of marriage and heterosexual relationships is also conveyed in “The Cross Line”. Egerton sees the discrepancy of true femininity and male comprehension of true womanhood as most hindering to the development of equal marriage relations.

Another prominent concern, which is tackled in all the texts, is the topic of motherhood. Generally, motherhood as experienced under the present circumstances is seen as a burden that further contributes to the subjugation of women. While Egerton, Schreiner and Chopin reject the Victorian equation of femininity and motherhood and do not accept the diminution of women to their reproductive function, Grand sees motherhood as a higher female call that is disturbed by society's acceptance of male vice so that it is rendered harmful to women and the development of the human race.

The highest discordance between New Woman authors can be noted in their treatment of sexuality. Although all of them acknowledge female sexuality and disprove the prevailing assumptions of women's frigidity and absence of sexual feelings, they do not agree on the idea of free love. While "A Cross Line", *The Awakening* and *The Story of an African Farm*, endorse the acting out of sexual feelings beyond marriage and accentuate the passionate and sexually active personality of their characters, *Ideala* and *The Heavenly Twins* warn against blind physical passion and demand sexual purity of men and women.

I have shown that the sexual outspokenness in New Woman writings caused quite a stir among Victorian traditionalists who worried about sexual anarchy and moral decline. Apart from sexual candour, New Women's rejection of motherhood and their pursuit of intellectual and professional occupations like art and politics were seen as fundamental violations of nature. Conversely, arguments of biological determinism that emphasized women's natural role as housewife and mother and warned of occupations beyond the domestic sphere provoked New Women's vehement protest. In their novels, New Woman writers unmask the misogynistic purpose behind allegedly scientific discourses and make clear that meaningful activities beyond household and childcare are the essential preconditions for women's health and happiness. Moreover, Grand and Schreiner agree about the importance of education as women's key to emancipation.

Furthermore, I have examined New Woman's focus on disease as a sharp and effective instrument in the destabilization of male-dominated medical

discourses. Instead of blaming women's flawed physiognomy for the mental instability of their female characters, New Woman authors detect the unequal gender politics and the restrictive construction of femininity as the actual reason for women's ill-health and thus successfully reverse patriarchal discourses.

The concept of androgyny and the practice of cross-dressing have proved to be powerful but transient in the undoing of fixed gender identities in the New Woman fiction discussed in this thesis. In order to deconstruct seemingly fixed gender roles and reveal their artificiality, New Woman novelists present heroines who perform gender counter to prevailing notions of appropriateness and naturalness and even slip into the roles of the other sex by means of masquerade.

Summing up, this thesis has illustrated that the novels dealt with display a variety of deconstructive concerns of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler who claim the performative and thus instable nature of feminism and masculinity and address issues like gender inequality and the distribution of power in society. New Woman authors demonstrate in their novels that identity features like sex, gender and sexuality restrict women's freedom and thwart their happiness and thus should be subverted. The mostly negative or morbid tone at the end of their fiction further reifies the necessity of change and the call for a society in which it is more important to be human than masculine or feminine.

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## **Zusammenfassung**

Diese Diplomarbeit widmet sich dem Kulturphänomen „New Woman“ im Fin de Siècle. Es handelt sich dabei um eine historische und literarische Frauenfigur, die sowohl Angst verbreitete als auch Hoffnung versprach in einer Umbruchszeit, in der alte Werte in Frage gestellt, aber auch neue Gedankengüter und Lebensweisen als Symptome moralischer Dekadenz, Korruption und Anarchie abgelehnt wurden. Die vielfältigen und oft widersprüchlichen Darstellungen der „Neuen Frau“ spiegelten die kulturelle Fragmentierung dieser Jahrhundertwende wider. Stereotypische Bilder von kämpferischen, sexuell hyperaktiven Amazonen, über kränklichen, verschrobene Jungfern bis hin zu maskulinen Frauengestalten, die sich weder durch ihr Benehmen noch durch ihr Äußeres von dem männlichen Geschlecht unterscheiden ließen, lieferten Ideen für zahlreiche groteske Karikaturen in der literarischen Presse.

Der Begriff „New Woman“ wurde geprägt von der feministischen Autorin Sarah Grand und bezeichnete Frauen, die sich gegen das restriktive, traditionelle Frauenbild der Viktorianischen Zeit wehrten und nach sinnvollen Beschäftigungen suchten, die über Kindererziehung und Haushalt hinausgingen. Diese modernen Frauen strebten nach Selbstverwirklichung in öffentlichen, professionellen und intellektuellen Bereichen und widersprachen somit dem konstruierten Frauenideal der Viktorianischen Gesellschaft, das mit einer häuslichen, unterwürfigen, passiven und naiven Hausfrau gleichgesetzt wurde. Ihr Wunsch nach mehr Freiheit, Individualität und Gleichheit zwischen Mann und Frau sowie die Ablehnung traditioneller Rollenbilder löste eine wahre Identitätskrise am Ende des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts aus. Man befürchtete einen Zusammenbruch der Gesellschaft, da konservative Vertreter davon überzeugt waren, dass in der Mutterrolle der Frau die Zukunft der Nation liegt.

Es soll gezeigt werden, dass „New Woman“ Autorinnen wie Sarah Grand, George Egerton, Olive Schreiner und Kate Chopin traditionelle Geschlechterrollen in Frage stellen, indem sie die zerstörerischen Einflüsse patriarchalischer Hegemonie in ihren literarischen Werken thematisieren und

vorherrschende Klischees entlarven. Durch gekonnte Gegenargumentation zeigen sie, dass scheinbar wissenschaftliche Fakten das Ergebnis einer männerdominierten, sexistischen Gesellschaft sind, die davon Nutzen trägt, die männliche Vorherrschaft aufrechtzuerhalten und Frauen in traditionelle und unterwürfige Rollen zu zwingen. Als wichtiger Ausgangspunkt für ihre Kritik einer Gesellschaft, die die Unterdrückung und Unterlegenheit des weiblichen Geschlechts forciert, erweist sich die Institution Ehe. Indem sie die unglücklichen und zerstörerischen Beziehungen zwischen Mann und Frau darstellen, sprengen die weiblichen Autorinnen Tabus wie beispielsweise männliche Gewalt, unterdrückte weibliche Sexualität und Geschlechtskrankheiten. Folglich enthüllen sie Heuchelei und Doppelmoral der gesellschaftlich getragenen Institution „Ehe“. Der Fokus auf Krankheit und weibliche Misere verschärft dabei ihre Kritik an der viktorianischen Gesellschaftsstruktur.

Ausgehend von den theoretischen Grundannahmen von Judith Butler und Michel Foucault, die aufzeigen, dass Geschlechterrollen nicht naturgegeben, sondern in Wirklichkeit performativ und gesellschaftlich konstruiert sind, wird untersucht, inwiefern die ausgewählten „New Woman“ Romane und Kurzgeschichten dazu beitragen, das vorherrschende binäre Gesellschaftsmodell - das sowohl das weibliche als auch männliche Geschlecht ihrer Freiheit und Individualität beraubt - zu hinterfragen und zu zerrütten.

# LEBENS LAUF

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