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The New Woman Novelist and the Redefinition of the Female:  
Marriage, Sexuality and Motherhood

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date of re-submission: 19 June 2006



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## **Abstract**

The turn of the nineteenth century saw a change in the perception of woman's nature. Trying to salvage a female self-identity from the distorted version of the preceding Victorian era, New Woman novelists attempted to tease out of a morass of social dictates of femininity a genuine female nature. In their novels they wrote New Woman heroines who, like themselves, faced the conundrum of discerning the truth from the fallacy of what society proposed as their identity and social role. This awareness for neither novelists nor heroines was the complete solution to their social problem.

The New Woman novelist challenged on terrain that was both within her jurisdiction and familiar to her. What she found there was simultaneously and profoundly oppressive: the Victorian institutions of marriage, sexuality and motherhood. Marriage required exhaustive reform before New Woman novelists would encourage participation in it. These novelists blindly probed woman's elusive sexuality, attempting to determine her archetypal, sexual nature, asserting that exposure to this nature by a man would be life-altering and would save the world, no less. Like sexuality, motherhood was an institution in which the New Woman novelist found power, and she aspired to manipulate the small power she saw dormant in this patriarchal institution.

The New Woman sought partnership and fellowship with a suitable male who valued her companionship - one who was enlightened or who was willing to be. Confronting the reality of the dearth of such potential partners had devastating effects connected with a devouring sense of solitude. Despite the growing number of New Women in society, the awareness of a self distinct from the former social mores proved to be isolating. An intense loneliness became the next and ultimate oppressor of the enlightened New Woman who lived for ideals beyond her grasp and who was hampered by the constraints of a society slow to make the changes she required for survival.

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I was admitted as a research student in September, 1998 and as a candidate for the degree of PhD. in June, 1999; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out at the University of St. Andrews between 1998 and 2006.

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## Introduction

One of these days, ... I am going to pull myself together for a while and think - try to determine what character of a woman I am; for, candidly, I don't know. By all the codes which I am acquainted with, I am a devilishly wicked specimen of the sex. But some way I can't convince myself that I am. I must think about it. (Chopin 79)

To many men and women of the 1890s, whether traditional or avowedly radical, it sometimes seemed as if the New Woman was an entity in and of herself. It appeared to some as if she burst into existence sexually aware, Aphrodite from the sea foam. She demanded her freedom from the burden of what she claimed were unnatural and oppressive Victorian laws, ideals and conventions. Those who feared her envisioned her tearing off her corset as she insisted on rational dress. That supposed femme fatale whom Victorian mothers had warned their daughters never to become, rejected marriage, and some asserted that in so doing she threatened the entire fabric of reputable society. Articles with titles such as "The Revolt of the Daughters" suggest the fear of rebellion. The New Woman was often considered by her critics an unfit mother who perpetuated the degeneracy that was reputedly dooming the human race. These same critics did not understand why she did not accept her role and responsibility as dutiful daughter and obedient wife. When told to suffer and be still she writhed and resisted. She became the prototype for the hysterical woman, a being most feared. Hugh E.M. Stutfield warned in his article entitled "Tommyrotics" in 1895, "Society['s] ... most dangerous and subtle foes are beyond question 'neurotics' and hysteria in their manifold forms" (234). She was the predecessor for what would be considered the sexual deviant who would follow at the beginning of the twentieth century, the supposed 'pathological' lesbian. "In the guise of a bicycling, cigarette-smoking Amazon", Angelique Richardson and Chris Willis, identify the New Woman as "a cultural icon of the *fin de siècle*" (12).

The New Woman was an awe inspiring figure both to her critics and her

admirers. Her critics' disgust was rooted primarily in their own fears and taboos. While the real New Woman was not the writhing, hysterical, sexual deviant and femme fatale her critics painted her to be, she was not the opposite either. She was not the asexual, demure, sycophant much of society desired women to be. The New Woman in society was not one stereotypical being; she was human. Faithful and fair representation of this flesh and blood New Woman was the central purpose for the writing of a considerable portion of novels written between 1880 and 1914. These novels were greedily devoured by much of the reading public affirming some success in the accurate representation of frustrations and desires experienced by the women of the period. Lucy Bland notes that "many of these novels ... are today unknown, but at the time they sold in their millions" (144). The popular success of these authors was valued primarily as large scale communication and education since "these female 'new woman' writers thought of their fiction as didactic in intent and as a political contribution to the women's 'cause'" (144). This study will attempt to isolate the identity of the New Woman, drawing extensively on apt contemporary criticism and on close critical readings of the central New Woman texts of the fin de siècle. Consequently, the study will also try to undo the misconceptions about the New Woman while identifying the character of the New Woman presented in feminist fiction of this period.

Among the many New Woman novelists seven prominent authors are included here who allow the complexities of the New Woman to be explored. This study aims to analyze how the New Woman novelist arrived at her conclusions and how she communicated these in what she was most famous for, her novels. The analysis will concentrate on that which the New Woman novelist focused: marriage, sexuality and motherhood as well as how a change in the conception of those institutions could free women from the shackles of a false identity; true identity for the New Woman novelists was essential. This study will also attempt to answer the question of why the New Woman novelist felt that identity was so essential. It will identify why she wrote the New Woman's story at all and what influence the

writing of this story had on society.

### **The 'Fin' and the Beginning**

Periodization has always been a problem for the fin de siècle because its position between cultural epochs disturbs traditional historiography. ... The process of cultural fragmentation that characterizes the fin de siècle threw the norms of the Victorian age into crisis: empires were threatened, feminism was on the march, and the first socialist parties in Britain were formed. (Ledger & McCracken 1)

Because of this "position between cultural epochs," this "no man's land" as it has been referred to by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, the fin de siècle offered female authors writing within it a freedom not tasted in the preceding Victorian age. These writers were still very much of the Victorian period, but also distinctly deviant. It was in this social climate, with the cacophony of ideas swirling to a crescendo that the New Woman walked onto the scene. The freedom of the era was a result of the distinction in the literature and ideas from those that preceded, but others, such as Margaret Morganroth Gullette, suggest that the narrow period was the beginning of what would follow. Despite its newness, it was not hampered by the later established ideas and styles of the Modernists. Gullette asserts the significance of the nineties suggesting that "the energies expended in that decade, the incredible expansion of discourse about women *by women*, the revolutionary changes in fiction that occurred, and the long term effects of that expansion" were so novel and experimental that they symbolically represent "the starting point of the wider modern movement" (495).

Throughout the study it is necessary to examine the contexts in which the novelists wrote, the social climate, their lives and their polemics, but the novels are most influential and effective at conveying the identity and conflict of the New Woman. The disjunction between female nature and the patriarchal social structure ultimately established an internal conflict in the woman of the fin de siècle. As long as the New Woman sought out her true

nature and as long as society would not allow for it then the conflict would remain insoluble. The craftsmanship in the development of internal conflict and scrutiny of character promote sympathy in the reader and allow him/her to relate to the fictional New Woman's experience while simultaneously recognizing her/his own personal struggle. In the female reader at the time the novels inspired the courage to enter into this treacherous conflict with the hope to find a personal resolution. The conflict held fascination as a socially dangerous yet necessary approach to life. The realism of many of the novels is the foundation on which the novelists establish this sympathy. This realism juxtaposes despair with the hope immanent in the exploration of self and the search for an alternative future for women as well as a future for the relationship between men and women. Since the novels are attempts at representing fin de siècle society, the outcomes are often tragic. The necessary tragedies are as much a part of the realism as the exploration of and the optimistic character's desire for a truer self. While one might predict that the apparent pessimism in these conclusions would likely discourage a reader from a similar search for self, the opposite seems to have occurred. The iconic New Woman became established not as an entirely tragic or grotesque figure, as some unsympathetic authors portrayed her, but as a symbol of hope and a voice of the era.

The ideals of the New Woman were presented in polemics and discussed in newspapers. Publicly and privately related issues were debated among progressive and non-progressive thinkers. As a result the New Woman was familiar to the public. Still, she needed to be realized in fiction and presented as human in order to inspire sympathy. The association with the idealism of the New Woman in society who lectured on the ills of Victorian marriage or on a woman's ability to purify a degenerating race made this otherwise tragic figure in fiction intriguing in a way that she was not when written by the New Woman novelists' antifeminist contemporaries.

Stylistically the authors vary, and some are more successful than others in their approaches to the craft of writing the novel. One area where all the authors find their strength is the New Woman character herself, inspiring

sympathy through the voice of a human being who is not self-righteous or all-knowing but is in a struggle for self-actualization that is part of the human condition and one to which women especially could relate. New Woman heroine Lyndall in *The Story of an African Farm* makes the comparison: "We fit our sphere as a Chinese woman's foot fits her shoe... . In some of us the shaping to our end has been quite completed. ... but in others ... we wear the bandages, but our limbs have not grown to them; we know that we are compressed, and chafe against them" (Schreiner 135-6). The chafing that Lyndall suggests is inevitable for some resounded far more universally than even Lyndall recognizes in her analogy. Many women at the fin de siècle were chafing against their bandages, and the New Woman writer was writing of this as a striving for self-identification. She wrote of the inevitable resistance against social constraints and of the determination for the foot to be a foot and not a malformed, crippled representation of its former self or of its potential. This striving in the novels is often fruitless for the heroines, but there is a sense that their struggle influences a world beyond their internal sense of self. That this influence is enough is not conclusive, but the authors suggest it is better to chafe and live in agony than submit to numbness and atrophy.

Olive Schreiner, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Mona Caird and Kate Chopin received letters in praise of their novels and their rendering of character. These were from their contemporaries, men and women, ranging from those of social prominence to those of little social significance. From the commentary by prominent reviewers to statements made by common folk, readers claimed that these authors had created a human voice that spoke a truth that readers had known. One woman said of *The Story of an African Farm*, "I read parts of it over and over," and she claimed the heroine's struggle was one familiar to many women: "I think there is hundreds of women what feels like that but can't speak it, but she could speak what we feel" (quoted in First and Scott 121). Most significantly, the readers whose comments have been preserved suggest that the novelists brought forth a being unlike any they had read in fiction before, a *new woman*. One

reviewer of M<sup>é</sup>nie Muriel Dowie's *Galia* believed that to write this woman's story onto the page was to fill a void that existed in fictional representations of women. "At last the likeness of a new woman has been caught and committed to paper with audacity, fidelity, and literary skill" (quoted in Small xxv). W.T. Stead notes the distinction of the New Woman novelists' depiction of female experience in his review of Ella Hepworth Dixon's *The Story of a Modern Woman*. Stead highlights the newness and importance of this rendering of character: "The Modern Woman novel is not merely a novel by a woman, or a novel written about women, but it is a novel written by a woman, about women from the standpoint of Woman" (193). Stead aptly recognizes Dixon's successful rendering when he states "she has studied [woman], painted her, and analyzed her as if she had an independent existence, and even, strange to say, a soul of her own" (193). Stead's "strange to say" is at the heart of the matter. There is tone of a shamefaced embarrassment for his society at being surprised by a presentation that identifies a woman as having a soul of her own. In a letter responding to Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wall-paper" a medical doctor wrote, "When I read 'The Yellow Wall Paper' I was much pleased with it; when I read it again, I was delighted with it, and now that I have read it again I am overwhelmed with the delicacy of your touch and the connectedness of your portrayal" (Dock 93). The public was startled by the New Woman novelists' heroines, by the authenticity of the presentation of their voices and their souls. Some were comforted by it, some dis comforted by it, but these New Woman heroines struck a chord that rang true to many readers.

This New Woman was not a creation; she was not the progeny of a fictional birth. These novelists unearthed a being that had always existed; only, she had been buried alive by Victorian mores. She had not washed herself completely clean of the residue of these Victorian ideals either. "Late Victorian feminism was full of contradictions and conflicts," Showalter illustrates: "These were women who made maternal instinct the basis of their ideology. Yet many of them were disgusted by sex and terrified by

childbirth" (*A Literature* 190). The perception and manipulation of sexuality and motherhood were two of the essential aspects of female existence that feminists adamantly fought to change, but were not areas with which feminists were entirely comfortable.

This New Woman did not merely burst onto the scene in the fiction of the New Woman novelist. The New Woman as a term had been applied negatively to any woman challenging the norm and social dictates for women. The concept of the New Woman gets muddled by this association, and occasionally the New Woman novelists were mired in the debates and discussions that became petty and mudslinging. As Richardson and Willis point out in *The New Woman in Fact and Fiction*, one of the fictive New Women, very different from the one written in the novels of the New Woman novelists, was the one found on the pages of the periodical press. "Journalists and cartoonists played a significant part in establishing the cultural status of the New Woman. ... As far as her opponents were concerned, the more startling and vivid the picture, the better" (13). As Richardson and Willis elaborate, "the 'journalistic myth' ... simplified and satirized the New Woman's real concerns over social and moral issues" (24). Patricia Marks suggests that the caricature of the New Woman is "as all caricature and satire are, an exaggeration," but not so much exaggeration of the New Woman's character but of the New Woman as one who is "the embodiment of multifold fears of change itself" (205). In these desperate attempts at the preservation of a certain kind of woman "the caricatures and satires ... tried to represent the unthinkable, ... invert[ing] the characteristics by which women were superficially identified" (206). Marks suggests that the jabs of the satire focused more on what the satirist valued than on the values of the object of ridicule. Bluestockinged, monocled, smoking, in masculine dress, wearing a severe expression these caricatures promised a change devastating to those who created them and laughed at them.

The fears were legitimate in that the New Woman and the New Woman novelists did challenge the old guard and the comfortable norm for

the patriarchy. As Richardson and Willis importantly note, this patriarchal system included both men and women. These challenges were broad in spectrum and often brought on by a shift in social structure that had little directly to do with women. Imperialism, emigration, western migration and war affected the number of marriageable men both in Britain and America. In societies that valued marriage and motherhood as the most suitable professions for women, such social influences as the reduction of men provided much of the impetus and necessity for a change in social roles for women. The New Woman challenged her former roles and social limitations; she “wanted a kingdom different from the home and a sphere of power broader than the domestic,” while she “asked for equality of education, jobs and personal habits” (Marks 205).

In this battle of the old against the ‘new’ the multiple opposing representations of the New Woman took part in establishing the ultimate identity of the New Woman as represented by the closest thing to her - the New Woman novelist. Some elements of the caricatures were actively refuted; some were surprisingly embraced in the writing for the New Woman heroine. The New Woman cannot be entirely divorced from caricature, but her doppelganger in the periodical press was not the New Woman of the New Woman novel nor was she representative of the novelists themselves, both of which are the focus of this study. “By the late 1890s, the image of the New Woman as a beautiful bicycling Amazon seems to have taken over from the image of her as an unattractive bluestocking” (Willis 54). While even this image cannot be considered consistent in all New Woman fiction, the attractiveness of the New Woman was a constant. Kate Chopin’s Edna Pontillier, a swimming Amazon, “was rather handsome than beautiful” (5); Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Herlanders in rational dress had eyes that were described as “splendid, wide, fearless” (*Herland* 18); and Olive Schreiner’s Lyndall, who looks “like a princess” (*African Farm* 130) exhibits physically more traditionally Victorian beauty.

### **These Seven New Woman Novelists**

As Stephanie Forward notes in her article linking the ideas of Mona Caird with Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “it is fruitful to explore the links between late nineteenth-century female writers. ... the two women had shared concerns and aims” (295). This approach when applied to the most prominent and influential New Woman novelists proves also to be fruitful, examining not only their shared, and as often conflicting, concerns and aims but also their approaches to conveying these in their fiction, cobbling them into their lives, and expressing them in their polemics. Their influence on each other is distinct, their respect for one another is varied, and most significantly their experience as writers, as New Women, as thinkers, and as trail blazers is parallel.

Kate Chopin is likely the most academically acclaimed of the New Woman novelists in this study. She has, since the early 1970s, acquired a secure place in the American literary canon. She is appropriate to start with because her novel, *The Awakening*, focuses primarily on what the New Woman's quest centered on: awakening the primal female within the shell of a Victorian woman, one not irretrievably lost due to social influence. Edna Pontillier is introduced to the reader as young mother of two boys who is married to a husband considered by most of Edna's peers as an ideal husband. Still, Edna chooses to neglect her wifely and motherly duties in order to pursue a search for identity, purpose and an authentic life truer to her newly discovered self. The alternative, as she and the narrator view it, is one of faceless, selfless, bovine maternity. The novel more than any of the others in this study explores a woman of potential, but not remarkable potential. This is a woman who is socialized by a Victorian upbringing, but who is experiencing an internal unrest. This coupled with the circumstances of one summer and interactions with a few catalysts thrusts her into an awakening of self. In this novel Chopin identifies the three areas of primary interest to the New Woman novelist: marriage, sexuality, and motherhood. She outlines the detrimental effects of the Victorian version of each of these on a woman, and she begins to explore a sexual and intellectual awakening within the soul of a woman when these old garments are shed. “The title

refers not only to the rousing of her erotic, individual and spiritual impulses but to the entire series of awarenesses that culminate in her sleepless certitude about her position in the universe" (Jacobs 80). Dorothy H. Jacobs identifies Edna's awareness of her physical and spiritual self with an existential sense of a greater position than that she might hope to hold in society. Such awareness, though often resulting in a tragedy for the New Woman heroine, is what is primarily lacking in those women who surround Edna, and it is what will set her free. However, the freedom of spirit and self does not allow her much as a reward beyond the freedom of mind, body and soul. Like most New Woman heroines "she finally perceives herself in a world that while apparently open to her potentialities, remains closed to her wishes and her will" (Jacobs 80).

Olive Schreiner enters into the discussion early on writing into fiction arguably the first New Woman in her character, Lyndall. Schreiner begins her foray into New Woman fiction at a young age, publishing her novel, *The Story of an African Farm*, in 1883. She had completed it three years earlier in South Africa, where she had been born to missionary parents (German and English) and had lived a somewhat independent, nomadic life due to her father's economic failure. Schreiner left South Africa in 1881 to pursue a sense of meaningful purpose and a career in the medical field, and also with the intention of finding a publisher for her book. At this time she had already begun work on another novel, *From Man to Man*, which she revised repeatedly during her lifetime, never able to complete it to her satisfaction, leaving that novel unpublished until after her death. *The Story of an African Farm* was completed, published, widely read and much discussed in London. With it Schreiner and Lyndall entered into the debates on marriage, motherhood and women's sexuality by denouncing the established institutions. In this novel Schreiner, unlike Chopin, uses Lyndall's bitter voice as well as her life decisions to convey her disgust with the social institutions. Lyndall is a much more self aware character from the outset than Edna Pontillier, and she needs no awakening to the ills of her society. Feeling helpless against the enormity of their power that oppresses her, Lyndall is

frustrated by how little she can effect change. Still, she refuses to conform in her own life, having a child out of wedlock that is sickly and dies very young. Lyndall rails against her lot verbally and with her steadfast decisions, but is ultimately defeated by it. This pessimistic approach to the situation for women at the fin de siècle represented in Schreiner's work is specific to this text. Schreiner's novel, *From Man to Man*, and her polemical tract, *Woman and Labor*, are written with a serious but optimistic tone, suggesting that all is not doomed, and the human race is not on an unalterable path to destruction. All the while Schreiner keeps that specter of doom in the background as a potential future if the approach society has toward women does not radically change. *Woman and Labor* was published in 1911 and profoundly influenced the women's suffrage movement at the time. The ideas presented in *Woman and Labor* are echoed throughout her fiction primarily relating to women's need for a purposeful existence, without which, the system would perpetuate its "sex parasitism" and degenerate potentiality toward extinction. Schreiner's *Dreams*, short stories and dream visions that relate thematically to the experience of the New Woman, also were published and read in her lifetime and were used as inspiration by those women fighting for women's suffrage. However, these stray from the realistic approach to the New Woman and take on a more didactic, political approach.

Schreiner was active in the debate surrounding the Woman Question as a member of the Men's and Women's Club in London. This group of intellectuals who discussed and debated the areas of concern in relation to the Woman Question. The intimate friendship between Schreiner and Havelock Ellis, noted for his work in sexology, was deepened by their association in this group. Schreiner lectured and also had an influence over many powerful decision makers such as Cecil Rhodes, but made her most significant impact through *The Story of an African Farm* and her writing of the New Woman, Lyndall, with her "two large eyes" that "looked about in the darkness" (2).

Mona Caird is most commonly associated with the marriage debate

because of her article, "Marriage," published in the radical quarterly, the *Westminster Review*, in 1888, which thoroughly examined the flaws in nineteenth-century marriage. This piece, written in a "plain-spoken, pithy, scathing, learned, and authoritative voice - a voice perfectly calibrated to its audience" (Gullette 493), inspired such a fervor of debate that this is often what Caird is noted for in history. However, her novels, as with Schreiner and Chopin, also connected her with the reading public. *The Daughters of Danaus*, her most widely read novel and the only one still in circulation touts a New Woman heroine, Hadria, whose speech has a good deal to do with the marriage debate. "Love! ... Do you suppose I could ever love a man who had the paltry, ungenerous instinct to enchain me?" (131) Hadria asks her less enlightened peer. Though laden with much of Caird's own politics the strength of the novel, as with Chopin and Schreiner's novels, lies in the struggle and the humanity of the New Woman heroine. Hadria might have a strongly held political agenda, but she still lives in a nineteenth-century world. This conflict propels her into a situation similar to Edna and Lyndall's in which an enlightened view of the world and of one's self serves to tighten the noose for struggling. While Hadria survives the novel, her fate is one of torture in which "the long playing of a fatiguing role" and "long self-suppression" result in "the spirit of tired acquiescence" and a cynicism contrary to her former hopeful and rebellious nature (470). The novel ends with a hopeful insight imparted on Hadria by one of her mentors, Professor Fortescue, on his deathbed. In reference to lives that never fulfill themselves he states "If the effort has been sincere, and the thought bent upon the best that could be conceived by the particular soul, then that effort and that thought must play their part in the upward movement of the race" (488-9). Shortly thereafter the novel closes. Though Hadria is living a hypocritical life that has entrapped her and goes against all she challenges, the narration suggests that the striving must go on and cynicism fought at all cost. Though it is torture and barely a life, Caird allows her New Woman heroine a narrow beam of hope symbolized by a sunbeam at the end of the novel. Fortescue explains to a frustrated Hadria: "We have room for

hope; indeed it insists upon admission; it falls into the shadow of our life like that blessed ray of sunlight" (489). Gullette suggests that Caird creates "a countertradition that privileges not martyrdom but endurance" (518).

Hadria's mentor her voice of inspiration and reason insists on his deathbed that she endure: "Hold fast to your own colours. Don't take sides, above all, with the powers that have oppressed you" (Caird, *Daughters* 489).

Sarah Grand is most commonly associated with the social purity campaign and her appeals against the spread of venereal disease to naive wives whom society has neglected to educate on such matters that all too often affect them. This is a theme she expounds upon in her novels, sacrificing heroines to tragic fates as a result of their ignorance. Her dedication to social purity stretches beyond venereal disease, and her ideal for marriage is one in which a woman can influence her husband to be a better person merely through association with her high, moral nature.

As a New Woman figure whose fiction was widely read on both sides of the Atlantic, Sarah Grand is described by her biographer, Gillian Kersley, as "a proud and beautiful woman with the courage to break the mould of accepted behaviour and attempt to improve the imbalance between the sexes..." (3). Grand did not find "fulfillment in marriage, or in motherhood either" (Senf xxix), and this is likely to have influenced her unconventional ideas on the two subjects. Often considered an autobiographical novel, Grand's *The Beth Book*, follows a heroine, Beth, "who believes in her right to learn to work and to love" (Showalter, Introduction ii), a truly New Womanly approach to self. *The Beth Book* examines the life of a New Woman who finds success and love without sacrificing her New Woman identity. This is unlike much of the other New Woman fiction in this study, including *The Heavenly Twins*, Grand's most popular New Woman novel considered "one of the most widely read of the New Woman novels" (Dowling 50). Both novels address the double sexual standard of the period particularly in relation to venereal disease. *The Heavenly Twins* focuses its commentary primarily on marriage while avoiding a reassessment of female sexuality often found in New Woman novels, but

as Showalter notes Beth in *The Beth Book* exhibits a “healthy and assertive sexuality” (iv), nontraditional by its very existence, since the traditional view of the wife was a woman who did not experience sexual desire.

Though in *The Heavenly Twins* Grand presents an acquiescent return to what seems to be the “happy marriages of earlier Victorian fiction” Senf claims that “the stories in *The Heavenly Twins* resemble real life more than they resemble earlier fiction” (x), and when Grand gives her heroines the fate of an inescapable marriage, she is not suggesting that these are happy endings a reader should seek, nor are they Grand’s ideal for marriage (x). Grand, herself, left her unhealthy marriage and her young son to pursue her literary career. Moreover, the ideas of her characters suggest that Grand believes her ideal for marriage and “for society to treat women as people”(x) will come to be; only society is not entirely ready for it. Her focus lay in marriage and motherhood and had a tendency to embody a “conservative sexual ideology” that Showalter suggests is common among “women writers at the turn of the century” (181). Despite the presence of Beth’s existing sexuality, Grand embraced the social purity campaign. As a result she exhibited a conservatism toward women’s sexuality which was necessary as scaffolding for her approach to men’s sexuality and their ability to be ‘purified’ by women of a higher sexual nature. Grand’s fiction, due to her commitment to this campaign, presents what Showalter identifies as a flaw in New Woman fiction as well as barrier to the progress of a changing ideology towards women’s sexuality. “The unchanging nature of woman as pure spirit made good politics but bad fiction” (“Syphilis” 181). This ideology was not threatening to a society apprehensive about embracing a free discussion of women’s sexual identity. But it echoed more of the Victorian angel of the house than the more authentic New Woman. Despite the drawback of sexuality, the novels offer much fodder for a study of gender especially with the extended episode of cross dressing in *The Heavenly Twins* which anticipates some of Woolf’s discussion of gender in *Orlando*. And, like Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall-paper” in subject if not style, “*The Heavenly Twins* reveals both the psychological

and social damage that occurs when women are kept in 'their place'" (Senf xvii).

Recent criticism by Richardson brings Grand into the discussion on eugenics at the turn of the century by identifying that Grand's "work as a whole shows an overriding commitment to eugenic ideas" (101). With the introduction of this reading of Grand's fiction, one can better explore Grand's approach to motherhood and a woman's eugenic obligation to the race.

As with the other New Woman novelists in this study, Grand "dares to address controversial topics and draws ... realistic conclusions ... [arguing] for rather modest ... changes" in society's treatment and view of both men and women (Senf xiii). Her heroines are described by Senf as "plausible human beings rather than exceptional beings" who "exemplify many of the possibilities available to women at the time" (xiii - xiv). Showalter also explains that Grand saw women "as heralds of the new age," in particular the "advanced women" who comprise the heroines of her novels (v).

Ella Hepworth Dixon's only novel, *The Story of a Modern Woman*, is one in which the New Woman heroine, Mary Erle, finds love and is attuned to her artistic genius in a way that Edna Pontillier is never able to be, but her thorough awakening is not enough to present her with an opportunity for happiness. In neither love nor art is Mary allowed to find fulfillment, and the novel closes with a profound sense of bleak drudgery despite Mary's noble, selfless<sup>1</sup> rejection of an extramarital relationship with the man she loves and her determination to survive (unlike Edna) in a society that offers her only a life of unsatisfying work as a hack journalist. "The banal, the pretty-pretty, the obvious! This was what she was to write - if she wanted to make any money, to keep her head above water" (183).

Similar to Hadria in her survival of the New Womanly existence, Mary differs in that, sexually and in marriage, she does not compromise her ideals nor live a life she feels would be hypocritical. Although, both Hadria and Mary compromise their selves and lose touch with their artistic inclinations. In this way, writing the attempt to survive this life of drudgery now an option to

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<sup>1</sup> Selflessness and sacrificing the self and personal desires are Victorian ideals for women dressing themselves in New Woman clothing, here, in Mary Erle.

unmarried women in society, Dixon anticipates the life of Edith Wharton's Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*, but not the death.

Dixon herself studied painting in Paris. Such a Bohemian life was unconventional, but Dixon was raised in a progressive family. Her father was editor of the *Athenaeum* and her mother was an early supporter of women's suffrage.

With the following description of Mary, Dixon introduces the predicament of a New Woman in the nineteenth century:

The life of Mary Erle, like that of many another woman in the end of the nineteenth century, had been more or less in the nature of an experiment. Born too late for the simple days of the fifties, when all it behooved a young girl to do was to mind her account-book, read her Tennyson, show a proper enthusiasm for fancy-work stitches, and finally, with many blushes, accept the hand of the first young man who desired to pay taxes and to fulfill the duties of a loyal British subject ... , Mary was yet too soon for the time when parents begin to take their responsibilities seriously, and when the girl is sometimes as carefully prepared, as thoroughly equipped, as her brother for the fight of life. A garden full of flowers, a house full of books, scraps of travel: these things were her education. (14)

The novel takes the reader through the life of such a woman starting with youthful hope and spiraling into deep depression, which deepens the longer she lives. However, the novel ends with a spirit of meager hope when Mary rejects an offer to be a mistress to the man she loves. In reference to the effect her selfish act would have on his wife, Mary explains her decision to decline though she admits to loving him: "All we modern women mean to help each other now. We have a bad enough time as it is,' she added, with a faint smile; 'surely we needn't make it worse by our own deliberate acts!'" (255). With this line, Dixon embodies the somewhat destructive spirit of the New Woman novelist to sacrifice the self she has

come to know for the cause of the betterment of women. Mary knows that she cannot be fulfilled by a love that will destroy another woman even if it is with a man for whom she knows she feels love and sexual passion. She also knows that, as is exhibited through his desire to be adulterous, he is an unworthy partner, despite her love for him. While this is only implied, the suggestion is evident and consistent with other New Woman ideology presented in the novel. With Mary's decision, Dixon highlights an irony in the New Woman's situation: all this exploration of self results more often than not in a sacrifice of it for a greater good. With Mary's fate Dixon draws her reader's attention to the potential, unfortunate fate of the woman of society who is likely to become "superfluous."

In response to M<sup>é</sup>nie Muriel Dowie's first novel, *Galia*, "her strongest supporters believed that she had finally shown the way for novelists to write honestly about women" (Small xxv), a hallmark of a New Woman novelist. In life Dowie was "every bit as defiant of convention as the heroine of her first novel" writes Helen Small. Noted for her solo trek through the Carpathian mountains on horseback and her affinity for hunting and fishing, Dowie was reported to have been "roguishly feminine" (xxvii-viii) and attracted attention for these charms, manipulating them to her benefit rather than rejecting them so as to be first viewed for her brilliance and worldliness. Dowie's striking physical contrast with the "neurotic type of New Woman" fascinated, and "Dowie was a celebrity" (xxviii).

Galia, Dowie's eponymous heroine is the "Girton girl" version of the New Woman: pretty; smart; witty; educated at Girton College, Cambridge and outspoken with clearly defined opinions about women's role in society formed before the action of the plot. Through the novel, Galia opines to anyone who will listen, and the essence of the story is the sharpening of these ideas as they are tested by her experiences in love as a young adult. Defining women's contribution to society as primarily maternal, Galia recognizes women's power to be the biological determinism of the future. Through experience she rejects any sentimental or emotional approach to sexual love and romantic relationships between men and women. How

much Dowie's own politics find a mouthpiece in her heroine is not entirely clear, but Galia is profoundly influenced by her literary creator's perspective on eugenics, though Small asserts that "Galia's views are rarely unambiguously endorsed by the narrator" (xxxix). Eugenics is the flavor of the discussion in *Galia*, and a New Woman reader discovers the examination of female self and the discussion of marriage, sexuality and motherhood to be almost exclusively eugenics based, despite the unlikely marriage of individuality and biology as destiny in this novel. Here, as in many places in the New Woman novelists' determination of womanhood, contradiction and conflict of ideas serves to interrupt the movement. This clash of ideas - reactionary and progressive, Victorian and modern - make for a muddled and cumbersome approach to woman.

Critics claim that in life, as well as in her writing and lectures, Dowie found another venue for her political ideas; she campaigned alongside her husband. Small cites that "at least one reporter questioned whether the voters would be making a decision about the candidate or his wife" (xxxiii). With her divorce and the allegations of adultery made against her came a rejection of her by society, and she was also forbidden from seeing her son. Her second marriage soon failed and eventually she separated from her debauched husband. All this life experience took place after the writing and publication of *Galia*, and the ideals of the novel for women's relationships with men and women's roles as mothers do not seem to be undertaken nor even attempted by its writer.

A New Woman novelist who made a sincere effort to live in such a way that was not contrary to her political view, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, left her husband and young child after making many efforts to survive a role as wife and mother that sent her almost irreversibly into a state of depression. Her early and most studied work "The Yellow Wall-paper" explores her experience of postpartum depression and a sense of captivity in the role of wife and mother. "The Yellow Wall-paper" is reflective and is a literary masterpiece in its neo-gothic retelling of a spiraling into madness perpetuated by a science of medicine which was more destructive than

helpful to women in the nineteenth century. While this work is relevant to the study and will be explored here, Gilman's novel, *Herland*, is of primary significance to the understanding of a New Woman's ideals for marriage, sexuality and motherhood. Though not all New Woman novelists agreed with Gilman's conclusions as to what these ideals should be, envisioning an ideal was essential to the process of achieving a new order. "First of all we must set up an ideal, undismayed by what may seem its Utopian impossibility" (Caird, "Marriage" 196). All the New Woman novelists in this study embody this philosophy that Caird presents. An ideal directs their polemics and their approach to life, while influencing their fiction. Gilman is the only author in this study who dabbled in the genre of utopia, itself. True to the genre, Gilman uses the mode to satirize elements of her society, but, in addition, she capitalizes on the potential afforded by utopian fiction to explore that ideal in a very literal sense. In her study of feminist utopias Francis Bartowski explains that "feminist fictions are the 'places' where women speak the desires that frame the anticipatory consciousness of utopia made concrete, bringing the not-yet into the here and now" (162). If New Woman novelists restricted themselves to writing realistic fiction, they would find themselves hampered by their realities; they often did. In utopian writing the possibilities for women, their social roles and identities were endless. While Gilman's utopia is not solely an experiment in what women might be, it is relevant to note that in her utopias she is trying out the ideals her polemical writing. Through the writing of utopia, she allows herself the freedom to do so. With the recognition that this is not a "real" society and that everything written into this utopia is somewhat tongue and cheek, Gilman provides herself some flexibility to connect her ideals for the future to people of the "here and now" who are represented by her male heroes from early twentieth-century America.

These authors all carefully examine marriage, sexuality and motherhood agreeing that there were unhealthy aspects of these institutions. From there the opinions and approaches diverged from a center point of agreement, and the authors were no longer on common ground with respect

to what was the cause of the problems and how to solve them. They ranged from social purists seeking to change the situation from the inside and through influence to eugenicists who believed that change could only be made through the womb and that power was in biological choice. So, too, do the texts themselves take on varying approaches to the issues at hand as well as stylistic approaches to the story of the New Woman. Some overlap; in each novel the New Woman remains identifiable and is given a voice and limited power in the course of her own life. Gilbert and Gubar explain this spectrum: "While *The Story of an African Farm* associates the breakdown of patriarchal culture with the tormented but subversive desires of a heroine whose tragic fate is identified with her feminism, *Herland* links the emergence of matriarchal culture with the futility and fatality of masculism" (*No Man's*, vol. 2: 51). Pairing one of the bleakest of the novels with the most outwardly optimistic, Gilbert and Gubar identify this contrast while noting that the discussion and many of the conclusions are linked if not parallel. The links and parallels as well as how the novelists diverge is fruitful to examine.

### **Why Marriage, Sexuality and Motherhood?**

"I see ... the possible regeneration of the race in that new union of friendship between man and woman: it must and will come at last, our dreams *are* not delusions but the forerunners of the reality" (Schreiner, *Letters* 84). Marriage, sexuality and motherhood are the areas targeted for change by the authors, themselves. The novelists believe that a shift in approach to these three areas of female life would give women power in their society as well as a route to self awareness which they say as necessary before any effective influence on society could be made.

The New Woman novelist ultimately hoped society will achieve a "transformed, purified and moral relationship between the sexes" (Bland 125) while at the same time affirming and providing a place for an individual identity for women that incorporated purpose and liberty. The New Woman novelist saw change as essential to each of these institutions. In marriage the partnership had to change as did the very definitions of wife and husband.

In sexuality another partnership was to be forged: one of equal respect and desire, one in which each partner gained from and was elevated by the sexual relationship. Regarding motherhood, the institution had to change from one that was oppressive and determined for a woman, not by her, to one which she established and the males of society respected.

Reconstruction of these institutions from what they were in the nineteenth century to a new standard that was physically and psychologically healthy for women was the means to the desired end: reaching the ideal for womanhood and for society. It was the “feminist strategy to purify marriage and reconstruct it as a site of true liberty for women” (Bland 125). Though what “purify” was interpreted to mean varied from one New Woman novelist to the next, they agreed on making a considerable change from an institution that oppressed women into one that would empower women to elevate their partners to experience a high love and sexual relationship beyond any that existed in their contemporary society. This is true of motherhood as well. All the authors in this study either experienced or wrote of the experience of a woman who did not know healthy and uplifting motherhood in her life. Many of the New Woman novelists were estranged from their own children and mothers, often because of political views held and still others were raised without a mother at all due to their mothers’ early deaths.

These categories for change were part of the woman’s world; there was some comfort in the familiar. While much of what they discussed within these areas had been taboo, the topics for discussion were becoming accessible in their lifetime as access to many other subjects remained restricted. Though these women gave voice to radical ideas for the time, there were other, more radical ideas and women making themselves known to the public. The serious New Woman novelist who wrote literary fiction with a political agenda wanted change, but truly she wanted to change the structures in place in society and not to abandon them altogether. As, specifically with marriage, these women, cautious and rational, pursued change, they were not willing to put an entire society of women in danger in

order to achieve their ideals. They saw that the institutions had potential for women, and for the time being they believed that these institutions could be made to benefit women and society if they were changed dramatically. The constructs of society existed; the New Woman did not have to sell an entirely new product to her consumer. She merely had to sell the newer, better version of the old familiar.

The New Woman novelists believed that these aspects of a woman's life - her marriage, her sexuality and her role as mother - possessed great potential either to empower her or oppress her. The New Woman novelists believed that their ideals were practical and within reach. They believed that changes to such institutions could effectively be made and were being made, though slowly. They held that without change in these vital aspects of female life, these would not be liberating institutions, they would continue to suffocate women and alienate them from themselves, doing irreparable damage to womankind and humankind. These currently were the most dangerous institutions imprisoning and disempowering them.

### **The Climate**

Other studies of this period, of these authors and/or of the New Woman, have sufficiently identified the influential events of the period which affected ideology, practical life, debates, and fiction. However, it is appropriate to draw one's attention to these again here as they do influence the fiction and the discussions explored in the following study.

"At the end of the nineteenth century [the man and woman] question ... became focused on ... the Protean figure of the New Woman, and on the social and psychological regeneration and degeneration that it promised or threatened" (Pykett xi). This hope for regeneration of society and fear of the degeneration of the race that some believed had already begun was intrinsically linked to marriage, the role of the mother and social approach to motherhood, and an emergent female sexuality. The New Woman novelist was not the sole determiner of these categories; the debates surrounding them raged on as various parts of society tried to ascertain who was to

blame and what the future of society might be if the norm shifted or remained.

## Marriage

The Marriage Debate was prominent at the fin de siècle. It was pushed to the forefront by the New Woman who was agitating for change, but adversaries were quick to enter into battle demanding the preservation of the bedrock of their society. The New Woman novelist recognized that, though marriage was flawed, possibly beyond repair, society was not ready to do away with marriage entirely. As frustrating as it might have been to some of the more revolutionary feminists of the period, most recognized that the institution of marriage, in some form was at least temporarily necessary, until society was reformed on other fronts. "*For the present, given women's vulnerability and disadvantage, reformed legal marriage was preferable to a non-marital relationship between the sexes*" (Bland 151). Without the protection of marriage, women were in danger from a predatory male counterpart physically, socially and economically. Marriage had to stay, but it also had to change.

A small number of people were participating in free unions and became the subject of much discussion in relation to the marriage debate. In theory, and in some practice, these were partnerships in which the two members of the union were in a committed relationship with one another, but the commitment was not authorized by church or state, allowing either member to end the union if the love waned. It was promoted, by those who approved, as a relationship in which "oneness was sufficient" and in which the partners did not require "*fetters to keep them together*" (Bland 154). According to Bland most feminists were opposed to free unions and free love "because they feared such unions would allow men unrestrained sexual license and would thereby render women more vulnerable" (153-4).<sup>2</sup> There were fears that the equivalent of a wife in a free union would likely be

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<sup>2</sup> There were also fears that a free union "absolves the man from all legal parental responsibility" (Bland 154). Here Bland quotes Eleanor Keeting, *Shafts*, July 1895, p.61.

discarded by her partner once she was no longer young and supposedly sexually appealing to him (Bland 154). Fears such as this underline the nature of Victorian marriage so opposed by New Woman novelists as one in which the sexual subservience of a wife is a defining characteristic. This suggests that the relationship between a man and a woman is first sexual - the woman offered sex and progeny for her maintenance - while other considerations of love, mutual respect and sympathy are merely an afterthought or pleasant accident of circumstance. The New Woman novelist takes up this cause, vehemently assailing the ills of this kind of marriage and attempts to propose alternative ideals for marriage. However, none of the New Woman novelists in this study promotes free unions as a possibility for their contemporary society, and in their own lives when they did enter into a committed romantic relationship they chose marriage over any alternative. Bland also notes that this is one of the New Woman novelists' weaknesses in their platforms: their inability to fully remove themselves from Victorian sensibilities. As Caird's Hadria says, "But then there is this sticky feminine conscience to deal with! ... It clings to the worst of us still, and prevents the wholesome big catastrophes that might bring salvation" (*Daughters* 194). Part of their resistance to free unions was their "class disgust with anything which challenged bourgeois respectability" (Bland 155). Sexual freedom for a man had entirely different connotations than it had for a woman (155), so despite the consistency of the concept of a free union with the New Woman novelist's ideal for the relation between the sexes, society was not ready for such a "wholesome big catastrophe" as free sexual unions just yet.

