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“The Valley of the Shadow of Books”: George Gissing, New Women, and Morbid Literary Detachment

MARISA PALACIOS KNOX

IN an 1891 essay, Oscar Wilde repudiated the current usage of “morbid” as an appropriate word for literary content:

It is, of course, a ridiculous word to apply to a work of art. For what is morbidity but a mood of emotion or a mode of thought that one cannot express? The public are all morbid, because the public can never find expression for anything. *The artist is never morbid. He expresses everything.* He stands outside his subject, and through its medium produces incomparable and artistic effects.¹

Wilde was responding to critiques of his own work using the term that, according to John Stokes, had “by the end of the

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¹ Oscar Wilde, “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” *Fortnightly Review*, 55 (1891), 307. Wilde also used the epigram “No artist is ever morbid. The artist can express everything” in his Preface to the second edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, published in April 1891.

century achieved the definitive status of a cliché just toppling into parody” in its promiscuous application to Decadents, New Women writers, homosexuals, and social deviants of all sorts who undermined the narrative of progress.² Wilde rejects the application of a label that denotes disease and connotes death to the fundamental vitality of art, in which all inspirations find fruition. At the same time, however, Wilde argues that a certain kind of aesthetic detachment is the source of this transcendent creativity, in which the artist transforms his material by “stand[ing] outside of” it.

Arthur Waugh in 1894 also located true literary artistry in a stance of detachment, echoing Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759):

It is only when we regard life with the untrammelled view of the impartial spectator, when we pierce below the substance for its animating idea, that we approximate to the artistic temperament. It is unmanly, it is effeminate, it is inartistic to gloat over pleasure, to revel in immoderation, to become passion’s slave; and literature demands as much calmness of judgment, as much reticence, as life itself.³

According to Waugh, the “untrammelled view of the impartial spectator” is not merely the capacity for criticism, for “[seeing] the object as in itself it really is” in Arnoldian terms. While Waugh sees detachment as a kind of balancing force of “reticence” (in contrast with Wilde’s vision of total expression), he equates it, like Wilde, with an “animating idea,” with “life itself,” the creative force of artistry. He also characterizes such detachment as a masculine skill and privilege in opposition to “effeminate” feeling.

As Amanda Anderson has noted, Victorians often demonstrated a general ambivalence toward detachment, especially in its connection with the forces of modernization. It was, in any case, “almost impossible for Victorians to imagine a positive, and disinterestedly critical, conception of feminine

² John Stokes, *In the Nineties* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 26.

³ Arthur Waugh, “Reticence in Literature,” *The Yellow Book*, 1 (1894), 210.

detachment.”⁴ Instead, women’s affective identification with literature was assumed to take place and in many ways was encouraged, in spite of the problems—physical and otherwise—associated with the traditionally feminine model of emotional reading untempered by rationality and rigor. In the lectures that formed *Sesame and Lilies* (1865), John Ruskin championed both the emotional acuity of the girl reader, who “should be taught to enter with her whole personality into the history she reads,” and her responsibility to “apprehend, with her fine instincts, the pathetic circumstances and dramatic relations” that the male historian “too often only eclipses by his reasoning, and disconnects by his arrangement.”⁵ Since a woman’s paramount role was to bear and raise children, she was believed to have an essential disposition toward “identifying with the experience of others” for the benefit of her offspring; the naturally feminine tendency to identify was then thought to spill over into her “processes of reading.”⁶

What has been less discussed in current Victorian studies is the converse proposition, which, I argue, gained force in the fin de siècle: that women’s *not* being able to identify with the subjects of literature could be symptomatic of mental and even physiological barrenness. By the end of the nineteenth century, increasing numbers of professional literary women were defying the idea of a natural propensity for identification, but in consequence their status as women became questionable. While prominent physicians like Silas Weir Mitchell (now notorious for his prescription of a rest cure for Charlotte Perkins Gilman) continued to express concern over the self-destructive “emotional stimulus which women carry into all forms of work,” the prospect of emotional *absence* in such work was beginning to appear even more alarming, because it was more disruptive to the ideology of essential gender difference.⁷ In

⁴ Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001), p. 47.

⁵ John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*, ed. Deborah Epstein Nord (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2002), p. 81.

⁶ Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader, 1837–1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 57.

⁷ S. Weir Mitchell, *Doctor and Patient*, 3d ed. (Philadelphia: J. B. Lipincott Co., 1888), p. 152.

order for womanhood to continue to be defined by affective response, female literary detachment had to become a disorder, instead of the fruitful aesthetic stance described by Wilde and Waugh. As women's passionate literary response was often correlated with sickness or blighted fertility throughout the nineteenth century, the dispassionate response attributed to female literary scholars, professionals, and artists acquired the pervasive label of morbidity at the fin de siècle.

In dramatizing the lives of professional women in the 1890s, George Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1891) and *The Odd Women* (1893) both evoke women's emotional detachment from literature as pathological. But while *New Grub Street* establishes the morbid woman as a new "type" emergent in the literary field, *The Odd Women* reassesses the professional woman as a potentially transformative, as well as productive, force. The novelty of the morbid female archetype nevertheless shaped the reception of *The Odd Women*'s Rhoda Nunn, along with the writer-heroines of New Woman novels,⁸ as emotionally and therefore creatively sterile.