Bland, outlines succinctly that "feminists had been criticizing marriage ... in terms of its injustices: a woman's economic dependency, loss of legal and political rights, an unequal divorce law, and, above all, the assumption of a husband's *ownership* of his wife" (124). In her study of marriage and sexuality in relation to the early British feminists of the turn of the century Bland notes that this criticism of marriage, though met with much adversity, made inroads for women, both legal and social. The Infant Custody Acts, the Married Women's Property Acts and the Matrimonial Causes Act all

contributed to a changing state of marriage in Britain. Parallel progress was being made in the United States by feminists agitating for major changes in marriage. Despite the legal successes, feminists were frustrated by “the condition of a married woman as legally under the ‘protection’ of her husband, with her legal existence subsumed within his” (Bland 125).

As marriage was evolving, so, too, was divorce in relation to the laws associated with it and social attitudes toward it. Many agitators for change, including radical, male lawyers and feminists, moved for divorce to be made a less expensive endeavor that was also more accessible to women, one “which placed both sexes on equal footing with respect to grounds for divorce” (Bland 184-5). They sought to significantly expand the grounds for divorce to include grounds that would protect women, such as “abuse of conjugal ‘rights’” and “the communication of venereal disease” (Bland 184-5). Some were successful, and marriage and divorce laws changed though slowly. The well documented Married Women’s Property Acts of 1870 and 1882 “eventually gave women the right to their own property, extending the equitable concept of married women’s ‘separate estate’, while dispensing with the need for settlements and trustees” (Richardson and Willis 7).

“In 1884 the Matrimonial Causes Act decreed that the refusal to comply with a decree for restitution of conjugal rights would simply render the refuser guilty of desertion: prior to this the Divorce Court had the power to imprison the refusing wife for contempt, and would release her only when she consented to return to cohabitation” (Richardson and Willis 7). The concept of alimony was also introduced at this time and applied to a “deserter of either sex” (Richardson and Willis 7). The introduction of alimony was crucial to a development of women’s financial independence because it was so limited. Even when women did find employment appropriate to their social class or when women resigned class for survival, the employment was not likely to be lucrative. This limit to women’s wages was no oversight, and records of women’s wages in Britain and America from this period indicate that women generally made one third of the wages

of a man in the same position (Faderman 185). Women who chose marriage as a profession and whose marital endeavor failed due to desertion would not be quite so financially destitute with the introduction of alimony.

“In 1891 the R. v. Jackson case established that a husband did not have the right to detain and imprison his wife” (Richardson and Willis 7). This was commonly known as the Clitheroe abduction case, as it was at the church in Clitheroe, England where “Edmund Jackson, with two accomplices, grabbed Emily” who was his wife by law who refused to live with him (Bland 136). The Court of Appeal held that “where a wife refuses to live with her husband he is not entitled to keep her in confinement in order to enforce restitution of conjugal rights”<sup>3</sup> (quoted in Bland 136). This began to establish that, at least legally, a man was not permitted to rape his wife (though a ruling on this in Britain had to wait for the House of Lords in 1991, one hundred years later). The courts were beginning to consider that a wife’s body was not her husband’s property upon marriage, and she could not be imprisoned by him. Other historians have noted that this legal right of a married woman to her own body has fluctuated and that this early case did not have the firmness feminists would have hoped for, but it introduced a weakening of a man’s power over his wife. Still, not one nor a few cases changes the opinion of a country. As Bland notes, “reaction to the verdict was mixed” (136), and as Phillip Mallett observes “the aftermath of the case, and the amount of attention it attracted, tells a less encouraging story about popular opinion on the rights of husbands and the duties of wives” (70). Emily Jackson was harassed and in response to the verdict, “her sister’s house was stoned, windows were smashed, and an effigy of Mrs. Jackson was prepared” (71). “One fine morning last month,” Mrs. Lynn Linton dramatically pronounced in dismay in the *Nineteenth Century*, “Marriage, as hitherto understood in England, was abolished ...” (quoted in Mallett 71). Such a statement is telling because of its implication that

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<sup>3</sup> taken from R. v. Jackson, Law Reports, I Q.B., 1891, p 671 cited by Lucy Bland in her book, *Banishing the Beast : Sexuality and the Early Feminists*, noted here in the bibliography.

embedded in marriage was the understanding of the ownership and complete dictatorship of one man over one woman. A society that allowed for such an institution would be one in which women would always remain subordinate to men. Most agreed on this on both sides. Feminists believed such an approach to marriage would keep society from progressing; stunted, subordinate women could bring men down, be a burden and create degenerate children. Those with more traditional values believed and asserted that without marriage social anarchy would reign.

In Victorian Britain the superfluous woman was also becoming a social concern. For a number of reasons including men's emigration to and military service in the colonies, unmarried women greatly outnumbered unmarried men. In a society where the primary occupations for women were wife and mother, this posed a problem, whether the unmarried woman saw herself as liberated by this happenstance or as unfortunate. "Such women were frequently called *redundant* in discussions of the time a term that suggests not only their status of personal alienation but the prevailing attitude toward their employment in the public sector" (Marks 24). In explaining that the United States was experiencing a similar predicament, Marks cites a pamphlet contemporary to the period, "Too Many Women," that addresses the "125,000 women in [New York City] as self-supporting, with one third unemployed, another one third destitute, and 20,000 - almost the same number as those legitimately working - engaged in prostitution" (quoted in Marks 26). Appropriate to this study the strange amalgam of contradictory ideas burgeons from this pamphleteer's mind blaming, in Marks' words, "modern novelists for impeding evolution," but then he praises the eugenic potentialities of extra women, claiming in his words, "It affords an opportunity of selection of those best fitted to become wives" (quoted in Marks 26-7). The irony is that he who castigates the "modern novelist" shares a eugenic ideology with many whom he condemns. Though, in that it is applied solely to women rather than men, it differs from certain New Woman novelist's approach to eugenics.

Ella Hepworth Dixon addresses the superfluous woman in *The Story*

of a *Modern Woman*, more directly than the other New Women novelists in this study. Though most of the heroines of the novels studied here are presented as more than marriageable and sought after for their vitality and that intangible characteristic of a New Woman, many other minor characters in their novels fall into the category of the superfluous women.

When the *Daily Telegraph* asked late nineteenth-century Britain, "Is Marriage a Failure?" it got more than it bargained for. Mona Caird, a New Woman novelist who is frequently associated with her commitment to the cause of changing marriage, wrote an essay simply titled "Marriage" in August 1888 to which the beginning of the Marriage Debate is attributed. In response to this essay the *Daily Telegraph*, "London's best-selling newspaper," posed the question to society "Is marriage a failure?" (Bland 126); the question to which Caird's article answered a resounding "yes." Letters flooded in on both sides by men and women of all walks of life, and the debate crested much higher than the *Daily Telegraph* had ever expected. "Years later, the writer Annie S. Swan, a contemporary of Caird, recalled the controversy thus: 'Mona Caird had thrown a flaming bomb into the camp of the thoroughly smug and respectable ranks ... Violent correspondence raged round that for months, even years, and she was banned and shunned like the plague in certain circles'"<sup>4</sup> (Forward 296).

To be sure, turning a hot light on the mystique of marriage was not new. Regarding marriage sociologically, anthropologically, and philosophically had been done before ... . What was new was that this fierce interrogation of the "respectable institution" was being enabled by the *Daily Telegraph*, which could not cut off the deep chords it struck merely by pulling the column. (Gullette 495)

In her essay on Caird Gullette pinpoints the large scale influence Mona Caird's article had on this society and the evolving ideas about the state of marriage, generating discussion among intellectuals and the middle class.

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<sup>4</sup> quotation is from Annie S. Swan, *My Life* (London: Ivor Nicholson & Watson, Ltd, 1934), p. 71, cited by Stephanie Forward in her article "A Study in Yellow" noted here in the bibliography.

As in the debates on all three subjects, marriage, sexuality and motherhood, the New Woman novelist and her contemporary, prominent feminists often sought to appease the wary male who vacillated between embracing the New Woman and entirely rejecting her. In the marriage debate one of the appeals by the New Woman novelists was that a reformed marriage would be not only a benefit to women but to men and society. In their reconstruction of the institution of marriage they predicted "the construction of an ideal relationship of emotional and spiritual unity" (Bland 125). They suggested that this would uplift men, inspire them physically, intellectually and spiritually. They claimed that women in Victorian marriage were not suitable partners for their noble, male counterparts and were "unprepared for real companionship" due to a "confining sphere that makes them limited" (Marks 44). Throughout New Woman fiction and her polemics the New Woman novelist asserts that a freer, more intellectually stimulated, sexually aware, purposefully employed woman makes a far more suitable mate for a man. Whether the man of the turn of the nineteenth century was advanced enough to be a suitable partner for the New Woman was another issue entirely. Though a related topic, it is addressed separately by the New Woman novelist. They presented a New Woman who was inspired, larger than life and charismatic; drawing men to her would elevate individual men and humankind. The New Woman novelist knew that if a man was going to be expected to give up the prized possession of wife and his power of authority over one woman (and figuratively all women), he was bound to wonder what was in it for him. The New Woman novelist knew this and pinned her hopes to her promotion: New Woman - sexually aware; stimulating conversationalist; womb healthy from vigorous exercise and unrestrictive clothing; eyes bright and skin rosy from healthy, robust physical state; pure soul; vibrant mind; funny; entertaining; honorable; athletic; a better mate than your best mate; a better lover than your prostitute and a better man than yourself. What she did not consider carefully enough was just how insecure the Victorian man might feel without his suit of armor - his institutions. She did not consider that this glowing

description of a suitable partner in life would intimidate and dwarf the average Victorian male. She hoped for a New Man, or at the very least, an old one with potential.

This study will also address the assumed degenerate state of men and the lack of 'New Men,' creating another dimension to the superfluous nature of those New Women who chose their independence. This added another aspect to the eugenics discussion. Not only was there an abundance of women without male partners, the male partners who were available were unacceptable. This left the New Woman to flounder - sexuality awakened, uterus pulsing with eagerness to form a great new race, starved for affection and understanding, alone.

## **Sexuality**

"The very existence of agitation for women's rights did raise vital questions about female sexuality" (Weeks 162). As a result of addressing issues such as conjugal rights and the communication of venereal disease, the role of female desire in a sexual relationship became a part of the debate. Jeffrey Weeks explains,

It was inevitable that feminists would be confronted by such questions as sexual ignorance..., male brutality in the sex act, problems of divorce and prostitution, and by problems about contraception. In their response two factors came into play: firstly, the question of consent, summed up in the term 'voluntary motherhood'; and secondly the question of the nature of female sexuality, and the related issue of sexual pleasure. (162)

In his examination of sex politics and society Weeks condenses what the New Woman novelist sought with both eagerness and trepidation. At the close of the nineteenth century women were beginning to enter into the debates and discussions on sexuality, a realm previously forbidden to them, one which it was believed did not apply to them. Despite its relevance to their lives, the forbidden nature of this realm served to intensify

their engagement once they were allowed into the conversation. Due to the novelty of such a discussion for women and the residue of its taboo in their minds women's distance and lack of comfort proved an insurmountable barrier to the kind of change in perception of women's sexuality for which they hoped. For all their failure in enacting great change to their designated end, New Woman novelists drew attention to the topic of women's sexuality and audibly made their contribution to the debate that attempted to determine the nature of women's sexuality.

The connected nature of sexuality and marriage intertwined the relationship between feminist ideals for each. "Feminists sought transformed sexual relations between men and women in which women were equal and independent and men took responsibility for changing the oppressive aspects of their sexual behavior - their 'beast within'" (Bland xiii). Such issues as prostitution, venereal disease, an emerging sexual psychology, mandatory heterosexuality and free love all were subject to debate at this time and all contributed to the new forming sexuality accepted by the post-Victorian society.

The Contagious Diseases Acts "had been introduced in the 1860s in an attempt to control venereal disease among the military; they amounted to state regulation of prostitution, allowing the compulsory examination, detention and treatment of any woman suspected of being a prostitute" (Richardson and Willis 8). These acts augmented the double sexual standard for men and women in Victorian society, affirming that men's sexual appetites and vices were merely their nature, cannot be helped and must be fed. The food on which they fed was woman. Though the women in question were prostitutes, the feminists of the period were not able to abide such a public display of the use of discarded women. Feminists would not accept the alienation of women from their civil liberties in order to prevent the spread of venereal disease. Though middle-class feminists, including the New Woman novelists, made a distinction between themselves and prostitutes, an effort was being made to understand the patriarchal institution of prostitution and its victims as well in order to dismantle it. The intrusion of

the rule of law for the “protection” of all struck too close to home. Walking home alone at night Schreiner was thought to be a prostitute due to the hour and her unaccompanied state. A laughable, but grim misjudgment, the episode forced Schreiner to write in a letter to friend and activist Edward Carpenter explaining that “the horror they all seemed to feel to me” was ironically humorous (*Letters* 138). She goes on to explain the connection that this incident made clear to her: “It is when I think of these women ... that I feel I am a woman” (138). The connectedness she feels toward them inspires sympathy “eating into my heart in horror and pity” (138).

Feminists were in favor of the prevention of spreading venereal disease and addressed such a need in their fiction, but they would not sit silently by as such a method of prevention as this was instituted. Feminists’ repeal campaign was successful in the 1880s and also established the firm place for women in the discussion of sexuality (Bland xiii-iv). As Bland notes the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts and the release of “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon,” a series of sensational articles by W. T. Stead, meant to draw popular attention to the problem of child prostitution, “encouraged feminists to place a number of sexual issues squarely on the agenda ...” (xvi-vii).

While women’s new access to the discussion of sexuality promoted a female exploration of what natural women’s sexuality might be, a conservative arm of this movement reached backward and found power in female sexuality not through awareness or through sexuality at all, but through sexual influence.

The social purity campaigns which had set out to challenge the idea of the male sexual urge as a biological fact now began to privilege nature over nurture, arguing that men were essentially sexually reckless while (unfallen) women were innately moral and the nation’s best chance of ‘race regeneration’. ... [Social purity] began to ground itself in biology, and to appeal to class based hostility and racism. (Richardson and Willis 8)

There was an unlikely coupling of the traditional and the radical. A conservative approach to women's sexuality superimposed old ideals for women on the emerging ideal of women's sexuality, and it embraced a eugenic approach to motherhood.

The sexually repressive attitudes of the social purists were not a million miles away from the earlier evangelical commitment to separate sphere ideology and the cult of domesticity which succeeded in the wide dissemination of ideas endorsing social hierarchy and sexual propriety.

(Richardson and Willis 9)

With an approach to women's sexuality such as this the social purists promised that any sexual appetite would again be swept under the rug of Victorian taboo. Women with sexual appetites were viewed as dangerous, hinting at an archetypal fear of a toothed, hungry vagina. The association with this monstrous femme fatale was too much for some feminists and New Woman novelists who felt more comfortable promoting a female sexuality associated with the social purity campaign with its veil of revolt hiding its conservative, angelic face.

A developing, new science, sexology, emerged and created an opportunity for women to learn about and explore ideas of women's sexuality. Despite the fact that sexology was more often than not inaccurate or based primarily in untested theory and did a good deal to damage the future approach to women's sexuality, it provided language and information to women to which they previously had been denied access. In suggesting that women's sexuality, urges and desires were legitimate, sexology began to establish lesbianism as a form of "inversion," enforcing mandatory heterosexuality on women (Bland 256-5). In this time of "superfluous women" the idea was introduced that women who had been involved in what up to this time were considered socially acceptable "romantic friendships" with other women were now considered "inverts" (Bland 265).

## Motherhood

“A conflictual attitude toward motherhood is typical of a good deal of New Woman writing by women: Sarah Grand regarded it as central to women’s self-identity ... whereas Mona Caird was vehement in her opposition to the binding ties of maternity” (Ledger and Luckhurst 76). Ledger and Luckhurst identify the two ends of the spectrum in Grand and Caird. The vast cavern of disconnect between the two is filled with other New Woman novelists who present a variety of new motherhood ideologies. It is likely that motherhood was the topic on which New Woman novelists disagreed most both with their peers and among themselves, and it dangerously became a central determination of the New Woman’s ability to affect change for the future.

There were growing widespread fears of social degeneration, hence the need to reiterate the traditional womanly ideals of self-sacrifice and service.

The assumption was that, as women were innately different from men in terms of their biological and mental make-up, their primary female function – to be wives and mothers – should take priority over everything else. The woman’s role was motherhood; if she ventured beyond this, mental disturbance might occur and may even be passed on to the next female generation. Doctors and scientists conspired to explain that ambitious seekers of self-development were sick and freakish ... . (Forward 299)

In her essay Forward reveals how the presumed innate difference between men and women was being used to limit women’s access to education and labor. She notes that “in the 1880s claims were made that female students were liable” to a variety of ailments, and “sterility was a possible outcome; racial degeneration was yet another” (299). Society was not taking this lightly, and “extremely ruthless treatments were devised for conditions such as anorexia, hysteria, or neurasthenia” (299).

Forward identifies the fear that society would lose its mothers and the genuine concern that while women were being educated their blood might

go to their brains instead of to their wombs where physicians seemed to believe it belonged. Evidently, women were seen as breeders by the patriarchy and as such were valuable but as anything else were not (at least not in such a way that could be discussed in reputable society). However, some feminists and New Woman novelists embraced this biology-as-destiny approach to self and motherhood and put their own spin on power through the womb. From this a strange discourse by some New Woman novelists shifted in large part to participate in and subscribe to a eugenic, ideological approach to women's maternal function. They hoped that through it she might be empowered; instead it tragically tied her to that function. She was not empowered, and she could not be as long as those in power manipulated her value as a breeder.

Eugenics, founded by Francis Galton, Charles Darwin's cousin, was a class-based theory of society that aimed to improve on nature through the self-conscious control of human evolution through selective breeding, and a number of New Women sought to apply their ideas in their development of the concept of 'civic motherhood', an expression of an emergent, moral and gendered citizenship ... . (Richardson and Willis 31)

Dowie presents the case for a eugenic approach to women's purpose, though not without implied commentary, and "*Galia's* central and most radical idea ... is its heroine's growing conviction that the real advance in society will be the careful selection of fathers and mothers ..." (Small xxxviii). Dowie and Grand most notably and Schreiner and Gilman in a slightly more veiled way all experiment with and/or advance this idea in their fiction. If nothing else, they present both positive and negative eugenics for discussion, suggesting that there might be benefits to preventing or discouraging the 'ill bred' from continuing to breed while encouraging those of 'good stock' to breed. Predating Hitler and his race purification, eugenic ideology should not be divorced entirely from its elitist, classist racism, though it cannot be pinned down how far the New Women who dabbled in

eugenic theory would take their approach to biological determinism in actual application. They were first theorists with an ideal, but one of the characteristics of the New Woman novelists was that, while the seeking of the ideal was of utmost importance, the practical application of theory was the objective. As with marriage and sexuality, one might be fair in assuming that New Woman novelists would also seek the extremes of the practical application of eugenics and purifying the race. This dystopian result has found its practical application in the events of the twentieth century from Nazi Germany to the sterilization of women who were presumed to be unfit, potential mothers in many societies in the western world. It continues to be experimented with in the twenty-first century under the dark cloud of its racist and sexist eugenic predecessors. The literature of the twentieth century comments directly on the dystopian potentialities of the eugenic politics of the New Woman novelist in novels, such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. The arm of the New Woman stretches into the twentieth century here, even if it is only to have its hand slapped. It is worthwhile to recognize that discussion comes from debate, and the New Woman novelists pose questions at the fin de siècle that have been debated long after the turn of the century.

### **Closing**

"Few recent historians have grasped the profundity of the social metamorphoses brought about by the 'new women' ..." (Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man's v2*: 21). Prominent literary critics such as Gilbert and Gubar, Showalter, Richardson and Ledger have effectively brought into the literary discussion the impact of the New Woman. Others have focused on the impact of one specific New Woman novelist on her society and on the continuum of literary change. Some have done an extended study including Carolyn Burdett and Joyce Avrech Berkman who each examine Schreiner's writing; Carol Farley Kessler who explores Gilman's development as a writer; and Teresa Mangum who analyzes Grand's theories. Many efforts have been made to bring back into print the works by New Woman writers

that are no longer published including letters, journals and autobiographies.

The New Woman novelist has found her way into discussions of genre, of the period and of the central issues of the period including colonialism, sexuality, marriage, socialism and eugenics, among others. She has also received critical attention in her own right. Gilbert and Gubar dedicate a portion of their study of women writers in the nineteenth century to the phenomenon of the New Woman writer, including Chopin, Gilman and Schreiner. In their later series, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, there is a more in depth analysis of the role of New Woman novelists placing them among a plethora of other women writers of the twentieth century. With these critical contributions Gilbert and Gubar provide a basis for analysis of these authors in a canon of women, inviting further study.

No invitation was necessary, however, for the surge of analysis in the last twenty years on the New Woman and the writers related to her existence. Recent biographies have been completed by Emily Toth on Chopin, by Gillian Kersley on Grand, by Ruth First and Ann Scott on Schreiner, and by Ann Lane on Gilman. Other scholars have anthologized the discussions of the period, recreating some of the debates that existed. Among these Ann Heilmann, Carolyn Christensen Nelson, and Sally Ledger and Roger Luckhurst include in their anthologies the essays, reviews and articles that debated the issues related to New Women. Angelique Richardson and Elaine Showalter both have compiled fiction of the period that debated the New Woman's identity and claims.

Numerous essays and articles have been published in the last quarter century examining what these authors were aiming to accomplish and what they, in fact, did accomplish in their fiction. Other essays examine the role of the New Woman as a historical figure and a social influence. Lyn Pykett, Ann Heilmann, Jill Rudd and Val Gough, Lynda S. Borren and Sara deSaussure Davis, Angelique Richardson and Chris Willis all compile some of the most compelling and engaging of these critical essays on the fin de siècle and the New Woman. Sally Ledger writes that the periodical press of the 1890s

“unwittingly prised open discursive space for” the New Woman in the 1890s (*New Woman* 9), and Ledger enters into the space prised open for critical discussion of the New Woman at the turn of the twentieth century in her book, *The New Woman: Fiction and feminism at the fin de siècle*.

The New Woman novelist finds her way into discussion through other means as well. Gilman is often included in genre studies of utopian writing. Chopin is approached as a regionalist writer as well as an influential American author by Christopher Benfey. Olive Schreiner’s social influence is examined by Ruth Brandon in her analysis of the Men and Women’s Club in London in the 1890s. In an extended analysis of eugenics and reproduction Angelique Richardson closely examines the roles Caird, Grand and Schreiner played in the discussion of these topics. Elaine Showalter includes New Woman novelists in her study of sexuality, gender and culture at the turn of the century. Lucy Bland references numerous writers of the New Woman in her study of sexuality and early feminism.

Chopin and Gilman, since the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, have found their way into the canon of American Literature and as noted above significant, recent study has included a number of other New Woman writers. Still, many New Woman novelists including some in this study still reside on the outskirts of scholarly debate. Critics such as Richardson, Showalter and Gilbert and Gubar have established the discussion of their writing. Heilmann, Pykett, Rudd and Gough, and Boren and Davis provide the forum. Bland, Heilmann, Ledger and Luckhurst provide the context for analysis.

Recognizing the existence of the New Woman novelist and her influence is critical. Showalter explains that “[The feminists] represent a turning point in the female tradition, and they turn inward” (*A Literature* 215). The feminists, initially set out, “with a sense of utility and a sense of mission, a real concern for the future of womanhood ...” (215). While, as Showalter notes, they did not accomplish that mission in the end, it is important to recognize the deviation from what came before, the mode of seceding from their literary predecessors, the successes found, and the influence on the

transformation in fiction and in the perception of the female.

Gilbert and Gubar note that “Gilman’s great expectations for victory...were continually qualified by her stubbornly realistic consciousness of the female defeats that she observed in a world she knew was mostly devoid of fairytale enchantment” (*No Man’s v1*: 89); real society was unlike *Herland*. Though they were dedicated to the refining and achievement of their ideals, in their fiction New Woman novelists explore the reality of putting these ideals into action. Even *Herland* is laced with a tragic, sardonic arsenic in its presentation of the early twentieth-century American man’s inability to assimilate into a woman-centered society. The novel closes with the anticipated shock and horror of a Herland woman as she enters into the archaic (for her), patriarchal world of early twentieth-century America. The New Woman novelist is an idealist at heart, but her strength as a writer is in her realistic approach. Though she wrote in styles other than realism, the realist work was most influential. Her creation of character, that intangible New Woman, whom she renders and makes human, resonates most poignantly with the reader.

Pykett aptly outlines the issue:

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 savior of a benighted masculinity; ... she was radical, socialist or revolutionary, or she was reactionary and conservative; she was the agent of social and/or racial regeneration, or symptom and agent of decline. (xii)

This study aims to take a close, critical look at how these contradictions play themselves out primarily in the fiction of the New Woman novelist and secondarily in her life and her polemics. It also aims to examine the approach to the fate of the New Woman heroine in the novels by New Women, attempting to reconcile some of the contradictions such as an

apparent fatalism juxtaposed with and victorious over idealism in novels by women who were, beyond a doubt, idealists. It asks how an author can uncompromisingly demand a woman's self-actualization if it will secure her destruction while alienating her from any contentment.

Toward the close of Dixon's *The Story of a Modern Woman* her heroine faces herself in the mirror, a common motif in New Woman fiction. She finds there a duplicity of spirit while she experiences a contrary feeling of oneness with herself. Dixon conveys a mood of isolation from the world as a result of an implicit bargain made long before. The bargain was to abandon the comfort of society and love in order to attain an intimate relationship with the self. The profundity of the loss is felt despite the greatness of the triumph.

In the mirror on the dressing-table she caught sight of herself as she passed. Her fair hair was floating in a kind of halo round her head; her bare arms and shoulders emerged from the whiteness of her bodice. How the eyes looked at her--hauntingly, appealingly--from out of a pathetic little face. She slipped into the chair at the table, and leaning her face on her hands, looked gravely at the mirror. For a long time now she had had a strange sense of dual individuality. When she looked in the glass a woman looked back at her with reproachful, haunting eyes. And to-night the woman looked at her appealingly. By the soft candle-light the face was curiously young. ... And, as she looked, the woman in the glass softened with a triumphant smile. (262-3)

This study seeks to examine the relationship Dixon eloquently describes as her heroine examines herself, searching, curious - the relationship between New Woman and the self, the relationship between New Woman novelist and the New Woman heroine and the woman of the fin de siècle.

## I. Marriage

“Marriage for love is the beautiful external symbol of the union of souls; marriage without it is the uncleanliest traffic that defiles the world” (Schreiner, *African Farm* 156). So says Lyndall, Schreiner’s New Woman heroine to Waldo her soul mate but unqualified romantic partner. So say most of the New Woman novelists as they enter into the Marriage Debate, validating a heterosexual union while simultaneously seeking to transform the institution of marriage.

Ella Hepworth Dixon in her 1899 article, “Why Women Are Ceasing to Marry,” wrote sarcastically “It has been seriously argued ...” that the New Woman has “lost the primordial instinct for conjugal life altogether” (83). She implies that those who believe it is a “primordial instinct” are misguided in the nature and instincts of women. The title of her article validates that the trend of women choosing not to marry was a reality in her society, and that whether a “primordial instinct” or not, a movement away from matrimony was one worthy of some attention and explanation. Dixon goes on to explain that it is not that women have become distorted in instinct, rather a disjunction has formed between the sexes: “There is a certain amount of misunderstanding nowadays between the sexes which make[s] marrying ... a somewhat hazardous enterprise” (84). Retaining her tone of humor, she does not belittle the significance of her overriding point, that marriage is in trouble. There is a reason women are choosing not to partake, and it is not because they would rather be lonely with cats and revel in the joys of celibacy than enjoy a healthy partnership with a man. Dixon claims that doubt is planted in the minds of educated women. They are beginning to consider that marriage might not present the wedded bliss they have otherwise been led to believe it would, rather that marriage might present more drawbacks than benefits. “It is just this general doubt of the institution of marriage, ... that makes people pause on the brink, and, choosing the known evil, remain celibate rather than fly to others that they know not of” (88). Dixon’s article, though light and gently mocking in tone, presents the very real situation of what she calls this “transition stage” (84) in which her

society finds itself.

New Woman novelists were given credit and blame for challenging the great institution of marriage, that which legally gave man ownership of woman. If a woman wanted to question her own identity that was one thing, but bringing the question of women's role in society into the realm of marriage was an entirely new level of challenge to the establishment. Blanche Leppington, a social-purist of the time, "praised the 'new woman' novel in 'helping to carry the pressure of the moral question into the sacred enclosure of marriage itself, from which all questioning had been too long excluded'" (quoted in Bland 145).<sup>1</sup>

Not all saw the challenge to marriage as a benefit to society. Ledger asserts that "one of the main sources of the panic provoked by the New Woman ... was a very real fear that she may not be at all interested in men, and could manage quite well without them" (*New Woman* 5). The New Woman novelist did not suggest this; she aimed in her novels to reconstruct marriage in such a way that the sexes could form a healthy union. If society continued along the path it was following, the New Woman novelist believed that the sexes quite possibly could be estranged forever from one another, a fate Schreiner feared and warned about in *Woman and Labor* (26). But, as Ledger points out, despite the fact that many New Woman novelists championed marriage in an altered form, the establishment continued to blame the New Woman for attacking it and undermining it, warning society that a challenge to marriage threatened to demolish the entire family structure (*New Woman* 12). Ledger explains that "the establishment's desire to defend marriage as an institution was underpinned by a belief that without conventional marriage and domestic arrangements, the social fabric on which Victorian society was based would begin to crumble" (12). While the New Woman novelists did not aim to secede from heterosexual society as a group of independent women without the need of or desire for men, they did not accept marriage as it was. The New Woman novelists averred that marriage was dangerous to

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<sup>1</sup> Bland quotes Leppington's essay, "Debrutalisation of Man," published in *Contemporary Review*, vol. 67, May 1895.

women in its present state, threatening their bodies and their souls. In fiction the novelists attempted to deconstruct the institution plank by plank. They revealed “the double moral standard..., the non-consensual sex” and “the incessant child-bearing;” Bland identifies that “the ‘new woman’ novel was spotlighting a host of horrors lurking behind the veneer of marital respectability” (146).

Because the sexes were now being seen by radicals, if not by most, as foreign to one another and incompatible, the sacred union of the two sexes was to be inevitably rattled by this awareness and attention. Throughout the Victorian era a number of ground breaking lawsuits mentioned earlier were fought, and some won, bringing change to that very union, though change was slowly and often grudgingly made. Women gained rights to property, divorce and their own bodies. Limited though some of these were in scope as defined by each law and judgment, it was significant that the institution was proven to be adaptable.

In Britain, attention to the marriage question was raised to fever pitch at the turn of the century. A significant indicator of this came in 1888 after the question was posed in response to Caird’s suggestion in the *Westminster Review* that “the present form of marriage ... is a vexatious failure” (Caird, “Marriage” 195-6). The question was plainly: Is Caird right? The response was overwhelming and illustrated that this had been brewing for a time. Brought to the surface in this way, even Caird’s critics and those who sought to preserve marriage in what they deemed its purest form could not deny that marriage was in crisis. Even they could not contest that marriage in its present form was threatened in a new way in the mainstream of culture. The letters coming from the readers of the *Daily Telegraph* were not merely the Mary Wollstonecrafts and J. S. Mills of this era. They were not only novelists who had broached the topic in their fiction. Though, as Gullette notes, the collection of letters was biased to underscore the “non-failure of marriage,” also included were such letters as Edith Maxwell’s that read “Women are afraid to speak for themselves and their rights. Mrs. Caird has made a beginning ... every woman, especially the unhappily married,

should bless her and call her friend" (quoted in Gullette 499).

To attack marriage was to confront Victorian mores head on. The claim that marriage is a "failure" suggested that there could be no easy solution. It suggested that the foundation on which society was built was crumbling under the very feet that breezily walked along its surface. In her article Caird had not sought to fight a lawsuit in defense of a battered wife. She had not suggested that a divorce law would allow women enough freedom to come and go in a fair and soluble union, and she was not speaking out on custody rights or property rights. Caird dismissed marriage outright. That institution that "we have girls brought up to regard ... as their destiny" Caird claims remains "the worst, most hypocritical, form of woman purchase" (193). Ledger explains that Caird's assertion that marriage "as an institution is relatively recent" gives her the opportunity to suggest "that it was not necessarily a permanent, unmalleable institution" (*New Woman* 21). Its impermanence and malleability are what would preserve it. If it were unchangeable, it would need to be abandoned entirely. Caird describes the present state of marriage as "degrading," and by its very existence, it is prohibitive of all women's independent, economic success (Caird, "Marriage" 193).

It was not that marriage was so fundamentally flawed and that feminists felt the need to repair it primarily for its own sake, but they regarded it as the institution that perpetuated the subordinate, dependent situation in which women found themselves. These authors suggest that the very nature of women that they so desperately sought to uncover, understand and reclaim was paralyzed, disfigured and distorted. They claim that marriage was one crucial, institutional culprit for this corrupting of the female soul. Until it was transformed, woman in her natural glory could not be freed, nor could man. The latter concern was probably more of an afterthought than grand, noble altruism, but man was a concern (without him there could be no heterosexual partnership). They sought to heal society, and men were a part of that society that needed care.

If one wants to uncover the politics of these New Woman authors, one

should study primarily the nonfiction that they wrote: essays, articles, responses to criticism. Certainly, these pieces are invaluable to add insight into the fiction these authors wrote. One should look, too, to the fiction and recognize that it is just that. It is fiction dressed as realism. At times, these authors allow their politics to overwhelm the fiction. Characters make speeches, have rants and write letters which are only slightly disguised segments of the authors' own polemical writing, but those are the weakest parts of their novels. The strength in the novels lies in that seeking, the frustration and the depression of these characters. These fictional New Women are not campaigning for the vote. They are not meant to be caricatures. They are women of great strength, intellect, artistic awareness, curiosity, nobility and spirit, but they are not meant to be perceived as a tiny minority. In most texts there is a mentor whose very existence suggests that there are crowds of these women, and more who have the potential lurking somewhere within. These novels were not written for a select few to read. They were not meant to be seen as too radical or unrealistic. The heroines of most are not women of the future; they are women of the day. That distinction is central to understanding the texts and the intentions of each author.

The nonfiction written by these women suggests the institution of marriage in its turn of the century form is the greatest flaw in the state of union between the sexes. Schreiner in *Woman and Labor* poses, "how is it if there be [a] close reciprocity between the lines along which the advanced and typical modern males and females are developing, that there does exist ... so much of pain, unrest, and sexual disco-ordination at the present day?" (106). And she answers that this "disco-ordination, struggle, and consequent suffering" are not a result of an innate disjunction between the sexes, rather, a conflict between "the old ideals and new," and she suggests that the institutions, marriage a primary example, need to catch up (106-7). Caird identifies marriage as an established institution is the greatest plague for the health of all women: "thus we have on one side a more or less degrading marriage, and on the other side a number of women who cannot

command an entry into that profession, but who must give up health and enjoyment of life in a losing battle with the world" ("Marriage" 193). Still, the fiction suggests otherwise. Most of the women of the fictional societies internalize and preserve the problems with the institution while the heroines work to escape this internalization. First, they try to recognize the nature of their own role in the perpetuation of the institution. The New Woman novelists look inward and force their characters to do so as well before making any progress toward real change. The New Woman novelists suggest that the change they are searching for in society must begin within themselves. They search for a way to identify their flaws, primarily concluding that they are a result of either socialization or evolutionary disintegration. The crux of the problem within women is classed in many different ways by these authors in their nonfiction, where they attempt to scientifically pinpoint it. This scientific approach is not so easily adaptable in the fiction. The inability to apply their theory to practice, even in a fictional world, is suggestive of the complex nature of applying theory and ideals to real human beings whose needs go beyond the freedom, labor and respect indicated as the necessary alterations to allow for marriage to meet women's needs. The application in fiction and in their own lives also serves to draw attention to the gaps and disconnects in the plan for renovation of the marriage structure.

All the heroines of this selection of New Woman fiction are capable of that first, most difficult task of introspection and recognition of the socialized flaws in their character. These authors suggest that it is simple to look outward on the flock of sheep of women who blindly follow the rules of society even though those very rules are closing them into a smaller and smaller pen. A select few can change themselves despite the powerful current of society, only those willing to be New Women.

On occasion Charlotte Perkins Gilman is rebuked by critics, even dismissed as a female separatist. She is seen as a radical worthy of attention for her extremist views and not because of her contribution to the debate of the era. This is primarily because of her novel, *Herland*, in which

she imagines a nation of women that, prior to the action of the plot, through catastrophe and miracle, becomes a single sex, self-sustaining society. The novel is commonly categorized as utopian. When interpreted in its truest form, utopia is a place that does not exist, therefore, Herland fits this category. As a perfect place, as the term, utopia, has come to be used, Gilman herself would not admit to Herland's utopian status. The central goal of the women of Herland is to find a way to peacefully coexist with men again, to love them and be loved by them, to work together in harmony and to propagate, the ancient way (ancient to them) - sexually. They want this, "the miracle of union in life giving," for connection and heterosexually shared parenthood which they already have homosocially among the women of the society (119). The women of Herland are asexual in their reproduction and raise all the children of the community together. They are not looking to change the structure of their rearing and raising of children. They are looking to include men in the process. One of the most significant fears highlighted in this text is that the women of Herland and the male explorers from the United States are too far apart in their separate evolutions, social or biological, to reunite in the desired manner. Gilman suggests that the American male of the early twentieth century has much evolving to do before he can reap the benefits of living with a woman in her more natural and greatly preferred state.

The goal of Gilman's novel is the central goal of the novelists examined in this study. They primarily sought to uncover and reclaim a woman's true nature, though that was only the first step. To accomplish that would be impossible given the existence of the institution of marriage. The argument was not that women who were freed from the constraints of marriage would automatically succeed in uncovering what lay deep within. However, even if they could catch a glimmer of that nature, a society that continued to support marriage in its current form would smudge out that glimmer with its thickest smog. Individual escapes from the institution would not suffice; the institution had to be torn down and rebuilt. Most agreed that it should be rebuilt in some form or another and also agreed that a union of the sexes was

desirable.

That marriage was a central problem, they agreed. Even the details of what was wrong with marriage were generally agreed upon. Beyond this, the deviation was widespread. The authors, having been brought into an imagined forum, would probably think they disagree even more than their theories really do diverge. There are two ends to the spectrum of marriage reform in this study. At one end is Grand, who sought to resuscitate marriage as an institution as woman's moral obligation to the morally weaker man. "As she saw it, the purpose of woman's self improvement was primarily to serve the marriage relation, and through ... this ... the world ..." (Richardson, *Love* 106). At the other end of the spectrum resides Caird who openly sought to deconstruct the existing institution entirely. Despite Caird's determination not to give in to the old form, she, too, believed that men and women could coexist, that they could and should be in union with one another. She would not accept the contract dictated by a social and institutional force for it suggested a mercenary relationship in a union of the sexes. "We are also led to conclude that modern 'Respectability' draws its life-blood from the degeneration of womanhood in marriage and in prostitution" (Caird, "Marriage" 196). As it is, Caird claims, as an offshoot of a mercenary society, marriage is "an insult to human dignity" (196). The perspectives ranged from viewing marriage as the noblest profession through which moral change could be made to the figurative "iron cage, wherein women are held in bondage, suffering moral starvation, while the thoughtless gather round to taunt and insult their lingering misery" (Caird, "Marriage" 192-3). Both perspectives and all the ideas in between were prompted by a dissatisfaction with the state of marriage.

All the New Woman novelists in this study sought to preserve the union between the sexes for various reasons: spiritual, romantic, intellectual, platonic, sexual and eugenic. Their contemporary critics would have argued that the New Woman novelist sought solely to undermine and destroy marriage, which the critics deemed a pure and noble institution. Twentieth-century critics sometimes disregard the New Woman novelist for seeking

and hoping for the preservation of heterosexual union. Olive Schreiner expresses just such a hope pinned to a transformed union of the sexes in her statement in *Woman and Labor*. She claims that “the endeavor of woman to readjust herself” will result in “a higher appreciation of the sacredness of all sex relations. . . . Above all that it will lead to a closer, more permanent, more emotionally and intellectually complete relation between the individual man and woman” (xv-vi). She does not directly address the traditional concept of marriage here, but does allude to what she hopes for as a replacement of it: union. This union becomes complicated by sexuality and by parenthood, but she claims that this union will usher society into a bright and wonderful future, one similar to that Gilman hopes for in *Herland*. Caird also suggests that an ideal can be hoped for, in fact must be established: “We must set up an ideal, undismayed by what will seem its Utopian impossibility . . .” (Caird, “Marriage” 196). Caird claims that “the ideal marriage then, despite all dangers and difficulties, should be *free*” (196). The New Woman’s utopian dream for marriage included men, but as with most utopias the central element is a freedom to be. The dangers and difficulties would also need to be addressed, but as Caird suggests freedom to be was more important to the New Woman than freedom from any number of social ills from which marriage falsely and often ineffectively protected women.

Carolyn Burdett identifies twentieth-century, feminist critics’ frustration and sometimes dismissal of the New Women novelists’ approach to marriage. In her essay on Schreiner’s unfinished novel, *From Man to Man*, Burdett states “The New Woman fiction has often been castigated by feminist critics for its inability to make narratives which imagine something other than heterosexual marriage as the route to happiness and fulfillment - and, because the latter invariably fails, to ward off depression and pessimism” (“Capturing” 170). This frustration is a valid one. In *The Story of an African Farm* Schreiner kills the voice of her greatest fictional feminist through complications of childbirth coupled with a profound depression. Schreiner’s noblest heroine in *From Man to Man* makes an attempt to

escape the sex-parasitism of her own life, but legally does not leave her husband. Some might interpret the suicide of Chopin's heroine, after leaving her husband and having extramarital relations, as a warning to all women considering such a route. Caird and Dixon's heroines are not exceptions and suffer great depression at the inability to have the romantic future of the spiritual and sexual union of man and woman. The heroines pursue the ideal throughout the novels despite set backs, disappointments and unsuccessful relationships with unsatisfactory men.

Here these authors are faced with the very questions that confounded them most. To those critics who are disappointed that the New Woman novelist limits her scope for romantic union to a heterosexual ideal, it is valuable to draw one's attention to the internal constraints within these novelists, most notably Schreiner. In her correspondence with the sexologist, Havelock Ellis, and with other close friends, one can see how Schreiner tortured herself over her desires and longings. She suffered over recognizing with whom her affections resided and how these conflicted with her ideal. Schreiner's letters reveal her shame in her desire to masturbate her admitted frustration in her lack of sexual attraction to Ellis who was intellectually her ideal romantic partner. She writes of her experience of romantic love for Edward Carpenter, a leading socialist reformer and homosexual male. She also hints at the possibly romantic nature of her undefined relationship with Eleanor Marx. Finally, in her letters she admits her hesitation to enter into a marriage with a man whose intellect she barely respects. Schreiner is one example of how these New Woman novelists did not have sexuality, marriage and motherhood clearly defined and smoothly incorporated into their own lives. They had theories, but their own desires muddled them. They were inspired to write, speak and act, but the era in which they lived inevitably corrupted their purest ideals. It is their determination, what confounds them and what they can conquer, that is fascinating. What is worthy of study is what they are able to accomplish within the plots of their texts despite the fact that perfect union is not found. Purpose and contentment is not accomplished, and survival is not always

possible. Why these are not possible or accomplished, how the heroines struggle and what they struggle for is worth close study, as are the conundrums the authors face in writing this fiction.

These novelists are not claiming that women who made an attempt at a more liberating life would all die in misery, nor are they offering only a pessimistic view of the prospects for the future. Though the endings to these novels are not optimistic on the surface, they generally avoid a worse fate. They do not conclude with the authors returning the wayward, New Woman protagonists to the conventional life pleasantly having lost access to their mind and soul and turned bovine. It is implied that this would be a fate worse than death. Certainly, there was a cloud of gloom hanging over society. The New Woman novelist conveyed that was of society's own making, and society could dissipate this smog if it so chose. Interpreting the fiction with the knowledge of the authors' polemical writing suggests that these were novels promoting change and not giving in to despair. The place to start, according to these novelists was with heterosexual relations and more specifically the institution of marriage.

### **Problems with Marriage**

The problems with marriage overlapped, and the methods for correcting these problems varied. Some of the problems were quite distinct and prominent in the debates that raged over marriage, in the proposed changes in the courts and in the desired changes by reformers. New Woman novelists saw the loss of identity for a woman when entering into a marriage as devastating, not merely in a symbolic manner but literally as well. Without independent identity her liberty to leave the union was hampered despite the inroads the courts were slowly making with respect to women and divorce. Some proposed open unions as a solution to the bonds of marriage that defiled the purity of the ideal partnership. Related to the difficulty for a woman to leave came the problem of legal ownership of the wife by her husband, further clouding the connection between the woman and man. This legal ownership was taken to the extent of owning

the wife's physical person; "given that marital rape was unrecognized in law, the slavery of marriage was sexual as well as economic" (Bland 132).

With this ownership came a mercenary relationship between a husband and wife in which traditionally a woman was passed from father to husband and was reliant upon a man for her keep for her entire life. Schreiner denotes this mercenary relationship between a man and woman as "sex-parasitism," likening it to prostitution. Many New Woman novelists believed that as long as a woman was economically dependent on a man and could not make an equal way in the world by the fruits of her labor (not her body), the sexes were doomed when it came to a pure partnership. In such an unequal partnership the woman became one of her husband's possessions; acquiring her was one of his accomplishments. He colonized her and possessed her under his rule in his home, thus the home becomes her prison and he, her jailer.

She was limited in scope and mobility because she was tied to the home while the husband was free to leave and free to dabble in the pleasures other women had to offer. This was not widely promoted, but the sexual double standard was accepted. A wife was often idolized as a pure angel and expected to have no sexual appetite but to gratify her husband's sexual desires and to yearn for children. "Feminists saw the two institutions of marriage and prostitution as inextricably interlinked, the supposed 'purity' and sexual passivity of the middle-class woman existing at the expense of the working-class prostitute who served the sexual 'needs' of the middle-class man" (Bland 132). While this sexual dichotomy of wife and prostitute rely on one another for existence, the influence of prostitution on the middle-class wife also reached her through her husband in the form of venereal disease. Commentary on the transmittance of venereal disease, most notably syphilis, was prominent in New Woman fiction. Through their fiction the authors called for a stop to society's proclivity to turn a blind eye to some men's depravity. As a member of the Women's Cooperative Guild put it, they believed "a woman has the right to expect from a man the same purity as he demands from her" (quoted in

Bland 184).

Possibly not an obvious link to marriage was the New Woman novelists' call for meaningful labor for women in society outside of marriage. For some New Woman novelists this is the most important of all marital change. They were certain that if women's role in society changed with respect to labor and purpose, then the relationship between men and women in marriage would automatically change. They believed that this would dissipate the mercenary relationship and inspire a new, long overdue respect for women's intellect and skill by their male counterparts. It was suggested that meaningful labor for women would ultimately be the change that would heal the disease in marriage.

### **Identity and the Erasing of Self**

The primary concern for the New Woman and the New Woman novelist was the identification and distillation of female self identity. Historically marriage was the transfer of ownership of and responsibility for a woman from her father to her husband, changing her name and familial associations. This history was detrimental to the further development of the female search for self identity as one independent from any other being. In Victorian marriage the wife defines herself by her husband: by his profession, his name, his ancestral background, his money and his reputation. An independent identity was not a possibility for an ideal Victorian wife. She might have hobbies, do humanitarian work, have accomplishments, but primarily she was Mrs. so and so, wife of and eventually mother of. In *Herland* Gilman has her hero Vandyck suggest about "the marriage tradition of our general history" that it "relates the woman to the man" (120). Vandyck goes on to explain, "He goes on about his business, and she adapts herself to him and to it. Even in citizenship, by some strange hocus-pocus, that fact of birth and geography was waved aside, and the woman automatically acquired the nationality of her husband" (120-1). The suggestion that a woman's alliance and personal association to a nation is transmuted by marriage implies that her primary allegiance is to

her home, her primary duty is to her home and her primary source of identity is determined by her home. And her 'home' is her husband, symbolized by his ring, his name, his house, his family, and his children. All these become representative forms of oppression not because of their tangible qualities but because of their symbolic associations with oppression and possession by the husband of his wife.

When deciding how the interlopers and the women of Herland should form their new union, Jeff, who tries most earnestly to assimilate to Herland culture, proposes, "Of course they haven't any marriage ceremony or service, but we can make it a sort of Quaker wedding, and have it in the Temple - it is the least we can do for them . . . . We can at least give them our names" (117). Even Jeff who is enamored by their progress and peaceful, progressive society, cannot reconcile some the notions he has been brainwashed to believe were respectable. He determines that giving his name will somehow elevate the woman he marries in a way that he is used to applying to the giving of a name from a man to a woman in early twentieth-century American marriage. He innocently and ignorantly implies that association with a man validates a woman in some way beyond her individual existence. In so doing he is merely espousing the ideals of his society, the society he deems far inferior to the one he has entered.

Vandyck relates the shock and surprise of the women of Herland at the concept of "wife" and that of name taking :

As to the names, Alima, frank soul that she was, asked what good it would do.

Terry, always irritating her, said it was a sign of possession. "You are going to be Mrs. Nicholson," he said, "Mrs. T. O. Nicholson. That shows everyone that you are my wife."

"What is a 'wife' exactly?" she demanded, a dangerous gleam in her eye.

"A wife is a woman who belongs to a man," he began.

But Jeff took it up eagerly: "And a husband is the man

who belongs to a woman. It is because we are monogamous, you know. And marriage is the ceremony, civil and religious, that joins the two together - 'until death do us part,'" he finished, looking at Celis with unutterable devotion. (117)

Despite the fact that the two men and the two relationships are entirely different, Jeff goes on to reveal his ignorance of the reality of the economic dependence of a woman on a man in a marriage in his society. He is also unaware of the inability for a man to equally belong to a woman as a woman does to a man in marriage as he knows it. Though an attempt to balance and idealize this joint ownership, his quick defensive explanation, does not address the name issue, and so the Herlanders press it.

"Do your women have no names before they are married?" Celis suddenly demanded.

"Why, yes," Jeff explained. "They have their maiden names - their father's names, that is." (118)

Remaining naive, Jeff introduces the subject of "maidenhood" which is pursued elsewhere in the novel and in this study in the chapter on sexuality. Jeff also introduces the suggestion of the possession of the "maiden" by her father, another concept foreign to the Herlanders who do not view parenthood as ownership in any way. Individuality and community are their values, and those values clash in large part with the values of the intruders. Still somewhat baffled, the Herlanders continue to question the men about the loss of the "maiden" names:

"And what becomes of them?" asked Alima.

"They change them for their husbands', my dear," Terry answered her.

"Change them? Do the husbands then take the wives' 'maiden names'?" (118)

The faulty logic of the patriarchal culture is completely lost on the Herlanders who cannot make the connection because there is none to make unless the men explain the cultural context in which this system of adopting

new names is used. But betraying their culture's flaws, juxtaposing them to this Herland culture's successes, is not the approach these Americans ever take.

“Oh, no,” he laughed. “The man keeps his own and gives it to her, too.”

“Then she just loses hers and takes a new one - how unpleasant! We won't do that!” Alima said decidedly. (118)

And they don't! The Herland women are willing to pacify the men with whom they plan to enter into a union on levels that they feel are harmless, but a loss of identity, however symbolic and benign it might be in Herland, is not an adjustment they are willing to make. The representation by Gilman that this symbolic loss of identity is significant to a woman in society is suggestive of an issue far more deeply rooted. It represents the dangerous loss of self a woman experiences in marriage and the detrimental effects this has on her psyche, as revealed in Gilman's short story, “The Yellow Wall-paper.” In *Herland* with humor, understatement and gentle mockery Gilman so adeptly writes her commentary on this social ill in succinct dialogue that is convincing even by twenty-first-century standards.

### **Liberty to Leave - Open Union, Divorce and Legal Ownership**

Advances were being made concerning a woman's freedom to leave a marriage. It was determined that, for a reason, deemed worthy by the courts, she may divorce a husband. It was also being established at this time that even a woman who was not divorced from her husband could choose to live apart from him for reasons best understood by her. While these standards were being slowly established by the courts, society was even slower to accept them as the norm. The liberty to leave was seen by New Woman novelists as an essential element in the change for marriage. They addressed this concern in their novels across the spectrum of mixed approaches to marriage reform. Grand writes a character who initially refuses to live with a reprobate husband; Schreiner writes a heroine who refuses to marry because of the confining qualities of the formal, institutional union and

another who, though she does not formally leave her husband, makes a symbolic move away from him; Chopin's Edna leaves her husband quite literally, entering into one romantic and one physical, extramarital relationship; and Caird has her heroine escape only to return. Many write about the necessity of an openness to the union in order for it to be authentic and healthy, and a number of these novelists put theory into practice leaving their own marriages; Gilman, Grand and Dowie formally divorced their husbands.

The right of either partner to leave the union was what made it a union of choice in the eyes of many New Woman novelists, and one that was not a choice carried the burden of a forced and contrived Victorian marriage. Without this freedom marriage was seen by the New Woman novelist as potentially suffocating and capable of becoming a prison to either husband or wife. It was believed that this could lead to mental illness (usually associated with the woman) and dangerous sexual wandering (usually associated with the man as well as with prostitution and venereal disease). As it stood the relationship between a husband and a wife was one of legal and literal ownership of the wife by the husband; as a result this left the wife at her husband's mercy. The New Woman novelist set out to expose and change this.

An alternative to the traditional state and church sanctioned union that was indissoluble for most and even more so if one was female was a private contract promoted by Mona Caird, among others. As Bland explains, "The proposed private contract was generally termed a 'free union', 'free alliance', 'free marriage', or 'free love'. Those feminists adhering to such an ideal insisted that their notion of 'free love' was one of monogamy, and, if love persisted, of permanence" (150). The proposition of a private contract between romantic partners indicated that a romantic and sexual relationship was no matter for the state or church to regulate. While the theory of free unions was consistent with the ideology presented by New Woman novelists, putting it into practice was problematic. Free unions were not an entirely new concept. Mary Wollstonecraft, among other

women preceding the fin de siècle, entered into such a relationship and found herself in dire circumstances.<sup>2</sup> The success of an open union as a replacement for traditional marriage relied on a society in which the female was not dependent upon the male economically and one in which a rejected female was not shunned or ostracized by her society. "The term had negative connotations for many, however, and was frequently equated with promiscuity, even polygamy, so that sometimes an advocate of 'free unions' might defensively argue that this did not mean she supported 'free love'" (Bland 150). The term "free love" was commonly associated with James Hinton who successfully gave it its immoral reputation. He was infamous for promiscuous behavior often with young women, behavior he defended as natural and right.

The idea of the harmonious marriage of two souls was synonymous with a sexual relationship to Schreiner, but she felt that marriage as it stood was a contract into which a woman could not enter without compromising herself. Schreiner is in the category of women Bland mentions who felt the need to distance themselves and their ideals from the negative connotations of free love. Schreiner's ideal for love is one in which sexual intimacy plays an essential role in achieving what she believed to be the higher state of being that was potential in a sexual relationship. At the same time she rejected the purely carnal element of sex, and accordingly found monogamy was equally necessary for the purity of her ideal. She firmly asserted that her ideology clashed with Hinton's and clarifies, "With regard to 'free love', I have long made up my mind that it is a peculiarly devilish thing. I believe most strongly that no union should be formed except in the hope of its being lifelong..." (*Letters* 68) She qualifies that if free love were not quite so "devilish" it might make sense, since she claims, "I differ *entirely* from the orthodox view of its being right to keep on the union when love has died" (68). Schreiner indicates that she understands that relationships are not all eternal, and should only continue as long as both partners involved continue

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<sup>2</sup> Schreiner comments on Wollstonecraft's rebellion against her society's mores: "her greatness lay in this, her view with regard to marriage; and her action with regard to it. ... she saw a hundred years ago with regard to sex and sex relationships what few see today, and what the world will see in three hundred years' time" (Schreiner, *Letters* 78).

to benefit from the union. In Schreiner's ideal the concept of a lifelong partnership is always hoped for but is not a precondition to any sexual relationship. She concludes that a contract of sorts need only be considered in the instance that children are born and only in respect to them. Schreiner's vision of a marriage contract is never made explicit, and no sexual relationship that she ever had resulted in children before she entered into the traditional marriage contract with her husband. She intimates repeatedly in her letters at the time that contract was for the very condition that she specified a contract should be considered, motherhood. Ironically, she had no surviving children and found herself in just that contracted marriage which she condemned.<sup>3</sup> Thus, in her life more than in her theory, Schreiner presents the situation of a woman facing the decision to enter into a sexual relationship while unmarried. She also places her most known New Woman heroine in a similar predicament.

"In practice 'free love' ... [had] drawbacks for women" (Ledger 124) in a society that saw a woman as a sexual possession either as prostitute out of wedlock or as wife within it. Society had no legitimate institutions set up to ensure a woman's economic means to raise a child should she have to do so without the help of the male partner who did his share in the creation of the child. When a woman who is known to participate in free unions is ostracized and less likely to find work in a society where it is already difficult for her to find meaningful and economically profitable work as it is for Hardy's Sue Bridehead in *Jude the Obscure*, living by her morals becomes implausible. Participating in free unions was likely to leave a woman financially and emotionally destitute with a child to raise, while impoverished and with a shredded moral code. Some of the heroines, such as Schreiner's Lyndall, are aware of the impossibility of surviving while living by their morals, but they are also aware that the survival offered to them living outside their morals is no survival they covet. Lyndall challenges, "I wonder how many men there are who would give up everything that is dear in life

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<sup>3</sup> Though within this marriage Schreiner and her husband practiced a nontraditional married lifestyle, with Schreiner leaving for months on end and her husband taking her last name. The contract legally was the same.

for the sake of maintaining a high, ideal purity?" (*African Farm* 140).

When faced with the reality of compromising her ideals for general comfort and security in a world that offers little to an unmarried mother, Lyndall repeatedly rejects the pleas of marriage from her lover. When he asks, "why not marry me?," Lyndall responds, "Because ... once you have me you would hold me fast. I shall never be free again" (176). She tries to understand his perspective and what has formed him when she explains, "I believe that when you ask me to marry you you are performing the most generous act you ever have performed in the course of your life" (177). Still, she cannot yield that she should conform to accept what he considers generosity. She will accept his love and his partnership but only in a free union. "I cannot marry you ... because I cannot be tied; but, if you wish, you may take me away with you, and take care of me [in her pregnancy]; then when we do not love anymore we can say good-bye" (178). More of a commentary on the unsatisfactory partner than on free unions Schreiner writes Lyndall's lover's response, "why will you not give yourself entirely to me? One day you will desert me and go to another" (179). And though he eventually agrees to the free union Lyndall requests, the union dissolves, and he leaves. Schreiner's Lyndall is the most defiant of the New Woman heroines in this study, and even she is inclined to love where there is no suitable partner, inclined to sacrifice an ideal of pure love for "experience" (178) and for some love. Even though she knows it is not an ideal love, not one that calls forth "the higher part" of her nature, she is drawn into the temptation for some version of romantic and sexual companionship (177). The specter of complete isolation haunts her and threatens to be her only companion.

Schreiner creates a whole being in Lyndall, sexual desire intact. In her society the sexual desire that leads to Lyndall's pregnancy causes her to find herself in an economic predicament. Neither as a result of this nor in an attempt to avoid this does Schreiner negate Lyndall's emotional longing for sexual intimacy with a partner whom she loves. Unlike Schreiner, many New Woman novelists desexualized the New Woman, clinging to a form of

the Victorian ideal of the angel of the house stripped of all sexual desire. Some saw sexual desire as a degenerative trait that humans could evolve away from and that the true role of the sex function was to allow for reproduction. Gilman in *Herland* and those who embraced eugenics as a woman's power through maternity (notably, in this study, Dowie) illustrate that sex function as subordinate even superfluous in marriage. Gilman presents marriage as a partnership in remaking humanity through parenthood and meaningful labor. Dowie presents a heroine who does not mind the fraud of marriage if it will further her ability to regenerate the race with her chosen mate. Marriage was often also seen primarily by social purists (represented by Grand in this study) as a method by which women through their influence could elevate the male in the relationship, helping him to be his better, more moral self. In such a relationship the female partner, who has already achieved perfection in moral well-being, serves as the male's mentor. Grand did not promote free unions because the fluidity with which unions might come in and out of existence put women in danger and might diminish a woman's power. Since she believed that sexual desire could be overcome; to her "free love [was] free lust, and its liberty [was] license" (quoted in Richardson, *Love* 113). She insisted that "the higher natures all abandon the cant of passion for the cult of love eventually" (113). Dowie and Grand suggest that the benefits to free unions only become apparent in a relationship that is dangerous to the female. Though in *Herland* Gilman denies that the women there experience any sexual desire beyond maternal longing, she suggests that an alternative society would have no use for the marriage contract.<sup>4</sup>

In *Herland* Gilman suggests a freedom within the union, but the primary function of the union is motherhood. Only two men in this entire land (there are only three in total) aspire toward such a union, and the reader sees only the beginning of the marriages rather than the test of years on them. Because of this a reader cannot discern exactly what Gilman suggests

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<sup>4</sup> An interesting aside as a point of information might be that all three of these New Woman novelists got divorced from their husbands, a dissolution of the union that the women chose.

would happen in a existing society when the female partner has had her allotted number of babies (carefully restricted in this utopia) or is past her "mating" years.<sup>5</sup>

It is implied by the state of the relationships at the present time of the plot that the true, natural marriage of man and woman is more of a friendship based partnership than one rooted in romantic or sexual attraction like those common to the men in their homeland off the plateau. The very concept of marriage does not exist to the Herlanders, and though hesitant, they allow for a ceremony - but its resemblance to the turn of the century marriage is illusory. Vandyck admits to the sham of the ceremony: "Do not imagine that these young women utterly refused 'the Great New Hope,' as they called it, that of dual parentage. For that they agreed to marry us, though the marrying part of it was a concession to our prejudices not theirs" (137).

Though Gilman does not address the topic of free love and open unions directly in her novel, she makes clear that once women have rediscovered their nature, there should be no use for marriage. The "marriages" in the novel are entirely to appease the men, suggesting that the Herlanders allow for this symbolic nod to the institution. The Herlanders recognize marriage as insignificant and antiquated, but they understand that it is an aspect of the men's former lives that they are not yet willing to entirely abandon. Considering this, the Herlanders go along with it but only in an empty manner to placate their partners. Because it carries no history for the women, nor any legal or traditional suggestion of bondage in Herland, Gilman implies that the union is soluble. She illustrates this when one of the "husbands" attempts rape on his "wife," at which time the bonds of matrimony are not even considered, and the "husband" faces perpetual anesthesia or exile.

"'Might as well not be married at all,' growled Terry. 'They only got up that ceremony to please us . . . . They've no real idea of being married'" (124). The offending Terry is quite right; the Herlanders have no understanding of the concept of "being married" in the traditional sense.

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<sup>5</sup> This is reminiscent of the Victorian marriage plot in a sense because of the timing of the marriages in the plot, only it is in an alternate society.

Giving up the self to be possessed by a husband and entering into an ironclad union they can never leave without shame and defeat are concepts beyond the capacity of a Herlander to understand.

The sexual spectrum that ranged from a Lyndall character to one of Grand's characters who was intended to have a wholesome influence as a wife complicated the reform of marriage so completely that one might suggest it was the true crux of the inability to enact real transformative reform of marriage. The 'social purists' and the 'mothers' would not have any part of the free love movement. It was not to be considered at all because they assumed that women did not have sexual desires. In their view women did not gain anything from having any possible, degenerative sexual desires fulfilled. However, the New Woman novelists were unified in their belief that a woman should not be sacrificed for the sake of the institution and allowances must be made for occasional and necessary divorce. Even Grand "argued for the divorce law to be applied equally to husband and wife; men could divorce adulterous wives; but husbands also had to be guilty of cruelty before wives could sue for divorce" (Richardson *Love* 113).

Schreiner explains:

And if in the present disco-ordinate transitional stage of our social growth it is found necessary to allow of readjustment by means of divorce, it will not be because such readjustments will be regarded lightly, but rather as when, in a complex and delicate mechanism moved by a central spring, we allow the structure for the readjustment and regulation of that spring, because on its absolute perfection of action depends the movement of the whole mechanism. (*Woman* xvi)

Though reasons for divorce fluctuated from one New Woman novelist to the next, its necessity was assumed. The mechanism must be adjusted "by means of divorce," Schreiner states. Readjustments of marriage will not be "regarded lightly" she assures, but if no adjustment is made "the whole mechanism" of society will not function properly, thus making the woman's cause and call for divorce, a noble cry to help society. It also helped to

distance women's request for revised divorce laws from what might be viewed as selfish if the desire for revised divorce laws were to benefit women alone.

Making equitable the ability for both sexes to get a divorce became prominent in the debate. These authors did not necessarily idealize divorce, nor did they want divorce ultimately, but it was a means toward an ideal end - if traditional marriage continued to exist, then divorce was a necessity. It was the quick solution for the current inequalities in legal marriage. Until there was a system in which women and men could have a healthy 'marriage' of souls and lives, there had to be a safe escape from this unhealthy one. But rarely was divorce a safe escape for any woman. None of the New Woman novelists pursue a plot line which includes a divorced heroine. These are heroines whose lives are touched by its possibilities, such as Schreiner's Rebekah in *From Man to Man* who requests a divorce from her husband. He will not oblige, and she does not press the issue (282). Many New Woman heroines leave their husbands - some permanently and some only temporarily - but leaving the legal bond of matrimony was a much more difficult issue for the New Woman novelist to address.

Dixon broaches the issue in the margins of her plot with a character the reader knows little else about, but that she is involved in a "scandalous" divorce case, that she, not her husband, has brought to court. In *The Story of a Modern Woman*, the divorce of Lady Blaythewaite provides a distant subplot to the primary plot of the novel and is dealt with regularly as scandal. In society it is discussed at the opera, when she is spotted by the gossips: "And who do you think is down there in the omnibus box? Lady Blaythewaite, of all people. ... Three days before she has to appear in the divorce court. They say, ... it will be a *cause célèbre*. She brings the case, of course, but she won't get it. They're betting on it at the clubs" (166). The two characters continue to have a conversation intimating in a hardly veiled manner that Lady Blaythewaite is depraved. She is said to be "irresistible" implying that that is a flaw in her character. "One's supposed to be able to find her at five. But very often she's out" (167), one of the male gossips

whispers, suggesting that in her absence from her home she must be engaging in some illicit activities. This conversation is had primarily to entertain Lady Jane at the opera whose daughter Alison Ives is about to marry a man from whom, once she learns of his past, she would desire a divorce. Alison is fortunate enough to escape the gossip circuit by narrowly escaping the marriage. She discovers his sexual depravity prior to the wedding, but that is merely a matter of timing. Lady Blaythewaite's divorce case was not only spoken of by the vicious, petty gossips at the opera. It is front-page news, as the heroine Mary Erle, who also narrowly escapes a marriage to a man who is not a suitable partner, notices.

"Spesh--shull!--*Globe* piper--*St. James's Gizett--Pall Mall*," shouted a newsboy in her ear, at Charing-cross; and looking down she read, in blue or red letters, spattered and stained with London mud, the posters of the evening newspapers: -  
- "The Great Divorce Case. Cross-examination of the Plaintiff, Unabridged Report. Ladies ordered out of Court. Sketches of the Co-respondents." For the Blaythewaite scandal hung, like a pestilence, over England. Like some foul miasma, it poisoned everything. It met the eye, in columns of close print, at the breakfast table; it formed the one subject of conversation wherever people met. With hoarse laughs and brutal jests, it was discussed in public-houses and at street corners; with tepid, meaning smiles and shrugged shoulders in drawing-rooms and clubs. (178)

Mary notes how "cheaply vicious" humanity can be, but then moves on in the wave of it (178). Mary is ill equipped to do anything against the social force of shame that heaved against any woman resisting the norm, divorce case or otherwise. The scandal Dixon suggests surrounds Lady Blaythewaite is parallel to the actual scandal that Dowie experienced when she divorced her husband. A very popular figure in London society because of her looks and her first book *A Girl in the Karpathians*, she campaigned with her husband for his seat in Parliament to the extent that it

was suggested people were voting more for her than for him. Yet, it took little to unseat her as society's darling. It took the suggestion of adultery and a very public divorce case. Of course, this hints at far more than the need for equality in divorce, but the more the courts upheld the sexual double standard set by society and not an ethical standard, the more women would be lost to it. "Although Dowie lived to be seventy-seven, she seems to have published nothing after the age of thirty-five. Her effective withdrawal from the literary scene after 1903 was probably motivated in part by her very public divorce case in January of that year" (Small vii). While Dixon was not writing about Dowie, she might as well have been considering the parallels, but those parallels prove the analogous nature of Dixon's fictional society with the one in which she lived and the likely commonplace nature of debate surrounding a woman in a divorce case. Dixon's disgust with this social poverty of compassion and fairness is revealed in her suggestion of the "London mud" splattered on the paper. The "scandal hung like a pestilence" and the "Ladies [were] ordered out of court" (178). The sexual dichotomy of whore and virgin, prostitute and wife mocks the women of society, claiming that Lady Blaythewaite's actions (of which the reader remains ignorant like the ladies who had to leave the court) are too brazen for "ladies" to hear and yet that same society is quick to destroy her reputation. As a result Dixon suggests it will also destroy any future life in that society because of her presumably depraved female nature. Dixon forces Mary to hear it and to be exposed to it despite Mary's general desire to be part of the world of the married. The divorce case warns her and mocks her role in society and powerlessness as a female.

Lyndall asks:

"If the bird *does* like its cage, and *does* like its sugar and will not leave it, why keep the door so very carefully shut? Why not open it, only a little? Do they know, there is many a bird will not break its wings against the bars, but would fly if the doors were open." She knit her forehead, and leaned further over the bars. (Schreiner, *African Farm* 138-9)

Lyndall leans over the bars of her cage, challenging, questioning the established relationship between a man and a woman in a marriage, in which the woman is the captive of her husband. She suggests that, although she does break her wings against the bars of her cage with a rebellious spirit, there are others not so rebellious who, if they were given the chance, would leave a possessive relationship.

While free love dealt with the sexual and romantic freedom of a married couple, these authors took into consideration the more pragmatic problems with marriage in the area of legal ownership. The ownership of a wife had become archaic, and the legal system was developing, though slowly, to meet with the feminist demand. Society and popular opinion did not seem to be on quite as fast a train as the slow one the legal system had boarded. Debate over divorce law, marital rape and child custody was renewed any time a new law was demanded or passed. Here, these authors were in agreement. Marriage could not be a contract in which either member owned the other in body, spirit or mind.

The Victorian chivalric code protected an unmarried woman's right to her own body in that a man could not legally rape her. Once a wife, the tables turned. Committing to a husband included committing to his sexual appetites and whims regardless of her own. However she might resist, he had a right to his wife's body whenever he so chose. Until the aforementioned Clitheroe case in 1887, a husband had a right to own his wife's person, entitling a man to custody of his wife (Bland 136). As extreme as these statements might seem to a twenty-first-century reader, the general acceptance of this established a tone for the marriage relationship between a man and a woman. This standard was what New Woman novelists attacked, what they aimed to destroy. In agreement on this issue New Woman novelists asserted that no relationship can be healthy if both partners are not of equal value to one another, if both partners are not on equal footing, sharing both burden and joy. If one partner can legally own the other, the suggestion was that the relationship would be hopelessly flawed. Thus, Schreiner's most frustrated feminist heroine,

Lyndall states, "I'm not in so great a hurry to put my neck beneath any man's foot" (*African Farm* 131).

Caird's Hadria finds herself in a situation where she has few options, and she chooses marriage despite her aversion to it. Hadria's intense need to escape her circumstances before marriage drives her into a more permanent set of negative circumstances. Marriage proves to be an exaggerated version of the oppressive, confined life she had been living with her mother. Hadria reveals her knowledge of the evils marriage promises when she states, "I have little enough freedom now, heaven knows; but if I married, why my very thoughts would become the property of another. ... I should consider it ... beyond endurance" (129). Despite her will, Hadria is subject to circumstance which is against her. While under the influence of sensibility, disguised by the author as Celtic music, and feeling a desire to escape the stifling situation in which she is trapped, Hadria submits to her doom.

*The Awakening* establishes "the focus of the woman as captive wife and her recognition of that bondage" (Jacobs 81). In the opening chapters Chopin's Edna acquiesces and holds out her hands to receive her wedding rings of which her husband has been in possession while she swam. Later, Edna tries to grind her wedding ring into the floor of her room in a fit of rebellion. "Edna could not help but think it was very foolish, very childish, to have stamped on her wedding ring" (Chopin 54). After the realization of the absurdity and futility of rebellion against the symbol of her oppression, Edna chooses genuine rebellion. "She was visited by no more outbursts, moving her to such futile expedients. She began to do as she liked and feel as she liked" (54). This rebellion should be read as much as one against self as it is commonly read as a rebellion against her husband and marriage. Her self disgust reveals this. Edna chooses her confinement, like many of the heroines, as an escape from another kind of confinement, that of young maidenhood under the thumb of her father (18-9). It is she who puts the ring on her finger after swimming, not her husband.

After recognizing that she cannot commiserate, understand or form any

meaningful connection with the “mother-women” in Grand Isle, she temporarily stays among them, even though “in short, Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman” (9). Edna sensed that she had little in common with these women but had allowed herself to fall into a pattern of similar habits. She was at Grand Isle with her children for the summer doing little of substance other than learning to swim and attempting to have some harmless amusement with a romantic liaison. Chopin suggests that Edna has greater potential than these women and is squandering it daily. At this point in the novel Edna represents Schreiner’s sex-parasite. However, it is not too late for Edna, and she recognizes that she is unsatisfied with a life in which she worships her husband who determines her fate and future, maternal or otherwise. After leaving Adelle Ratignolle, a mother-woman friend of Edna’s, and Monsieur Ratignolle “Edna felt depressed rather than soothed ... . The little glimpse of domestic harmony which had been offered her gave her no ... longing. It was not a condition of life which fitted her” (54).

Edna chooses to leave the marriage, her husband and her two sons to recreate herself in a society that is not yet capable of having Edna in her reformed state, and that ultimately destroys her. For Edna as with many of the heroines the problem with her marriage has many roots, but the tap root leads to a loveless union. Chopin explains that “her marriage to Léonce Pontellier was purely an accident, in this respect resembling many other marriages which masquerade as the decrees of Fate” (18).

Outside of marriage Edna discovers both emotional and sexual awakenings with men. Still, there is the subtle suggestion that if Edna were to enter into a marriage with the man she believes she loves or the man she had experienced “the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded” (80), the love and the sexual longing would eventually die. This is an example of how marriage becomes the culprit for killing the possibility of meaningful and authentic bonds between men and women. In Edna’s marriage she experiences many of the flaws with marriage outlined earlier: meaningless existence, lack of meaningful labor, sex-parasitism, a

sense of being owned by another. Léonce, Edna's husband, does not conceal that he views her as his property and that he can dictate her actions and thoughts. The reader's first introduction to Léonce is to see him "looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property" (4). In the following scenes Léonce insists on certain behaviors from Edna, demanding that she come in from outdoors and not swim out too far. Like an obstinate child, Edna disobeys. Her rebellion initially is very childish and only representative of her pluck. When she eventually moves out of her husband's home she is unsure why exactly she is so inclined. She tells Mademoiselle Reisz that it is because she does not like that the house is not hers nor is it theirs, but it is her husband's. She is coming to understand that this economic reliance is a burden to her (76). She prefers to stay in a much smaller house which the fruits of her artistic labor afford. Just as she prefers to feel love for Robert rather than an emptiness toward her husband, or sexual pleasure from Alcée rather than the unnatural physical relationship she has with her husband.

The women of Herland accept marriage with the intruders but only because they associate no negative connotations with it. Marriage to them holds only positive potential. They do not know marriage as Lyndall does, as a trafficking in women. They hope for and expect a genuine union of souls and the potential to procreate the old fashioned way. As time passes in their wedded lives they become acquainted with marriage as it is accepted by the 'civilized' world off the plateau, and they resist specific constructs within it. What they oppose should be read as what Gilman suggests are marriage's greatest flaws, its greatest offenses to woman's nature and what restricts it from being a healthy partnership between men and women. These include equality of personal space, ownership over one's own body and equality in labor. Much to the surprise of the male protagonists, the women will not budge on these issues. When the men force the issue, particularly in the case of the attempted rape, the women of Herland come together in the defense of the endangered. The men are confined and then exiled. Even that union that the society of Herland has so

longed for is not valued at the cost of sacrificing one woman. This is the great difference between the experience of marriage in Herland and that of the realistic fictions of the other authors in this study. When approached from this angle one recognizes that although the fictions differ from author to author the resonating commonality is that union, as central as it is to the drive of these feminists, is not of more value than the individual soul of any one woman. When that soul is damaged, distorted, or sacrificed the union is unworthy and no longer union, rather it is a usurpation of self and a devouring of one being to sustain the other. This approach to marriage Schreiner, Caird, Gilman and Grand agree will destroy society as a whole. "We have in us the blood of a womanhood that was never bought and never sold; that wore no veil, and had no foot bound; whose realized ideal of marriage was sexual companionship and an equality in duty and labor" (Schreiner, *Woman* 54).

The women of Herland do not have any sense that they have an obligation to sacrifice their bodies to the sexual desires of their husbands and, therefore, have no intention of doing so. This does not mean that they want to continue to be asexual. They do not. Their sexuality needs to merge with that of the men of the early twentieth century and not be overtaken by it.

The attitude of the Herlanders can be viewed in direct contrast with the acceptance of the post-Victorian sex-parasite of Schreiner's novels and nonfiction. According to Schreiner the role of the parasitic wife is vital to the deterioration of the union between men and women. Without this parasitic woman, this parasitic relationship, the women of Herland are capable of reforming the minds of two of the three men involved in the alternative marriage. Gilman's conclusion implies that two out of three is not bad, especially when the Herlanders can exile the third.

"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!" (Schreiner, *African Farm* 140). Likewise, the crisis of a decision but no decision is offered to a

woman, and the problematic presentation of “freedom” in marriage is mocked in Lyndall’s disgusted rant to Waldo. The freedom within the bond of marriage, one that holds a woman economically to her husband, is no freedom at all. Therefore, Lyndall suggests in her metaphors that while society might allow for a legal liberty for a woman to leave a marriage, there is little liberty at all until the system changes in such a way that the cat is no longer afloat in a tub in a pond, nor is the single woman drowning and catching at straws in a society that does not allow for her success and financial independence.

### **Mercenary Relationship - A Room of One’s Own, Economic Dependence and Sex-Parasitism**

Like the rings that Lyndall and Edna rebel against, the home is representative of the unbreakable bond of marriage and the possession of husband over wife. The home itself becomes the woman’s prison, where she is ‘kept,’ when it belongs to her husband, and he becomes her jailer. This home as prison motif is not new to women’s literature as Gilbert and Gubar relate “dramatizations of imprisonment and escape are pervasive in nineteenth-century literature by women ...” (85). Gilbert and Gubar go on to explain that this “represent[s] a uniquely female tradition in this period” (85).

Most notably represented among the authors in this study, Gilman’s short story, “The Yellow Wall-paper,” describes a narrator who is imprisoned in a room in an “hereditary estate” in order to cure her of her depression. She is not allowed to write, and she is encouraged to clear her mind of all thought. Ultimately, her mental state deteriorates due to her captivity, and she imagines that there are hundreds of women also trapped in the pattern of the wallpaper of the room. She explains that in the moonlight the pattern “becomes bars” and “the woman behind it is as plain as can be” (37). The woman shakes the bars and rattles her cage (39), and the narrator peels away the paper so as to liberate the woman, trapped inside the walls. As the delusion persists the narrator sees many women

who have escaped from the wallpaper, and she wonders "if they all [came] out of the wall-paper as I did" (41).

By the end of the story there is a shift in possession of the prison, and the room becomes hers. In her deluded state she refuses to leave it and is reluctant to allow anyone else in. The language is paradoxical in that she says "I've got out at last," and she defies anyone to "put [her] back" (42), but she remains in the room crawling along the edge of the wall in circles. What she has gotten out of and what she is in possession of become layered and complicated. Gilbert and Gubar suggest that in other gothic fiction written by women the house comes to represent the female (*Madwoman* 88-9). "The Yellow Wall-paper" presents the house, in this case the room, as a symbol of the narrator's body within which she is trapped. While she is confined within the structure of her husband's hereditary estate, by its very nature oppressing her, she strips it of its confining wallpaper which she now views as bars, and no longer imagines herself jumping out the window. She has transcended the house and the idea of her body as her prison because she has stripped from the room and herself the patriarchal dictates society has superimposed on each. Only in her delusional state is the narrator able to escape the bonds of social self and the walls of the hereditary estate.

The escape is essential, and Gilbert and Gubar give praise to Gilman for allowing her narrator to rise up and transcend her confines if only through the route of madness. Gilbert and Gubar identify the triumph of the madwoman in "her own imaginings and creations, mirages of health and freedom, with which her author endows her like a fairy godmother showering gold on a sleeping heroine" (91). The escape and the power she feels over herself and her world are illusory. The narrator is completely out of touch with her social reality and unable to function in the society which she has overthrown in her mind. In other New Woman fiction an alternative home is sought by many heroines who rebel against their captivity. On the opposite end of the spectrum in *Herland*, Gilman presents women who have never known captivity.

The Herlanders are baffled by various elements of conventional matrimony. Vandyck explains, "If the lack of tradition of courtship left us much at sea in our wooing, we found ourselves still more bewildered by lack of traditional matrimony" (95). Without a formal tradition of matrimony Herlanders were unlikely to adopt practices that would stifle and subordinate them, such as a husband and wife assuming separate spheres, and the woman confining herself to the home. Gilman identifies what she deems natural and unnatural about male/ female relationships through Vandyck's voice:

That we should pair off together in our courting days was natural to them; that we three should remain much together, as they did themselves, was also natural. We had yet no work, so we hung about them in their forest tasks; that was natural, too.

But when we began to talk about each couple having "homes" of our own, they could not understand it (97).