In the first part of this essay, I show how Gissing marks a gendered divide between creative expression and morbid professionalism in *New Grub Street*. Contradicting Wilde's definition, the morbid literary woman Marian Yule cannot attain the status of artist *because* of her detachment. While Gissing's male writer characters are by no means immune to the modern problems of alienation and mechanization, they either thrive upon soulless careerism or martyr themselves on the altar of letters. None of these characters finds his masculinity imperiled by literary labor. In contrast, Marian explicitly connects the loss of her womanliness with her emotional dissociation from the texts that she reads and writes about.

The Odd Women, written two years after *New Grub Street*, focuses more narrowly on the ramifications of female

⁸ Sarah Grand, the novelist who first coined the term "new woman," defined her—as a person instead of a character type—in terms of her detached position, "sitting apart in silent contemplation all these years, thinking and thinking, until at last she solved the problem and proclaimed for herself what was wrong with Home-is-the-Woman's-Sphere, and prescribed the remedy" (Sarah Grand, "The New Aspect of the Woman Question," *North American Review*, 158 [1894], 271).

professionalization.⁹ In the second part of this essay, I argue that in *The Odd Women* Gissing departs from his own narrative of the sterile professional woman in *New Grub Street*. *The Odd Women* portrays a woman who abjures literary identification and still finds emotional and creative satisfaction in her vocation. Yet in late-Victorian as well as current reactions to the work, Rhoda's divestment from the marriage plot elicits for her the same tragic categorization as the unhappy Marian. The criticism tends to cast Rhoda's mission of creating new versions of herself, an entire class of self-replicating "odd women," as a barren substitute for "natural" forms of creation and procreation.

The female authors of New Women novels were also accused of copying themselves for subject matter, using the challenges of their profession as plots and themselves as characters. In the conclusion of this essay, I contend that the new but widespread fin-de-siècle anxiety about women's supposed under-identification as a result of careerism influenced the substance and reception of these novels, in which professional and romantic fulfillment, much less reproduction, ultimately prove incompatible. Even when the female characters are satisfied with this tradeoff, criticism of the genre then and now finds them lacking in their ability to solicit the expected emotional identification from their audience.



In the late nineteenth century, literary men and women were increasingly vying for success on the same professional terrain. The number of women working in literary professions, especially print journalism, rose exponentially.¹⁰

⁹ As a result, *The Odd Women* has begun to garner more critical attention, beginning with feminist criticism in the 1980s, and more recently, illuminating studies of its relevance to political, technological, and urban culture in late-Victorian Britain. See Zarena Aslami, "The Space of Optimism: State Fantasy and the Case of *The Odd Women*," *Victorian Studies*, 47 (2004), 55–85; John Spiers, ed., *Gissing and the City: Cultural Crisis and the Making of Books in Late Victorian England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); and Emma Liggins, *George Gissing, the Working Woman, and Urban Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

¹⁰ Although its practitioners constantly represented the field of journalism as overcrowded, the market for periodicals had expanded in relation to a steady rise in potential readership among the working classes, maintained by William Edward

This battle for professional territory in the literary field was waged in the popular imagination in the space of the public library. The snooty narrator of Edward Kersey's "A Romance of a Public Library" (1889), who explicitly bemoans the results of the 1870 Education Act,¹¹ heaps particular scorn on women readers, who are "hardest of all to deal with":

... especially those who were forced by necessity or misguided ambition to seek their living by devilling up matter for authors, scholars, writers of leading articles, and others. In consequence of their misfortunes they had to work for others, and by virtue of their sex they thought that the officials ought to work for them. A knotty point or a difficult question meant to them nothing more arduous than ten minutes' talk with an official, by preference the sub-librarian, but to him it meant a great deal more, amounting in some cases to the waste of a whole afternoon.¹²

The problem with these lady readers, according to Kersey's narrator, is that their labor is neither laborious nor creative; they are not the "authors, scholars, writers of leading articles," nor are they shouldering the weight of research that is delegated to the sub-librarian. The narrator mocks a woman "copying and making extracts" from various references for a male historian friend of his for saying she is "employed in what *she*

Forster's 1870 Education Act, as well as the ever-growing middle-class population. See Barbara Onslow, *Women of the Press in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), pp. 15–16; and Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800–1900*, 2d ed. (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1998), p. 171. Technological innovations in printing as well as the repeal of the newspaper stamp tax in 1855 and the paper duty of 1861 enabled cheaper and easier distribution of periodicals to keep pace with the enlargement of the reading public (see Altick, *English Common Reader*, p. 357). A greater number of educated women were available in turn to supply the demand for copy from an increasingly literate nation.

¹¹ Journalist Mowbray Morris, among others, observed this phenomenon with some consternation: "I may (as an old man) be permitted to doubt whether the great spread of education our age has seen has not somewhat lowered the standard of what in my time was meant by what you now call culture. But I cannot doubt that there are a far greater number of people existing now who know something about many things, and can turn that knowledge to account, than were in the world when I was young. There are many more people in search of a livelihood, womenfolk especially; and . . . the pen is an instrument that can be employed for that purpose." [Mowbray Morris], "The Profession of Letters," *Macmillan's*, 56 (1887), 308.

¹² Edward Kersey, "A Romance of a Public Library," *Belgravia*, 68 (1889), 36.

called *research*” (“A Romance of a Library,” pp. 37, 36). The work of selective reading and transcribing is merely the performance of research instead of authentic immersion in it, according to the narrator. Rather than subsuming themselves in their reading as they were supposed to, such women researchers were thought to use their reading to assert themselves, to the inconvenience of men and their work.

Eliza Lynn Linton, one of the first women admitted as a reader to the British Museum Reading Room in the mid nineteenth century, dramatized this perception of a weighted competition between the sexes by describing the ideal female library patron in her 1885 novel *The Autobiography of Christopher Kirkland*:

She was one of the vanguard of the independent women; but she did her life's work without blare or bluster, or help from the outside; and without that weakness of her sex which makes them cry out when they are hustled in the crowd they have voluntarily joined—which makes them think themselves aggrieved because they are not aided by the men to whom they have placed themselves in opposition and rivalry.¹³

According to this description, a woman library-goer who did not actively draw attention to herself in some way was a rarity. As Ruth Hoberman writes of the Reading Room, its “very centrality and conspicuousness made it also a public stage, an opportunity for women to dramatize their entry into—or rejection of—public life.”¹⁴ Hence even diffident young ladies could not avoid being recognized, as Marian Yule is by Jasper Milvain in *New Grub Street*, as fellow sojourners “under the great dome.”¹⁵ Before even speaking with Marian, who acts as her father's researcher, Milvain is able to assess her immediately as “a good example of the modern literary girl. . . . [with] a very delicate, pure complexion, though morbid” (*New Grub Street*, p. 46).

¹³ [Eliza] Lynn Linton, *The Autobiography of Christopher Kirkland*, 3 vols. (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1885), I, 253.

¹⁴ Ruth Hoberman, “Women in the British Museum Reading Room during the Late-Nineteenth and Early-Twentieth Centuries: From Quasi- to Counterpublic,” *Feminist Studies*, 28 (2002), 494.

¹⁵ George Gissing, *New Grub Street*, ed. Bernard Bergonzi (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 50. All further references to *New Grub Street* are to this edition and appear in the text.

Marian's morbidity marks her as a part of a newly visible social category, in which the woman as library nuisance was recast as a library casualty. In *New Grub Street*, Milvain is unaffected by the Reading Room environment, whereas Marian feels herself poisoned by the "warm, headachy air" of "the valley of the shadow of books" (*New Grub Street*, pp. 137, 221). She "always" leaves her work at the library "faint with weariness and hunger" (p. 115). G. Stanley Hall, the late-Victorian medical authority on adolescence, would certainly agree with Milvain's evaluation of Marian:

Bookishness is probably a bad sign in a girl; it suggests artificiality, pedantry, the lugging of dead knowledge. Mere learning is not the ideal, and prodigies of scholarship are always morbid. The rule should be . . . not to overburden the soul with the impedimenta of libraries and records of what is afar off in time or zest.¹⁶

Marian's own association of literature with a kind of cancer or living death, "a morbid excrescence upon human life," and her vision of herself along with the other readers in the British Library Reading Room as "hapless flies caught in a huge web, its nucleus the great circle of the Catalogue" (*New Grub Street*, pp. 204, 138), confirms Hall's own catalog of her type as a doomed specimen. She is not merely pitied by others, but identifies herself as the female victim of, rather than an aggressive competitor within, the literary field.

The vitiation of Marian's physical and psychological fitness through her library work illustrates the enduring nineteenth-century view that systematic study indisposed women for motherhood. In 1839 physiologist Alexander Walker articulated the widespread opinion that women's intellectual labor exacted a toll upon their reproductive systems:

. . . it is well known that, when women are capable of some degree of mental exertion, this, by directing the blood towards the brain, makes it a centre of activity at the expense of the vital organs which are much more important to them; and, if the

¹⁶ G. Stanley Hall, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education*, 2 vols. (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1904-5), II, 640.

latter suffer from the activity of the former, their chief value as women is destroyed. Science can never form a compensation to them for the deterioration of their vital system and their natural attractions.¹⁷

Herbert Spencer put it more bluntly in *The Principles of Biology* (1864–67): “absolute or relative infertility is generally produced in women by mental labour carried to excess.”¹⁸ Since women continued increasingly to pursue such labor in higher education and the professions,¹⁹ Spencer’s maxim continued to be cited in books, medical journals, and more broadly circulated periodicals such as *Popular Science Monthly* up to and after the turn of the century.²⁰ Dr. William Withers Moore, for example, quoted the same passage in an address on “The Higher Education of Women” upon assuming the presidency of the British Medical Association in 1886. Moore also alluded with approbation to another doctor who, drawing the same conclusion as Spencer, devised a counterintuitive solution to the problem of women’s diversion of energy to intellectual pursuits, perhaps inspired by Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847): “When I see a girl under twelve with a book in her hand, I always feel an inclination to throw it at her head.”²¹

The fact that Moore chose this topic for his first Presidential Address indicates how seriously it was taken by the medical community. As an official statement, it was widely excerpted

¹⁷ Alexander Walker, *Woman Physiologically Considered, as to Mind, Morals, Marriage, Matrimonial Slavery, Infidelity and Divorce*, 2d ed. (New York: J. and H. G. Langley, 1840), pp. 58–59.

¹⁸ Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Biology*, 2 vols. (London: Williams and Norgate, 1864–67), II, 485.

¹⁹ Bedford College for Women was founded in 1849; Girton and Newnham Colleges at Cambridge in 1869 and 1871, respectively; Lady Margaret Hall and Somerville Colleges at Oxford in 1878 and 1879. The University of London opened degrees to women in 1878.