Terry, the chauvinist, explains to his companion, Alima, and to the others that "a man wants a home of his own, with his wife and family in it" (97). In response to which the "girls" question the likeness of this to imprisonment and wonder at what a woman does there all day. The explorers fumble through some paltry explanations which do not satisfy the three women. Ellador determines that she cannot understand the reasoning behind "the home" and "social duties" of a "wife" without seeing them, giving the incomprehensible society the benefit of the doubt before being utterly repulsed by it (98).

After the marriage ceremony come 'difficulties', and the question of the home becomes more immediate. "The more external disagreement was in the matter of 'the home,' and the housekeeping duties and pleasures we, by instinct and long education, supposed to be inherently appropriate to women" (121). Despite their expectations, the male explorers are not about to convince the Herlanders to become Victorian wives, for the women are content with having private space of their own.

These people had, it now became clear to us, the highest, keenest, most delicate sense of personal privacy, but not the faintest idea of that "solitude à deux" we are so fond of. They had, every one of them, the "two rooms and a bath" theory realized. From earliest childhood each had a separate bedroom with toilet conveniences, and one of the marks of coming of age was the addition of an outer room in which to receive friends. (123-4)

Though much of the Herland realization of theory is not able to be accomplished off the plateau in the settings most New Woman fiction, the "two rooms and a bath" theory is. Both Schreiner's Rebekah in *From Man to Man* and Chopin's Edna in *The Awakening* escape their husband's homes and live in a very small one of their own. Even though Rebekah's husband denies her a divorce, she moves out into a little two room structure built in the garden of her husband's home (390). Though this might seem a minor rebellion, considering the hereditary estate as a prison as in "The Yellow Wall-paper," its symbolic nature and the freedom of body and mind it affords are considerable.

Little by little Edna throws off the restrictions of her tie to her husband's house. Her rebellion manifests itself one afternoon in going out instead of receiving her callers. Her husband is shocked and expresses "genuine consternation" that she "simply felt like going out, and [she] went out" (49). Disgusted beyond his ability to stay in her presence, Léonce goes to the club and Edna to her room where "she began to walk to and fro down its whole length, without stopping, without resting" (50). She tears a handkerchief to shreds, attempts in vain to crush her wedding ring, and smashes a glass vase on the hearth (51). "She wanted to destroy something" (51). In the following days she finds that she cannot paint anything that satisfies her while in the house and, out of frustration at this, often goes out. While visiting Mademoiselle Reisz, a spinster and musician, Edna announces that she is moving out of her husband's home and into "a little four room house around the corner" (76). She explains that her

husband's house "never seemed like mine, anyway - like home," elaborating that "the house, the money that provides for it, are not mine" (76). The rent for the new home she will live in will be provided for by her inheritance of her mother's estate and money she earns through selling her paintings. Edna moves out and provides for herself, essentially (in all ways but the legal) divorced from her husband.

The proximity of these homes to the patriarchal estates belonging to the husbands is gentle mockery of the former ownership of the wife as one of the possessions in the house. It matters little to these women if they live near their husband's homes, but to live inside them is suffocating.

The imperative to escape the home of the husband suggests the necessity of economic independence. Edna is liberated by her ability to sustain herself. The Herlanders could not imagine a marriage without meaningful labor and contribution to society that rewards them with their share of economic support. The economic independence of a woman within a marriage was unlikely, and in traditional marriages it was even frowned upon. This economic dependence most New Woman novelists claimed would inhibit any marriage reform made, because it established a dependent relationship of the wife on her husband, one which, by its nature, made her subordinate to and reliant upon him. There could be no equality in such a relationship. Caird states that "the economical independence of woman is the first condition of free marriage" ("Marriage" 196). She simplifies that a woman "ought not to be tempted to marry, or to remain married, for the sake of bread and butter" (196).

Schreiner labels this economic dependence "sex-parasitism" likening it to a socially acceptable and even promoted form of prostitution. Women gave their bodies up to their husbands in order to be "kept"; this made them only slightly better than other "kept women." Schreiner explores this concept in great detail in her central work of nonfiction, *Woman and Labor*, but also in her fiction in *The Story of an African Farm* and *From Man to Man*. Sex-parasitism is what Schreiner weighed most heavily as the flaw in marriage, and the gravity of her philosophy should be noted when she

defines it in terms directly compared with prostitution,

From the mighty laboring woman who bears human creatures to the full extent of her power, rears her offspring unaided, and performs at the same time severe social labor in other directions ...; it is but one step, though a long one, from this woman, to the woman who produces offspring freely but does not herself rear them, and performs no compensatory social labor. From this woman, again, to the one who bears few or no children, and performs no productive social labor, but who, whether as wife or mistress, lives by the exercise of her sex function alone, the step is short. There is but one step farther to the prostitute, who affects no form of productive labor, and who, in place of life, is recognized as producing disease and death, but who exists parasitically through her sexual attribute. (*Woman* 35)

These steps are in close proximity to one another on the page and in Schreiner's theory of sex-parasitism and its prospects for damage to society if the system continues as it has. As Schreiner views it, the common sexual relationship between men and women in Victorian society was prostitution no matter how it was dressed up. The titles varied, but all represented the same horrific disease. She notes only a slight distinction between "kept wife, kept mistress or prostitute" and claims that the prostitute is on an equal footing with the "'fine lady,' the human female parasite" of "modern Paris or New York or London" (*Woman* 24). She footnotes that "prostitution can never be adequately dealt with either from the moral or scientific standpoint, unless its relation to the general phenomenon of female parasitism be fully recognized" (24-5). She explains that, "the result of this parasitism has invariably been the decay in the vitality and intelligence of the female" (22-3).

Schreiner represents her female sex-parasite as the most notorious degenerated being. In *The Story of an African Farm* this character type is portrayed in the characters, Em and Tant' Sannie. The sex-parasites in her

novels are representative of the image of the tick she presents in *Woman and Labor*. Schreiner footnotes a repulsive and effective image in *Woman and Labor* that describes the parasitism of the female species of certain insects. This is Schreiner's foreboding prophesy for the future of the human female if she continues degenerating further into pure sex-parasitism. The female termite is "a mere passive, distended, bag of eggs," and the female tick is "a mere distended bladder, which when filled with eggs bursts and ends a parasitic existence which has hardly been life" (22). Sex-parasites are presented as sucking the lifeblood from society, a bloated sac with no other purpose besides reproduction. Intriguingly, Schreiner toys with her reader's sympathies on this issue. Presenting a repulsive parasite, Tant' Sannie, she also writes a pathetic but likable sex-parasite, Em, into the novel. Em is the literary predecessor to the more tragic, Baby Bertie, in *From Man to Man* who is innocently driven by society to what is commonly accepted as prostitution.

"Tant' Sannie is a miserable old woman, . . . . Your father married her when he was dying, because he thought she would take better care of the farm, and of us, than an Englishwoman . . . . Now she saves every farthing for herself, buys us not even one old book" (Schreiner, *African Farm* 10). As a perceptive, small child, Lyndall recognizes that Tant' Sannie represents the most abhorrent type of womanhood. She goes through husband's like socks. "It is Tant' Sannie who buries husbands one after another, and folds her hands resignedly . . . and looks for another" (140-1). Tant' Sannie represents evil and a warped concept of survival of the fittest in a society that dictates and distorts what is fittest, simultaneously killing what is naturally fittest: Lyndall.

While Tant' Sannie is presented as a hypocritical, repulsive woman in her prime, sucking the life out of all in her path and dominating in so doing, Em is presented from innocent childhood. Em grows up alongside Lyndall and in contrast to her cousin is eager to be married (131). As a child Em is kind and caring, but not strong-willed, defiant or intelligent. She is a passive being, unhappy with much of her situation, but not moved to alter it. The

reader's sympathy is further evoked because of Lyndall's reaction to Em. She sees the goodness in Em, but she also has an uncanny sense about Em's fate and an unrelenting frustration with Em's simplicity and complacency. Lyndall says that Em is like "the accompaniment of a song. She fills the gaps in other people's lives, and is always number two; but like many accompaniments - a great deal better than the song she is to accompany" (172). Despite the pity and regard for her goodness that Lyndall expresses, the reader is left with a stubborn sense of repulsed pity for Em (174).

She works in the text as a foil for Lyndall, but she has a significant role of her own as the child female destined to sex-parasitism and as an already degenerated form of the female, a result of the degeneration of her parents. Like Lyndall, her strongest desire is for love, but, unlike Lyndall, this is Em's only significant desire. The theme of the woman's futile search for a love that will suit her nature is ever-present in Schreiner's fiction, no matter if that woman is a sex-parasite or New Woman.

Though all sex-parasites are innately evil in the role they play in the downfall of society, a number of them are like Em, passively contributing to this social evil and, Schreiner suggests, deserve some element of pity in that they will receive no pleasure from their fate. Em is born to become bloated with eggs and to explode. The system has created her, and, though she perpetuates it, she is also a victim of it.

In *Woman and Labor* Schreiner links sex-parasitism to capitalism. "The wealthier the males of a society become, the greater the temptation, both to themselves and to the females connected with them to drift toward female parasitism" (42). Here she links the success of any substantial change for marriage to a socialist transformation of society, suggesting that the former is reliant upon the later. Since any real change for women she felt relied on a change in the state of marriage, Schreiner implies that women's fate can only truly change in the evolution of an unhealthy social state of capitalism to a more equitable, healthy socialist society. Caird was in agreement with Schreiner on the corollary relationship of capitalism and women's economic

subordination. Caird clarifies, "our present competitive system, with its daily increasing ferocity of the struggle for existence" must be adjusted, and "some form of co-operation, in which no man's interest will depend on the misfortune of his neighbor, but rather his neighbor's happiness and welfare" must be brought about ("Marriage" 196-7). Caird makes the connection that "under improved economic conditions the difficult problem of securing the real independence of women, and thence the readjustment of their position in relation to men and to society would find easy solution ..." (197). This leads to another problem with marriage which will be addressed later, one Schreiner links to sex-parasitism, the lack of purposeful labor.

### **Double Sexual Standard**

Those, such as Schreiner, who boldly believed in monogamy without matrimony and partnership with the option to leave, saw that if society ignored the necessity of this freedom, the chosen ignorance was likely to promote certain social ills such as adultery. These would bring all the goblins associated with them. In the case of adultery these included the perpetuation of prostitution and the spread of syphilis. Social purists suggested that free love was not the answer to these social ills. Men did not need more sexual freedom, rather, less. Social purists believed that "men had to be instructed in self control; morally inadequate men or those who resisted moral training were to be treated as social outcasts" (Heilmann, General Introduction xxii). They asked the world, who exists who is better to do this moral training than the wife? Grand states, "We must look upon man's mistakes ... with some leniency, because we are not blameless in the matter ourselves" ("The New Aspect" 89). Grand was determined in her ideal to present a society in which women could help men out of their depravity. New Woman novelists sympathetic with Grand believed that women had to help men evolve away from the baser part of their natures. Grand claims, "now woman holds out a strong hand to the child-man, and insists, but with infinite tenderness and pity, upon helping him up" (90). She explains that it was "the woman's place and pride and pleasure to teach the

child, and man morally in his infancy" (90).

Not all men could be reached, though, and the sexually depraved who could not be reached were a danger to wives and society. Schreiner's antagonist, Frank, in *From Man to Man* and Gilman's would-be rapist, Terry, in *Herland* represent this odious and destructive character type. Terry, who cannot assimilate into the Herland culture, commits a profound offense when he attempts rape on his "wife." Frank is characterized by his adulterous behavior with a servant and an adolescent girl and represents the imperialist "colonizing" the weaker and more defenseless. Gilman and Schreiner imply that if allowed to continue in their behavior, such characters would have abysmally detrimental effects on society. In *Herland* the rapist, Terry, is exiled, but in Cape Town, Frank has the power. There is certainly no community of women in Cape Town who support and protect Rebekah, quite the contrary. She is instead totally isolated for her "mannish" ways that are represented by outrageous behavior like "digging in the garden with a big spade where people could see her" (131). Frank continues with his behavior, and as a result he has a child for which he claims no responsibility. Rebekah escapes physically unscathed, albeit with six children to raise, and remains his wife and his property.

To complicate matters Frank puts into words the double sexual standard and virgin/whole dichotomy that oppresses Rebekah as angel and her whore counterpart who is represented in the novel literally by her sister, Baby Bertie. In writing this relationship, Schreiner draws the connection between the two into direct familial contact. Frank explains that "women think ... that men don't see through them when they ogle and flirt and try to captivate every fellow they meet; but we do! That style of woman is all very well to dance and flirt with," and in Frank's case have intercourse with and colonize (205). He continues, "but when he really wants a wife and means to settle down he looks for something different" (205). In this scene Rebekah and her depraved husband are looking at Rebekah's sister, an unconscious Baby Bertie. Rebekah kneels down at Baby Bertie's feet and tends to her physical needs representing a humility. This also suggests that

Rebekah's relation to her sister is not one of superiority, when one considers Schreiner's belief that in traditional marriage any wife is a sex-parasite and similar in moral status to a prostitute. Though his opinion is unsolicited by Rebekah, Frank continues with his lecture on what a man wants in a wife and explains that both her resistance and her innocence made him determined to have Rebekah as his wife.

In as much as the husbands in certain marriages were depraved, the innocence and "purity" of the female before marriage and the idealizing of her purity within marriage worked to her detriment. In Grand's novel, *The Heavenly Twins*, two of her heroines fall prey to their own ignorance and the sexual double standard of their time. "Edith Beale had now been married for more than a year ..." and, though that might not seem long, it foreshadowed a future existence that would be much like the year that had passed, "a painful period of gradual disillusion - and all the more painful because she was totally unprepared even for the possibility of any troubles of the kind which had beset her" (276). Evadne, who marries earlier in the novel, tries to warn Edith that Menteith is a "*dreadful man*." She is reluctant to believe it, but asserts that "if he is *bad*, I will make him good; if he is lost, I will save him" (234). Evadne, who has learned of the potential of the depravity of husbands, insists, "when a man's moral fiber is loosened, his share of love escapes" suggesting that some men cannot be saved (234). It is Edith's very ignorance of what "bad" might actually be that allows room for her deluded hope, for Menteith's kind of evil is that of deadly proportions. Edith contracts syphilis and deteriorates after having given birth to a syphilitic child.

Bland documents that "... until the 1880s girls' sexual innocence-cum-ignorance had been widely believed to provide them 'protection'" and notes that after such time the equation between sexual innocence and purity was also being challenged" (139). Edith and Evadne represent victims of this delusion, leaving them adrift and vulnerable once they enter into a marriage. This sexual double standard of accepted male debauchery and presumed and enforced female innocence and purity was an equation for

the failure of many sexual relationships. Evadne, given her experience, tries to instruct Edith, but fails. Evadne explains that she can tell from how he looks at her and the suggestions made by her own husband about the objectionable nature of his character. She emphasizes that if her own husband makes this implication, then it must be "very objectionable indeed" (233). However, it is all to no avail since Evadne's voice is drowned out by a sea of voices including Edith's mother, Mrs. Beale. To her Evadne plaintively remarks, "It is you good women who make marriage a lottery for us" (233). Edith marries Menteith and her purity is her undoing, leaving her "totally unprepared even for the possibility of any troubles of the kind which had beset her" (276).

Although Grand characterizes this handful of men in her fiction as hopeless, Evadne is willing to accept that some men are able to "be saved," from a base part of their nature. This hope and belief in the power of female influence in marriage is an essential part of the Grand's ideal for marriage. Gilman alludes to the raising influence of a moral woman on an ordinary man in *Herland* when she has the narrator, Vandyck, say that it feels better to love "up" a woman, to aspire to be as good as she, as opposed to the traditional approach to loving a woman, the approach he accepted outside of Herland.

These were women one had to love "up," very high up, instead of down. They were not pets. They were not servants. They were not timid, inexperienced, weak. ...

I found that loving "up" was a very good sensation after all. It gave me a queer feeling, way down deep, as of the stirring of some ancient dim prehistoric consciousness, a feeling that they were right somehow - that this was the way to feel. ... I mean the feeling that a very little child would have, who had been lost - for ever so long. It was a sense of getting home; of being clean and rested; of safety and yet freedom; ... a love that didn't irritate and didn't smother. (139-40)

Gilman suggests that with most men (two-thirds in her experiment) this is a plausible approach and outcome. She goes on to claim that women in their natural state can elevate men in moral well being, almost without even trying, as do the women of Herland, who are purposeful and laboring, intelligent and well educated, curious and inquisitive, moral and mothering.

### **Labor - Lack of Purpose and the Mundane Existence for the Middle-Class Wife**

*“Give us labor and the training which fits labor! We demand this not for ourselves, but for the race”* (Schreiner, *Woman* 1). Schreiner demands that women’s share of labor be given to them in her tract appropriately titled *Woman and Labor*. She claims that, while in the past motherhood was a profession that was respected and that absorbed much of the lives of women, this was no longer the case, nor should it be. In her elaborate explanation that, due to advancements in medicine, infant mortality was no longer a problem and that it was no longer a woman’s duty to populate the earth. Motherhood, though noble, was a temporary profession and not one for which all women were suited. She explains that because of this shift and the extension in the human life span, women need their “share of honored and socially useful toil, our full half of the labor” of society (18). Schreiner’s commentary on the relationship between motherhood and labor will be addressed. However, it is significant that she determines that marriage, in and of itself, is no vocation, a least not an honorable one. In fact, in her discussion of sex-parasitism, she explains that it *is* a profession, a form of prostitution. Marriage ideally is a partnership between a man and a woman.

With the exception of those in Gilman’s utopia, none of the New Woman heroines find sustainable, purposeful labor despite their search for it. Chopin’s Edna paints, but, without guidance or support from her society she flounders. Dixon’s Mary Erle writes, but her society encourages her to write not what she deems meaningful but hack journalism to feed the appetite of the masses. Caird’s Hadria flees to Paris to pursue her art and is fortunate to have mentors to guide and educate her, but before she makes

any substantial progress, she is deceived into a return to her marriage. Schreiner's Lyndall seeks out her education but returns embittered by the experience describing her time at a finishing school as one in which she was "shut up with cackling old women, who are without knowledge of life, without love of the beautiful, without strength ..." (*African Farm* 132-3). She explains that "it is suffocation only to breathe the air they breathe" (132-3). Her education was comparable to having her "[brain] slowly diluted and squeezed out" (133). She explains that she "found time to write some plays" and has found out how difficult "it is to make your thoughts look anything but imbecile fools when you paint them with ink on paper" (133). She seeks education and guidance before she can be effective, but after her experience she becomes cynical and has a pessimistic outlook on the potential to find education, guidance or purpose in a society that is determined to define her by her sex. She says she has learned at school, just not what she expected to learn. "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" (135). This is the truth imparted to her while at school.

Without noble labor, New Woman novelists suggested, marriage could not reach its ideal. In fact, far short of an ideal, marriage could exist in no other way than its present, debauched, state if society did not allow for women to contribute purposeful labor outside of marriage. Until this occurred women would remain dependent on men, and this dependence would result in the aforementioned sex-parasitism, perpetuating the problem of defining women's value by their sex. New Woman novelists explain that the subsequent effect was that women could not acquire, nor should they be able to, the respect of their male partners. Without it the marriage relationship could not be equal. Without easing her sarcasm for a moment, Lyndall explains to Waldo,

We have always this advantage over you - we can at any time step into ease and competence, where you must labor patiently for it. A little weeping ... a little careful use of our advantages, and then some man will say - "Come, be my

wife!" With good looks and youth marriage is easy to attain. ... a woman who has sold herself [in this way] ... need hold her skirt aside for no creature in the street. They both earn their bread in one way. (136)

Lyndall resents the power she wields through her sex. "'Power!' she said suddenly, smiting her little hand upon the rail. 'Yes, we have power, and since we are not to expend it in tunneling mountains, nor healing diseases, nor making laws, nor money, ... we expend it on *you*'" (138). Lyndall explains that women's intellect does not merely disappear because they have no outlet for it. Instead, it is redirected into a form of manipulation of the opposite sex, a manipulation that is by its nature destructive to the relationship of the sexes. "You are our goods, our merchandise, ... we buy you, we sell you, we make fools of you, ... . We are not to study law, nor science, nor art, so we study you" (138). The implied result of this study is the knowledge of how better to manipulate with one's sexual attributes the male's desires in such a way that benefits the woman; eventually the wife. Despite this power, ultimately the woman is both degraded by the misuse of her ability to study and apply that knowledge and feels an inner sense of uselessness and self disgust as is apparent in Lyndall's outrage. As with the female gothic turning the prison of the house into the prison of the body, Lyndall's disgust with society is reflected inward and applied to a herself and her participation in this distorted, detrimental relationship of the sexes. She does not want to study and manipulate men; she does not want the power society allots her. She does not want to exist in a female form if this is the only way a female is allowed to exist in society. She is trapped inside her gender, but she implies that in other circumstances her sex would be more than capable of contributing to society in a beneficial rather than detrimental fashion.

Though all the authors in this study agree with the suggestion that women and marriage cannot reach a sublime state of existence without meaningful labor for women, they characteristically disagree as to what that labor might be, and the distinction splits authors who otherwise are

accordant, while connecting authors who on other topics are divided. Schreiner and Gilman write most resolutely about the importance of purposeful labor for a woman's ascension out of her current state of degeneration. Gilman's *Women and Economics* and Schreiner's *Woman and Labor* are parallel texts; both authors identify that women's labor must go beyond the home and the role as mother. Both also explore these concepts in detail in their fiction. Dowie and Grand agree that labor is essential to a woman finding purpose, but resolve that this labor can be found primarily in the role of mother. This suggestion is utterly rejected by Chopin in *The Awakening* in her portrayal of the faceless "mother women" on Grand Isle who have given up all sense of self and greater involvement with the world in order to be doting mothers.

In "Marriage" Caird addresses the compatibility question in relation to the forced ignorance and superfluous nature of a wife. She first mocks the virtues associated with a good wife. "The luckless man finds his wife so very dutiful and domesticated, and so very much confined to her 'proper sphere,' that she is, perchance, more exemplary than entertaining" (195). Caird's suggestion that it is a wife's duty to entertain her husband is asserted sarcastically, but in relation to men and women's compatibility, Caird is in earnest. The perfect wife, Caird explains, "may look injured and resigned, but she must not seek society and occupation on her own account ..." (195). In reform, said wife must deviate from her proscribed realm and accomplishments, "adding to the common mental store, bringing new interest and knowledge into the joint existence, and becoming thus a contented, cultivated, and agreeable being ..." (195). Caird suggests that, then, all would be lost of the commonly known marriage and the woman and man would complement each other beyond their ability to procreate. "No wonder that while all this [broadening of self] is forbidden we have so many unhappy wives and bored husbands. The more admirable the wives the more profoundly bored the husbands!" (78). Though Caird appears to be making light of a woman's right and need to pursue knowledge, labor and purpose outside marriage, she associates the primary problem of this with

bored husbands and unhappy wives. Her sentiment has both levels, and her reader would have understood the significance of both in the context of the debate that raged in society. 'Allow us labor,' the New Woman novelist demands of her society; 'do not force us to be trapped in a degrading role in society' Lyndall insists. While New Woman novelists believed that this request of their society was one of the utmost significance to women, coupling it with a suggestion that meaningful labor for women would benefit marriage and bored husbands, was meant to give it added strength. Schreiner closes her polemic, after describing the Adam and Eve story, with a new vision for an Eden and the new ideal to replace the Victorian one:

We also have our dream of a Garden, but it lies in a distant future. We dream that woman shall eat of the tree of knowledge together with man, and that side by side and hand close to hand, through ages of much toil and labor, they shall together raise about them an Eden nobler than any the Chaldean dreamed of; an Eden created by their own labor and made beautiful by their own fellowship.

In his apocalypse there was one who saw a new heaven and a new earth; we see a new earth; but therein dwells love - the love of comrades and co-workers.

It is because so wide and gracious to us are the possibilities of the future; so impossible is a return to the past, so deadly is a passive acquiescence in the present, that to-day we are found everywhere raising our strange new cry - "Labor and the training that fits us for labor!" (117)

### **The Ideal Union**

While identifying the areas where contemporary marriage was failing society, New Woman novelists constructed an ideal to be worked toward and to serve as inspiration to those who recognized the faults in the current state of the union between the sexes. The ideal was a necessity as Caird states, "every good thing that we enjoy to-day was once the dream of a

'crazy enthusiast' mad enough to believe in the power of ideas ..."

("Marriage" 196 ). This ideal was vital as a beacon for New Women like Lyndall who were embittered by their experiences. Schreiner's reader hears uncharacteristic hope in Lyndall's tone when she speaks of the ideal, "'Then when that time comes' she said lowly, 'when love is no more bought or sold, ... when each woman's life is filled with earnest independent labor, then love will come to her, a strange sudden sweetness breaking in upon her earnest work; not sought for, but found. Then, but not, now -'" (*African Farm* 141). As identified in Lyndall's sentiment about the ideal, the New Woman novelists formed the ideal around the solutions to the problems they saw with the current form of marriage. New Woman novelists also claimed that it was for the sake of the ideal itself that they worked toward it, that the ideal they envisioned was as close to a natural union of the sexes as they could envision. Lyndall again explains, "A great soul draws and is drawn with a more fierce intensity than any small one. By every inch we grow in intellectual height, our love strikes down its roots deeper, and spreads out its arms wider. It is for love's sake yet more than for any other that we look for that new time" (140-1).

"Feminists strove to construct a new and inspiring vision of the ideal marriage in which the sexes were equal, an equality that included female bodily autonomy and a sexual relationship of the highest morality" (Bland 134). The success of the sexual partnership between a man and a woman was entirely dependent on an equal partnership in marriage without it there could be no "sexual relationship of the highest morality." What exactly this entailed will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter, but generally as Bland explains, "... feminists described the ideal relationship between the sexes as one based on love, sympathy, companionship, mutual attraction, monogamy, fidelity, permanence, mutual responsibility, equality, and, above all, women's autonomy" (Bland 149).

"The woman question is the marriage question" Sarah Grand declared in 1894 (quoted in Heilmann, General Introduction xii). This correlation between the Marriage Question and the Woman Question highlights the

identification of woman's nature in direct relation to the identification of woman's relationship with man. Where could it be more rigidly defined and simple to deconstruct than in the institution of marriage? Motherhood and sexuality would pose more complicated problems having to do with biology and love, whereas marriage as an institution was the least convoluted, the least shaded by human emotion. It was a construct, and, therefore, it could be deconstructed and reconstructed. Marriage, in its current form, they claimed, had nothing to do with the true nature of a woman. Deconstructing the institution of marriage seemed simple enough; it was the reconstruction that posed a problem as with most of the difficulties these New Woman novelists faced. Schreiner admits her awareness of the problem:

The one and only ideal is the perfect mental and physical life-long union of one man with one woman. ... All short of this is more or less a failure, and no legal marriage can make a relationship other than impure in which there isn't this union. How we should arrange that this great pure form of marriage may be oftenest and most perfectly reached seems to me a great problem. (*Letters* 145)

While the old institution was not hampered by the complicated nature of a woman, the ideal that the New Woman novelist proposed was thus encumbered. The alterations to be made to marriage necessitated interweaving woman's nature into the new concept of marriage. In order to propose an ideal for romantic partnership between men and women, one had to first understand the nature of woman, her sexuality, her inclinations toward love and all the facets of motherhood as well as how the introduction of partnership with a man affected these. Since these dabblers in sociology, psychology, and philosophy could not entirely agree on woman's nature, they, also, could not agree on an ideal form for marriage, though some key elements were consistent which amounted to what they deemed partnership: freedom and the elevation of the two parties' intellect, spirit and imagination. There was no consensus on how to achieve these

elements in a new marriage. The concepts on which they did agree remained broad and left the authors much room to develop their personal theories.

In *Herland*, Moadine, one of the “Aunts” and matriarchs, comments on how she expects the world beyond Herland must be. She imagines a heterosexual, ideal union: “You have helped one another all over the globe, sharing your discoveries, pooling your progress. How wonderful, how supremely beautiful your civilization must be!” (85). This supreme beauty is what Gilman, through the hopes of the women of Herland, desires as a union between the sexes. The form of marriage for the future ideally would be one of “sharing ... discoveries” and “pooling ... progress” both partners jointly contributing to the progress of their society.

“Of marriage as a ceremony they knew nothing ...” (94), Vandyck explains as an introduction to his description of the marriage ceremony in Herland. The wedding itself contrasts with that presented in Caird's *The Daughters of Danaus*. “Hadria compared the whole ceremony to some savage rite of sacrifice” (249). She goes on to pronounce, “What a magnificent hideous thing the marriage service is! ... It is the hideous mixture of the delicately civilized with the brutally savage that makes one sick. A frankly barbarous ceremony, where there was no pretense of refinement and propriety ... would be infinitely less revolting” (250). When a nineteenth-century wedding ceremony is juxtaposed to the Herland ceremony, one can truly identify the contrasts. In *The Daughters of Danaus* the reader finds a celebration of a woman entering into a new level of degradation, and in to the ceremony of Gilman's ideal future union no history of degradation can be found in the hearts and minds of the Herlanders. The ceremony there is untainted.<sup>6</sup>

Vandyck continues in his description emphasizing the evident magnitude of the occasion,

We had a great triple wedding in the biggest Temple of

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<sup>6</sup> Caird would not have entirely shared Gilman's ideal due to conflicting approaches to motherhood though they conflicted less than either would likely have admitted. Still, the contrast in these descriptions of an old, oppressive institution and a future, ideal is noteworthy.

all, and it looked as if most of the nation were present. It was very solemn and very beautiful. Someone had written a new song for the occasion, nobly beautiful, about the new hope for their people - the New Tie with other lands - Brotherhood as well as Sisterhood, and, with evident awe, Fatherhood. (118)

Vandyck is surprised by the reverence with which the Herlanders approach this new union of men and women, this great experiment they were about to embark upon. "There was a splendid procession, wreathing dances, and the new Anthem I spoke of, and the whole great place pulsed with feeling - the deep awe, the sweet hope, the wondering expectation of a new miracle" (119).

This "sweet new hope" and "expectation of a new miracle" is not accidentally parallel to that very same hope and expectation experienced by the New Woman and written into Lyndall's voice thirty years prior. "When each woman's life is filled with earnest independent labor, then love will come to her, a strange sudden sweetness breaking in upon her earnest work ..." (Schreiner, *African Farm* 141).

While witnessing the wedding, Somel, another of the "Aunts," explains to Vandyck in a whisper,

There has been nothing like this in the country since our Motherhood began! ... . You see it is the dawn of a new era. You don't know how much you mean to us. It is not only Fatherhood - that marvelous dual parentage to which we are strangers - the miracle of union in life giving - but it is Brotherhood. You are the rest of the world. ... Ah! You cannot know. (119)

Vandyck tries to "know" the Herlanders' perspective, but Somel is correct in her conclusion that he cannot.

### **Problems with the Ideal - The Great Unwed**

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 look forward to an old age without honor, without the reward of useful labor, without love? I wonder how many men there are who would give up everything that is dear in life, for the sake of maintaining a high, ideal purity? (Schreiner, *African Farm* 140)

Lyndall asks the air around her these questions. She resents the “high, ideal purity;” she regrets her moral code that makes existence difficult; she deplores her society for having values incongruous to hers. Lyndall almost compromises and marries but resists and stays true to her beliefs. The “high, ideal purity” is ambiguous. Whether it is her definition of purity or her society’s, it frustrates her. She seems to argue with the woman who writes her onto the page, into the farm. Schreiner writes into Lyndall’s character an “overshadowing consciousness of large impersonal obligation” (*Woman* 45). Schreiner writes her into a time of “peculiar strain, as mankind seeks rapidly to adjust moral ideals and social relationships” (44). She gives Lyndall the awareness that her attitude toward a change in sex relations and her dedication to live by it “cannot be of immediate advantage to [herself]” (44). In *Woman and Labor*, Schreiner emphasizes the importance of such consciousness and dedication to upholding the morals embedded within it.

This consciousness enables [woman] often to accept poverty, toil, and sexual isolation ..., and renunciation of motherhood, that crowning beatitude of the woman’s existence, ... in the conviction that, by doing so, she makes more possible a fuller and higher attainment of motherhood and wifehood to the women who will follow her. (45-6)

Lyndall shouts at her in response to the ideal purity that Schreiner asks New Women to uphold for the dream of the Eden that Lyndall knows she will never see. Lyndall seems to be resisting, damning Schreiner’s claim that a “consciousness of great impersonal ends” (45) will give her “strength for renunciation” of sex, love, marriage and motherhood in their current form (45) which is the only form available to the likes of Lyndall. Lyndall knows

that these will not be fulfilling in their current form and will likely be destructive to her soul, but the alternative is not desirable: “to accept poverty, toil, and sexual isolation” to “[renounce] motherhood” all for the sake of the possibility of “a fuller higher attainment of motherhood and wifehood to the women who will follow her” (46). Lyndall seems to imply a challenge for Schreiner, ‘You try to survive this. You, with your high, ideal purity. I am human here, inside this little world you have created. You wrote me *human*, therefore I need love and sex and motherhood. And you take them all away.’ Schreiner claims the power over one world and thus becomes the “man,” of whom Lyndall speaks when she asks him to “think for five minutes of what old maidenhood means” (140). Lyndall is the little voice inside of Schreiner, the New Woman she writes and the New Woman to whom she writes. Lyndall bites at the inside of Schreiner’s ears with such challenges, and Schreiner does not meet the challenge. Eventually Schreiner marries into a system that has not yet changed enough to justify her acquiescence. Schreiner admits in her letters that she does so primarily because she so desperately longs for love, even if it is not ideal love, and she longs for that “crowning beatitude” of motherhood.

In each novel the New Woman characters are limited and are noticeably isolated, fighting the current of all the salmon blindly swimming to lay their eggs and die. Occasionally, in these novels there is a woman of an earlier generation who previously broke away from the group and serves as a mentor to the New Woman of the younger generation. Though these mentors serve as guides for the heroines, they are presented to the reader as the New Women of a previous generation who paved some of the way but did not succeed entirely in changing society. These are spinsters, intellectuals, artists; they are lonely, bitter and in many ways broken and sad characters. The fact that these authors choose to include the older version of the heroines contrasts with the tone of promise and hope that is presented in the nonfiction.

Caird presents a formula for perfecting marriage and for righting the evils against women for the future, creating a world where women can be

fulfilled and contribute to society in a meaningful and appropriate manner.

But she also writes Valeria Du Prel into the pages of *The Daughters of Danaus*. Though Valeria supports Hadria, the New Woman heroine, in her efforts to discover herself, she warns both verbally and by example.

Valeria laments the lot of an enlightened woman to live by her morals as Schreiner has asked the New Woman to do. She also laments the timing of her birth "I was born ten years too early for the faith of this generation" (451). She reveals her cynicism as both genuine and as an instigation, to inspire Hadria to take action: "Women don't really believe that the cloud will lift. If they really believed what they profess, they would prove it. They would not submit and resign themselves. Oh, why don't you show what a woman can do, Hadria?" (451).

Valeria, a New Woman novelist herself, speaks not only to her protégée, Hadria, but to Caird's reader who sympathizes with the feminist ideology presented in the text. She can be read as speaking to the New Woman novelists as well, daring them to live by their ideals. But her life, as a model, is not ideal and ten years, though significant, have not proven to be enough to allow the New Woman of the 1890s to live her ideal.

The more I see of life the more bitter a thing it is to be a woman! And one of the discouraging features of it is, that women are so ready to oppress each other!

...I suppose we are inheriting the curse that has been laid upon our mothers through so many ages. (450)

Bringing up an essential point, Valeria touches one of the most tender nerves of the movement, illustrated in much of the debate between women on marriage. There were women who were represented in New Woman novels as rejecting and harming the New Woman. Their rejection of the New Woman speaks to the fear that those women felt who had subscribed to their society's propaganda all their lives. The newness of the approach to womanhood challenged their very identity in a way that was uncomfortable, forcing an undesired introspection they would rather have avoided. Some of these characters have learned to manipulate the system in such a way

that they feel it can benefit them and are not bothered by the ethical implications of perpetuating a system that oppresses them and all women.

Schreiner was particularly disgusted by such women, her aforementioned sex-parasites, and accredited them with the degeneration of society. As obsequious and insidious predators, draining the life out of society they bartered the sexual use of their bodies for goods, for a living. Among these prostitute wives, Tant' Sannie is her most malicious and manipulating, having become so swollen from her sucking on the system that she is about to burst. Despite her own destructive power Tant' Sannie fears the New Woman Lyndall even when Lyndall is a little girl. When Lyndall boldly asserts herself against Tant' Sannie's will, Tant' Sannie does not move to discipline her or stop her. Lyndall assures those who Tant' Sannie unfairly and harshly disciplines "we will not be children always; we shall have power too, someday" (82). The promise of this is what Tant' Sannie dreads. The change and challenge Lyndall represents loom large over her threatening her existence and her means to survive in the social order.

Not all the unenlightened react in this way, though, and Adelle Ratignolle can be seen as an example of a "mother-woman" in Chopin's *The Awakening*. She cannot reach inward to recognize that there was once and could still be more to her identity than wife and mother. She cannot recognize that she has a "self" at all. New Woman heroine, Edna, explains to Adelle that she "would never sacrifice herself for her children," but she "would give up the unessential," her life (46). Adelle tries to understand the difference but is ultimately unable to make the distinction in her own mind. The two women are described by the narrator as not appearing to be "talking the same language" (46).

While it is isolating as it is for Edna not to be able to communicate with Adelle, in her world there are both self-effacing mother-women and older, New Woman mentors. In *The Awakening* Edna is warned by her mentor, Mademoiselle Reisz of the implications of what Edna is taking on by allowing the awakening of her consciousness to occur. "The bird that would

soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weakling bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth" (79). She warns Edna of the potential isolation and failure she might face and adds a hint of reservation when advising Edna to proceed cautiously, suggesting that she has seen others be, and perhaps has herself been, the "sad spectacle" that has failed "bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth" (79). Reisz, a musician estranged from society, is accomplished and true to her art but is also dour, forsaken by society and acrid. She has faced society's reaction to her enlightenment and artistic temperament and genius and as a result is isolated, misunderstood and bitterly alone. Reisz, though fascinated by Edna on many occasions, even excited by Edna's promise and prowess, fears that Edna will not be able to accept the isolation which will be the result of a rejection of society's ideals. When Edna reveals to Reisz that she is leaving her husband, she "put her arms around [Edna] and felt [her] shoulder blades, to see if [her] wings were strong" (79), a protective, affectionate gesture, but also one indicating uncertainty.

The distinguishing trait of these New Women of an older generation is that they chose not to marry. Chopin and Caird address two prominent themes with the incorporation of Mademoiselle Reisz and Valeria Du Prel respectively to their New Woman readership: an isolated path of intellectual and artistic pursuit is not the only goal, and the new way is going to be a hard road to take. Unless women inspire the support of society, they, too, will be broken down and defeated in old age and will become lonely and bitter. The former indicates that personal enlightenment is essential but only a beginning. Once enlightened, Valeria Du Prel and Mademoiselle Reisz's mentor role suggests that it is the enlightened woman's duty to nurture those new chicks who are not yet fully formed nor ready to venture out, rebelliously, into society. With the latter comes the repeated theme of there being a responsibility embedded in a position of power and influence. Without these mentors, Edna and Hadria would have struggled blindly to their awakenings of spirit and ability. Still, the reader is to lament the limited scope of influence Valeria Du Prel and Mademoiselle Reisz have in the

world of the novels thoroughly touching only to Edna and Hadria. Their art reaches more but is often misunderstood or manipulated to mean what society wants it to mean.

Mademoiselle Reisz and Valeria Du Prel represent women who have survived their choice for spinsterhood instead of marriage, their lives are not appealing in many ways to a young woman questioning the decision to marry. Their loneliness could not have been erased by marriage in its current form, but there is a suggestion in these novels that it is not women's lot to be forever isolated from men and each other. Still, the structure of the society and institution of marriage is such that it leaves women, enlightened or not, in a devouring solitude. The enlightened, woman awakened to her genius, is no longer able to deceive herself into believing that she can find companionship and fulfillment in marriage and therefore experiences a more profound, hopeless loneliness and isolation.

Mary Erle in Dixon's *The Story of a Modern Woman* is one of the few New Woman heroines in the novels in this study who does not marry. Her circumstances do not allow for it. The man she loves marries another, and eventually she finds that he is not a suitable partner in moral standards for her, anyway. When he returns offering her the possibility to be his "real wife," his mistress, she declines (252). He cannot be a suitable partner, and therefore no union can be accepted. Similarly, Mary's New Woman friend, Alison Ives, discovers prior to her marriage to her fiancé, Dunlop Strange, that he is a moral degenerate and creates the problems for women that Alison tries to repair. She discovers his role in using and abandoning a woman known only as "Number Twenty-seven" who is now dying of consumption in the hospital where Strange is a doctor. Though the discoveries were enormously disappointing to both women, marriage with either potential partner would have promised a different kind of solitude than that experienced by the spinster. Theirs would have been one experienced by many of the other New Woman heroines in their marriages, such as Grand's Edith and Evadne and Schreiner's Rebekah, that of a fallen hope for union with a sympathetic soul. This realization of the lack of

sympathetic souls as male partners in life, while depressing and isolating to a heterosexual ideal, is far less treacherous when discovered prior to the potential marriage mishap. The dangers for women were far greater once the women were locked into the marriage contract and the women had become in many respects property of their unsympathetic partners. New Woman heroines appeared to have two choices as presented by the authors. The first was a life devoid of romantic and sexual partnership while the woman held fast to an ideal. The independence of this option afforded these women the freedom to strive for economic success and to attempt to infuse the world with their creative influence. The other option was that of the imprisoned wife who for any number of reasons would find her husband to be an unsuitable partner who wielded over her a power that she could not transcend. The link that connects both scenarios is the promise of devastating loneliness and isolation in a world they longed to connect with. The human desire for companionship and a validation through the acknowledgment of a corresponding soul was not possible for either.