²⁰ See, for example, Ely Van de Warker, “The Relations of Women to the Professions and Skilled Labor,” *Popular Science Monthly*, 6 (1875), 458; [Anon.], “Collegiate Training of Women,” *Medical Record: A Weekly Journal of Medicine and Surgery*, 66 (1904), 17; and Robert B. Sellers, “The Cause of Insanity in Women,” *Texas State Journal of Medicine*, 3 (1908), 304.

²¹ [William] Withers Moore, “The Higher Education of Women,” British Medical Association, 54th Annual Meeting President’s Address, *Gaillard’s Medical Journal*, 43 (1886), 412.

and summarized.²² Moore's speech also prompted reactions both supportive and outraged from a lay audience concerned with the evolving "place" of women in society, literalized in the move from private to public spaces like universities and libraries. While the suffragist Millicent Garrett Fawcett accused Moore of trying to "popularize the old fallacy that the only proper object in life for women is to become wives and mothers," *Punch* made the same point more sympathetically in verse: "Women should be wives and mothers, / That's their duty, so he said; / Not competing with their brothers, / Reading with an aching head."²³

Marian's emotional as well as physical discomfort in the Reading Room anticipates the response of Modernist women writers such as Virginia Woolf, who, as Hoberman discusses in juxtaposition with the New Women, recorded their "alienation" from an institution that "threaten[ed] to crush women with the weight of its male-oriented knowledge" ("Women in the British Museum Reading Room," p. 491). The difference between Marian and Woolf, however, is that Marian's alienating burden does not derive from her feeling excluded as a woman, but rather from her too-easy assimilation into the masculine world as a result of her labor. Gissing's narrative forms a stark contrast to the reported experiences of similarly situated female writers at the fin de siècle described by Susan David Bernstein. Karl Marx's daughters Jenny and Laura performed the same function as Marian for their father at the British Reading Room in the 1860s, and Marx's daughter Eleanor earned money by researching and writing pamphlets for Frederick

²² See for example *The Lancet*, 2 (1886), 314–15; *The Chemist and Druggist*, 29 (1886), 196; *The Pharmaceutical Journal*, 17 (1886), 356; and *Medical Record*, 30 (1886), 187–88.

²³ Millicent Garrett Fawcett, "The Use of Higher Education to Women," *Contemporary Review*, 50 (1886), 720; and [Anon.], "A Daring Doctor," *Punch*, 91 (1886), 105. For other direct responses to Moore's speech from a range of periodicals, see for example "A Bad Look-Out," *Saturday Review*, 62 (1886); Lucy M. Hall, "Higher Education of Women and the Family," *Popular Science Monthly*, 30 (1886); "Higher Education of Women," *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, 7.6 (1886); "Comment and Criticism," *Science*, 8.189 (1886); and "The Higher Education of Women," *The Academy: A Journal of Secondary Education*, 1 (1886).

Furnivall's various literary societies.²⁴ According to Eleanor Marx: "After all work is the chief thing. To me at least it is a necessity. That is why I love even my dull museum drudgery."²⁵ For Eleanor Marx, as well as her friends Clementina Black and Amy Levy, the Reading Room "facilitated productive encounters" of both the professional and social variety ("Radical Readers at the British Museum"). Even in the midst of "drudgery," the Reading Room for actual women was hardly the sterile, isolating chamber that Gissing depicts. In an 1894 interview with Linton, the author Mrs. Alec Tweedie boasted: "The struggle of fifty years ago to gain that admission [to the Reading Room] is of the past, and to-day almost more women are to be found at the desks than men. No one now denies their right of admission: they can work in peace unheeded."²⁶ Gissing, however, portrays Marian's unremarkable enculturation within the male preserve of the library as less of a triumph of progress than a tragedy of entrapment.

Marian herself is keenly aware that her Reading Room existence has deprived her of her womanhood, as defined in terms of marriage and fertility, and arrested her in a kind of sickly adolescence. Milvain, who has broken an engagement with Marian, concurs when he tells his wife, Amy: "My dearest, you are a perfect woman, and poor Marian was only a clever school-girl. Do you know, I never could help imagining that she had ink-stains on her fingers. . . . for I knew how fearfully hard she worked" (*New Grub Street*, p. 550). Marian is thus tainted in her former fiancé's mind by her labor in his own profession, and eulogized in the past tense as a perennial "school-girl" in unflattering contrast to the fully developed Amy, whose only work is to support her husband's professional literary ambitions.²⁷ *New*

²⁴ Susan David Bernstein, "Radical Readers at the British Museum: Eleanor Marx, Clementina Black, Amy Levy," *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, 3.2 (2007); available online at <<http://www.ncgsjournal.com/issue32/bernstein.htm>>.

²⁵ Eleanor Marx, 1882 letter to Jenny Marx, quoted in Bernstein, "Radical Readers at the British Museum."

²⁶ Mrs. Alec Tweedie, "A Chat with Mrs. Lynn Linton," *Temple Bar*, 102 (1894), 358.