Schreiner and Lyndall are inspired by what they see as a shared relationship of the sexes exhibited by some species of birds.

“Let us wait at this camp and watch the birds,” she said, as an ostrich hen came bounding toward them, with velvety wings outstretched, while far over the bushes the head of the cock was visible as he sat brooding on the eggs. ...

“I like these birds,” she said; “they share each other’s work, and are companions.” (*African Farm* 134)

Sexuality and marriage were carefully considered, human behavior attentively studied and soul searching persistently done. These ideals were the result. Despite Schreiner’s diligence to ascertain the true nature of sexuality, her ideals repeatedly prove false and unattainable in both her life and her fiction. Yet, she clings to them and proclaims them in her letters. She professes them in her nonfiction but is more aware and honest in her fiction. The release of these ideals into the abyss of existing Victorian ideals and mores is unthinkable. Carefully considered, unrealistic ideals were a

better alternative than none at all, were better than conformity to the one that already existed, sex-parasitism.

Beyond the initial self discovery and decision to evacuate any typical marriage of the era there was little else in the grand scheme of marriage reform that an individual woman was being asked to do by these authors. So once out of the detestable situation, liberated and awakened to her capabilities and her appetites the New woman was then to flounder and possibly repeat the fates of Valeria Du Prel and Mademoiselle Reisz. Despite Valeria Du Prel's suggestion that she would have had a preferable fate had she been born ten years later, the fate of the New Woman heroines suggests otherwise. These authors present a dire situation for the imaginary women of their fiction. The nonfiction incites change, but in order for that change to come about, marriage in its present state had to be rejected by a majority. Small changes would help; a few cases won, the suggestion by the courts that a woman owned her own body, these helped. Still, to the women who rejected marriage, the ideal as an alternative was nowhere in sight. In fact the New Man with whom they could share conjugal bliss apparently did not exist.

The closest any of the authors came to realizing the New Man in fiction is Schreiner's promise of him at the end of *From Man to Man*. The reader is left to wonder at him, though, in that he is not a developed character nor is the relationship between Mr. Drummond and Rebekah developed. The promises found in Drummond include an equality in the relationship in both labor and companionship. Schreiner died before finishing or publishing *From Man to Man*. Schreiner's husband published it after her death in its incomplete form but claims that she explained the ending she had planned to him. In a note at the end of Schreiner's material he describes the future of Rebekah's relationship with Drummond. "The sense of full comprehension and close fellowship between her and Drummond increase until they realize mutually the depth and the fitness of the undying love between them" (Cronwright-Schreiner 462). Had she written this it would have gone much further than her contemporaries had, but she did not, nor did she plan to end

there according to Cronwright-Schreiner. "But, as they were situated, a more intimate relationship was unwarrantable to such a woman as Rebekah; for her it was impossible to do anything which could degrade such a love ..." (462-3). With this impossibility of accepting a degradation of their perfect love comes the renunciation Schreiner forces on Lyndall and asks of her reader in *Woman and Labor*. "It therefore became inevitable that she must give up and leave the one man who she felt could be her life's close companion; and so they parted forever" (Cronwright-Schreiner 463). In this prediction Rebekah moves away with her children from her deprivileged and now estranged husband as well as from her ideal partner. The closing scene Cronwright-Schreiner describes as similar to Waldo's death scene in *The Story of an African Farm* in which Waldo melts into his environment, transcending his body to become one with the natural environment.

There we see the last of Rebekah. As the sun sets, flooding the Karoo flats with radiance and glowing the brilliant mountains as it disappears behind them, Rebekah stands on the summit of the lonely koppie in the soft effulgence of the evening light, in something of that unutterable beauty of wild nature that suffused the veld and comforted the mind ... .

(463)

Despite Rebekah's ability to find the ideal partner, due to the social state of her world, she is unable to allow that relationship to be fully realized. Rebekah, like all the other New Woman heroines in this study written into realistic representations of society faces the fate of consuming loneliness, obscurity and (literal or figurative) death.

In order to please all, the New Woman novelist creates a circular argument for herself in which she suggests that for marriage to change and thus society to heal itself, women first had to reject the institution as it existed and needed to independently find their identity as women. Alternately, the New Woman novelist suggests that living alone without inspiring partnership would leave the New Woman lost, lonely, destitute and without influence. A short step from this was the claim that from within a marriage a

woman could change a man. Sarah Grand clung to this idealism of social purity which was dangerously reminiscent of the Victorian angel-of-the-house dictates ("New Aspect" 89). Caird had no ideological sympathies with Grand's view that women could influence the morally inferior men, and Chopin did not write the ideal for her heroine as an asexual union primarily to reproduce as Gilman did, but the overlaps are great, the disgust with marriage as it existed at the turn of the century consistent, and the ideal at its core the same. Chopin and Gilman both suggest the small independent space afforded by the woman is essential; heroines in both authors' novels insist upon this. Schreiner's in depth description of a sex-parasite in her polemic and her parasitic wives in her novels echo much of Caird's rejection of the mercenary relationship that Caird claims results in the failure of marriage. All speak to the loneliness that is offered by a society that only presents to women a marriage of "woman purchase," laden with a double sexual standard, from which a woman who attempts to leave is shunned and ostracized by society. For all women marriage was potentially a loveless trap into which they entered ignorantly due to society's neglect of women's education and its idealization of the institution. Once married, a woman was subjected to the sexual whims of her husband, who often enough to receive public attention, brought home to her and her body a number of venereal diseases - syphilis the most prominent in the discussion at the turn of the century.

The solution that Chopin approaches in *The Awakening* is self-awareness and self-promotion. Edna's is not a success story. Edna does not find perfect union with another, but the first step is to reject imperfect union and its flaws, such as economic dependence, and the prostituting of oneself as a wifely duty. Edna takes these steps but is not doing so in a society that supports her; she is doomed to a fate similar to that of Mademoiselle Reisz. No man in existence in her society can equal her in her enlightened state, not her lover nor her beloved. True marriage, ideal marriage that is proposed in the nonfiction of Chopin's contemporaries is not accessible for the likes of Edna. However, if Edna had remained in her

hypocritical, married state, in full knowledge of its fraud, she would have been continuing to contribute to the problem. Just by leaving she becomes part of the solution.

Dixon closes her article on "Why Women Are Ceasing to Marry" with the ideal she shares with her contemporary New Woman novelists, suggesting that if society makes the right adjustments, women will not continue this boycott of marriage:

It would seem certain that if woman continues to cultivate her critical faculties and her sense of humor - to exercise, in short her feminine prerogative of deliberate choice in the great affair of matrimony - that the standard of human felicity will be steadily raised, and the wedded state will shine forth in a different light to that which it stands revealed to many thoughtful persons today. (88)

## II. Sexuality

“When we enter the region of sex we touch ... the spinal cord of the human existence, its great nerve center, where sensation is most acute, and pain and pleasure most keenly felt” (Schreiner, *Woman* 112). In *Woman and Labor* Schreiner deliberately tries to define the value of understanding sexuality. She identifies literally and figuratively the potency of human sexuality and its influence on life, personality, society. Before Freudian psychology reached Britain, Schreiner and her contemporaries were examining some of the effects of repression on the psyche in a naive but fascinated manner. They touched “the spinal cord” to see the reactions.

Validating her exploration of sexuality she stated that “it seems ... most important that we should begin by trying to see as clearly as possible what sex is, and to understand how it has gradually assumed its present form as found in man ...” (Schreiner, *Letters* 103). Schreiner’s fascination with sexuality is representative of the New Woman novelist. She identifies in her letters the value she believes is merited in exploring and understanding the ways in which people relate to one another most intimately. More specifically, she explores the ways in which women experience that intimacy. Schreiner outlines the specific areas she plans to study: celibacy, masturbation, the effect of child bearing, equality or difference in sex feeling between men and women, the scientific approach and the exclusion of any moral approach. She does not, however, address all these topics in her public writings and addresses some only in letters. One of her most valued male partners in these discussions, Havelock Ellis, shared her fascination with women’s sexuality: “We may not know exactly what sex is; but we do know that it is mutable, with the possibility of one sex being changed into the other sex, that its frontiers are often uncertain, and that there are many stages between a complete male and a complete female” (Ellis 194). While Ellis’ approach to the question of sexuality takes the fluidity of gendered sexuality to another level, the very discussion of sexuality with Schreiner was influential in the development of a new ideology held by women concerning the topic of sexuality.

Schreiner claims that the social problems of her era negatively impact on sexuality and not vice versa. "It is not sex disco-ordination that is the root of our social unrest; it is the universal disco-ordination which affects even the world of sex phenomena" (*Woman* 112). She asserts that an intensive study and change of the system is necessary before this discoordination can become coordination. "Man injures woman and woman injures man. It is not a case for crying out against individuals or against sexes, but simply for changing a whole system" (*Letters* 66).

As with marriage and motherhood, the New Woman novelists sought first to undo some of the troubling distortions and manipulations of female sexuality imposed on them by society, and then they sought to unearth what women's sexual identity naturally was, unfettered. Caird's Hadria explains exasperated, "Think what it means for a girl to have been taught to connect the idea of something low and evil with that which nevertheless is to lie at the foundation of her after life" (*Daughters* 251). Though vague in her language, it is clear that Hadria's exasperation at the training of women to be chaste and then the requirement to live by their sex function is utterly irrational and detrimental to a woman's healthy self-identity. This incongruity is an essential part of the presumed hysterical behavior of women and the breakdown of an understanding of one's own sexuality. While both sides of the Victorian sexuality coin are dangerous to women, Caird suggests that women are allowed to be neither sexual beings nor chaste beings. Therefore, the incongruity and confusion of sexual self-identity ensues.

Neither social distortion of woman as whore nor that of woman as virgin benefitted the female. It was coming to be claimed that neither identity, in exclusivity, was a fair and accurate representation of a true, female, sexual nature; titles and sympathies toward both roles were damaging. Caird boldly asserts in "Marriage" that chastity "has originally no connection with the woman's own nature" (192). Thus, Caird deviates more than some of her contemporary New Woman novelists are willing to in stating that women's sexuality is not associated with a lack of sexual desire. Schreiner, who agrees with Caird on this point, asserts further that society is

responsible for such a distortion of women's sexual identity. She claims that it is responsible for producing both pitiable prostitutes and pitiable virgins. These were a result of "our civilization:"

... millions of women in our modern societies are so placed as to be absolutely compelled to go through life not merely childless, but without sex relationship in any form whatever; while another mighty army of women is reduced by the dislocations of our civilization to accepting sexual relationships which almost negate childbearing and whose only product is physical and moral disease. (*Woman* 16)

Schreiner asserts that prostitution is the fault of "our civilization" and produces only "physical and moral disease" (16). Though motherhood is incorporated in order to validate the discussion of women's sexuality, Schreiner brings into focus the notion that a virgin is to be pitied in much the same way as a prostitute ought to be. She does this through the juxtaposition of the chaste with the unchaste in a similar way to her comparison of wife and prostitute. Both have become estranged from their true sexual nature by a society which idealizes one while demonizing and perpetuating the other. Nineteenth-century British society necessitated the prostitute's profession by its misuse of women in marriage and its distortion of women's role in society. To claim that women's sexuality was related to neither pure, chaste angel nor carnal, vampire vixen was an initial attempt to recognize that women's sexuality was made of other stuff entirely. Schreiner writes Rebekah, society's sexual ideal for wife, as a biological sister to Baby-Bertie who, it is projected, will eventually be found "stricken down by a loathsome and terrible disease" in a house of "ill fame," a fate invoked by a short life of prostitution that she is forced into by society (Cronwright-Schreiner 461-2). The sisterhood of the two is no accident. Schreiner felt a kinship with her "sisters" regularly asserting that she was not of another, higher order of female existence than they. She writes that on occasions when she passed a prostitute she felt "the sense of agonized *oneness* with her ..., that she was *myself* only under different

circumstances" (*Letters* 65-6). Schreiner writes that the feeling "has stricken me almost mad" (66).<sup>1</sup>

New Woman novelists write into the voices of their child heroines questions such as that Dixon writes into Mary Erle's: "What is a lost woman really, Miss Brown? ... Dickens says that little Em'ly is a lost woman, because she goes to Italy with that Mr. Steerforth. Was Mr. Steerforth a lost man, too?" (26). They asked their society to reconsider the sexual double standard that oppressed women not only in marriage but in any relationship with a man. Gilman has the Herlanders question, with innocent ignorance, "... what is *virgin*?" (47) when the concept is presented to them by the outsiders. After it is explained as a term only applied "to the female who has not mated" (47), they are dumbfounded and assert that the categorizing of the female in this way without the parallel category for the male of the species is illogical. What Gilman suggests is that without the explanation of the social value of the virginity of a woman and a wife, the concept of a virgin applied to women is not only arbitrary, but is also bizarre.

Schreiner advises that as women evolve from Victorian to New, they are not in danger of becoming more promiscuous. On the contrary she claims that the New Woman is coming to regard sex relations with a new level of reverence. "The direction in which the endeavor of woman to readjust herself to the new conditions of life ... to-day is not toward a greater sexual laxity or promiscuity or an increased self indulgence, but toward a higher appreciation of the sacredness of all sex relations ..." (*Woman* xv). Schreiner explains that the New Woman is forming "a clearer perception of the sex relation between man and woman as the basis of human society, on whose integrity, beauty, and healthfulness depend the health and beauty of human life, as a whole" (xvi). With such an explanation Schreiner suggests that the future of society is dependent on the New Woman for guidance and for use as a model. She also claims that society is reliant

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<sup>1</sup> Schreiner did go to live with prostitutes in London. Trying to "know them" in much the same way, Dixon's character Alison Ives tries to "help them" in *The Story of a Modern Woman*. (Schreiner, *Letters* 69-106).

upon the New Woman having the experience of a new sexual union because “the health and beauty of human life, as a whole” relies on this experience. “Above all” Schreiner claims, “it will lead to a closer, more permanent, more emotionally and intellectually complete relation between the individual man and woman” (xvi). This sexual union is necessary for the realization of the new Eden she has developed as her marriage ideal. With such claims Schreiner reveals that she “believed that women’s emotional and reproductive lives should not be rationalized out of existence” (Barash 9) as they had been formerly.

### **Sex for a New Generation**

It is likely that this subtitle could be applied to any period’s perspective on sexuality, but this generation has the stronghold on it. Bland accurately identifies these post Victorian, pre-War years as a window of time, “a brief moment in which a space was opened up for feminists to discuss sex” (Bland 296). The Victorian garb was tossed aside and feminist women and sexologists alike were taking a closer look at what they had closed their eyes to for the past few generations.<sup>2</sup>

Schreiner writes to sexologist Havelock Ellis, “... Sex is so beautiful! It can be discussed scientifically ... philosophically ... from the poetic standpoint ... from the mater-of-fact standpoint ... from the personal standpoint ... and it is all beautifully clean and natural and healthy” (quoted in Bland 265). In her effusion of enthusiasm for ways in which one might explore the many aspects of sex, Schreiner illustrates a sense of delight in the liberty to know and to discuss. At the same time she validates and rationalizes the nature of the act and the desire for the act as “clean and natural and healthy”.

Bland also periodically draws her reader’s attention to some of the definitions and parameters with which one associates sex today. Before formal, rigid sexual classifications were imposed there seems to have been a hiatus during which reconstruction and exploration could be done. What

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<sup>2</sup> Literally, Schreiner hated clothes and was reported to have been naked as often as possible. This is illustrated in her letters: “It’s really a great bond between us that we have such a horror of clothes” (*Letters* 226).

feminists wanted to do with marriage - deconstruct it and begin again - was very close to what they were faced with being able to do with sexuality. Women's sexuality of the Victorian period is defined by Bland and other critics quite distinctly as nonexistent. Literally, women were thought to have no sexual desire. Thus the language begins to mislead and mute those women who attempt to use it. Bland approaches many of the language complexities. Passion, lust, love, sex, sexual desire and intimacy all pose problems if one person or group intends one definition when using the term and an audience or reader infers a very different meaning. Not only sexuality and one's understanding of it, but the very meanings of the terms used in the discussion of sexuality were in flux.

Because of this linguistic deficiency analyzing and deciphering what female, feminist authors of the period were stating and implying about female sexuality is not an exact science. In many instances they appear to contradict themselves. Quite possibly, in some cases, they *are* contradicting themselves. Schreiner believes in physical sexual desire in women, but she reveals she was disgusted by her own (*Letters* 56, 60). Gilman wrote the ideal, sexual relationship as heterosexual, but the closest she came to experiencing an ideal, romantic relationship was a homosexual one (Kessler 25). In *Galia* Dowie suggests that women can transcend sexual desires for higher purpose if they use sexuality purely as a means to improve and purify the race. In so doing, Dowie presents the most sexually predatory heroine. Chopin was rebuked by critics for the sensual nature of *The Awakening* and for the heroine's extra marital affairs claiming, "It is not a healthy book" (quoted in Culley 163). The most sensual passages are about the lure of the sea, and the most lurid scenes consist of kisses. Further, despite her critics' disgust at her heroine's adultery and disregard for the sanctity of marriage, they fail to note that Chopin remained in her own marriage until her husband died.

For these women sexuality and the ability of a woman to connect with a man in a romantic relationship was the primary objective once the true nature of the female was identified, but of any topic left vague in their

novels, this is the most veiled subject of all. Possibly, it was a lack of vocabulary. Possibly, it was a fear that their fiction would be completely rejected if too direct with sexual content. Possibly, sexuality had them more baffled than anything else. If utopia was the blank canvas genre that Gilman used to redesign a woman-centered world in which as creator she had the ultimate power over what was true and what was false, then sexuality was the utopian genre for feminists of this era. In a sense they could choose to identify what they deemed a true, woman's sexual identity. It did not 'exist' in the Victorian era. They could bring it into existence however they envisaged it. Gilman had her utopia in order. She had social mores organized; she had a defined plan for economy, education, agriculture and population control. She had religion, criminal justice and commerce all sorted out. She had it planned right down to the number of pockets in the clothing on the backs of the Herlanders, down to the extinction of dogs and the uses of cats, down to the arrangement of plants in the gardens. But there is not one appearance of a direct mention of a female sexual desire separate from the desire to be a mother. She approaches it, touches it a few times lightly, but leaves her reader a good distance outside of the bedroom door.

Why Gilman and the others could not cope with the freedom and responsibility bestowed upon them in this time of the formlessness of women's sexuality is significant in any exploration of sexuality of this period. Of yet more importance is what these women did write and suggest in the veiled scenes and metaphoric descriptions of the sea, how they said it and how it helped to create a new dominion for women's sexuality of the period. This freedom to recreate women's sexuality, though in itself enigmatic, was hampered, like this chapter, on either side by the burden of the traditional, institutional marriage and the glory of bringing forth the next generation through motherhood. So, too, was it chronologically limited fore and aft by the dominant ideas of the middle-class respectability in the nineteenth century and the Freudian psychosis attached to most of women's sexuality in the early twentieth century. These women had space and time to reconnect with the true sexual nature of woman, her very primal

nature, in that it was the most personal of the three topics of focus. They failed, but before the sexologists and Freudians came to dominate, the New Woman novelist did have a few things to say on the subject, blindly feeling for her clitoris in the dark.

### **The New Woman and the Madwoman**

In their fiction New Woman novelists, Schreiner, Chopin and Gilman, somewhat blindly probe woman's elusive sexuality at the turn of the nineteenth century with neither language nor experience outside the Victorian to guide them. This handicap, however, does not stop them from attempting to determine woman's archetypal, sexual nature, nor does it force them to pause before asserting that exposure to this nature by a man would be life-altering and would save the world, no less. Trying to salvage a female self identity from the distorted version of the preceding Victorian era, New Woman novelists attempted to tease out of a morass of social dictates of femininity a true female nature. At the center of this self-actualization was sexuality, partly because the formal exploration of it by women was new and partly because it belonged to them. With limited language to discuss what they understood of their sexuality and the baggage of being socialized by the very structures they aspired to dismantle, New Woman novelists faced their challenge. As a result, a bizarre tale is told of the future of men's and women's potential sexual connection, one in which the birth of a truer, cleaner, nobler race could be created, but one which could not exist in the social climate at the fin de siècle, a social climate doomed by an apocalyptic shadow of degeneration and eventual extinction.

"In an attempt to transcend female vulnerability and transform male violence, ... these thinkers sought to imagine ... a world in which the woman's cause is the man's" (*No Man's* v2: 77), write Gilbert and Gubar in reference to the effort made at the end of the nineteenth century to transform male sexuality and eradicate venereal disease. This sentiment applies to the entire woman question which can be more appropriately termed the

compatibility question. How can men and women coexist in and contribute to a future that is different from the past? The axis around which this question and its answer revolve is the changing female identity from Victorian woman to the great, unknown, mystery woman, protector of genes, savior of humanity. Transcending the old identity was not a feat so easily accomplished. Remnants of the angel of the house/madwoman in the attic dichotomy still existed, but, as would seem to be the logical progression, these two fused into one. Writers of Jane Eyre characters who might have suppressed their madwoman chose instead to liberate her from her attic chamber, but, occasionally, she was still tainted with madness rather than walking gloriously dressed in her uncensored sexuality.

In theory feminists of the era believed that women continued to bear the honor and/or burden of saving mankind from its vices and from degeneration, a justification both to self and society for seeking self-actualization. The claim was that, in order to save mankind, woman had to be truer to herself, had to understand her own madwoman. After all she was not mad, but through repression of sexuality she had been driven to ravings from the confines of the subconscious (though not a term in common use at the time, the concept was becoming more accepted). The New Woman author suggested that Bertha could not be exorcized as Bronte attempted. Charlotte Perkins Gilman in "The Yellow Wall-paper" claims that the madwoman is merely a result of sexuality that is constrained and repressed and will eventually overpower even if it is through madness. The aspect of the Victorian woman that is kept in shackles and hidden away will find her way out from the prison of the subconscious, out from behind the pattern of the wallpaper (42). If she is repressed, she will go mad, and the madness will have a destructive power over society's most valuable commodity: woman, and thus, the future. Feminists asked why any society would choose to destroy or damage its most valuable resource.

These New Women suggest that rediscovery of their nature was the rite of passage to the brave new future of humanity. In contrast, to choose not to pursue woman's true sexual nature, to perpetuate old myths or allow

new misconceptions to develop, would ultimately destroy civilization. In *Herland*, Gilman reveals an optimistic alternative to her prior representation of the destructive effects of society's misunderstanding of the female soul. Women are raised in an all female society where, as a result of "historical misfortunes" (56), all the men were killed or separated from the women through war and natural disaster. The Herland society of the novel is one where what Gilman deems is female is nurtured and valued; women have meaning and purposeful labor suited to their abilities. Women here reproduce by parthenogenesis, the power to become pregnant by *wanting* a child enough, and concepts such as "virginity" do not exist. Laced with satire this utopian vision suggests a possible future for Gilman's own society, if it chooses life. But the utopia of Herland is incomplete without men. The entire plot revolves around how to incorporate three uninvited but welcome male explorers safely into this woman-centered society. The awareness the Herlanders have of these interlopers' potential to do harm is uncanny, since none of them have ever known men. But the history of Herland reveals that the explorers' naiveté and presumptive welcome is a misjudgment of something more akin to calm patience. A history of two thousand years of growth and development away from some of the more appalling social rules that existed when men lived in Herland is explanation enough for the Herlanders' apprehension toward three men who came to invade what they imagined to be a sort of "sublimated resort - just Girls and Girls and Girls" (9). Yet despite the character flaws in the Americans, Gilman pursues the incorporation of them into the utopian society. This suggests that the only way that Herland could be made better would be the safe and subtle addition of men to their society. Vandyck Jennings, the narrator and one of the men on the expedition, explains, "We thought ... that we could have our pick of them. They thought - very cautiously and farsightedly - of picking us, if it seemed wise" (89). Gilman and her contemporary feminists were ultimately optimistic for women, for society and for the compatibility question:

Significantly, as the hope for a new future merged with

revulsion against a contaminated past, and as the vision of a New Woman fused with the horror at the traditional woman, much female authored literature oscillated between extremes of exuberance and despair, between dreams of miraculous victory and nightmares of violent defeat. (Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man's v2* 81)

It is accurate to recognize that Gilman's *Herland* was alone among the New Woman novels in this study in its presentation of so idealistic a view of the possible future, but it is not meant to be read as the future, nor should Gilman be read as a blind idealist. The primary goal of the novel, alongside satirizing the anti-female elements of her contemporary society, was to explore the female self and how it might exist untainted by the patriarchal society of the time.

Gilman and the other New Woman novelists were fully aware that discovering women's true nature in a vacuum was impossible, and, as Gilbert and Gubar suggest, there was a fusing of repugnance and hope. There was also a fusing of the traditional, dominant, middle-class ideals and the longing to be truer to one's own nature. The New Woman was not a woman of *Herland*, nor was she the ideal hoped for in the next or subsequent generations. She was the woman who fought against what the New Woman novelist would call "degeneration". She was a woman striving to find her nature (sexual and otherwise) and live by it in a society that would not allow for its existence. These were the heroines of most New Woman fiction, and these were the authors, as well.

Regarding her madwoman, the disjunction between the nature of women and the daguerreotype of a woman who walked about in society at the fin de siècle lay in her ignored, repressed Bertha. By negating the most essential part of herself a psychosis or distorted self emerged. This was the claim by New Woman novelists about women who had not degenerated, about women for whom there was hope, about women in whose hands, or wombs rather, the future of society rested. As a result of this psychosis some New Women would be driven to suicide as Edna is in

*The Awakening*. Some would turn completely inward, living in an alternate reality as Gilman's narrator does in "The Yellow Wall-paper." Others would be tortured by the contradictory forces of guilt and desire within them.

The time had arrived in which male and female thinkers were coming to recognize that it was entirely possible that women were sexual beings. In the Victorian era this would have been a laughable assertion. As Bland outlines, there was a period from the late nineteenth century to approximately W.W.I., during which time it was coming to be accepted that women were sexual beings. In this period women were being recognized as having sexual appetites and as seeking sexual partners for their own gratification, separate from a longing to please a male partner and separate from the desire to have children (296). Bland draws attention to the emerging science of sexology as one aiding in the development of thought on this subject, encouraging women to explore and identify their sexual selves (258). The relationship between Olive Schreiner and Havelock Ellis exemplifies this connection between New Woman novelist and sexologist. Sadly, Bland notes, sexology would also contribute to the pathologizing of female sexuality especially lesbianism which was considered a "depraved manifestation of sexual passions" (264). Sexology eventually would fuse with Freudian thought. Was women's search for sexual identity doomed from the beginning because they allowed their sexuality to be defined by a male science? Possibly, but sexology provided much assistance to the development of female sexual identity, says Bland, giving women a language with which to define sexuality as well as a discussion in which they could participate: "Where the [sexological] texts were available, they clearly made it easier for women to think and talk about issues formerly taboo" (258). Feminists did not merely superimpose the ideas presented in sexology onto their own convictions, but they absorbed and scrutinized the new 'science' thoroughly:

In their keenness to discuss sex, its role and potential [many feminists] appear to have read as much sexology as they were able to lay their hands on. It was the only current

discourse offering a set of ideas with which women could explore the possibility of being sexual agents as opposed to eternal victims. (279)

They took what they could from the teachings of the sexologists and made it their own as much as was possible. "All kinds of feminists in this period ... drew on sexology. They did so selectively as a part of their own project: the exploration of what sex meant and could mean for women and men" (278). Bland gives equal attention to the detrimental effects of the sexologists' ideas about women's sexuality; though women had access to the ideas, the concepts did not originate with women. Women's sexuality in sexology was a construct. It was how the male thinkers of turn of the century society viewed it and was a result of analysis of the data they collected from interviews with and studies of women.

This study focuses on how women came to understand and perceive their own nature and the potential of that nature, but, here more than anywhere else, where the heart of their identity lies, women, previously considering themselves 'non-sexual,' having no language with which to discuss their sexuality, were more reliant on men than anywhere else in their reform of the perception of woman's nature. This, coupled with the New Woman's association with eugenics (though the two can be seen as one depending on how one views them), forms the fatal flaw in the feminist movement of this era because sexuality was that on which all other aspects of female selfhood rested. Sexuality was the most crucial element of their search for self, but it was also the most precarious foothold on their journey. Though much progress had been made, the dependence on what would become Freudian pathology of nearly all aspects of female sexuality was largely responsible for the end of a liberation of women's sexuality from a male definition. It created the mudslide of the fin de siècle feminists' ascent to self-actualization.

Still, the New Woman novelist sought to carve out a voice for herself in the sexuality debate and did so in fiction, polemical writing and public speaking. As with marriage and motherhood, it is the fiction and the lives of

these women that tell the truest tale of what they believed to be woman's nature, woman's plight, and women's realistic future. Their polemics tell of a sexuality very daring for the age, boldly challenging old concepts of the passive, female sexual partner with a variety of different focal points ranging from venereal disease, to prostitution, to eugenics, to passion. The diversity in focus is minute in comparison with the variety within the debate on each subject, but the continuity and consensus is found in the prophesy of great ideals for male and female sexual partnership and a sexual union most unlike much of what it is recorded that these women, themselves, experienced in intimate relations with men. Their lives tell the story of those women who have hope but not a hope fueled by experience. Their fiction speaks primarily of a hopelessness that haunts their determination to assert a sexual identity from its locus.

### **Sexuality in Fiction**

In their polemics, Schreiner, Caird and Gilman could expound upon their understanding of the ideal, sexual relationship between men and women. They could refine it, organize and prioritize the elements that go into a sexual relationship; they could write an optimistic path to the golden mean. On some level they all understood that to design a sexual ideal would inevitably sterilize women. They did not consciously set out to sanitize an aspect of human nature that was undeniably intricate and made complicated by the social constructions women's sexuality had acquired through the years. They felt they had to "dissociate sensual passion from all that had debased or cheapened it before it could blend with [the] vision of [a] woman..." (Holbrook 12)<sup>3</sup>, all the while becoming increasingly aware that sensual passion could not be extricated from women's sexuality. They were faced with a task with at least two tiers to it: one, personal and social sexual understanding which required reductive analysis and organization and two, a representative reconstruction as true to the original as possible.

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<sup>3</sup> Critic David Holbrook in his book, *Edith Wharton and the Unsatisfactory Man*, discusses the commentary Wharton makes on this approach to her characters who live in the era of the New Woman.

Sexuality had to be defined in new terms by new voices. The honest, true nature of women's sexuality had to be washed clean of the grime of prostitution and the foul sex-parasitism of marriage. A New Woman could pity, even sympathize with the fallen woman, the lost-woman wife, or the faceless mother-women; in fact, it was central to her case to save them, but she could not *be* one of them. She had to be dipped in antiseptic. Her polemic had to be pure. However if her fiction were to be realistic, it could not represent women living with the ideal sexual awareness in ideal sexual partnerships. An ideal could only be envisioned. A map could be drawn to aid future generations in their journey, but even the finest, most self-aware women of the day, even the New Woman authors, themselves, had never been to that land and were not living the utopian lifestyle envisioned in the polemics.

When the authors put away the mop and the bleach and stopped scrubbing their skin raw, they created their fiction which reached more, drew more attention to the cause and was more insightful about the human condition with respect to sexual ideals and the application of such ideals. The New Woman heroines were not pure because women were not untainted. As Lyndall in Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* proclaims in her bitter rage, "We all enter the world little plastic beings, with so much natural force, ... and the world tells us what to be, and shapes us by the ends it sets before us" (135). The strength of the novels lies in the complexity of the characters, the forces pulling them in different directions. One is the way of the masses:

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. 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.  
(Schreiner, *African Farm* 136)

While the novelists might be seen as "wise" according to Lyndall's prophesy, they are not so sparing of their heroines, and the novels can be

read as surrendering the New Woman to that stampede of “the drove.” Each individual is pushed as far as she can possibly go with her capabilities in her time. Eventually, that longing part of her is suppressed. Eventually, each is broken. Even Lyndall, who claims she does not have the energy to resist, cynically claims she will go with the drove in spite of herself. Still, she is incapable of being an antiquated version of womanhood, and Schreiner offers her a sympathetic death as an alternative. But the Lyndalls who die as in one of Schreiner's dream visions in *Dreams* become the stones over which the next generation are to cross the river as far as they are capable, and so it goes in Schreiner's horrific and hopeful description of a body bridge to the new life, to truth.

### **Discovery**

Edna Pontellier in Chopin's *The Awakening* and Vandyck Jennings in Gilman's *Herland* have unexpectedly parallel experiences in the two novels, both experiencing an irreversible awakening to a new way of living represented by a physical nap and an awakening arousal of the slumbering self. This can be identified nowhere better than in the symbolic scene they each have early in their awakenings, waking to a new self in a new bed with a sensation of disorientation and awareness, release and fullness. The sensation is one that describes the sexual experience of both sexes, at once, in one being. This is both the experience of the awakening and what they have been awakened to.

Edna's Rip van Winkle sleep occurs after she quits “the stifling atmosphere of the church” (34-5) fleeing the oppressive, androcentric institution that is dictating the nature of her soul and dictating in what ways she is allowed to be spiritual. She and Robert, her emotional but not physical lover, retreat to an Acadian village where a Madame Antoine invites Edna to take a rejuvenating rest in her cottage. Here, Edna finds repose in an “immaculately clean room” on “a big, four-posted bed, snow-white” (35). She bathes, examines herself closely and dozes. As Edna falls into her life-altering nap she is “drowsily attentive to the things about

her. ... she half heard the voices. ... She did not stir" (36). This is her initial severing of the past life as Edna, pre-siesta. When she awakens it is to a silent world. None of the sounds and voices heard while she sleeps are present any longer; all is stillness. She rises feeling rejuvenated "with the conviction that she had slept long and soundly" and examines herself again in the "little distorted mirror" (36). "Her eyes were bright and wide awake and her face glowed" (36). Rested, more alive than ever, she ventures out into this quiet world to meet the only other soul seemingly in existence, Robert "reclining in the shade" (36). When she draws his attention "an illumination broke over his whole face" (36). This illumination is of the light Edna is radiating in her newness, the glowing of her face that she, too, had seen in the little mirror. Robert is enchanted by the New Woman or her potential which lay in her light. When Edna teasingly asks him how long she has slept, he tells her that it has been one hundred years, long enough, she believes, for "our people from Grand Isle to disappear from the earth" (37). There is both eeriness and promise in this premonition of Edna's, for she cannot exist in her new form among them, but she is also of them. If they have ceased to exist, then she will as well. In this fantasy, though, she and Robert do exist in this magical Eden of a now extinct Acadian village, and in theory they could begin a new race together. They spend the two hours together under the orange trees, until the sun sets on the fantasy, Robert in dutiful submission to the dominant Edna. The reader comes to know, later, that this submissive male is not a suitable partner for the vibrant, alive New Woman Edna promises to be, but here in this scene, the reader along with Edna, is lulled into the appreciation of the sublimity, though temporary, of the scene.

Vandyck Jennings experiences a similar transition of self. Though seemingly emasculated, anesthetized and imprisoned by the Herlanders, Vandyck describes his awakening very similarly to how Edna's is described in the white room after escaping the stifling of the church: "From a slumber deep as death, as refreshing as that of a healthy child, I slowly awakened" (26). This awakening, much like Edna's in which the white room, is symbolic

of the greater awakening to enlightenment Vandyck is about to experience throughout the rest of the novel. "It was like rising up, up, up through a deep warm ocean, nearer and nearer to full light and stirring air. Or like the return to consciousness after a concussion to the brain" (26). This elevation is by means of the exposure to the more lofty way of living of the Herlanders, and the concussion to the brain is symbolic of the unnatural bashing of one's head against a brick wall in early twentieth-century America.

Vandyck is meant to be read as coming to understand his nature through interaction with women more true to their nature rather than meeting the roadblocks of sexuality like a ram, head down and charging. He is becoming capable of assessing the barrier, considering every aspect of it calmly and rationally, and then negotiating around it. As "... receding waves of half caught swirling vision, memories of home, the steamer, the boat, the airship, the forest - at last all sinking away, one after another, till my eyes were wide open, my brain clear ..." (26)<sup>4</sup>, Van in his awakening slowly recognizes and releases what he has gone through to come to this point of awareness and is ready for the next stage at this mental and physical plateau. Like the pristine room in the foreign house in which Edna has her physical awakening from a seemingly anesthetized sleep, Van finds himself with "the most prominent sensation ... of absolute physical comfort, ... lying in a perfect bed... with the finest linen" (26). It is no surprise, as well, that through exposure to this new way, this new kind of woman, however brief, Van feels "as light and clean as a white feather" (26). And though "it took [him] some time to consciously locate my arms and legs, to feel the vivid sense of life radiate from the wakening center to the extremities" (26), Van does become consciously self-aware. He is reborn in this nation of mothers, through them. The scene of struggle which precedes this scene of

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<sup>4</sup> There is a distinct parallel between Van's scene of awakening and Edna's death scene, the final scene in *The Awakening* which is discussed in this study in the conclusion. As she swims out to her death she is "thinking of the blue-grass meadow that she had traversed when a little child, believing that it had no beginning and no end ... She thought of Léonce and the children ... she heard her father's voice and her sister Margaret's. She heard the barking of an old dog ... the spurs of a cavalry officer ..." (109). The primary difference is that Van is invigorated in Gilman's scene, and Edna is exhausted in Chopin's. Instead of the memories "all sinking away" (Gilman 26), in *The Awakening* Edna sinks away, and the oppressors engulf her.

sublimity can be read as the child being released through the great birthing channel of the New Woman to a new life, one much brighter and one in which man will experience far fewer concussions. It can and should also be read as the afterglow scene of a man who has just experienced the most life-altering sex. "I lay perfectly still, quite happy, quite conscious, and yet not actively realizing what had happened" (26). Here he is seen in the afterglow, quite changed from the experience. He is in her bed, this great New Woman he is only just coming to know, and he is profoundly fulfilled. What might have been read originally as emasculation by the stampede of this herd of Herland cattle, should instead be read as a re-masculation by the sympathetic New Woman seeking her perfect partner, and finding him in the damaged but not entirely ruined shell of the man of the early twentieth century.

Vandyck's experience is representative of the very suggestion implied or stated by many New Woman authors that exposure to, or more specifically sexual partnership with, a more elevated, enlightened species of women will bring a man sensations he can only imagine. It promises spiritual, mental, emotional and physical awareness and bliss he has never known. Some New Woman novelists, Grand in particular, suggest this would come through a cleansing of the male sexuality, exterminating the little pests nesting within it. Others such as Schreiner suggest that the bliss was untold because they did not yet know its bounds. They knew there would be a connectedness between the sexes, unfamiliar to them now, which must, by the very nature of the relationship of the sexes to one another, be more blissful than its current state.

Edna's experience is not so optimistic despite its similarities to Van's. While Van awakens to his new self in all its possibilities so, too, does he awaken to a nation replete with women capable of nurturing him and encouraging him along in his journey, women with whom he can find companionship, even partnership. Edna awakens to a silence not of promise, not of a Herland community at rest about to rise to the day in its gloriousness, but to a silence of emptiness. Her joking suggestion that the

previous residents of the house where she slept have long since died during her great slumber is one that has many dimensions. It is only after generations have lived and died and considerable change has occurred that the awakened Edna could thrive. Instead, only hours have passed. The land still harbors numerous “past relics” (37), and the mentality has not changed despite the beginnings of the internal change of Edna’s psyche. She awakens not to a land abounding with New Men capable of understanding her and loving her, worthy partners all, but to an empty land, barren of all but herself and Robert. The reader is half meant to hope that Robert is capable of what this new Edna requires of him, but, like Edna, the reader knows that he is a “past relic,” himself (37). Chopin so effortlessly reveals this to her reader simply by having Robert break the spell of the advance of one hundred years by adjusting “a ruffle upon [Edna’s] shoulder” (37).

The two scenes like the two novels have their similarities, but, like the two novels, they are presenting two dissimilar experiences not because the nature of the experience should be so vastly different, but because of the social surroundings in which the experiences occur. Gilman advises her reader to allow the New Woman to come to fruition and guide the New Man to a reclaimed, renovated Eden. Chopin warns her reader to beware the destruction of its finest resource, the vibrant woman capable of being better than she is in the confines of social dictates. She warns that these Ednas may sleep now, but they will awaken one day, albeit to a barren world. Other feminists of the period would extend this to suggest the literal decline and extinction of the human race. Chopin is more subtle in her suggestions and warnings; the extinction she is most concerned with is that of the endangered Ednas.

In *The Daughters of Danaus* Caird describes a scene suggestive of sexual excitement when Hadria leaves her marriage to pursue her art. It is described as “a time of blossoming. Disjointed, delicious impressions followed one another in swift succession, often superficially incoherent, but threaded deep, in the stirred consciousness, on a silver cord” (295). Caird

also refers to a sense of waking to the new and genuine awareness and existence. “*This* was no dream, this bold, blue, dancing water, this living sunshine, this salt and savor and movement and brilliancy!” (297). She writes into Hadria’s thoughts, “The *other* was the dream; it seemed to be drifting away already. ... it would not stand up and face the emphatic present” (297). Caird legitimates Hadria’s experience of the world in her awakened state as Gilman and Chopin do their protagonists’. She asks her reader to recognize the validity of this existence of her heroine, suggesting also that this awakened, alert existence is more real than the past one of marriage, subordination and imprisonment - of “rabid agony” (297). Hadria sees the potential as did Chopin and Gilman for the continuation of this post-dream existence. As with Van and Edna, Hadria feels the other existence “drifting away already” and can only call forth the memory of it, “recalled as through a veil” (297).