²⁷ Amy's own leisurely reading preferences are for periodical summaries of the social sciences; she was "a typical woman of the new time, the woman who has developed concurrently with journalistic enterprise" (*New Grub Street*, p. 398). In consciously selecting digested reading material "alien to [Edwin] Reardon's sympathies" (p. 397),

Grub Street concludes with the triumphant song of Amy, while our last account of Marian, even though we have continually been privy to her thoughts, comes secondhand, via the man who has discarded her and thus excluded her from the reproductive economy. Marian has not died, but instead “suffered much all the winter from attacks of nervous disorder, and by no effort of will could she produce enough literary work” for her livelihood after her father’s demise (*New Grub Street*, p. 542). Ultimately she ceases all creative production and becomes a librarian’s assistant, presumably still caught in the “web,” perpetually moribund, in “the valley of the shadow of books.” The state of morbidity exists in an imperfect tense: Marian is left at the end of the novel not dead, nor really existing, as the narrative that had relayed her consciousness through free indirect discourse now abandons her.

Instead of suffering from the feminine propensity for readerly identification, Marian suffers from its lack. She feels no kinship, for example, with the “French Authoresses of the Seventeenth Century” about whom she is writing; the original bluestockings, such as Mademoiselle de Scudéry, Madame de Lambert, and Madame de Sevigné, feel remote to Marian because they wrote for creative pleasure, not subsistence:

To write—was not that the joy and the privilege of one who had an urgent message for the world? Her father, she knew well, had no such message; he had abandoned all thought of original production, and only wrote about writing. She herself would throw away her pen with joy but for the need of earning money. And all these people about her, what aim had they save to make new books out of those already existing, that yet newer books might in turn be made out of theirs? This huge library, growing into unwieldiness, threatening to become a trackless desert of print—how intolerably it weighed upon the spirit! (*New Grub Street*, pp. 137–38)

Unlike the seventeenth-century *Précieuses*, famous for their multivolume romances, Marian shrinks from contributing to the proliferation of books that surround her in the circular library.

which are inclined toward ancient classics and the literary novel, Amy identifies herself with a medium directly aligned with the *métier* of her second, striving husband.

She does not think in terms of content or any quality that might distinguish one from another, but instead sees all of them as materially identical and inexorably self-reproducing through the media of uninspired amanuenses like herself. She is simultaneously a worker on a literary assembly line and its product. The paradox of Marian is that she perceives herself as part of a class, surrounded by “all these people” pursuing the same end, and yet she feels no emotional solidarity with her fellow laborers. According to John Goode, “the Gissing character has no access to typicality,” but Marian’s problem is that she is part of a type, and the similarity of others forms no basis for sympathy or connection, but rather represents their inhuman nonparticularity.²⁸

Marian’s affective detachment from literature thus results from her professionalized relation to it. We glimpse the moment in which Marian’s “natural” interest in literature as a girl is capitalized on and converted to productive labor: “From the nursery her talk was of books, and at the age of twelve she was already able to give her father some assistance as an amanuensis” (*New Grub Street*, p. 125). As a woman, Marian is still working for her father, the “battered man of letters” Alfred Yule, even ghost-writing some of the material he submits for publication (p. 49). In consequence, she is no longer able to express herself according to gendered expectations through the medium of literature, either in reading or writing. As she tells her father, “I am afraid, . . . I haven’t so much sympathy with literary undertakings as you would like me to have” (p. 348). In fact, Marian’s detachment makes her a more effective writer than her father, who is too sincerely and passionately invested to prosper: “Had Yule been content to manufacture a novel or a play with due disregard for literary honour, he might perchance have made a mercantile success; but the poor fellow had not pliancy enough for this. He took his efforts *au grand sérieux*; thought he was producing works of art; pursued his ambition in a spirit of fierce conscientiousness” (p. 127). While Yule finds pleasure in being cited in a footnote, Marian declines to sign her compositions.

²⁸ John Goode, *George Gissing: Ideology and Fiction* (London: Vision Press, 1978), p. 135.

Instead of inheriting her father's disease of tortured ambition, Marian has no desire to claim her work for herself—because to her it is emphatically only work, completely depersonalized (p. 111). Both Yule and Milvain encourage her to try writing fiction and take on romantic subject matter, but Marian simply cannot infuse her literary work with the emotion that she feels in her attachment to Milvain. Nor can she approach this work with the sort of cheerful but cold-blooded detachment that the contemptible Milvain possesses. She retains her feminine capacity for sensibility, but it is tragically frustrated instead of fulfilled by literature.

To some degree Marian shares her literary malaise with the beleaguered novelist Edwin Reardon. The pressure of having to make a living for his family from his pen blights Reardon's creativity. Both Marian and Edwin are continually labeled by others as "morbid" because they are trapped in a mechanized mode of literary production that neither can abide. When Reardon discusses his new novel, with which he is dissatisfied, Gissing describes him as "talking like an automaton. It seemed to him that he turned screws and pressed levers for the utterance of his next words" (*New Grub Street*, p. 181). Marian is similarly conscious of her own dehumanization: "She was not a woman, but a mere machine for reading and writing" (pp. 136–37). Nevertheless, while Reardon may speak "like" a machine, Marian is entirely metaphorized into one. Indeed, Marian's characterization of herself as a "literary machine" repeats itself rather mechanically throughout the novel.²⁹

The difference between Marian and Reardon is that Reardon's professional woes do not impinge upon his affective relationship with literature. When he and his wife Amy separate, Reardon cannot part with certain beloved books, despite his straitened circumstances:

²⁹ "A few days ago her startled eyes had caught an advertisement in the newspaper, headed 'Literary Machine'; had it then been invented at last, some automaton to supply the place of such poor creatures as herself, to turn out books and articles? . . . A machine has no business to refuse its duty" (*New Grub Street*, p. 138); "She did her best . . . to convert herself into the literary machine which it was her hope would some day be invented for construction in a less sensitive material than human tissue" (p. 505).