Unlike Van and Edna, Hadria is awakened to her potentialities and her self prior to the action of the plot, but is forced to sublimate this awareness once married. This scene is a second coming, but it, too, is short-lived, due to the same knowledge Chopin imparts through Edna that the spell of liberty is a spell only; the reality is not so liberating. Hadria, after a short time of delicious freedom and pursuit of her artistic genius, is wrenched away and deceived into returning to the *other* life that is the dream not the reality, the nightmare existence. In this penned-in existence, Hadria cannot stand to inhabit her own body as it is defined by the society that oppresses her, giving her little choice but to “[barter] ... womanhood, using these powers of body, in return for food and shelter and social favor, or for the sake of so called ‘duty’ irrespective of - perhaps in direct opposition to [her] feelings” (343).

While Caird hems Hadria into a circumstance from which she cannot escape, she presents a very different power dichotomy in her short story, “The Yellow Drawing Room.” Describing a theme of this short story, Forward highlights the concern explored in *Herland* and *The Awakening*, the absence of the New Man: “The New Man will not appear instantaneously

on the scene to rejuvenate human relationships, and the road for the New Woman is a tortuous one" (302). Gilbert and Gubar assert a similar idea as "the rise of the New Woman was not matched by the coming of the New Man but instead was identified (in the imaginations of both men and women) with a crisis of masculinity that we have imaged through the figure of the no-man" (*No Man's* v2: xii).

Caird in "The Yellow Drawing Room" writes of a masculinization of the sexual role of the woman having her male speaker describe the New Woman heroine thus: "she was like some great radiating centre of light and warmth; I was penetrated with the glowing atmosphere" (Caird, "Yellow" 24). Forward suggests that the male speaker "feels 'penetrated' by her, because she is strong, potent and autonomous, and his fear of emasculation reduces him to misery and despair" (Forward 301). In that he does not experience this awakening to the New Woman's potentialities in a sheltered woman-world as Van does, this potential partner for the New Woman, instead of feeling inspired by the prospective relationship, feels threatened by it.

### **New Woman + New Man = New Sex**

Schreiner remains hopeful for the future union of two corresponding souls, though she, too, does not write a successful partnership between any man and woman in her novels. She writes in her polemic that the sexual union of such souls will have profound effects not merely on the two involved (though the importance of this is noted by Schreiner), but on society as well. She makes the distinction very clear that it is actually the experience of sexual intimacy between two such sympathetic and well matched people that radiates creative, spiritual and intellectual energy.

... it will be found, that over and above its function in producing and sending onward the physical stream of life ..., that sex and the sexual relation between man and woman have distinct esthetic, intellectual, and spiritual function and ends, apart entirely from physical reproduction. That noble as

the function of the physical reproduction of humanity by the union of man and woman, rightly viewed, that union has in it latent, other, and even higher forms of creative energy and life-dispensing power, and that its history on earth has only begun. (*Woman* xvi)

Schreiner claims for women's as well as for men's sexuality "a distinct esthetic, intellectual and spiritual function" (xvi). Sex can be an act that has esthetic value, intellectual value and spiritual value to those involved. Schreiner thus believes that sex could raise the two involved to a new level of insight into humanity, to a new level of creative ability and to an entirely new spiritual plane. She claims that sexual desire and the satiation of it in a true partnership of equals is in and of itself, "apart entirely" from the hope of procreation, worthy of awe. This is the most precarious limb that Schreiner has ventured out onto. With this assertion in 1911 she undermines, though briefly, what was considered the all encompassing power of maternity, for the validation of a female, sexual identity that could exist *separate* from motherhood. Of the most influential New Woman novelists, Schreiner is alone in directly making this daring claim. Unfortunately, for women, her view did not predominate, and motherhood staked its claim on women's sexuality once again.

"That union has in it latent other and even higher forms of creative energy and life dispensing power" (xvi). This kind of sex was sex for a new generation. This was sex that was going to change the world. The creative, intellectual and spiritual energy that would be produced by such partnerships would have untold merits according to Schreiner. She cannot contain her optimism when she prophesies, "its history on earth has only just begun" (xvi). Perhaps, considering New Woman fiction, it has not quite begun yet, since society is presented as devoid of suitable, sexually inspiring partners. Still, she remains hopeful and identifies the ideal for any New Woman who might spot a modern man.

If the ideal of the modern woman becomes increasingly one inconsistent with the passive existence of woman on the

remuneration which her sexual attributes may win from man, and marriage becomes for her increasingly a fellowship of comrades, rather than the relationship of the owner and the bought, the keeper and the kept; the ideal of the typical modern man departs quite as strongly from that of his forefathers in the direction of finding in woman active companionship and co-operation rather than passive submission. (*Woman* 105)

One can interpret this to apply to sex as well as partnership. Schreiner claims the passive sexual partner is no longer the ideal role for a woman, nor is the man who is seeking a passive sexual partner the ideal for a man. The "modern man" will desire a sexual partnership with a woman who recognizes and acts on her own sexual appetites, who seeks sexual intimacy for the sake of connection, physical, emotional and spiritual, separate from and also coexisting with her desire to procreate. Schreiner is careful to identify the New Woman not as a prostitute nor as a sexually depraved woman but as a sexually aware being who is most attractive to any male partner worth having.

Schreiner claims New Women are sexier. "The merely brilliantly attired and unintelligent woman probably never awakened the same intensity of profound sex emotion ... which followed a George Sand, who attracted to herself with deathless force some of the most noted men of her generation ..." (*Woman* 94). When reviewing Schreiner's life one cannot help but notice that she, too, fits the description of one who drew to her "some of the most noted men of her generation." Among them, Havelock Ellis, Cecil Rhodes and Karl Pearson were in varying ways fascinated with and attracted to Schreiner.

Schreiner's ideal for sexuality, what she believed to be an instinctive relationship between the sexes, begins with a true union of souls a bonding

in friendship.<sup>5</sup> All that develops from this relationship has a safer chance at being pure. According to Schreiner, once a friendship reaches a certain level, when the only logical growth for the relationship is sexual, it should be thus entered into for the growth of the two people involved toward a heightened sense to enable the lovers to reach new artistic, creative and intellectual heights. "Neither is woman without the man, nor man without the woman, the completed human intelligence" (*Woman* 76). A sexual relationship should not be entered into on a passing whim. Sex was not merely "esthetic," nor should it simply feed physical desires. Suckling lust was not the purpose of sex as it presented itself to Schreiner. She did not deny the existence of desires in men or women, but as long as she could securely fasten those desires to some greater purpose, she could justify her acceptance of sexuality to her repressed, though ever-present, nagging upbringing, and her more conscious self. Unfortunately, this would pose incredible problems when she attempted to live by her ideals.

### **Lust and the Nature of Sexual Desire**

There is a striking and portentous parallel between the way the women of Gilman's *Herland* keep their cats and the way the male explorers are kept. As one of the Aunts describes, "The fathers are few compared to the mothers, just a few very fine ones in each town; they live quite happily in walled gardens and the houses of their friends. But they only have a mating season once a year" (52). Somewhat startled by this reining in of the male cats' sexual activity, Terry responds, "Rather hard on Thomas, isn't it?" (53) revealing his prejudice. Calmly and patiently the Aunt explains to her student why this is not a cruel practice at all: "Oh, no - truly! You see it is

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<sup>5</sup> Though Schreiner implies in her search for the natural sex relationship that it is between men and women, she understands there to be a very real and logical need and lure to homosexuality when men and women have veered so far away from their natural states and thus each other. She understands that there is "an inevitable and invincible desire of all highly developed human natures, to blend with their sexual relationships their highest intellectual interests and sympathies." When men and women have grown so completely apart due to sex-parasitism, the distance between the two naturally draws like to like and out of intellectual friendship comes sexual love, even if it is homosexual love. She does not accept this as natural. If and when the natural state of man and woman is regained, the implication is that same-sex relations be abandoned (*Woman* 26).

many centuries that we have been breeding the kind of cats we wanted. They are healthy and happy and friendly, as you see. How do you manage with your dogs? Do you keep them in pairs, or segregate the fathers, or what?" (53).

Gilman toys with her reader as she toys with her explorers, suggesting the possibility of keeping men in this way. In the end she does not suggest a society would keep its men as it would a species of domesticated animal no matter how humane, and the implication that 'keeping' a sex of humans is unacceptable is quite clearly a commentary on the keeping of women as wives that she is addressing in her own society. To Terry's response in sympathy with the male cat Gilman rejoins that once men understand how to control themselves, once they have been enlightened to a better way of living and a better sexual relationship with their partners, they need not be kept in walled gardens - once society has bred "the kind of" men "we wanted" (53). Gilman promotes the idea that humans are made up of more than their instincts; they are rational, as is displayed by all the rational advances made in the Herland society as well as the interest the Herlanders have in the rational advances made outside their nation. Gilman is suggesting that, while male cats must be kept in such a confined yet humane way, men need not, unless they act like cats when it comes to reproduction and sexual urges.

Van and Ellador have many discussions about when and how often to have sexual intercourse. Van is presented as having a male cat outlook with some human, romantic notions attached to it, and Ellador, too, has a touch of the cat in her approach to sex in that she believes a couple should not "mate" "out of season". She does not have the romantic notions about sex that Van has, and, although she thinks they are beautiful and intriguing, she remains unconvinced and is unwilling to participate until she comprehends it more completely, until she is convinced "that regular sexual relations are both proper and desirable" (Knight xv).

Gilman is careful to suggest that neither Van nor Ellador have the mystery of human sexuality solved. It would be too easy and quite

dangerous to assume that Gilman sympathizes with Ellador, that Ellador is the mouthpiece for Gilman's politics and philosophy, as is true with other New Woman novelists and is true on occasion in the weakest parts of *Herland*. Here, Gilman stands out in her examining and manipulating of the delicate workings and mechanics of human sexuality. The genre itself is satirical and should be read with that in mind. Gilman has presented to her reader an asexual woman quite different from the asexual Victorian woman, but with striking similarities when it comes to sexuality which can, all too easily, be overlooked. If one reads the parallel, one can find an entirely different connection and prescription for the ills of the beginnings of modern sexuality. Once the surface is scratched, one can read this unlikely parallel between the two couples: the modern, but naive man and his Herland partner and the modern, naive man and his post-Victorian sexually ignorant partner. As Ellador tells Van "you see dearest ... you have to be patient with us. We are not like the women of your country. We are Mothers and we are People, but we have not specialized in this line" (125). This line is, of course, sex. "We are not like the women of your country," should be taken literally and ironically, for Herlanders have not specialized in sex. Women off the plateau have, in that they have specialized in how to use it as currency, but have not, in that they also are meant to be chaste in body until marriage and then are expected to be chaste in mind by nature. This definition of women's sexuality is given by the male science of the time, one Caird's Hadria refers to as a regularly misused excuse by both sexes, "her Serene Highness Science" (257). Ellador's resistance to accept a definition of her own potential sexuality by her male partner is the only way she will be able to leave room for the slow but healthy development of her understanding of the true nature of her own sexuality, parallel to that development of understanding that is being done by her New Woman counterparts off the plateau.

The lack of specializing in sex is the only way that Herlanders are able to be "People." But Gilman, through the promise of her conclusion of the novel, suggests that women can be both "People" and sexual beings; it

will just take some time and discovery. This is where the women off the plateau and Ellador share a sexuality. Both have evolved away from what, the New Woman suggests must one have been a healthy 'bi-sexual' sexuality, one in which men and women connected through sex. The relationship has moved toward one very far distant from the original. Both partners must be given time and space to adjust to a redevelopment of this former, healthy sexuality.

In 1886 Schreiner asked Karl Pearson, a contemporary, socialist intellectual and potential lover, "How many men have you known who have reached the age of 30, and been absolutely celibate? ... What in England among the middle classes should you say was the proportion of celibate men?" (*Letters* 106). In 1893, to another potential lover and eventually her husband, Schreiner writes, "I do not think the celibate life the ideal. Neither physically nor mentally does it lead to the fullest health or vigor. I find it one of the bitterest evils in our transitory condition ..." (218). Though not all New Woman novelists would agree with Schreiner on this point, as illustrated with Gilman's Herlanders choosing never to mate out of season; Schreiner ponders it, and the question is open for discussion.

Chopin presents a different kind of potential innate sexuality for a woman, one that is assertive and hungry. Chopin describes Edna's first experience with this part of her nature. "They continued silently to look into each other's eyes. When he leaned forward and kissed her, she clasped his head, holding his lips to hers" (80). It is essential to note in a study of New Woman novelists' presentation of female sexuality that Chopin does not suggest that what Edna experiences is an aberration. She explains, "it was the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire" (80). Edna's "nature" is responding to the kiss. Edna's "desire" is "kindled" by the kiss, the "flaming torch." Something dormant within her is awakened, and she responds to its whims. She rejects the passive role of traditional sexual partner and is even annoyed that Alcée, her lover, insists on talking. She has little interest in him, his thought, his emotions and his character. She is interested only in what he

can offer her sexually.

“There was a dull pang of regret because it was not the kiss of love which had inflamed her, because it was not love which had held this cup of life to her lips” (80). Edna tastes the forbidden lust the middle-class Victorian woman is deprived of feeling. When Edna experiences it she loses an entirely new sort of virginity and as a result is “assailed” by a “multitude of emotions” (80). “She felt as if a mist had been lifted from her eyes, enabling her to look upon and comprehend the significance of life, that monster made up of beauty and brutality” (80). Chopin is suggesting that until Edna recognizes all aspects of her own humanity including lust, she cannot understand life. This finds a contemporary parallel in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* where Marlowe attempts to see into the darkness within himself. Edna must face her demons as well as the beauty of her sexual awakening. Lust is certainly being presented as “brutality” in contrast to her awakening with Robert to love, the “beauty” aspect of the “monster.” To go so far as to suggest that women were capable of the same “brutality” as men, that women were capable of sexual desire unconnected to motherhood or even to love was to go in a direction where no other New Woman novelist in this study dared go. Chopin leaps ahead of her peers connecting the nature of man to the nature of woman in a way no other was brave enough to do nor for that matter believed was possible. She does not elevate the morality of Edna’s sexual appetite over her partner’s. Instead, she forces Edna to see it, experience all aspects of it and recognize it. Only then is she capable of rising above the baser aspects of it (baser according to Chopin) and reject it. This lust was not the fulfilling, sexual, loving partnership Edna longed for as is revealed in her disappointment in it. After experiencing it and the exhilaration of the release of another part of her nature, she rejects it just as Lyndall rejects her lover after realizing that she has made a “terrible mistake” in entering into a sexual relationship “with a man she did not absolutely love” (Schreiner, *Letters* 260). Neither Edna nor Lyndall are rebuked by the author for making this “mistake” because the characters recognize the error in their ways and do

not embrace these relationships that are considered by their creators as a base sexual experiences unequal to the heroines' potential.

Gilman writes Vandyck's awe at the strange state of limbo of Herland sexuality:

Here everything was different. There was no sex-feeling to appeal to, or practically none. Two thousand years' disuse had left very little of the instinct; also we must remember that those who had at times manifested it as atavistic exceptions were often by that very fact, denied motherhood.

What left us even more at sea about our approach was the lack of any sex tradition. There was no accepted standard of what was ... womanly. (Gilman, *Herland* 92-3)

Similarly, the New Woman novelists feel at sea at the fin de siècle, at this time, "everything was different." "Disuse" and misuse as they saw it "had left very little of the [pure] instinct," and, as Gilman noted of the Herland society, "we must remember that those who had at times manifested it as atavistic exceptions were often by that very fact, denied." In reality much more than motherhood was denied them if they manifested an active sexual desire. With uncertainty the New Woman novelist attempted to seek out a sense of "sex-feeling" and through it, determine what was "womanly," but they could never be complete outsiders, like Van, with an objective perspective.

### III. Motherhood

With motherhood ... the least understood, the most tormenting, complex experience to wrest to truth.

Telling the truth about one's experience as a body, forbidden, not possible, for centuries.

Rights of one's own body denied to woman for centuries. Men owned us. Babies inhabited our bodies year after year.

Knowledge of one's own body that comes from free use of it, even free exercise of it, denied. (Olsen 254)

Tillie Olsen, who anthologized women's silences, writes about the claim motherhood makes on women's existence. In this excerpt she considers the manipulation of this part of female nature throughout history, identifying it as "the most tormenting, complex experience to wrest to truth". Wrestling it to truth is just what the New Woman novelist attempts to do. She is fighting the pressure of her society that determines her maternity while resenting the being growing inside her and fighting off her own socialized desire for this subordination. She tries to distinguish between the determination of motherhood by all the outside forces and the truth of her own experience as well as the underlying truth of motherhood. The New Woman novelist experiences frustration with her inability to be understood as well as her inability to demand that thorough attention be paid to the truth she is unveiling. It is the knowledge of one's own body that draws the New Woman novelists, and the manipulation of it defeats them. Despite the outcome of their struggle with the underlying truth of motherhood and uncertainty of what to do with their new, partially discovered knowledge, motherhood merits their attention and energies. As with the specific example of Kate Chopin, "Motherhood, not race or politics, dominated [her] years in New Orleans, and it linked women across the color line. ... babies were more important than battles" (Toth 78). Emily Toth, a biographer of Chopin, emphasizes the importance of motherhood in a woman's existence in this period in New Orleans.

As much as it is relevant to the New Woman's discourse, it was also

considered of profound importance to the New Woman's adversaries.

The assumption was that, as women were innately different from men in terms of their biological and mental make-up, their primary female function – to be wives and mothers – should take priority over everything else. The woman's role was motherhood; if she ventured beyond this, mental disturbance might occur and may even be passed on to the next female generation. (Forward 299)

Motherhood, though intrinsically related to the subjects of sexuality and marriage, was a matter of significance in and of itself. Motherhood adds a new complexity to the issue; it introduces another layer of difference between the sexes, in which the question of inferiority applies to *men*; it addresses the direct juxtaposition of opposites: empowerment or oppression, obligation or privilege, burden or right. 'Who deems it such?' and 'for whom does a woman become a mother?' were the questions that had to be answered before coming up with a solution to the riddle of female identity. The New Woman's and, in particular, "Schreiner's strongest personal and narrative ambivalence - woman as pure and maternal, maternity as central to the salvation of the human race - helped to shape the [suffragists'] rhetoric and symbolism of gender and remain problems central to contemporary feminism" (Barash 269). This ambivalence defines the New Woman discussion of motherhood. Some New Woman novelists reject motherhood as it exists in their society suggesting it only to be revisited and revised at a much later and more enlightened time.

"A conflictual attitude towards motherhood is typical of a good deal of New Woman writing by women: Sarah Grand regarded it as central to woman's self identity, ... whereas Mona Caird was vehement in her opposition to the binding ties of maternity" (Ledger and Luckhurst 76). As Ledger and Luckhurst indicate in their anthology of prominent essays and articles of the fin de siècle, there was a division among these New Woman thinkers. Though Ledger and Luckhurst note only the two extremes, Grand and Caird, the other New Woman novelists in this study can also be

associated with one side or the other and at times both. An examination of this is pertinent to understanding the conclusions that all the New Woman novelists came to about female identity. Caird, Chopin and Dixon all fall into the category of New Woman novelists who made the search for identity paramount and the mess of motherhood contradictions temporarily insignificant. While "Caird ... questioned the very foundations on which the institution of motherhood was based" (Richardson, "People" 186), she focused her energy for change more in the realm of marriage for without the change in marriage no true change could exist within motherhood. Gilman and Schreiner attempted to identify the benefits and potential power motherhood offered women without losing sight of the danger defining motherhood as a woman's duty and role. This was a fine line to walk, and one stumble sent them tumbling without a safety net. Grand and Dowie explored in their fiction the more radical eugenic approach to motherhood and motherhood as the avenue through which women could be understood. Though in many ways reactionary, there was a revolutionary aspect to their theories. Unfortunately, it was tragically flawed, and their concept of motherhood promoted a 'sex as destiny' approach to the female, entrapping her once again in the bonds of her own body.

Like a number of her contemporaries, Schreiner chose to idolize the mother, to capitalize on the power of giving life. Motherhood created for Schreiner the biggest snarl in her theories. It was the chink in her sexuality ideal. In her own life, the desire for maternity would prove to be that force which had such a strong hold on her that she could not bring herself to resent it. She would prove unable to give birth to a child that could live, and thus, she dealt with potential motherhood purely in vague, theoretical terms; her vision blurred when it came to motherhood.

Motherhood was promoted by nineteenth-century society to be a woman's highest ambition, her duty, her most important function as a woman. To whom it deemed motherhood a duty and in what respect was of particular importance. The antifeminist novelist Grant Allen wrote, "If every woman married, and every woman had four children, population

would remain just stationary” (Allen 210). He goes on to explain, “If some women shirk their natural duties, then a heavier task must be laid upon the remainder” (212). With an inherent patronizing tone he asserts, “I have the greatest sympathy with the modern woman’s demand for emancipation” (212), but he qualifies that “her emancipation must not be of a sort that interferes with this prime natural necessity” (213). Within the same article, “Plain Words on the Woman Question,” in the *Fortnightly Review* in October 1889, he refers to motherhood as both a burden that rests on women’s shoulders and “their great privilege” (217). Twenty years earlier the Anglo-Irish feminist Frances Power Cobbe identifies the problem with reproach for sentiments similar to Allen’s when she writes “To admit that Woman has affections, a moral nature, a religious sentiment, an immortal soul, and yet to treat her for a moment as a mere animal link in the chain of life, is monstrous” (quoted in Hollis 23). In this simple statement Power Cobbe takes issue with the core of some New Woman fiction in their definition of woman as mother by instinct, suggesting all other characteristics of her female identity are subordinate. These New Woman novelists who project this approach to maternity sympathize in part with Allen, using woman as a vehicle for the future, a means to an end, a machine whose power negates her own humanity. As long as this was the approach to motherhood, and thus to woman, women could never be social, emotional or intellectual equals to men. As long as society approached women’s ability to reproduce as their primary social function, women would be slaves to those who used them in such a way and slaves to that function for which they were used. So sympathetic to “the modern woman’s demand for emancipation” (Allen 212), Allen closes his article with the conclusion that “whether we have wives or not ... we must at least have mothers” (220). The “we” to whom he refers, though loosely interpreted as society, more clearly resonates as the higher order of men in British society. And it is this exactly that Cobbe claims is monstrous, reducing women first to their function and secondarily allowing them other aspects of humanity. A division bears itself within the New Woman novel as New Woman

novelists could not agree on whether motherhood was more of a burden or a privilege.

“Monstrous” though it was, a conflict was making itself known for women as mothers both resenting it in its current form and conversely longing for it. To complicate matters the power it afforded them was alluring in a society that otherwise offered to them little influence and purpose. Tempted and trying to rationalize, New Woman novelists seem to wonder if maternity was a part of them, how could it be oppressive. Most could distinguish that the motherhood in which they could participate was heavily influenced by the patriarchal society’s needs and desires and had little to do with the natural state of motherhood, whatever that may have been. Considering this reality they chose to try to carve out a motherhood from within society’s dictates that afforded them just that power and control they craved.

In order for such women to capitalize on their biological function there had to be some, at least minor, shift in society, and that came with the fear of degeneration. “Positing itself as a universally applicable scientific discourse, ‘degeneration theory’ was very much a product of the social and cultural climate of the late nineteenth century” (Ledger and Luckhurst 1). Degeneration also had a profound influence on society as Ledger and Luckhurst indicate. Writers such as Edwin Ray Lankester wrote that “... we are subject to the general laws of evolution, and are as likely to degenerate as to progress” (Lankester 3). Such ideas “wielded considerable cultural influence” (Ledger and Luckhurst 2). What caused degeneration was up for debate; how to combat it was also disputed, but if one subscribed to the degeneration theory, then s/he was called upon by an ethical sense of responsibility “to ascertain what will conduce to our higher development [and] what will favor our degeneration” (Lankester 5). Thus, a portion of the New Woman thinkers and novelists who did accept the theory of degeneration assumed the responsibility and sought the antidote to degeneration in motherhood.

On the other side of that same coin were those who claimed that the

cause of this very degeneration rested with the mothers. Some of the New Woman novelists are included in this camp, most notably Schreiner with her theory of sex-parasitism. There was a definite fear as Britain teetered on the edge of its hegemony at the end of the nineteenth century, that the race and thus the power of the British empire just might cease to exist, and the cause of this would likely be women producing a “puny, enfeebled, and sickly race” (Maudsley, quoted in Hollis 25). The fear that women’s education would interfere with women’s ability to give birth to and rear a great, robust and healthy next generation of Englishmen was prevalent. Schreiner attempted to transform this fear, explaining that women’s education and then labor was actually the solution to the quickly deteriorating race, rather than the cause of the deterioration. She claimed that if society invests in regenerating its women, as a result it will regenerate itself entirely.

### **Motherhood, a Messy Affair**

Gilman closes her autobiography in a spirit of hope as she and the world had stepped foot into the new century claiming it to have “immanent possibilities for swift improvement” (*Living* 330). And, as if speaking directly to Kate Chopin’s Edna Pontellier, she asserts that these “immanent possibilities” cannot be achieved while the “ostentatiously revolted youth” continue to entertain their “infantile delight in ‘self-expression,’ playing with their new freedom as a baby does with its fingers and toes ...” (330-1). Chopin would claim that first the infant must learn to know its fingers and toes before it can use them, but an advanced and impatient Gilman calls forth these liberated youth, as if they are her infantry of female soldiers fighting for the cause of humanity, to “see their real power, their real duty,” and then “things would move” (331). She qualifies her statement and tightens the noose on Edna’s neck when she explains the way in which the troops will make “swift improvement” and will “make things move” (330-1). She gives women power and responsibility, purpose and presence. “This is the woman’s century, the first chance for the mother of the world to rise to her full place, her transcendent power to remake humanity, to rebuild the suffering

of the world - and the world waits while she powders her nose" (331).

In these nearly final lines of Gilman's autobiography she outlines the turn and focus that much New Woman feminism took and the locus from which some New Women sought their power. The reevaluation of motherhood as a benefit not a burden can be attributed, at least in part, to the fact that it was one power that could not be (or so they thought) taken from them. With the rise in popularity of eugenic discourse, this venue for female power gained in prominence.<sup>1</sup> Using Edna as the model for the New Woman noosed by the liberating, empowering role of "New Mother" seems only too appropriate because of the vim with which Chopin suggests Victorian motherhood ravaged the female soul. Of course these were two different kinds of motherhood. As with sexuality and marriage, the motherhood that Gilman projected as "the power to remake humanity" was not the self-denying motherhood of the mother-women of Grand Isle. Nevertheless, Schreiner, too, would be hesitant to accept this motherhood-as-purpose approach to a new century for a New Woman. Labor and purpose was what she challenged society to allow women. Most of the New Woman novelists would have accepted that motherhood was meaningful labor, but that it was the primary way women were to "remake humanity," was a daunting and shackling prophesy.

Yet Gilman who claimed that motherhood would be the great healer of the world is the very same who remembers feeling in the weeks after bearing her child "that even motherhood brought no joy" (*Living* 92) She is the very same author of the autobiographical story, "The Yellow Wallpaper" in which motherhood is the catalyst to the narrator's mental breakdown. She is the very same woman who writes earnestly in her autobiography, "Here was a charming home; a loving and devoted husband; an exquisite baby, healthy, intelligent and good; ... and I lay all day on the lounge and cried" (89).

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<sup>1</sup> Though it is ironic; with the rise in eugenic power came female sterilization of some 'low women.' It is even more ironic that some of the New Woman novelists, at least in theory, were in support of this state sanctioning of female sterilization for the sake of regeneration. Some of the very same argued against the Contagious Diseases Acts disputing the right of the state to control the female body.

Gilman found that as soon as she left her domestic sphere of perfect home, husband and child, almost within moments, she was healed. "From the moment the wheels began to turn, the train to move, I felt better" (92). This sensation of coming back into herself continued the entire time she was away, healing, like the fictional mother who 'selfishly' left her children in search of herself, Edna Pontellier. Gilman explains that in such a transitional frame of mind she was eager to return to her home and young family. When she did return, she got bronchitis on the way, and a month after arriving back home she was "as low as before leaving" (95).

This merits a momentary recap. Gilman wrote *Herland* in which she creates a utopia where women have children because they will them into existence, and to have a child is the noblest and most coveted experience in a woman's life. Gilman wrote "The Yellow Wall-paper" in which she fictionalized in a darkly neo-gothic style, the postpartum depression and suffocating experience of motherhood at the fin de siècle as well as the dangerous anti-female medicine practiced on her while she experienced this. Though somewhat sparse and sweeping, considering the impact on her creatively, Gilman addresses this very experience of new motherhood as "absolute misery" (*Living* 91). This woman, whose utopia is reliant on each woman having labor fitted to her skills and desires, is the same one who wants women to recognize their "real duty" as "mother of the world" (*Living* 331). There does appear to be a distinct disjunction in her most prominent values. What Gilman claims to be woman's duty, also, it would seem, is her ultimate undoing. Gilman had no other children and would never have been considered the noble mother of *Herland*, glowing with pride and motherly devotion. This might seem to be a cruel and unfair reduction of one woman's life and work for the purposes of making a point, but the point still must be made that Gilman was not alone in the double bind of her values, seeking social purpose, power and experience in her society. Her life, her polemics and her most prominent works of fiction do not connect in a way that made sense for a woman at the turn of the nineteenth century. When motherhood was adopted as the "new" noble

cause for the New Woman, New Woman feminism fell backward because, like sexuality and marriage, it could not be divorced from its former self so easily. No Herland could be created and modern motherhood for the New Woman was likely to be so tainted by its predecessor that it would inevitably afford the New Woman mother “absolute misery” (91).

Motherhood, like sexuality, has two opposing sides for the New Woman novelist. One must have seemed perfect for the woman’s cause, representing mothers’ supreme power, in whose hands the future lay (though even this was characterized by a dangerously definitive quality). The other side was motherhood’s link to the domestic sphere that many New Woman novelists were rejecting. Because of this, their ideas were often contradictory. This contradictory nature was even more prevalent when writing about motherhood than it had been with sexuality or marriage. Gilman, known most for her haunting “The Yellow Wall-paper,” conveys a bleak outlook on motherhood. She represents it as an aspect of a woman’s life that saps her intellectually and spiritually. It is an element that confines her in the domestic sphere even more than marriage had. Conversely, Gilman writes the mother-utopia, *Herland*, where women’s *raison d’être* is motherhood, and though the novel is a satire, this aspect of the novel is not meant to be satirical if one considers Gilman’s polemic and autobiography. How then, could the author so directly contradict herself and present a utopia of women defined by their biological destiny of motherhood? The answer, quite simply, is that she did not, nor did the other New Woman novelists.

Hampered by the details of the case for motherhood, from a distance, these authors might be seen to have contradicted themselves, but on close scrutiny one can identify that these New Woman novelists were, as with marriage, rejecting motherhood, only as it was a construct by a society that denied them meaningful work. Motherhood as it was commonly understood in Victorian society, thus, was a falsely constructed or at least was incomplete in its definition. The difference for Gilman, in the two works mentioned, is the society in which the “mother” character exists. The unnamed narrator of “The Yellow Wall-paper” is stifled by her role as

mother because of the unbearable domesticity and oppression it suggests. The narrator of "The Yellow Wall-paper," while kept captive in her room to cure her "nervous troubles" (31), begins to hallucinate, seeing one woman and then many trapped behind the pattern of the wallpaper. "I didn't realize for a long time what the thing was that showed behind, that dim sub-pattern, but now I am quite sure it is a woman" (37). This woman in the wallpaper "by daylight ... subdued" (37) shares a kinship with the narrator who is also trapped inside the walls of her domestic world. Marriage began the entrapment, and motherhood clinched it. Like Grand's Evadne, "her mental state deteriorates considerably," and "far from providing an incentive to take an interest in the outside world, motherhood encloses her once and for all within the domestic sphere" (Heilmann, General Introduction 128). The women of *Herland* have no knowledge of the "domestic sphere" as it exists off their plateau, therefore, motherhood means power and hope for a better future. They exalt in this power rather than fall into madness under the pressure of the oppression and confinement it represents. "'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" writes Kessler, "provides an essential dystopian vision of female constriction" (107). Kessler goes on to explain that the earlier piece is half of a larger whole; "'The Yellow Wall-paper' provides the dark side that *Herland* looks beyond" (107). A coupling of the two pieces in this way provides an essential reflection of one in the other; woman is still woman, but in one environment is driven insane by her maternal role and in the other is raised to a sublime state.

As Knight notes in her introduction to *Herland* "social motherhood was closest to Gilman's heart" (xiv) as a social reform advocated for throughout the novel. "In both the novel and her own life, Gilman advocated a system in which the young child would be trained by professional caretakers and raised communally" (xiv). This socialist approach to motherhood links to Schreiner's plea for meaningful labor for non-mothers and mothers who are no longer biologically in the reproducing stage of their lives. It takes this assertion that women need labor to another level in which "such a system would free the child's mother to engage in work outside the home with

remunerative benefits" (Knight xiv).

Herland, the voyagers discover, is a country where mothers become mothers through parthenogenesis, reproduction by the development of an unfertilized ovum. What starts this reproduction in each woman is a profound desire to have a child which, interpreted from a twenty-first-century perspective, sheds light on the question of when a woman can and should have a child. In Herland this only occurs when a woman chooses it to, when she deems that she is ready. As much as this land is a place defined by the fact that "we are mothers - all of us" (47) and "children were the - raison d'être in this country" (53), one recognizes as a reader that the women are in complete control over their maternal destinies. They are not subject to their own biology; in fact, it is subject to their will. They, as a woman-centered community, determine their maternity and each woman's role in the raising of each child. Writing from within a society in which a woman has very little control over becoming pregnant and very little control over what her role is in the upbringing of her children, Gilman writes a truly utopian, potential world, anticipating the birth control that would soon follow in contemporary society.<sup>2</sup>

Gilman suggests that humans might just refrain from sex when it is not mating season. Her Herlanders wonder at what Vandyck Jennings refers to as "marital indulgence" (135). They cannot comprehend why people would participate in sexual intercourse if they were not trying to reproduce. Ellador tries to understand: "You mean - that with you - love between man and woman expresses itself that way - without regard to motherhood? To parentage, I mean" (136). Gilman throws in an additional jab of understatement, playing with Ellador's ignorance of the fact that motherhood does not smoothly slip into parentage when shifting from the discussion of a single sex society into a discussion of what she calls a "bi-sexual" society. The central point of this element of the novel remains that in Herland and in

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<sup>2</sup> It is unlikely, though, that Gilman would be a strong supporter of birth control since she promotes abstinence and rejects the existence of women's sexual desire. She would likely view birth control as a means of sustaining what she would consider men's insatiable desire for sexual gratification. However, there is an aspect of birth control that is congruent to her approach to maternity, women's complete control and choice.

Gilman's ideal for motherhood, intercourse cannot be had "out of season." Vandyck gives an ironic argument that Ellador needs to rise above her animal nature in order to recognize the necessary enlightened aspect of intercourse. Gilman juxtaposes Van's ethnocentric idea of his elevated nature with the nature of a Herlander, one Gilman presents without deviation as elevated not only in thought but biologically evolved beyond sexual desire. And when faced with the potentially consuming, unwanted sexual advances of her lover, "there rose in her eyes that look [he] knew so well, that remote clear look as if she had gone far away even though [he] held her beautiful body so close, and was now on some snowy mountain regarding [him] from a distance" (136), forcing Vandyck to ask his reader "What is this miracle by which a woman [and he does not specify Herlander here], ... may withdraw herself, utterly disappear till what you hold is as inaccessible as the face of a cliff?" (136). Thus, Gilman claims that it is universal to women's nature to escape within oneself, or rather outside of one's body, if one's body becomes possessed by someone else in an unwanted form - be that a lover or a fetus.

### **Rejection of Institution**

The institution of motherhood at the fin de siècle threatened to consume women, and "it" manifested itself in their very own bodies. While many New Woman novelists were uncomfortable with embracing the possibility that they might have an innate carnality, they could not deny that their nature encompassed the ability and desire to reproduce. They could not ignore that their bodies on some level were equipped to be fertilized and to gestate a fetus. This reality had to be reckoned with. When one was part of a movement to reclaim a female self, to reject an obvious aspect of the self would defeat the purpose of the search. Ovulation, menstruation and potential gestation were inescapable aspects of being female. The New Woman novelist was faced with a few choices. She could first embrace her maternal leanings and secondarily reject the social prescriptions (though never very successfully), or she could reject the social

prescriptions for motherhood and cope with her own maternity at a later date, after she had come to terms with the other aspects of her self. Chopin has her heroine, Edna, do just this when, after moving out of her husband's home, she goes to visit her children for a week. Though Edna does not entirely come to terms with her identity as a mother, after she has done a good deal of soul searching she might. She cannot be any kind of mother prior to this point (89-90).

Of the New Woman novelists in this study, Caird is the most adamant and vocal about her rejection of motherhood as a means of oppressing women in her contemporary society. "At a time when most feminists celebrated women's 'innate' maternal qualities as a sign of moral superiority, Caird developed a critique of motherhood as constituting an oppressive patriarchal institution" (Heilmann, "Mona Caird" 69). Though this study takes issue with categorizing "most feminists" as "celebrat[ing] women's 'innate' maternal qualities as a sign of superiority," Heilmann's point still holds in that Caird distinguishes herself among her contemporary feminists and New Woman novelists who probed the potential of their maternity. In *The Daughters of Danaus* Caird's heroine Hadria states that "A woman with a child in her arms is, to me, the symbol of an abasement, an indignity, more complete, more disfiguring and terrible, than any form of humiliation that the world has ever seen" (341). Unyielding in her assertions, Hadria insists on clinging to her personal rejection of the institution of motherhood constructed by "tyrannies" despite, or rather in part because of, her experience (though she held these views prior to her own maternity, her vehemence only grew slightly less enraged after becoming a mother). This image of a mother and babe is carefully chosen by both Hadria and Caird as an ancient image used to idolize mother because society idolizes child. Therefore, in the selection of the image that evokes thoughts of Mary and Christ, she likens the mother, any mother, to Mary who is only noble and recognized for her relation to and participation in bringing forth the far more significant son of God.

"Caird saw the suppression of the spirit of liberty as a key factor in

explaining contemporary support for the state against the individual ...” (Richardson, “People” 195). Richardson goes on to explain that Caird suggested that women such as Grand and Gilman who supported eugenics did so as a result of their social subordination (195). The sacrifice of woman for her child, the future of society, Caird warns, perpetuates a system in which women remain of no significant value in the eyes of that society beyond their ability to reproduce.

### **Rejection of Mothers**

Mothers themselves, if they conformed, represented what was rejected by New Woman novelists. Throughout the novels these women, destructive by their complacent perpetuation of the old system, are represented as women who inspire in the novelists reactions ranging from jaw-clenching disgust to pity for the pathetic acquiescence and/or ignorance that conforming mothers embody. Mrs. Walker, the vicar’s wife, hampered by “her countless daughters” (Caird, *Daughters* 175), in Caird’s *The Daughter’s of Danaus*, Adelle Ratignolle in her confinement and her daily self-effacing approach to motherhood in Chopin’s *The Awakening*, and Mary Erle’s own unnamed mother in Dixon’s *Story of a Modern Woman* all represent just that sort of mother. No mothers were idolized in the novels of these three authors. Though as part of female identity it was not dismissed, merely put on a back burner to simmer while the more urgent questions were answered. According to them it was imperative that issues of identity were addressed before motherhood could be reformed. The rhetorical question these authors pose is: how can a woman raise a next generation if she is still giving birth to and raising herself from a childlike naiveté to a whole being with wisdom and dignity?

Even Schreiner who vacillated over the mother-as-deity approach, writes her heroine, Rebekah, in *From Man to Man* into this struggle as a mother and writes Lyndall’s experience in *The Story of an African Farm* as a failure of a mother. Rebekah, is written in such a way that she achieves a wholeness and is presented at the end of the completed portion of the

novel as raising a family of children, boys and girls, natural and adopted, in a noble and conscientious manner. In *The Story of an African Farm* Schreiner formerly wrote Lyndall's death shortly following that of her newborn child. Lyndall is able to give birth to the child, sick and dying as it is. However, there is no chance that the lost and cynical Lyndall, who knows who she is but cannot determine how to allow that self an existence, would be able to raise a child in the manner that Rebekah is presented doing.

"In short, Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman" (Chopin 9). With this brief statement of Edna's relationship with her children, Chopin distinguishes Edna from the "mother-women" who "seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle" (9). Chopin creates a microcosm of Victorian society, and, like Wharton's Newport, Grand Isle is the summering spot where the members of high society Louisiana migrate for the summer months. Here the mother-women "prevail." "It is easy to know them... . They were women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels" (9). The queen mother of them all was Adelle Ratignolle who "was always talking about her 'condition'" which "was in no way apparent, and no one would have known a thing about it but for her persistence in making it the subject of conversation" (10). Adelle, who is her society's ideal for a mother, finds the need to make her perpetual condition the subject of conversation because without it she does not exist (not in any way that society recognizes). There is an ever-present fear in mother-women linked to their existence. If they are in any way distanced from their mother role, then they fear they will fade from existence and out of importance in the world of Grand Isle. The mother-women in general, and Adelle specifically, are foils for Edna who comes to understand her own maternal desire and occasional lack thereof in direct contrast to Adelle's approach to maternity.

Caird's mother-woman differs from Adelle who is alluring in many ways to Edna. "Mrs. Walker was a middle-aged, careworn, rather prim-looking woman" (*Daughters* 175) and was the kind of mother who threatened to

undo all that many New Woman novelists attempted to accomplish. She was worse than Chopin's "mother-women" in that, not only was she giving her entire life and effort to motherhood - as Caird, Schreiner, Gilman and Chopin warned against, she was breeding and raising "countless" more of the same. The "countless daughters" (175) calls to mind the image of an infantry of the next generation of women who will not even expose themselves to new ideas in "the courageous plays that Mrs. Walker wouldn't mention" (181). The "countless daughters" call to mind the futility of the lives and roles of the daughters of Danaus in the myth to which the title of the novel refers. Mrs. Walker was an enormous contribution to the next generation of Mrs. Walkers, women couched in their own domesticity and servitude with no ambition to climb out from under it. Still, she inspired pity in Hadria who "had the habit of regarding the clergyman's wife as another of society's victims" (189). In her mind Hadria likened "the careworn woman at the Vicarage, with her eleven children, and her shriveled nature, poor and dead" to "an autumn leaf that shivers before the wind" (189). From Hadria's perspective it was "a savage idol that had devoured" her (189). That idol of course was the patriarchal determination of mother. Mrs. Walker's nature as it is referred to in this passage is her true female nature, distinct from her role as mother, actually damaged by the abuse of her mother function, leaving her to shiver "before the wind," that can be read as progress. She is not equipped for change; the nature required to be a New Woman is "poor and dead" in Mrs. Walker.

In Dixon's *The Story of a Modern Woman*, Mary Erle's mother died young; and, though her death is an "event which makes far less impact on the little girl than the death of her favorite cat" (Flint v), Dixon deems it relevant to the introduction of Mary's character to reveal the young Mary's perception of her mother and her mother's death. While the most prominent memories of her mother in life include her hampering Mary's opportunities to sculpt clay, her mother's many flounces and the fact that she was "poorly" after her pregnancy, the child Mary still tries to understand her mother's death:

First they said that she was poorly, and had gone to Italy, and then they said that she was very ill, and afterwards that she was in heaven; . . . . Nurse said that her mummy was an angel now; but, in all the picture-books, angels had long, smooth hair, wore a kind of night-gown, and had enormous, folding wings. The child could not picture her mother looking like that; she always remembered her in many flounces, with a headache; and certainly, no, certainly, mummy never had any wings out of her back. (18)

Barely veiled, the contrasting juxtaposition of the frivolous mother with her “many flounces” and her perpetual headaches to the angel with “wings out of her back” poses a severe mockery of the stereotypical, middle-class wife and mother of the nineteenth century, the ‘angel of the house’. Mary makes very clear that her mother, an agitated woman who “certainly” was without “wings out of her back,” was no angel. With this quick sweep of her pen Dixon aims to debunk the myth of ideal womanhood promoted by the patriarchal standards of the time. The angel of the house did not exist, for she certainly had no wings and when a woman attempted to achieve angel status she was likely to be prone to headaches (representative of far greater ailments).

Further, “the child could recollect that, some little time before her mother went to Italy, they took her upstairs one day and showed her a baby, with a red, crinkled face, lying in an over-trimmed cradle” (18-19). Her mother’s maternity is not one in which she revels in her delight at her new child; neither “poorly” mother nor “fretful” child could ever truly be healthy. Their sickness was due to an approach to motherhood that incorporated too much trim and too many flounces. Neither her mother’s life as wife nor her sickness after giving birth appealed to the young Mary, who preferred enacting great naval battles to babies, for “she did not care for babies” (19).

Alison Ives, Mary’s friend, more stereotypically a New Woman than Mary, has a mother of the old regime, who *is* alive during the action of the plot and represents, throughout the novel, one of the mothers of the former

period, who subscribed to the the ideas of submission and subordination. Lady Jane “is the ‘Old Woman’ of the Victorian age, ... imprisoned by the past and worn by tradition” (Farmer 33) and presents another example of the detrimental mothers of society though she was unable to keep Alison, her own daughter, from becoming part of the newness she despised.

While Mary herself does not become a mother in the novel, she relates to the monotony and self-effacing nature of motherhood as part of her own existence and woman’s existence in general. At the opening of the novel Mary watches a seamstress and ponders the servitude of the “women ministering to the caprices of the well-to-do” (12).

... it was all tame, monotonous and regular as a clock. She was a docile, humble, uncomplaining creature, who suggested inevitably some patient domestic animal. Her features, rubbed out and effaced with generations of servility, spoke of the small mendacities of the women of the lower classes, of the women who live on ministering to the caprices of the well-to-do. To-day it would seem she had assumed an appropriately dolorous expression. (12)

Mary studies her, recognizing the woman’s understanding of the woe evident on her face. Through sympathy, habit, training or instinct, Mary takes up some sewing while watching the seamstress - connecting them, though the narrator tells Mary’s perspective on the scene as one comfortably distanced by the definition of class.

The seamstress's hand continued to move with docile regularity, and, as Mary looked at her, she was curiously reminded of many women she had seen: ladies, mothers of large families, who sat and sewed with just such an expression of unquestioning resignation. The clicking sound of the needle, the swish of the drawn-out thread, the heavy breathing of the work-woman, all added to the impression. Yes, they too were content to exist subserviently, depending always on someone else, using the old feminine

stratagems, the well-worn feminine subterfuges, to gain their end. The woman who sews is eternally the same. (12)

There is a certain comfort implicit when the narrator tells of Mary's examining the woman as if she were a subject in a scientific study behind glass, but their relationship becomes complicated for Mary when she finds a commonality with this woman in their both being born female into this society. "It sometimes soothed Mary to stitch. Taking up a strip of black merino, she began to hem." The stitching sews the women together in its soothing quality, contenting them "to exist subserviently." Dixon concludes that "the woman who sews is eternally the same." As long as Mary "sews," she is inextricably connected with the seamstress and with all the "ladies" wearing "expression of unquestioning resignation."

The novel is not about Mary's sewing, and she rejects the social dictates rather than assuming the soothing docility linked with motherhood in this passage. The toil that links all women is that of motherhood and the domesticity it entails. "Mary threw down her work with an impatient gesture, and, in the grey twilight, an immense pity seized her for the patient figure bending, near the window, over her foolish strips of flounces, the figure of the woman at her monotonous toil" (13). The toil can be read as the toil of the working-class woman "ministering to the caprices of the well-to-do," or it can be read as the toil of any woman, of all women, ministering to the caprices of the male order, unquestioningly providing babies, innumerable daughters and sons. These were women who were pitiful to look at and unnerving to relate to. Mary is able to "throw down her work with an impatient gesture," distinguishing herself from the woman she watches, who does not have that liberty. This scene appears at the opening of the book, and though Mary never assumes her role in the traditional, patriarchal system, making babies, she does eventually find her own effacing, monotonous, uninspiring work that continues to bolster and to contribute to the perpetuation of the system that oppresses her.

**Children: “little ambassadors of the established and expected”<sup>3</sup>**

The children are presented by some of the authors as little, metaphorical oppressors. Chopin reveals Edna's children as just such a menace to her freedom: “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” (108). Caird has Hadria unravel and reveal her children's power, and Caird presents the perception that they are the most difficult for Hadria to reject, to leave ‘helpless,’ without their mother, if she were to go off in search of herself, escaping their reign over her. Edna experiences this with her children but cannot quite understand it. While the hold they have over her is not merely representative of society's lien on her, Edna finds that “she was fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forget them” (19). On Grand Isle, the summer resort for Louisiana's mother-women, Edna is an anomaly in her ability to “sometimes forget them.” To a mother-woman that sentiment would mean to forget herself. The irony is evident, the mother-women have already forgotten their selves. When Edna goes in search of hers she “did not admit it even to herself” that her children's “absence was a sort of relief . . . . It seemed to free her of a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her” (19).

Caird's Hadria is parallel to Edna as a mother of her biological children, two young sons. Both women are oppressed by their children's existence and its lien on theirs. Edna is only at the very beginning stages of understanding how her children are, by default, part of a system that oppresses her; she only has an vague sense that it is so. Hadria, on the other hand, is fully aware of their role in her subjection and explains to those around her exactly how she believes the little rascals are part of the larger scheme of oppression. When describing her own children, Hadria explains, “They represent to me the insult of society - my own private and

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<sup>3</sup> Caird, *Daughters* 187

particular insult, the tribute exacted of my womanhood. It is through them that I am to be subdued and humbled” (190). In true, glib, Hadria style she tells it exactly as she perceives it, even when what she is describing is so familiar that her very self-disgust links her with Mrs. Walker.

“Hadria will be so different when she has children,’ everyone had said. And so she was; but the difference was alarmingly in the wrong direction” (187). So begins Hadria’s role as mother and her distinguishing difference.

Throughout history, she reflected, children had been the unflinching means of bringing women into line with tradition. Who could stand against them? They had been able to force the most rebellious to their knees. An appeal to the maternal instinct had quenched the hardiest spirit of revolt. No wonder the instinct had been so trumpeted and exalted! Women might harbor dreams and plan insurrections; but their children - little ambassadors of the established and expected - were argument enough to convince the most hardened skeptics. (187)

What Hadria is reflecting on are her own biological children and traditional motherhood in general as determined by an outside force with which Hadria feels little kinship and to which she has no devotion. Skillfully, Caird creates an opportunity for Hadria to distinguish between motherhood as directed by those around her and a motherhood in which Hadria is willing to participate and, by contrast, one which her society rejects. Hadria takes under her care an infant, the illegitimate ‘love child’ of a dead schoolmistress. This completely confounds Valeria Du Prel her New Woman novelist friend: “You say that children have been the means, from time immemorial, of enslaving women, and here you go and adopt one of your enslavers!” (188). Hadria explains that it is the very illegitimacy of this baby that offers her an opportunity to experience motherhood free from the bonds of the “ignominy reserved for the married mother who produces children that are not even hers” (188). Hadria plays on the irony that this child who is not biologically hers, shares none of her genes, is more hers than any child she

might have with her husband. In her relationship with her husband, she is first the vehicle through which the future is brought about. These children that live inside her body are at no point hers; they inhabit her, but they belong to her husband and to the future of society. Legitimacy here identifies a child with the establishment as Hadria explains it, and the illegitimacy of this child gives her (and Caird) an opportunity to make the distinction between motherhood within the "legitimate" Victorian scope of marriage and motherhood, and motherhood as a concept distilled and having solely to do with women. "I feel in defending this child ... I am ... opposing the world and the system of things that I hate" (188). Caird is surely to contrasting Hadria's decision, to legitimize this child by her own standards, with Mrs. Walker who "was particularly scandalized with [Hadria's] ill-advised charity" (189). Here Caird identifies two value systems with two different concepts of mother.

Schreiner compounds and complicates the freedom of motherhood outside of the boundaries of legitimacy through the maternity of her New Woman heroine Lyndall who has determined never to become society's victim (at the same time she cannot avoid it). Lyndall resolves to choose her fate if she cannot choose her environment. An undeniably sexual being, Lyndall chooses to become lovers with the man she has no intention of marrying and whose proposals she refuses. She fears that marriage will irrevocably distort their relationship, but she also refuses to remain chaste as her society deems she should if she does not to marry. Gilbert and Gubar suggest that in "electing single motherhood she rejects chastity as a masculine ideal established to ensure male ownership of children, and she thereby threatens the patrilineage at the heart of the patriarchy" (*No Man v2*: 62). In so doing she "disentangles reproduction from marriage" (*No Man v2*: 62) and claims her share of influence and authority over her child and the future. In writing Lyndall as a mother to her biological, illegitimate child, Schreiner goes further to undo motherhood as an oppressive regime than Caird is able to do with Hadria's unprecedented, but safe experience with motherhood from outside the patriarchy's hold on it. Schreiner and

Lyndall are more willing to create a situation in which Lyndall is socially vulnerable but ethically driven.

### **Determining Destiny Despite Biology**

Chopin's Edna determines that motherhood is "a condition of life" to which she is not "fitted." In this era of women determining where they fit in the motherhood establishment, Edna determines that she is going to go about the rest of her life without being an active mother. Despite her obvious biological predisposition to becoming pregnant, Edna opts out of the rest of the deal.<sup>4</sup> "After dinner with the entwined Ratingnolles, Edna feels no envy but pity for the 'colorless existence'" of Adelle's "subsumption in husband and children" (Jacobs 83). Edna is saddened by the very concept of such "subsumption," but she decides, at least for herself, to control her own destiny rather than be controlled by her biological capabilities. Edna is the only character among those examined here who rejects her role as mother, completely. Even Hadria continues living in her husband's home raising their children, albeit with resentment.

In *Woman and Labor*, Schreiner, on the other hand, looks to "primitive woman" and explores her role and continuing significance through motherhood. "'May thy wife's womb never cease from bearing,' is still to-day the highest expression of good will on the part of a native African chief to his departing guest" (12). Schreiner identifies in this example the value of a woman by the number of children she is able to produce.

The man who has twenty children to become warriors and laborers is by so much the richer and the more powerful than he who has but one; . . . . Incessant and persistent child-bearing is thus truly the highest duty and the most socially esteemed occupation of the primitive woman, equaling fully in social importance the labor of man as hunter and warrior. (12-13)

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<sup>4</sup> Edna does not, however, opt out of sex, but Chopin manages to avoid the unfortunate connection for a woman in Edna's position, between sex and motherhood in a time without mainstream contraception through Edna's premature death.

Searching for woman's true nature, Schreiner does her questionable anthropological study of "primitive woman" in *Woman and Labor*. Critics condemn Schreiner for misperceiving and misrepresenting the situation of the native African woman and her experience as mother in that society's form of patriarchy. Though the criticism highlights Schreiner's self-presumed knowledge of the African society she was raised next to, the significance of the statement remains that from Schreiner's perspective motherhood is not, at its core, detrimental to female existence and, as she sees it, has in the past offered women purpose and status in their society.

Schreiner then makes the connections between the above study of "primitive woman" in relation to the role of women in her own society. She claims that the woman who produces a large number of children is now a burden to society rather than a benefit because it costs to educate these children and train them in a way that will make them useful members of society. Before, many would die in war or in youth, and the ones left would be necessary for physical labor. With those conditions diminished it is not necessary for a woman to spend the majority of the years she is capable of childbearing in that employment. She is, in fact, a burden if she does so: "The woman who to-day merely produces twelve children and suckles them, and then turns them loose on society and family, is regarded, and rightly so, as a curse and downdraft, and not the productive laborer, of her community" (14). Schreiner asserts, "the commandment to the modern woman is now ... 'Thou shalt not bear in excess of thy power to rear and train satisfactorily'" (15). This is likely a commentary on her own mother's inability to provide for and train her children. Schreiner claims:

It is certain that the time is now rapidly approaching when child-bearing will be regarded rather as a lofty privilege, permissible only to those who have shown their power rightly to train and provide for their offspring, than a labor which in itself, and under whatever conditions performed, is beneficial to society. (15)

This last quote represents Schreiner's leaning toward eugenics in this essay

but does not appeal entirely to a purely biological determinism for who should be allowed the “privilege” of motherhood. She indicates that these few women will also need to prove that they can “train and provide for their offspring.” In *Woman and Labor* Schreiner repeatedly asserts that woman’s sole contribution to society must not be her maternity; first she must have meaningful labor, and this is contrary to much eugenic thought.

Schreiner claims, “We do not even demand that society shall immediately so reconstruct itself that every woman may again be a child-bearer ... ; neither do we demand that the children that we bear shall again be put exclusively into our hands to train” (17). She does, however, identify that women should no longer be deemed mothers first in a society that does not respect or value mothers (in her determination of the true sense of the term), but that women should have “our share of honored and socially useful human toil, our full half of the labor” (18). She asks, “Is child-bearing to become the labor of but a portion of our sex? - then we demand for those among us who are allowed to take no share in it, compensatory and equally honorable and important fields of social toil” (19). She determines that progress will show that there will be more to womanhood than motherhood.

She systematically addresses her next concern, the child-bearers after they are finished child-bearing:

Is the demand for child-bearing to become so diminished that, even in the lives of those among us who are child-bearers, it shall fill no more than half a dozen years out of the three-score-and-ten of human life? - then we demand that an additional outlet be ours which shall fill up with dignity and value the tale of the years not so employed. (19)

Schreiner elaborates, identifying repeatedly and without wavering that motherhood is honorable if approached with caution and deference. Citing both that not all women will be mothers and that even the mothers need not devote their entire existence to mothering (which Schreiner maintains would be both detrimental to society and a waste of one person’s potential

contribution to society), Schreiner insists that women need to be laboring humans first and potential mothers second. In this insistence Schreiner distinguishes herself from other New Woman novelists who idolize motherhood. Grand and Dowie in particular take an opposing view to motherhood. While Schreiner explores the potential eugenic approach to motherhood, she deviates from Grand and Dowie in that motherhood is secondary to personhood and to woman as worker. In differing from Grand and Dowie, Schreiner aligns herself with Gilman who, in her polemical tract, *Women and Economics*, as well as in *Herland*, sympathizes with Schreiner's point of view that no healthy motherhood can be part of society unless women are meaningful contributors to that society outside of their potential to be mothers.

### **The Feminists' Influence on "fellow sinners"<sup>5</sup>**

Edna explains to her uncomprehending friend Adelle, "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" (46). Adelle, confused, asks for clarification, "I don't know what you would call the essential, or what you mean by the unessential, ... but a woman who would give her life for her children could do no more than that - your Bible tells you so" (46). And thus the incomprehension between the two is made evident once again. Edna rejects what her "Bible" tells her is essential and unessential, and what Edna means by her life is an entirely different concept than the one that Adelle and her Bible believe her life to be. Edna tells Adelle that she "can't make it more clear" because "it's only something [she is] beginning to comprehend" (46), but she is aware that there is a distinction between what she is willing to give for her children and what "her Bible" asks her to give. The reader knows that Edna is not willing to be made secondary, to sacrifice her 'self' for the future of society.

While Edna is busy rejecting the patriarchal definition of what it meant to be a good mother, Schreiner attempts to manipulate patriarchal values.

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<sup>5</sup> Caird, *Daughters* 173

Preserving the mothers of the race was the chink in the Victorian armor where Schreiner chose to aim her blow. She felt she could change the way society viewed women by capitalizing on its views of women. She used the idolization of the mother to convince her readers of the necessity for change, second only to using 'woman's right' to play a more significant role in society as a reason for change. It was with this that she plays on the fear of the Western world, warning, 'If you continue to force your women to degenerate thus, you will be responsible for the downfall of the race.' She attempts to strike terror into the hearts of her society, both men and women.

Schreiner's use of society's existing ideal of motherhood gave her the opportunity to explain her antidote to the current degeneration. Taking the idea already in place that the doom was directly linked to the mothers of the race, she proposes her hypothesis. Allen stresses, "If [women] realized how magnificent a nation might be molded by mothers who devoted themselves faithfully and earnestly to their great privilege, they would be proud to carry out the duties of their maternity" (217-8). When Schreiner acknowledges this obligation and the power it represents, she meets its proponents on their terms. When she has captured their collective ear, she explains that work and intellectual stimulation will make women regenerate to their prior, greater selves. It was a somewhat convoluted approach to her plea for work for women, but it exhibited an acute awareness of her society's weaknesses and prejudices.

Still, to assume that all Schreiner's stated philosophies on motherhood constituted a thoroughly greased, manipulating machine would be naive. She certainly was prey to some of the Victorian ideology of motherhood. She could not completely separate herself from it, and motherhood was a particularly weak spot for Schreiner.

It is with this concept of motherhood that Schreiner's feminist verve wanes, where her feminism regresses into the mire of middle-class dictates. A true Schreiner enthusiast might seek to defend her motives thoroughly, to demand that she is manipulating her audience for all they are worth. She would argue that Schreiner is far too insightful a woman to accept the

Victorian ideal on any subject, that Schreiner's massive intellect was stronger than her society's influence. While the critic of Schreiner would reduce her to and diminish her as a frustrated, hysterical bluestocking who could not compromise her femininity for her feminism, the truth lies somewhere in the abyss that stretches between the two. It would not be inaccurate to picture Schreiner with one toe on either side of this chasm, while the majority of her being is hovering precariously over an uncertain depth. Her nonfiction and much of her allegorical short stories cling to the crumbling ground of the cliff sides, while her novels more ambitiously seek to explore the space in between.

Like Schreiner, Hadria is described as having a certain charisma and captivating quality. Hadria's voice, one unafraid to condemn society for women's lot, is a component of her magnetism, particularly to women, and she is aware of this herself. She explains to a friend about her aversion to society's construct of motherhood and denies that she is alone in her feelings. "Few grasp it intellectually perhaps, but thousands feel the insult" (173). She sarcastically explains that "fellow-sinners detect one another, you know" (173). She highlights the joint awareness of the oppression, revealing a crowd of "sinners" like herself who are dissenting from the socially approved approach. Unlike many heroines of this period, Hadria knows that her ideas are not as radical as her society would lead her to believe. She holds fast to the belief that even those women who reject her ideas, believe they are accurate in the depths of their souls. This insight contributes to Hadria's strength of conviction and encourages her to refrain from wavering. Someone must speak out or the system will continue to perpetuate itself, feeding on the souls of its women. The knowledge that there are "fellow sinners" out there encourages her.

### **Motherhood as a Primal Calling**

Despite all the rejection, fear and reconstruction of the institution of motherhood, with the possible exception of Caird and Dixon, all the New

Woman novelists studied here would admit or proclaim that women are mothers at their core. There is an element of a woman's nature dedicated to the function of mothering. It varies and its function is far different from that experienced by their contemporaries, but the New Woman novelists recognized this aspect of their nature and the related internal longing felt by all in one form or another. Dowie presents her heroine, Galia, eager to participate in the regeneration of the race: "I certainly hope to bring up a child. I think it is all I do want" (126). Schreiner identifies in *Woman and Labor* that "deep and overmastering ... lies the hunger for motherhood in every virile woman's heart!" (17). Even Edna, arguably the worst of the mothers, by middle-class standards, in this lot of New Women has a maternal longing for her children, though it is unclear if it is socially manifested or innate. "The year before [her children] had spent part of the summer with their grandmother Pontellier ... . Feeling secure regarding their happiness and welfare, she did not miss them except with an occasional intense longing" (19). Later in the novel Edna transposes her situation and spends one week with her children out of a life that is now without them, since she moved out of her husband's home. "How glad she was to see the children! She wept for very pleasure when she felt their little arms clasping her" (89). When not bound by the confines of motherhood as determined by someone else, Edna is drawn to it. "She looked into their faces with hungry eyes that could not be satisfied with looking" (90). This hunger might be interpreted as a hunger for a connection she is unable to experience due to the limitations of motherhood established by society.

Shifting to the other extreme of mother-desire, in Gilman's *Herland* "almost every woman values her maternity above everything else. Each girl holds it close and dear, an exquisite joy, a crowning honor, the most intimate, most personal, most precious thing" (84). In *Herland* the stage in life when a woman becomes maternal is related in an almost orgasmic way, certainly a way in which a first sexual experience might be described:

You see, before a child comes to one of us there is a period of utter exaltation - the whole being is uplifted and filled with a

concentrated desire for that child. We learned to look forward to that period with the greatest caution. Often our young women, those to whom motherhood had not yet come, would voluntarily defer it. When that deep inner demand for a child began to be felt she would deliberately engage in the most active work, physical and mental . . . . ( 71)

It would appear that mother longing without satiation of the desire for a short time is almost unbearable; one must immerse herself in “the most active work, physical and mental” (71).

### **Nature vs. Nurture**

An ideal for motherhood in the New Woman novels has a defined division. A considerable portion of the discussion of the topic addresses eugenics and its influence on the concept while the remaining (and comparable) portion of the discussion forms around the maternal influence on society considering mothers as nurturers. Much like other discussions in literature, the discussion of motherhood divides down the line of the nature/nurture debate. “Unlike Spencer, Gilman did not believe that human evolution entailed the elimination of the ‘idle and unfit’ by natural selection. . . . Especially provoking to her was the notion that women must sacrifice their human potential in order to breed more children” (Magner 125).

The eugenicists were often bold in their claims that women might perfect the race through selective breeding; in this pre-Nazi world there was little denunciation of the concept of this kind of ethnic cleansing. Dowie writes into the voice of her heroine Galia, “I want to marry; and I want you to be my husband - or rather, the father of my child” (191). Galia announces this to her potential mate transposing the woman as a vehicle for the future into the man as a vehicle for maternity, dehumanizing him and reducing him to sperm.

Olive Schreiner found a woman’s maternal power lay in her nurturing capability as exhibited in *From Man to Man* when the heroine Rebekah adopts Sartje, her husband’s illegitimate child, the product of sexual

relations with a servant of mixed race. Though this, too, cannot be separated from its racist undertones, the suggestion is not that society is doomed because it is degenerate, but because it is neglected. A healthier more conscientious voice of the movement is found in Lyndall, who is physically degenerate, with tiny feet, and an inability to give birth to and rear a healthy child. *From Man to Man* is a work that Schreiner revised continually throughout her life resulting in a softer, more optimistic approach to degeneration. Society can regenerate, thought Schreiner, if motherhood is allowed to heal its wounds, and Grand and social purists would agree. Schreiner seems to contradict herself here in more than one way. In other writings, such as *The Story of an African Farm* she suggests that society is degenerating. She seems to have become less cynical as she aged, and Rebekah and *From Man to Man* are both far more hopeful in their projected attitudes toward the future of humanity and the potential for regeneration. One can recognize Schreiner's allegiance to the influence of environment through Rebekah's patronizing (or matronizing) condescension to raise Sartje. The child was "treated in all ways as [Rebekah's] own child, except that it was taught to call her mistress" (390). She taught all her children to be purposeful and well adjusted members of society. Rebekah also fights the racism that threatens to corrupt her son, Frank. He shares his father's name and is in double jeopardy, since he carries his father's degenerate biological make up. Rebekah believes that, through nurturing, a being can be raised to live a meaningful and purposeful existence, and she lives in such a way that puts her beliefs into practice. Rebekah, as a woman wearied by excessive pregnancy, forces herself to find time to write her thoughts into a journal where she discounts any value of negative eugenics, claiming that no society can deem what is truly degenerate. In it she asks rhetorically, "Where is any body of humans to be found impartial enough, and untouched by the warping of personal and racial prejudices, to be able to determine for the race at large just what qualities are desirable and should be preserved and which should render their possessors liable to destruction?" (170). Schreiner, whose sympathies and personal writings

echo the ideas and sentiments of her character, Rebekah, with whom she lived and whose life she revised throughout her own life, does not belong entirely to the eugenicists' camp.

Gilman's devotion to the power of motherhood is far more muddled than either of these two, and she finds a way to fuse the two concepts in their most extreme senses in *Herland*. As the women of Herland consider "bi-sexual" (heterosexual) mating they first try to determine if their mates are suitable and are not immediately certain whether or not they want to reproduce with these men. As if the women were going to a sperm bank and reading the credentials of the potential sperm they planned to use for fertilization, the women of Herland study these men for months, and then, jointly, as a community, decide that yes, they will do; they are suitable sperm donors. This decision is influenced by the profound desire that all women of Herland have, a devouring desire to reproduce, to create the future. This desire again seems to be in direct conflict with the ever so non-utopian earlier story of Gilman's, "The Yellow Wall-paper," in which the postpartum depression coupled with a nasty rest cure contrast with the utopian maternal desire the Herlanders feel. As contradictory as this might initially seem, it serves to highlight the complicated issue for the New Woman novelist when addressing the power of maternity. As with sexuality and marriage, there was a truth in their minds, a natural beautiful form, one which, quite possibly, they knew they might never be able to uncover, but one which they also felt certain did exist and would strive to decipher and reveal. Also, like sexuality and marriage, a re-creation of the purest most natural form of each could not exist, for there was no plateau, no vacuum in which mothers could raise their children. Mothers existed in society. Gilman's protagonist in "The Yellow Wall-paper" cannot find power in her maternity because it was that very definitive power that cancels hers, that consumes her existence, that makes her inferior to the potential of the future. The future, always intriguing and alluring, makes the idea that one has power over it elevating, but as soon as a society can reduce one's individual existence beneath her ability to reproduce, a

woman becomes merely a vehicle through which the future is incubated. Gilman's heroine in "The Yellow Wall-paper" is overwhelmed by this reduction and is repulsed by the object that represents her demise, all the time feeling guilty for this repulsion and general disinterest in her child. The women of Herland, though very much defined by their ability to reproduce also, as Gilman would be quick to point out, have purpose outside of their maternity. They have labor, lives, meaning, society and friendship outside of their maternal abilities. Most significant of those Gilman would indicate (and Schreiner would second) is meaningful labor suited to the woman, which in turn gives her a sense of meaning and purpose.

### **Nurturers of the Future**

The two sexes are not distinct species but the two halves of one whole, always acting and interacting on each other and reproducing each other and blending with each other in each generation. The human female is bound organically in two ways to the males of her society: collaterally they are her companions and the co-progenitors with her of the race; but she is also the mother of the males of each succeeding generation, bearing, shaping, and impressing her personality upon them. (Schreiner, *Woman* 102)

Schreiner identifies women's influence over the males of society, both through breeding and through "shaping and impressing her personality upon them." She prophesies, "that which the women of one generation are mentally or physically, that by inheritance and education the males of the next tend to be" (102-3). In this is both a threat and a promise depending on the reader. To those who devalue and demean the women of their society, it threatens doom to that which they most value, their sons. To those who value and respect the women of their society it promises a bright and noble youth, both male and female. The threat to those who devalue women in society is more pertinent since Schreiner aims to enact a change in the value system that determines women to be of less

importance and significance than their male counterparts. Like many others discussed in this study, Schreiner manipulates the power that she wields as a female, her maternal influence over the future.

Gilman also identifies the power of the maternal influence in *Herland* where "life was, to them, just the long cycle of motherhood" (61). They "devoted their combined intelligence" to determine "how to make the best kind of people. First this was merely the hope of bearing better ones, and then they recognized that however the children differed at birth, the real growth lay later - through education" (61). If this history of Herland is to be read in any way as a potential possibility for society, one can interpret that Gilman is making careful commentary on the blind application of eugenic discourse from theory into practice. She is stating that one cannot rely on it alone for perfecting the race. She suggests that, though it might be attractive and at times useful, it is secondary to where "the real growth lay," in the conscientious raising of these new people by an entire community. And, while they are all biological mothers here, it is more important to society that they are all nurturers of the next generation. Once another member of society is introduced, who is fit to help raise the future, she or *he*, will be called upon to do her or his part. Though veiled in a presentation of shared motherhood, Gilman proposes a utopian, socialist society.

Though Hadria is forced to do her nurturing in what she might consider a dystopian society, she is determined to raise her adopted little girl in such a way that she may be a capable, strong member of that society. Hadria explains:

She has to make her way in the world. She must not be too meek. Her mother was a victim to general selfishness and stupidity. She was too gentle and obedient; too apt to defer to others, to be able to protect herself. I want her daughter to be strengthened for the battle by a good long draught of happiness, and to be armed with that stoutest of all weapons - perfect health. (Caird, *Daughters* 246)

Hadria takes far more interest in raising her adopted daughter than she does

in raising her own two sons, for reasons established earlier - the illegitimate nature of Martha and the little girl's status in society. It is not her biological make up that Hadria believes might lead her to a fate similar to her mother's, rather it is a matter of how she is raised, a matter to which Hadria is determined to attend.

Hadria's compassion for Martha is akin to the kind of nurturing motherhood represented in Dixon's *The Story of a Modern Woman*, a nurturing of the woebegone young women of society. One of these unfortunate women is known to the reader only as Number Twenty-Seven. She is the character whom Alison Ives tries to rescue and settles on arranging for a "proper burial." She describes her as a victim of circumstances: "the girl, at any rate, seems to be what we are now agreed to call a 'morally deficient person' - one, in fact, who has urgent claims on all men's honor, on all women's pity" (205). Alison explains that she feels certain that had Number Twenty-Seven been "properly trained and protected, she might have been well, happy, and a tolerably useful member of society" (205). Though Alison's sympathy is laden with class stereotypes, she clearly believes that circumstances can define a person and transcending them is unlikely. Thus, she implies that it is society's responsibility to change the circumstances and claims that "Number Twenty-Seven is the martyr of civilization" (205). Alison makes her own naive and ineffectual personal attempt to take responsibility, and with its ineffectiveness, Dixon suggests that one woman is not capable of shifting an entire society from its abuse of women. Dixon gently satirizes Alison's belief that "if I had only known her earlier, who knows? I might have been her friend; I might have saved her from --" (205). From what, Alison is not even able to say, and her speechlessness is indicative of her suppressed knowledge of her own limitations when it comes to saving society from a systemic, patriarchal, sexual abuse of women. Dixon thus suggests that while nurture is the conscientious way to alter society, it is unlikely to be able to do so, one sad case at a time. The entire system must be altered and the violators not the victims must be changed.

## Eugenics and Biology as Destiny

Eugenics, motherhood as highest accomplishment of woman, and maternity as woman's most natural lot all profoundly influenced New Woman fiction of the fin de siècle, dividing the New Woman novelists and feminists of the period with a very crooked line. Eugenics as defined by the Eugenics Education Society at the fin de siècle is "the study of agencies under social control that may improve or impair the racial qualities of future generations, whether physically or mentally" (quoted in Greer 307).<sup>6</sup> In other words it is the study of the manipulation of breeding by a social organization to determine what kind of people will be allowed to be born. Eugenics, as noted earlier, was an approach to reproduction that was swiftly growing in popularity fueled by imperial arrogance, fear and racism. This term that was coined by Francis Galton, when defined, explored how society could both breed out traits that it (society/authority) deemed degenerate and how it could also elevate the race by encouraging breeding of those who were deemed biologically ideal. The extremes to which this could be taken existed in the imaginations and fears of those who considered it. Many turn-of-the-century thinkers embraced what they saw as the positive potential in this scientific approach to breeding. It was seen by many that through these means humans might have an impact on healing what they considered were the ills of their society such as their determination of disease, crime, alcoholism, overpopulation, homosexuality, feeble-mindedness and sexual deviance. Quite simply, eugenics as applied in the fin de siècle was a theory and potentially the practice of the elite to preserve their status and power.

Those who subscribed to the theory attempted to establish that "the way to a better future and more rational social organization lay through ... eugenics" and that this involved "the application of Darwinian principles to the social organism ... cutting off... inferior strains and breeding only from the best" (Greer 306). The theory was not merely an abstract concept contemplated by those who believed their biological make up to be the

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<sup>6</sup> Greer quotes Galton from "Eugenics, Its Definition, Scope and Aims," published in *Eugenics Review*, vol. 12, no. 1 (1920-21), p. 20.

coveted crème de la crème. While Galton was fascinated by positive eugenics, “that the best and the brightest should be encouraged to breed,” he was, as Greer notes, “particularly squeamish about the idea and practice of family limitation, and he ignored the question of sterilization of criminals and defectives” (308). Though he coined the term, he could not control the direction in which society would take and apply the theory. Experiments and studies were done and laws were passed, many of which twentieth century feminist, Germaine Greer, records in her study *Sex and Destiny*. “In 1907 a law providing for compulsory sterilization [in state institutions] was passed in Indiana” (312). Though this law was short lived, rescinded four years later, it, among others, established a practice of what had not formerly been formally sanctioned by the government. Real people, eight hundred and seventy three of them, had been sterilized in a state sanctioned eugenic experiment (312). In 1898 it was brought to the public’s attention that Dr. F. Hoyt had been practicing castration in the Kansas State Institution for Feeble-minded Children; forty four boys and fourteen girls had been affected, and public opinion was divided in response (311). Dr. Harry Sharp, “medical officer at Jeffersonville Reformatory” (311) wrote, “since October, 1899, I have been performing an operation known as vasectomy . . . . I do it without administering an anesthetic either general or local . . . . I have two hundred and thirty-six cases that have afforded splendid opportunity for post-operative observation . . .” (quoted in Greer 311). Greer notes others in her exploration of the history of these practices, too many to note here, but the examples identify the fervor with which some embraced the eugenic ideal.

The New Woman novelists who either explored or embraced eugenic ideas were not strapping presumably ‘hysterical’ women down for hysterectomies; they tinkered with the theory in order to make it correspond with their politics. Though as mentioned before New Woman novelists were committed not merely to having a well determined theory, but to putting that theory into practice. For the most part they shied away from the gory details of negative eugenic practice. Greer claims that “as long as

eugenics is merely a study, it cannot presumably do very much harm ...” (307). However, in her analysis of New Woman fiction, Richardson notes that harm could very well be done by eugenics in its theoretical form, in that the theory, when embraced by New Women, directed New Woman feminism down a path that led them back into the oppressive realm of patriarchally defined motherhood (woman’s destiny). This trapped them by their biology (““People”” 183-207).

As Squier documents, “Common to ... discourses inspired by late-Victorian biology was the new sense that human sexual behavior, and perhaps even the human species itself, might be capable of scientific and/or social reconstruction” (139). Squier identifies the ways in which these progressive thinkers were not quite as progressive as they would have society believe:

They used scientific discourse to validate three unscientific (and tiresomely familiar) misogynistic notions: that there are innate, biologically based, immutable differences between the sexes (especially in the realm of sexual behavior); that ideal sexual relations are male-dominant, female-submissive; and that the womanly ideal is wholly embodied by motherhood. (139)<sup>7</sup>

Squier also notes that while many sexologists identified that there should be a “separation of sexuality from reproduction, many sexologists also vigorously promoted a notion of ‘racial motherhood’, holding that to produce healthy children was a woman’s duty to the nation and the race” (139). Feminists of the period were devouring the newly available information and studies of women’s sexuality. As the connection between eugenics and ‘motherhood as power and influence’ was carved out, many more feminists and New Woman thinkers of the period took advantage of this. Unfortunately, this was “exalting motherhood at the price of female diversity” (139).

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<sup>7</sup> Squier cites to Sheila Jeffreys for the claim that “sexologists ... built their ‘progressive’ sexual program on an antifeminist foundation”, from *The Spinster and her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality 1880 - 1930*. London: Pandora Press, 1985. 128-46.

As much as Gilman's proposal of a society where motherhood is a task of the community, not belonging only to one woman, places her in the 'nurture for the future' camp, she also has a foot very firmly placed in the eugenicists' camp. She has a Herland elder explain, "we have, of course, made it our first business to train out, to breed out, when possible, the lowest types" (83). Without shame Gilman suggests that certain women, "the lowest types," would and should not be allowed to reproduce. Conveniently she does not explain how these women would be so imposed upon - beyond simply being asked not to reproduce (83).

Agreeing with Spencer that the female was provided with special energy for reproduction, Gilman rejected his conclusion that it was associated with a lower level of evolution. Instead, she argued that the natural impulses of motherhood were particularly appropriate to social evolution. Becoming increasingly useful, the services performed by human mothers led to the development of conduct that promoted wider social coordination. (Magner 124)

Gilman's agreement with Spencer provided an opportunity for the mainstream of male intellectuals to accept some of her philosophies, but only insofar as they coincided with Spencer's philosophies. In effect they allowed her to restate Spencer's ideas, but dismissed her suggestion that the power and influence of a female's reproductive and maternal energy wielded an equal if not elevated, highly evolved power over society, social development and change. It is in response to Gilman's suggestion that second wave feminists reacted with rejection to the definitive quality of sex as destiny. To be defined by their reproductive ability subordinated women. Outright rejection of reproductive and maternal qualities seemed the only, logical, possible way out from under the weight of it. Widely available birth control, sexual promiscuity and abortion paradoxically contributed to the assertion that women are human first and sex second. In this context Gilman, it can be suggested, was more honest, clear-sighted and less reactionary than that of the second wave. One can only speculate

at whether or not she would have altered her view or her presentation of motherhood had she anticipated how easily it would be perverted and suppressed by her contemporary society.

In Gilman's view of human evolution women played two important roles: as members of the human race, they should participate in all activities, achievements, and interests that are the measure of social progress. But the special female purpose was to reproduce and improve the race. ... through the selection of superior fathers; [and] ... to improve the physical and intellectual environment of all children. (Magner 125)

In Dowie's novel, Galia proclaims, "we shan't live to see the real advance; which will be the getting of fathers and mothers, or rather husbands and wives to be fathers and mothers" (113). In *Galia* Dowie places eugenics at the center of the novel, and the eponymous character, Galia, develops her eugenic plan for her life and outlines some of her eugenic hopes for the future of society. Maintaining all the while that it is the most logical, rational approach to child bearing, rearing and playing a part in evolution, she calmly explains to her contemporaries that it will help to build a stronger race. Her words reek of imperialist ambition, and her explanations stop short of illustrating what she would have done to those who are unfit to be mothers and fathers. As Galia's eyes are described as "uncompromising" (123) by Dowie's narrator, so, too, is Galia's approach to marriage and reproduction.

After being heartbroken once, she dehumanizes relations between a man and a woman and turns them into a business arrangement for the progress of humankind. Galia's confession of love to Essex, her prospective lover, at the beginning of the novel is met with "priggishness and affectation" (59) which serves as a basis for and influence on the rest of the novel and the development of Galia's attitudes toward love and sex, primarily rejecting any non-rational aspect of the two. What develops as a result is that her longing for purpose, connection and meaning is funneled

entirely into having and raising children. Though it is obvious through Dowie's sympathetic portrayal of Galia that she shares some of her heroine's approach to life, this establishment of the broken-hearted woman rejecting love for fear of having her "soul's light" put out (59), adds implications of which the reader is periodically reminded throughout the novel. One of these instances comes directly after the aforementioned assertion Galia voices about 'getting in' mothers and fathers. After Galia leaves, the two women she was speaking to muse, "Do you think she can have been jilted or had a disappointment? It sounds like it, doesn't it?" (116). In the establishment of and repeated reference to Galia's "disappointment" Dowie puts an edge on Galia's sexual politics, implying that for all its presumed rationality of approach, Galia's eugenic leanings might also be influenced by profound irrational emotions as well. This and the unflinching imperialist, racist, classist overtone that Dowie does not mute of Galia's explanations of her ideology lead one to assume that as Small states "Galia's views are rarely unambiguously endorsed by the narrator" (xxxix).