He stood before his bookshelves and began to pick out the volumes which he would take away with him. Just a few, the indispensable companions of a bookish man who still clings to life—his Homer, his Shakespeare—

The rest must be sold. (*New Grub Street*, p. 255)

Gissing contrasts Reardon's chilly interactions with his spouse with this poignant depiction of books as "companions" and sources of "life." Such literature remains inviolate from economic contingencies, though Reardon's marriage does not. In Gissing's *Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (1903), the eponymous diarist speaks similarly of his miserable living and working conditions: "Yes, 'literary work' was done at that filthy deal table, on which, by the by, lay my Homer, my Shakespeare, and the few other books I then possessed."³⁰ Ryecroft depicts his hack "literary work" as a profane activity in proximity to Homer and Shakespeare. This recurring allusion in Gissing's writing emphasizes the sacred importance of maintaining an emotional connection with literature, unsullied by the detached exertions of "literary work." Reardon and his fellow author Harold Biffen do not believe in God, but they believe in Greece—or rather, the Golden Age of literature it represents for them.

Despite, or more likely because of, their alienation from the market, Reardon and Biffen are able to achieve a kind of sublimity through literary failure. The narrator of *New Grub Street* says of Reardon:

... there are less fortunate beings whom the vehemence of their revolt against fate strengthens to endure in suffering. These latter are rather imaginative than passionate; the stages of their woe impress them as the acts of a drama, which they cannot bring themselves to cut short, so various are the possibilities of its dark motive. (*New Grub Street*, p. 373)

This characterization of Reardon in *New Grub Street* echoes Biffen's complaint about Zola, that even in so-called realistic

³⁰ George Gissing, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1903), p. 25. See Austin Harrison, "George Gissing," *The Nineteenth Century and After*, 60 (1906), 463.

fiction there is always the grandeur of the “drama,” the magnification of “misery” that makes it artistic. Reardon’s angst is still an “imaginative” and creative response to a “dark motive.” Like Wilde’s artist, he is able to adopt a kind of objectivity by positioning himself “outside his subject” and thus making it productive—of “incomparable and artistic effects”—without becoming entirely mechanized himself. Although Biffen wants literature to focus on the “essentially unheroic,” Gissing has him risk his life to rescue his manuscript from a burning building (p. 173). Eitan Bar-Yosef has called *New Grub Street* a “suicidal” novel that depicts the impossibility of its own existence in the current literary market,³¹ and yet Reardon and the actual suicide Biffen even at the last find solace in identification with literature despite their struggles with writing for the modern public. Both men die reciting Prospero’s words from *The Tempest*: “We are such stuff as dreams are made on . . .” (*New Grub Street*, pp. 490, 529). Reardon’s and Biffen’s works do not flourish, but they outlive their authors, and therefore the men are not truly morbid according to both Wilde’s definition and Gissing’s conception of the artist. Marian, however, has been forced by her circumstances to trade the reproduction of children for a barren “desert of print.”

Since the great works they have read form a common language and final bond between them, Reardon and Biffen are also notable exceptions to Goode’s observation that “literature is never fully represented as a mode of social communication” in *New Grub Street* (*George Gissing: Ideology and Fiction*, p. 118). Marian’s dissociation from literature therefore forecloses potential homosocial bonds as well as those of romantic fulfillment. Once she is entombed in the library, she loses touch with her only friend, Jasper’s sister and aspiring writer Dora Milvain, who gives the reader a small glimpse of hope for literary women.³²

³¹ See Eitan Bar-Yosef, “‘Let Me Die with the Philistines’: Gissing’s Suicidal Realism,” *Literature Interpretation Theory*, 14 (2003), 185–204.

³² While her sister Maud abandons literary pursuits as soon as she marries well, Dora continues writing for a publication entitled *The English Girl* even after she becomes the comfortably situated Mrs. Whelpdale. Perhaps because Dora’s subject matter and audience are designated as immature and female, her status as a writer does not taint her womanliness as Marian’s did when writing for her father’s prospective readers.

Even as the narrative completely isolates Marian from other characters and conspicuously severs her internal discourse from the reader, she remains arguably the most pitiable character in *New Grub Street*, because she is granted no relief or dignity in her suffering. Neither she nor the reader can take comfort in aestheticizing her misery. Ironically, though, as Marian loses her own capacity for literary sympathy, we cannot help but sympathize with her.



Characters like Marian Yule embodied fin-de-siècle anxiety about women who approached literature as a profession instead of a passion. New Woman novelist Grant Allen anticipated Marian's self-assessment when he denounced higher education for women in an 1889 essay for the *Fortnightly Review*: "In one word, emancipate woman (if woman will let you, which is more than doubtful) but leave her woman still, not a dulled and spiritless epicene automaton."³³ Yet two years after *New Grub Street*, Gissing created a more robust vision of female professionalism in *The Odd Women*, the novel that David Grylls calls "the high-water mark of [Gissing's] sympathy for the female cause."³⁴ Though the oddness of the eponymous women refers to their singleness as well as their singularity, thus continuing the trope of career women compelled to embrace a celibate life, *The Odd Women* locates morbidity within the older model of female quixotism that absorbs women within romantic fictions. The character Rhoda Nunn, a typist, educator, and aspiring editor of a woman's paper, blames the moral degradation of a former acolyte on literary identification:

All her spare time was given to novel-reading. If every novelist could be strangled and thrown into the sea, we should have some chance of reforming women. The girl's nature was corrupted with sentimentality, like that of all but every woman who is intelligent enough to read what is called the best fiction, but not

³³ Grant Allen, "Plain Words on the Woman Question," *Fortnightly Review*, 52 (1889), 456.