After Essex's tirade on Galia being a "waste of material" and "a misshapen woman" because her physical characteristics are in contrast with her "sociology of a school's half-holiday," Galia responds with a light "growing at the back of her eyes" that love is not all (128). "There is something more than love in the world is there not? ... There is motherhood" (128). While Dowie might have her heroine collapse into a fit of sobs or a puddle of tears at such an upbraiding of her character, she does not. Instead Galia redirects her sexual energy entirely into maternal desire, not unlike a frightening real-world version of a Herlander. "Time and again, Dowie takes the familiar materials of romantic fiction - the declaration of love, the proposal scene, even the deathbed scene - and turns their assumptions inside out" (Small xxxviii).

Richardson explains that the discussion of eugenics was not a matter merely of New Woman novelists and feminists tinkering with the ideology to fit it into their polemical discourse, but that there was true contradiction of

ideals among New Woman thinkers arguing both for and against the practical application of both positive and negative eugenics. Richardson reads Caird as actively anti-eugenic, "taking issue with her feminist contemporaries who advocated 'civic motherhood'" ("People" 185). Though it may be clear to a modern reader, what Caird claimed was not so easily distinguished among New Woman novelists of the period.

Richardson explains that Caird clear-sightedly "expos[ed] the limitations of a (feminist) politics that sought to gain social advancement through a gendered division of labor - arguably the single greatest cause of sexual oppression" ("People" 185). There is not one umbrella under which all New Women stand. Richardson establishes that eugenic ideology is no different when she identifies Caird's novels as participating in "a direct engagement with and overturning of maternalist and eugenic arguments" (187). Richardson cites that Caird connected "the concept of 'race' and 'race purity'" with the "exploitation of motherhood," both of which she opposed ("People" 188).

Most significantly, Richardson makes the point that Grand, because of her eugenic sympathies, entraps herself in such a way that her higher ideal, that of individual liberty and self-actualization, cannot be reached. Dowie and one might suggest even Schreiner and Gilman experience this same problem. Authors such as Chopin and Caird do not allow the means to be the ends. Power in motherhood through a eugenic approach snuffs the flame of the search for individual self-actualization for each woman. Chopin's instillation of the fear in Edna of being erased by her role as mother, the fear of being engulfed by the enormity of the power and significance of motherhood is representative of what Richardson notes that Caird argues: "individual freedom was of paramount importance" ("People" 193).

Gilman sets her mother-land in a woman-centered utopia where the ideal for motherhood is established by the socialist society of Herland, and Gilman would certainly argue that, while nature plays a role, the strong influence of environment as a forming factor in any being is equally represented in her nonfiction, private writing and her fiction. When challenged by one of the

male visitors who asserts that "... acquired traits are not transmissible" (79), Zava, a Herland elder, explains, "If that is so, then our improvement must be due either to mutation, or solely to education ... . It may be that all these higher qualities were latent in the original mother, that careful education is bringing them out ..." (79).

Each woman of Herland is encouraged to find her individual strength and contribution to society and retains her own home after marriage. Despite these progressive social elements, the very nature of placing so much significance and power in motherhood, particularly racially pure motherhood, is detrimental to, almost contrary to the woman's cause at the time: to validate and search for a true, individual identity. In her discussion of the connection between Caird and the philosopher John Stuart Mill, Richardson suggests that Caird subscribes to this theory explaining that both Mill and Caird "fought against the right of the state to interfere with the life of an individual unless they impinged on another's freedom" ("People" 192). Yet another level of this argument, Richardson suggests, is that Caird believes that "without respect for individuality, true socialism was impossible" (193), thus connecting Caird and Gilman. The web becomes complicated when one weaves in with Caird the ways Gilman contrasts with her, while at the same time Caird supports some very similar ideas to those Gilman presents in *Herland*.

The distinction may be clear, as Richardson suggests, between Grand and Caird, but the contrary connection becomes blurred when Caird is compared with Gilman who is not wholeheartedly a social purist. Gilman subscribes to some aspects associated with the social purity movement, such as the negation of female sexuality, the "Maternal Pantheism" representative in *Herland* (61), and the eugenic approach to cleansing the race of "bad qualities" also presented in *Herland* (83).

This group of writers overlaps and interweaves in such a way in the area of motherhood that their individual arguments can seem indecipherable, but as Richardson notes, it is detrimental to any study to categorize them as one lot especially with regard to motherhood. They had

a similar goal, to liberate women from the bonds in which their society placed them and to help women to be their true selves again with regard to maternity. However, as Richardson indicates in her distinction between Caird and Grand, the New Woman novelists splinter and in defining woman, either by her maternity or by her individuality, they become irrevocably divided. The irrevocable nature is due to two key elements of society. The first is the significance of the eugenics debate in society at this time and the extremes to which it would be taken in the near future. The second is what Richardson notes that Caird warns against and feminists today still struggle with which is putting too much value on an element of female 'power' that is still steeped in patriarchal control. She claims that the innate female 'power' cannot be extricated and used to benefit the oppressed female. Thus, when women place too much significance in it, they seal their fate within the established structure. In the battle between placing the individual first or the mother first, motherhood became the defining factor for the New Woman and her search for liberation, individual power and self identification.

"They were Mothers, not in our sense of helpless involuntary fecundity, forced to fill and overfill the land, every land, and then see their children suffer, sin and die, fighting horribly with one another; but in the sense of Conscious Makers of People" (Gilman, *Herland* 69). Gilman makes the distinction between a motherhood as it was known to her as "helpless fecundity" which was "forced" on women and a motherhood ideal in which mothers were "Conscious Makers" of humanity. Their conscious involvement in the raising of the next generation overshadowed the biological ability to gestate and give birth to a child. Gilman's perspective suggests a cycle of regeneration also predicted in Schreiner's letters "One woman better fitted to be a mother means a whole generation starting with a greater vantage in life" (*Letters* 217).

In her study, Squier does not focus on a New Woman novelist but a successor, Charlotte Haldane, who wrote *Man's World* in reaction to this categorizing women by their biological capabilities. Squier explains that in

this novel Haldane “portrays a society in which women are reduced to biology, categorized by their reproductive roles, and ruled by a coterie of racist male scientists ...” (137). Noting that this novel precedes Huxley’s *Brave New World* by six years, Squier makes clear the connection for the contemporary critic of the transition from Victorian to Modern. While New Woman novelists sought power through their biological capabilities in a society that afforded them little power, their idealism blinded some of them to the potentially detrimental effect a eugenic approach to women and motherhood might have.

New Woman novelists sought power through an active motherhood as opposed to more passive, earlier ideals of motherhood. It was the transition away from a selflessness into an assertion of self, and it demanded that they be allowed to play an active role in determining how they would participate in the forming and nurturing of the future. Disillusioned and misled, many New Woman novelists chose a path which would lead back to the oppression formerly experienced, back to a patriarchal determination of a woman’s worth, despite the deceptively attractive elements of a eugenic power that some New Woman novelists were drawn toward. While the path led back to oppression, it did not lead back to silence as Haldane’s voice illustrates, and the New Woman novelist moved the woman of the nineteenth century away from her faceless existence as mother toward a Modern existence as mother, definitive though it might have been.

“Oh, Hadria, explain yourself! You utter paradoxes. I want to understand your point of view” (Caird, *Daughters* 340). In this the reader of the twenty-first century might be sympathetic with Hadria’s sister in law in reference to the New Woman’s approach to motherhood. But the best explanation that Hadria can give her or the twenty-first-century reader is “I deny that motherhood has duties except when it is absolutely free, absolutely uninfluenced by the pressure of opinion, or by any of the innumerable tyrannies that most children have now to thank for their existence” (341). The tyrannies are that of the establishment, and, as long

as they dictate the rules of motherhood, Hadria denies that there are any duties that a woman should feel committed to fulfilling, for they have little or nothing to do with a motherhood that is woman-centered. The duties, too, were concocted by the “tyrannies.” No new mother could exist from within the bonds of marriage.

## Conclusion

You may think, dear reader, that I have overestimated my case. The attack upon my culture is, indeed, extreme, but the weight of custom is heavy as life and its hide is thick. ...

Some judicious people will say that I should have made a better case if I had been less emotionally involved ... . If I had felt less strongly about the subject I should not have written at all ... .

... I have no hope of having answered [the questions I pose], but only of having asked them so poignantly that they cannot be ignored or forgotten. (Greer xiii-v)

So writes Germaine Greer, twentieth-century feminist, in the opening of her tract *Sex and Destiny* in which she explores “the politics of human fertility” with a much broader world scope than that of any of the fin de siècle feminists. While the scope is broader and much of the conclusions jar with those of the New Woman novelists, the sentiments in this “warning” echo those of the New Woman novelist. There is a near apology for the necessity of her emotional involvement in the subject of her text; there is a justification for her emotional involvement; and there is an assertion that the goal of her writing is to plant the questions in her reader’s mind in such a way that said reader cannot escape them. In tone these are parallel to those of her feminist predecessors from the fin de siècle. While the New Woman novelists made an effort to establish ideals to work toward and answers to the questions they posed, what was essential was the questioning of the established institutions of female sexuality, marriage and motherhood. It was imperative that the posing of these questions was done, as Greer claims hers is, in such a way that society at large could not help but be plagued by them. The questions were asked “poignantly” and could not “be ignored or forgotten” (Greer xv).

It was not consistent with the nature of thought at the fin de siècle for reflective women to try to determine their genuine nature, their undeniable identity and their appropriate place in society. The New Woman novelists

recognized that what was currently being presented to them as female could not be what female selfhood truly was. Caird's Hadria resents that the questioning, challenging New Woman is the anomaly. In a sexually violent description of this process Hadria mocks the women who do not question: "The wildly funny thing is that women are ready, with open mouths, to reverently swallow this male verdict on their inherent nature, as if it were gospel divinely inspired" (*Daughters* 257). The image this conjures of a woman reverently on her knees receiving what the males of her society give her to swallow speaks to the levels of disgust Hadria and Caird share for both participants and the act itself.

Though it was not acceptable for a woman to be involved in such introspection and analysis of her society, the study of one's nature in contrast with society's expectations was in vogue. In a post-Darwinian world the movement to understand "by ceaseless and ever hopeful labor ... man's place in nature" (Lankester 4) was typical of all, not only New Women. Though Edwin Ray Lankester's book on degeneration is not sympathetic to the woman's cause to determine self identity, purpose and worth, this concept of seeking one's place in nature and seeking one's very nature, was common to much thought - literary, philosophical and scientific - in this period. Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* exemplifies the exploration of man's nature, impulses and desires. It explores the protagonist's ability to manipulate them, to meet society's standards as well as his desire to be true to this nature despite society's constraints. The New Woman was in many respects a product of her time, much like Dr. Jekyll in an odd way, for though she sought what she had to "Hyde," she could not ever completely shed the garments society set out for her to wear that cinched and stifled her.

In "The Yellow Wall-paper" Gilman's narrator and the trapped women in the wallpaper live a double life similar to Dr. Jekyll's. By day they live under the guise of Victorian propriety and by night escape those bounds. The knowledge of this escape excites the narrator of "The Yellow Wall-paper," but she will reveal nothing to anyone who might threaten to remove the opportunity for this escape:

Life is very much more exciting now than it used to be. You see I have something more to expect, to look forward to . . . .

John is so pleased to see me improve! He laughed a little the other day, and said I seemed to be flourishing in spite of my wall-paper.

I turned it off with a laugh. I had no intention of telling him it was *because* of the wall-paper. . . .

I don't want to leave now until I have found it out. (38)

Gilman writes into her narrator's character an unquenchable thirst for discovery parallel to that of the New Woman novelist's thirst for self-discovery. The woman behind the paper is the narrator, in a sense, and the discovery is self-discovery. The New Woman novelist and the narrator of "The Yellow Wall-paper" are drawn, like Dr. Jekyll, back to the narcotic.

Once she has connected with it, the wallpaper, the woman behind it, the hundreds of women trapped inside of it, she cannot escape its lure. "The smell! . . . It creeps all over the house. . . . It gets into my hair" (38). The New Woman novelist takes this knowledge to a new level, beyond the personal, and she sees it as her duty to heal society with her new knowledge and to liberate other trapped women from the wallpaper that confines them. "As soon as it was moonlight and that poor thing began to crawl and shake the pattern, I got up and ran to help her" (40). By the end when the narrator of "The Yellow Wall-paper" has peeled nearly all the wallpaper off, she sees "so many of those creeping women," and she wonders "if they all come out of the wall-paper as I did" (41). This scene is representative of the ironic feeling of isolation that the New Women experience within a rebellion of many which contrasts with a general, abstract sense of unity in their nature, their situation and their intense desire to enact change in the name of all women and society itself.

Like the hero in the archetypal hero's journey, the New Woman heroine and novelist have gone into the abyss - behind the wallpaper. The New Woman hero faces the challenges and obstacles there. Surviving

these, she reaches atonement, at one with herself. As with the hero she must then return with her new knowledge to the society from which she originated in order to impart that knowledge to those who have not experienced her journey. However, she is not of the same constitution as the hero of Greek myth, and the gods are not on her side. Reflecting on this return, the narrator concludes, "I suppose I shall have to get back behind the pattern when it comes night, and that is hard!" (41). The validation and escape is liberating but in order to make it worthwhile the New Woman novelist must return her knowledge to society. The narrator, however, opts not to. "It is so pleasant to be out in this great room and creep around as I please!" (41). Gilman relieves her of her duties to society and allows her the license to stay within the comfort of her personal liberation.

The narrator asserts that she will not go outside because outside it is green and not yellow. Inside there is a "smooch" in the wall where her shoulder fits so she cannot "lose [her] way" as she "creeps" (42). As with other female gothic fiction the house becomes the domain of the woman and is often a symbol of the woman's body or of the woman herself. In "The Yellow Wall-paper" the narrator "creeping" along the "smooch" in the wall so as not to lose her way describes the New Woman novelist who is exploring the woman trapped behind the wallpaper of turn of the century existence, while remaining within the realm of the familiar. Echoing the narrator's final words to her husband who represents what oppresses her, the New Woman novelist finds herself exclaiming "I've got out at last," and they, too, had "pulled off most of the paper" so their jailer cannot "put [them] back" (42).

### **Contemporary Frustration with the Tragic Demise of the New Woman**

For someone so keenly aware of female oppression, Schreiner is sadly underambitious. When all is said and done, the novels are depressing and claustrophobic. The heroines are granted only the narrowest of possibilities; the treatment

of them is disconcertingly unadventurous, even timid. ... Like Schreiner, they give up too easily and too soon (Showalter, *A Literature* 203).

After much scholarly insight into the fiction by the female novelists whom Showalter titles "feminist novelists" her tone in reference to Schreiner reveals frustration with Schreiner's limitations and those of her fiction. However, it is this faithful representation of a reality Schreiner and other New Woman novelists imagine and experience that make their writing both ambitious and bold. These New Woman novelists attempt to write a reality that they knew to exist for a New Woman such as Schreiner's Lyndall, such as Schreiner herself. They choose to eradicate the happy marriage from the end of the novel and to present a different truth, one they saw and lived. Some put the marriage near the opening of the novel or place it prior to the action of the plot altogether to provide an opportunity to reveal the many other truths of married life that were not included in the resolutions of Victorian novels with a marriage plot. Dixon and Schreiner leave their heroines unmarried throughout the novel neither celebrating marriage nor celebrating the emancipation of the married woman eventually liberated from marriage.

The New Woman novelist did not seek solitude or an escape from society, rather a change in society and a healthier companionship with the opposite sex. Many murdered their heroines in body or soul but would have their readers recognize the murder as one not enacted by the writer of the text - not as punishment for decisions made - but by the society which the authors tried to represent accurately in their fiction. It would not do to save their heroines or to give a falsely optimistic fate to the New Woman whom society stifled, smothered and exiled. Having the New Woman lose her burgeoning, capricious understanding of self and comply with social rules would be worse than suicide or murder. Having the New Woman heroine rise up and conquer her society would be unbelievable and likely categorize her with the other stereotypical, femme fatale characters from whom the New Woman novelist sought to distance herself. To have the New Woman heroine receive compassion and understanding from her male

contemporaries would be equally unbelievable. One exception is Jeff Margrave in *Herland* who is an eager learner, desirous of his own adaptation and assimilation into that society which he recognizes as superior to his own. However, this enthusiastic approach to assimilation is because he is removed from the patriarchal society that would hamper an openness to a more woman-friendly approach in society. Even Jeff is a hopeful creation on the part of Gilman whose utopian optimism touched all aspects of her novel. And, unlike the other New Woman novels in this study, in *Herland* Gilman does create an alternative reality where she can manipulate how men react to women and the punishment or rewards they receive for their actions.

For the twenty-first-century reader and feminist, Schreiner and her New Woman contemporaries are likely to be interpreted as “underambitious.” Schreiner’s novels are “depressing and claustrophobic” (Showalter, *A Literature* 203). especially in their conclusions as Showalter indicates, as often are the works of the other New Woman novelists.<sup>1</sup> Because in these works the New Woman has been brought into fiction in a way unlike any preceding, she has yet to learn how to survive and flourish. She exists; she is a sympathetic character with a voice her universal reader can recognize. Her voice resonates and intrigues in a way few have before her. Gullette remarks on “how few, big-voiced women there are before her in English fiction” (504). Her struggle is one with which a reader can identify. Despite the conclusions of the novels which leave little to no room for optimism, each is what Gullette refers to when writing about *The Daughters of Danaus* as “not merely a woman-centered novel” (504). Gullette explains that *The Daughters of Danaus* is a novel “centered on a woman who comes on stage indignant and gets to be by turns sarcastic, cunning, militant, and exalted, as well as sympathetic, loyal, dispirited, cynical, conscience-stricken, and despairing” (504). It is no wonder that such women as Hadria with their big voices reverberating through the rafters of the house that confines them,

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted once again, though, that Schreiner did struggle to write the optimism of her ideals into *From Man to Man* but never successfully wrote through a hopeful conclusion.

contribute to conveying the world they inhabit as one inducing claustrophobia. It is.

As Gilbert and Gubar indicate, the fiction in the female canon that follows these novelists enters a whole new level of bleakness retuning in a tragic way to the fate of the Victorian heroine, but not with ignorance, instead often owning and exploiting a manipulative female role. While, as Gilbert and Gubar explain it, New Woman descendent Edith Wharton's "rage at the state of things cannot be overestimated" (*No Man's v2*: 128). This rage does not assert itself in a redefinition of woman nor does she offer her heroines unlimited possibilities. Much to the contrary "... most of [Wharton's] fiction is focused with cold fury on the limits and liabilities of 'the feminine' in a culture that fashions women to be ornamental, exploitative, and inarticulate" (129). This is what the New Woman novelist set out to make comment on, but, unlike Wharton, the New Woman novelist wrote heroines who were not what their culture fashioned them to be, who resisted an existence as "ornamental, exploitative and inarticulate" (129). The New Woman heroine was quite the opposite, voicing her convictions and resisting her socially defined, traditional role.

Other readings are offered by twenty-first-century literary critics interpreting the tragic endings of the New Woman novels in a more celebratory way. "Baring herself to air, wind, and sea, Edna feels the 'delicious' sense of being a 'new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known.' ... Chill water is no barrier, for she is returning to the elements of which she is an undeniable part" (Jacobs 94). Jacobs reads the concluding scene of *The Awakening*, the drowning death of Edna Pontellier, as one of liberation and birth from an old world she has outgrown. By suggesting that Edna is returning to "the elements of which she is an undeniable part," Jacobs highlights the center of the New Woman novelist's argument: the New Woman is really the oldest kind of woman. A grand, noble source for womanliness comes from an archetypal matriarch, and the Victorian woman has lost touch with this sense of self. Thus, Jacobs' reading links Edna to this return of the New Woman to her nature, the first and

foremost point for which the New Woman novelists were petitioning: not until she is true to her nature will woman be able to save humankind or stop from dragging it down. Schreiner claims that “the truth is, we are not new. We who lead this movement to-day are of that old, old ... womanhood. ... We have in us the blood of a womanhood that was never bought and never sold; that wore no veil, and had no foot bound ... . There moves in us yet the throb of the old blood” (*Woman* 53-4). Jacobs argues that the death of Edna is a sort of transcendental ascendance to the sublime while Showalter argues that Edna’s Schreinerian counterpart Lyndall’s death is timid and allows Lyndall no alternative. The comparison of the two critics’ perspectives cannot be a direct one because they are addressing two different texts with very different language describing a common end to a New Woman heroine. Chopin’s is arguably celebratory in the author’s tone and Schreiner’s arguably bleak and depressing in tone.

The final scene of *The Awakening* presents Edna back at Grand Isle on the isolated beach facing the sea and her subsequent release and demise.

For the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her.

How strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky! how delicious! She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known.

The foamy wavelets curled up to her white feet ... . The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace. (108-9)

Edna thinks of Mademoiselle Reisz and imagines her mocking Edna’s ultimate failure: “And you call yourself an artist! What pretensions madam! The artist must possess the courageous soul that dares and defies” (109).<sup>2</sup> She is momentarily oppressed by flashes of those who had asked more of her than she could give: Mademoiselle Reisz, her husband, her children, her father, her sister, an old love, a dog chained to a sycamore tree. Then she

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<sup>2</sup> Reisz’s voice can be read as the subconscious of the New Woman novelist mocking her own life decisions as well.

releases them and is released by them. "There was a hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air" (109).

Lyndall dies not after a spell of robust, invigorating life, but after a long illness brought on by childbirth. "Through these months of anguish a mist had rested on her mind; it was rolled together now, and the old clear intellect awoke from its long torpor. ... The old, strong soul gathered itself together for the last time ..." (Schreiner, *African Farm* 218). In this death scene Schreiner uses a repeated mirror motif as Chopin uses the repeated motif of the lure of the sea. "The dying eyes on the pillow looked into the dying eyes in the glass ... . She raised one hand and pressed the stiff fingers against the glass" (218). She tries to speak, but cannot; "only, the wonderful yearning light was in the eyes still" (218). Schreiner thus ends Lyndall's short life as she lived it: yearning. She was a muscle atrophied in disuse despite desire for purposeful labor.

Despite the indirectness, the connection begs comparison. The two New Woman heroines are caught with too much knowledge, too much insight and desire with no adequate outlet, no suitable partner and no purposeful existence. Society has no place for them and does not want them. They are in extremely parallel predicaments and meet a similar fate. The tone of Schreiner's description of the death of Lyndall is meant, at least in part, to discourage and inspire a sense of frustration in the reader. Neither resolution offers the reader a solution or an alternative fate in the future. In reading these conclusions to the lives of the enlightened women of the fin de siècle one can imagine hundreds of others perishing in their depths or fading away due to a lack of nourishment from a society which cannot provide for them and will not allow them to effectively provide for themselves. Though Chopin's language draws the reader optimistically to a return of woman to her nature, Edna is not emerging from the sea, reborn; she is returning to it and to death. One can read optimism, naturalism, or ethereal elevation into Chopin's closing scene, but one still cannot escape that it is the closing, the end of Edna's awakening, the end of her progress, and she dies leaving unchanged the society that exiled her back to her

natural roots. Adelle Ratignolle is not about to start agitating for the vote, and Mademoiselle Reisz will remain a recluse, for it is the only way she can survive in her society. So, too, does Lyndall leave her society unaltered. Her child dies before she does; her lover cannot understand her and Waldo, the only human whom Lyndall appears to have influenced, dies like Edna, melting into his environment. Schreiner has her reader believe that the farm society will continue exactly as it has, spiraling downward, degenerating exponentially; women swelling like ticks; men becoming more emasculated and frail. There is no optimism in Lyndall's return to nature.

Lyndall's death is "depressing and claustrophobic" (Showalter, *A Literature* 203), offering her narrow possibilities, and Edna's is strangely celebratory in tone, but what is crucial to note in a study of these New Woman novelists is that they write Lyndall and Edna into existence. These heroines become the bodies over which the next New Women, and feminist novelists will walk, the body bridge of Schreiner's *Dreams*, nightmarish though it may be. What the fictional voices reveal of ideals and desires, and the fictional beings attempt to accomplish in self awareness and social acceptance, is remarkable and remarkably new. They slough the skin of their Victorian predecessors and, in so doing, make themselves vulnerable. Most ultimately fail, are miserable and often die young. So what good does it do to write the New Woman heroine into existence at all? Why liberate her from the bonds of nineteenth-century, middle-class sexuality, motherhood and marriage only to force her to face the fact that there is no alternative for her but death, despair or knowingly living a hypocritical life? Lyndall, Edna, Rebekah, Mary, Galia, Hadria, Evadne, Angelica and Beth all have their voices resonate and all are heard, and were heard from 1884 to 1915. They shook the foundations of the institutional structures that endeavored to confine them. They did not go through their lives without influencing anyone. Although they influenced few with any results in the world of the fiction they inhabited, they inspired discussion and change in the authors' societies. Fear, debates, enthusiasm and empathy were resounding responses to Lyndall's rebukes of sex-parasitism, to

Hadria's strident disgust with motherhood, to Evadne's singular refusal to consummate a marriage with a husband who has a depraved sexual history. Edna's awakening was deemed "morbid" and "vulgar" and was "censured in the national press" (Showalter, *Sister's* 65).

As frustrated as Showalter is with Schreiner's limitations, she admits that "*The Awakening* broke new thematic and stylistic ground as Chopin went boldly beyond the work of her precursors in writing about women's longing for sexual and personal emancipation" (65). Showalter also highlights that Chopin's voice is echoed by Mademoiselle Reisz, the token artist and strange woman in the world of *The Awakening*, when she claims that "the artist must possess 'the courageous soul that dares and defies'" (66). Schreiner, like Chopin and the other New Woman novelists in this study, boldly "dares and defies", but to an end. The authors have direction and purpose; they have a social and political agenda for change, and fiction is their most effective vehicle for enacting this change. The strength of their fiction lies in their realism not in a misleading optimism, nor in their occasional bogs of polemical preaching to society through their characters' voices. Their effectiveness is in the representation of a new kind of woman attempting to accomplish self-affirmation, to rise to her highest potential and then to attempt to survive her society while clinging to her self.

Mademoiselle Reisz might have claimed that the artist's soul is one "that dares and defies" (Chopin 61), but she is also afraid of the water. She dares and defies in her music that no one in society, except Edna, can begin to understand, and then she hides away, a hermit, a recluse, tortured by her solitude. The reader is led to believe that she lives an enlightened life internally, but her only release of this self is through her art which is rarely understood - another level of isolation. Throughout *The Awakening*, Edna's learning to swim parallels her learning to be. It is described with a sensual language of liberation and discovery: "Edna plunged and swam about with abandon that thrilled and invigorated her" (47). Chopin only allows Mademoiselle Reisz such abandon in her music; she avoids the water and symbolically, any complete awakening. Mademoiselle Reisz, like Valeria

Du Prel in Caird's *Daughter's of Danaus*, is a predecessor to the New Woman. They have survived because they have not gone in the water. The New Woman novelist suggests with her fiction that there can be no more avoidance of the water, and the heroines in many cases go even further than their creators.

### **“A Solitary Soul”<sup>3</sup>**

In her isolation and her illness Lyndall finds solace in only one place, the reflection in her little looking glass, in her own eyes, in “the depths of her soul” (Schreiner, *African Farm* 182). There is no vanity only affirmation of self as she looks in her mirror, and is determined to exist and to survive against the odds:

“We are all alone you and I,” she whispered; “no one helps us, no one understands us; but we will help ourselves.”  
... There was a world of assurance in their still depths. ...  
“We shall never be quite alone, you and I ... we shall always be together.” (Schreiner, *African Farm* 182)

It was in solitude that the New Woman novelists found safety laden with isolation. Their ideals identified connection with, not freedom from, men as their goal. *The Awakening* was originally entitled “A Solitary Soul” (Chopin 2). In reference to Mademoiselle Reisz’s music, the narrator of *The Awakening* explains:

One piece that lady played Edna had entitled ‘Solitude.’ ...  
When she heard it there came before her imagination the figure of a man standing beside a desolate rock on the seashore. He was naked. His attitude was one of hopeless resignation as he looked toward a distant bird winging its flight away from him. (25-6)

In this description of Edna’s vision inspired by Mademoiselle Reisz’s music, Chopin foreshadows Edna’s literal experience at the close of the novel. The bird that represents her liberated self and her knowledge of that self,

<sup>3</sup> “A Solitary Soul” was the original title of Chopin’s novel *The Awakening*.

evades her grasp, and in her nakedness she is resigned, hopeless, but not to return nor to continue the experience of life in "solitude." Edna does not give the piece the title "disappointment" or "imprisonment;" there is significance in the connection Chopin makes between despair and solitude. The experience of hearing this piece sends Edna into such a state of agitation that she is brought to tears and is unable to speak. While Mademoiselle Reisz shares Edna's experience of solitude there is a certain daunting imprisonment in one's own, self-selected solitude. That is a different prison than that externally, socially imposed solitude of the experience of sexuality, marriage and motherhood for the middle-class woman of the nineteenth century. Mademoiselle Reisz's is a private cell. She is not searching as the narrator of "The Yellow Wall-paper" is for an understanding of the strange sensation of imprisonment and isolation that marriage and motherhood bring to her life. Mademoiselle Reisz knows why she must be alone; she does not tear confusedly at the wallpaper trying to release the women trapped behind it. She creates art, and she is alone. Dixon who understood this experience writes in her novel quite simply of the profound and inescapable loneliness of a New Woman who chooses to be true to her values: "It was sad for a young woman to be alone" (11).

Fearing this solitude and isolation, the New Woman novelists altered their lives in such a way to avoid a conclusive outward solitude for themselves. Most married, though many separated and/or divorced from their husbands, and many had children or wanted to - despite the relative oldness of the institutions that marriage and motherhood remained. Schreiner married a man whom her letters suggest offered her potential maternity and respect, but there is no hint of the ideal love she wrote so prolifically about (Schreiner, *Letters* 229-233). Gilman attempted to survive and remain in a marriage which drove her to "Yellow Wall-paper" psychoses (Gilman, *Living* 90-106). As suggested earlier these women were both afraid of their sexuality and afraid of the absence of it. As a result, they experienced, as evidenced in their personal revelations or life decisions, unfulfilling sexual partnerships with men, never approaching the

ideal they identified. They did not stand, literally, with Edna on the shore and choose the escape of suicide as a result of their solitude. In the journals and letters of these authors, this fear of solitude and isolation from other, thinking, passionate individuals of their society, this fear of an estrangement from women and a repulsion or confusion from men haunted them, checking them and their choices about how they might live their lives. More merciless with their heroines and much bolder in their polemics, the New Woman novelists dare in their writing far more than they were willing to dare in their own lives. "After all there's nothing but *one's own* desertion of one's own ideals, that can utterly crush one's soul ..." writes Schreiner in a letter in 1899; "one might die of a broken heart, and yet life would have been worth living if one had only been true to *oneself*" (*Letters* 346). Lyndall, Rebekah, Hadria, Mary, Evadne, Edna, Galia all suffer in their various ways but, despite digressions, overall remain true to their ideals. Thus, the New Woman novelist in subjecting her heroine to a very real social isolation, spares her the "crushing of [her] soul" (346). In 1891, Schreiner writes in a letter, "my own sadness always rises from my own weakness, from my inability to live up to my *ideal*." She elaborates, "when I can do that, all is well. Nothing saddens me, nothing depresses. If we held fast to the high ideal of just doing our work, and never even allowing our hearts to go out hungering after love or any return from our fellows, nothing would depress us" (194). So Schreiner outlines the way a New Woman can stay true to her ideals and survive her society - cauterize her need for love and companionship. Schreiner's very recognition of her weakness, her humanness, her desire to be understood by her society and her "hungering after love," identify why the New Woman novelist lives and her heroine dies. To never desert one's ideals for the sake of one's need for companionship, understanding and love is impossible, as Schreiner herself experiences, despite her frustration with herself when she falters. The New Woman novelist could not be unflinchingly steadfast in living her life by her ideals because of a prevailing fear of isolation from a society that did not share those ideals .

The close of *The Story of a Modern Woman* bookends the plot set

again in the cemetery where the reader was first introduced to Mary. As Farmer notes, this time Mary “stands alone, without companionship” (35). Upon reflection on her disappointments since the reader first saw her here, “she has found life itself to be nothing more than a dreary battle fought in lonely isolation,” and Farmer claims that this “seems only to offer despair” to the reader (35).

Like many critics and biographers of Chopin, Showalter in her study of *The Awakening* recognizes the origins of the original title “A Solitary Soul” which were at least in part the inspiration for the major premiss of the novel: a paradoxically liberating and isolating sense of solitude. This inspiration was de Maupassant’s short story, “Solitude,” that Chopin read and wrote about in her journal at the same time as she was writing *The Awakening*. Showalter makes some poignant connections for the reader, first between Chopin’s and de Maupassant’s stories, when she explains that the theme of the “Solitude” spoke to “a woman who had survived the illusions that friendship, romance, marriage or even motherhood would provide lifelong companionship or identity, and who had come to recognize the existential solitude of all human beings” (*Sister’s* 66). Significant to this study Showalter identifies that “by the end” of the novel both Chopin and Edna have “claimed a solitude that is defiantly feminine” (66). By the end of the novel Chopin takes Edna through “the illusions of friendship, romance, marriage [and] even motherhood” to the other side of them dissipating their promises like dandelion gossamers. She leaves Edna with that sense of “existential solitude” as she faces the deserted Grand Isle in the off season, a distorted version of her earlier, prophetic fantasy with Robert when “the whole island seem[ed] changed,” when Edna asked Robert, “when did our people from Grand Isle disappear from the earth?” (Chopin 37). Thus Edna finds herself unavoidably alone which is merely a physical representation of the growing internal awareness of her solitude in society. Showalter explains that Edna is caught in a period of transition between two worlds. “As a heroine in transition between homosocial and heterosexual worlds, Edna has lost some of the sense of connectedness to other women

that might help her plan her future" (79). She has lost her connectedness to women, like Adelle Ratignolle, as Showalter points out, without successfully forging a new bond and connection with a male counterpart or with women like Mademoiselle Reisz, who in many ways is more advanced than Edna in this transition. "Even Edna occasionally perceives Mademoiselle Reisz's awkwardness as a kind of deformity, and is sometimes offended by the old woman's candor and is not sure whether she likes her" (Showalter, *Sister's* 75).

"Both the author and the heroine oscillate between two worlds, caught between contradictory definitions of femininity and creativity, and [are] seeking whether to synthesize them or to go beyond them to an emancipated womanhood and an emancipated fiction" (Showalter, *Sister's* 83). Showalter connects the author to the heroine in their struggle and their limitations, and this study weaves this smattering of New Woman novelists and heroines alike into that realm shared by Edna and Chopin. While a good deal of the proposals for change in society and the ideals held vary from one New Woman novelist to the next, there is a defined connectedness between them that lies in their disconnection to their societies' ideals. They, like Edna and Chopin, are estranged from a womanhood of the Victorian era and from the Adelle Ratignolles. The New Woman novelists have no desire to return to that femininity, but there is a vastness of longing that they experience, quite similar to Edna's "unfocused yearning" (Showalter, *Sister's* 83). While they, like Edna, are awakened and enlightened to the reality of their society's anti-woman, oppressive institutions of female sexuality, marriage and motherhood, they have some idea of what an ideal for more woman-centered versions of these categories might include. They are abstract, vast, vague and not universal even among the New Woman novelists. The New Woman novelists are fully aware that these ideals cannot exist in their contemporary society. When written into the fiction they are presented in utopias like Gilman's or the utopian dreams and dream visions found in Chopin and Schreiner's fiction. The actual attempts at reaching the ideals are made only in the margins of these

societies as with Caird's heroine Hadria's adopted motherhood of an illegitimate little girl, a child society pretends does not exist. Only here, in the margins, in the empty space outside of the borders of the patriarchal society, can the experimenting be done. And even these experiments, when discovered by the ruling authority, are destroyed. Hadria's experiment is deflated as are others such as Lyndall's attempt at a free union with her lover which ends in abandonment, the premature birth and death of her child and her own death. The New Woman novelist can be seen as this premature birth. Though her arrival had been long awaited, she was not nourished enough or loved enough, and she was diseased by her nourishment as she was developing.

"She finally perceives herself within a world that while apparently open to her potentialities, remains closed to her deepest wishes and her will" (Jacobs 80). Jacobs writes this description of Edna, but it applies to the other New Woman heroines and, periodically throughout their lives, to the New Woman novelists as well. Neither Edna nor her creator's New Woman literary contemporaries were quite able to fathom exactly what their "deepest wishes" were. Due to a fear of complete isolation from all society, a fear of their own ideology, or a limitedness as a result of their proximity to and influence by the society which they strove to change, the New Woman novelist was caught in between. She was neither able to be part of the tradition that preceded hers as she "broke new thematic and stylistic ground," as Showalter claims Chopin did (*Sister's* 65), nor to be a distinct part of the developing Modernist movement. The disconnection of their experience both limited them as writers and as revolutionaries, and it united them, as a study upon reflection, as a group of radical, literary thinkers and women. And while the New Woman novelists are like Edna in the respect that Showalter shrewdly points out that "Edna's solitude is one of the reasons that her emancipation does not take her very far" (*Sister's* 79-80). So, too, does the solitude of the New Woman novelist direct her fiction and advance women's fiction away from attempting to escape this solitude through marriage or motherhood while alternatively embracing solitude as

part of a validation of their rejection of all that oppresses them.

### **Dedication**

Schreiner dedicated her small volume of *Dreams*, “to a small girl-child who may live to grasp that which for us is yet sight, not touch” (vii). The New Woman was plagued by continuous frustration with her own conditioning, what Hadria refers to as “this sickly feminine conscience” that New Women are forced “to deal with! ... It clings to the worst of us still, and prevents the wholesome big catastrophes that might bring salvation” (Caird, *Daughters* 194). Anxious for of the “big catastrophes that might bring salvation,” they also struggled against the mainstream and the establishment which conspired to cripple them in their mission. They faced the knowledge that their “striving and striving” (Schreiner, *African Farm* 88) would not likely return results that would directly benefit their lives. They were faced with their own human needs for companionship, sexual outlet and motherhood which, for many, overpowered their ideals. As torturous as the relinquishing of those carefully sculpted ideals might have been, the sacrifice was often made. Considering what hindered and encumbered them, the dedication was made.

Schreiner touches on this theme with Waldo’s frustration at Lyndall’s bitter acceptance of her unfortunate lack of power, and he confusedly asks her to tell others, encouraging her that they will listen: “Lyndall, ... if you think that that new time will be so great, so good, you who speak so easily ... why do you not try to bring that time? When you speak I believe all you say; other people would listen to you also” (*African Farm* 141). But Lyndall is too marked by animosity and is resigned to a death at the hands of society. “I, Waldo, I? ... I will do nothing good for myself, nothing for the world, until someone wakes me. I am asleep, swathed, shut up in self; until I have been delivered I will deliver no one” (141). In contrast with Valeria Du Prel and Mademoiselle Reisz, despite Waldo’s need for Lyndall to change the world through her influence, Lyndall recognizes that she cannot yet, because she is too “swathed ... in self” and cannot influence others until

“someone wakes” her. The New Woman novelist makes an earnest attempt to wake her by writing her voice to be read by the world and figuratively to wake the other Lyndalls in society; she writes to the “small girl-child” to wake her.

In contrast Rebekah in *From Man to Man* spends much of the enlightened part of her life writing to figure herself out and to communicate to others how to enact change for good. She is not standing on a soap box in the center of Cape Town, but she leaps and bounds ahead of Lyndall in respect to enacting change. She also attempts to do so through the male and female children she is raising. Ironically, this voice is silent in the New Woman movement because Schreiner never finishes her to release her on society, while Lyndall on an isolated farm in the karoo does exactly what she claims she cannot - enact change.

Though in each novel there is usually only one New Woman of the younger generation represented, there is the suggestion throughout that there are many New Women. Only, they are not organized; they have not formed a union, as it were; the plight of each is essential to the success of another. In response to Valeria’s cynical suggestion that women truly do not care about change, Hadria offers the haunting image of a dream she had. She describes the “strange and grotesque vision” from the dream:

a vast abyss, black and silent, which had to be filled up to the top with the bodies of women, hurled down to the depths of the pit of darkness, in order that the survivors might, at last, walk over to safety. Human bodies take but little room, and the abyss seemed to swallow them, as some greedy animal its prey. (Caird, *Daughters* 451)

As bleak as the description of the chasm appears Hadria related that she had an uncanny sense of certainty that “some day it would have claimed its last victim, and the surface would be level and solid, so that people would come and go, scarcely remembering that beneath their feet was once a chasm into which throbbing lives had to descend, to darkness and a living death” (451).

Schreiner uses similar imagery in her collection of *Dreams*, that the above dedication precedes. In "Three Dreams in a Desert" the protagonist finds herself walking over the bodies of those who perished in the plight before her. Schreiner suggests in her repeated dream vision that Waldo shares, that this journey, though perilous and requiring sacrifice, is shared and not only by women. The truth is more than just a literal means to an end, a call to martyr oneself for the cause; "it is a striving and striving and an ending in nothing" even with the knowledge that it might end thus (Schreiner, *African Farm* 88).

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