³⁴ David Grylls, *The Paradox of Gissing* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986), p. 162.

intelligent enough to understand its vice. Love—love—love; a sickening sameness of vulgarity. What is more vulgar than the ideal of novelists? They won't represent the actual world; it would be too dull for their readers. . . . This Miss Royston—when she rushed off to perdition, ten to one she had in mind some idiot heroine of a book.³⁵

The conventions of the sentimental genre encourage unthinking, emulative identification with artificial characters; the “sickening sameness” of its artificial plots reproduces a “sickening sameness” in the women who mechanically, and often fatally, conform to these misleading examples. Rhoda resists these narratives and the women who identify with them, as in her dispute with her colleague Mary Barfoot over Miss Royston: “I should have despised myself if I could have affected sympathy. . . . Or have really felt it. That would have meant that I did not know myself” (*The Odd Women*, p. 150). For Rhoda, pitying Bella Royston would require her to emulate Miss Royston's loss of critical distance, the ability to see herself as she really is, in favor of morbid identification with delusion. Although Mary condemns Rhoda's reaction to Miss Royston's suicide as unduly harsh, Gissing positions his readers to be similarly unaffected. We never meet Miss Royston directly as a character, but only hear of her as a cautionary example of female quixotism.

The plot, as well as the structure, of *The Odd Women* repeatedly corroborates Rhoda's argument. Miss Royston commits suicide. Monica Madden, after marrying an older man for decidedly unsentimental reasons, begins to imagine another “type of man correspondent to her natural sympathies. . . . She found a suggestion of him in books; and in actual life, already, perhaps something more than a suggestion” (*The Odd Women*, p. 226). Monica's preference for cheap yellow-back novels over her husband's recommendations of Ruskin and Scott helps form the romantic illusions that lead to her misguided dalliance with a hero manqué in order to escape her claustrophobic marriage. Her sister Virginia finds a retreat from her meager

³⁵ George Gissing, *The Odd Women*, ed. Patricia Ingham (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000, 2008), pp. 67–68. All further references to *The Odd Women* are to this edition and appear in the text.

existence in novels and alcohol. The addictions enable each other, allowing for private indulgence: "To sit comfortably at home, the bottle beside her and a novel on her lap, was an avoidance of the worst shame attaching to this vice" (pp. 333–34). Her older sister Alice represents Virginia's detachment from the world into fiction as a sickness commensurate with her dipsomania: "Her life has been so dreadfully unhealthy. She seems to have become weak-minded. All her old interests have gone; she reads nothing but novels, day after day" (p. 340). *The Odd Women* ends with Virginia away at a rehabilitative institution, though with some promise of her being able to open a school with her elder sister Alice, an idea first suggested by Rhoda. Monica is dead, after giving birth to a daughter. Yet fiction per se is not responsible for these women's falls into moral turpitude, mental stagnation, and physical disintegration, but rather their inability to detach themselves from it critically, much less artistically. Certainly they are not reading anything akin to Gissing's novels.

Gissing claimed that he supported female emancipation as a solution to the problem of companionship for *men*. His famous letter advocating "sexual anarchy" to his friend Eduard Bertz was sent after Bertz read and praised *The Odd Women*; Gissing explained his rationale: "I am convinced there will be no social peace until women are intellectually trained very much as men are. More than half the misery of life is due to the ignorance and childishness of women."³⁶ He apparently alludes here to his own personal suffering as a result of marrying two uneducated women, but his novel avoids using the intellectual woman as a marital reward. As Grylls notes, *The Odd Women's* narrative seems more pessimistic about the odds of success for heterosexual relationships than for the happiness of unmarried women.³⁷ While Gissing was characteristically ambivalent about women's ideal position in society, his openness to the possibility of single women's professional fulfillment is evident in his lifelong friendship with and admiration for civil

³⁶ George Gissing, letter to Eduard Bertz, 2 June 1893, in *The Letters of George Gissing to Eduard Bertz, 1887–1903*, ed. Arthur C. Young (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1961), p. 171.

³⁷ See Grylls, *The Paradox of Gissing*, p. 177.

servant Clara Collet. Although Gissing wrote *The Odd Women* shortly before he met Collet, he had already favorably cited her sociological research on women's employment ("Obviously a woman of brains") in a letter to his sister.³⁸ Gissing's initial assessment of Collet was also at least partly owing to her appreciation of his works, on which she lectured to the Ethical Society. In writing *The Odd Women*, I would argue, Gissing is concerned with women's intellectual status not merely as potential marriage partners, but as a receptive audience, like Collet, for his own literary genre of realism.

Just as *The Odd Women* itself, according to Deirdre David, is "in part, the fictive response to all the vapid mush fed to poorly educated, confused women" against which Rhoda rails,³⁹ so Rhoda acknowledges her own responsibility as a positive, "real" role model to counterbalance both the idiot heroines of fiction and the social stereotype of the odd "feeble, purposeless, hopeless woman; type of a whole class; living only to deteriorate" (*The Odd Women*, p. 322). Rhoda is conscious about her status as an alternative heroine—as opposed to the typical novelistic heroine—to the young women in her circle: "My work is to help those women who, by sheer necessity, must live alone,—women whom vulgar opinion ridicules. How can I help them so effectually as by living among them, one of them, and showing that my life is anything but weariness and lamentation? I am fitted for this" (p. 204). Rhoda tacitly encourages young women to copy *her* example as they copy texts. When her prospective suitor, Everard Barfoot, asks her condescendingly, "What is your work? Copying with a type-machine, and teaching others to do the same—isn't that it?" Rhoda replies: "The work by which I earn money, yes. But if it were no more than that—" before he interrupts her (p. 203). Clearly Rhoda imbues her profession with a symbolic value that transcends monetary or practical concerns. While Karen Chase argues that Rhoda "never sobs for meaning" in her "strictly professional" clerical work,

³⁸ George Gissing, letter to Ellen Gissing, 11 April 1892, in *The Collected Letters of George Gissing*, ed. Paul F. Mattheisen, Arthur C. Young, and Pierre Coustillas, 9 vols. (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1990–97), V, 28.

³⁹ Deirdre David, "Ideologies of Patriarchy, Feminism, and Fiction in *The Odd Women*," *Feminist Studies*, 10 (1984), 132.

Rhoda is by no means emotionally detached from what she sees as a means of women's salvation.⁴⁰

Despite the fact that Rhoda's work literally and figuratively involves "copying" or replication, she does not cast herself or her pupils as automatons. Instead, she and Mary Barfoot view themselves as fervent evangelists for the work of "winning souls, propagating a new religion, purifying the earth!" (*The Odd Women*, p. 99). As Susan Colón has noted, Rhoda and Mary possess an "otherworldly and ascetic vocational motivation" in contrast with the strictly mercenary approach the novel ascribes to most of its male characters.⁴¹ More specifically, Rhoda and Mary are invigorated by the *newness* of their enterprise; instead of representing horrific bodily and aesthetic sterility, female professionalization in this Gissing novel manifests itself as spiritual rebirth.

While Rhoda is bodily as well as mentally "fitted" for the professional life, her romantic life has a disastrous effect upon her well-being and even her identity. Everard's pursuit of her is incited by his desire to test her singularity, symbolized by her detachment: "Had she, or not, a vein of sentiment in her character? Was it impossible to move her as other women are moved?" (*The Odd Women*, p. 142). During their abortive engagement, Rhoda becomes her own cautionary tale, bearing upon her person the demoralizing effects of the "sickening sameness" of love. In a novel where most of the women succumb to illness at one point or other, the normally aggressively healthy Rhoda is physically affected by her relationship with Everard—in which they are both constantly battling for control—with "sunken cheeks" as well as a "state of mind" that "resembled that of the ascetic who has arrived at a morbid delight in self-torture" (p. 311). Once Rhoda definitively rejects Everard, her strength returns, and in the final chapter of the novel her enterprise continues to "flourish like the green bay-tree" with the imminent prospect of publishing a newspaper for women (p. 370). She and Miss Barfoot were "never in such health and

⁴⁰ Karen Chase, "The Literal Heroine: A Study of Gissing's *The Odd Women*," *Criticism*, 26 (1984), 234.

⁴¹ Susan Colón, "Professionalism and Domesticity in George Gissing's *The Odd Women*," *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 44 (2001), 453.

spirits" (p. 371). Identifying with romantic narratives, not careers, turns women into automatons of a manufactured sentimentality in *The Odd Women*.

The finale of *The Odd Women* by no means offers a neat resolution. The reader cannot be certain whether or not Virginia will be rehabilitated, whether she and Alice will actually set up a school and sustain themselves, and whether the nameless baby daughter that takes after Monica will become a "brave woman," as Rhoda commands (*The Odd Women*, p. 370). The woman's newspaper that Rhoda and her colleagues are about to publish is also still nameless. These various lacunae together represent the gap between the fictional women's "ideal" ambitions and the real status of women at the time the book was written, a future that has yet to be determined. But in a novel of naturalist bleakness, where the odds have certainly been against odd women (of the five Madden sisters in the first chapter, only two are alive in the last), the undeniable health of Rhoda and her cause in the closing pages, in a chapter entitled "A New Beginning," defies morbid associations.

Moreover, Gissing continually conveys Rhoda's capacity for emotion, thereby refuting the equivalence of womanliness with reproduction and of professionalism with alienation. Rhoda's repeated exclamation of pity for Monica's baby, "Poor little child! Dear little child!" at the end of *The Odd Women* (p. 370) is not a neutral response, nor is it the "impersonal" solidarity with which Nina Auerbach characterizes "sisterhood" in the novel.⁴² Rhoda's final address to the child demonstrates a capacity for sympathy that does not involve romantic or familial love, as well as her vital connection to cultivating the next generation. The biological mother has died, but Rhoda remains a fertile source of inspiration for other women, old and newborn.

Yet most nineteenth-century critics of *The Odd Women* regarded Rhoda as a portrait of an impossible ideal inevitably thwarted. While one contemporary reviewer, bemoaning the fact the book was "neglected," hailed Gissing's heroine as an unexpected deviation from "the same cold, theoretical female

⁴² Nina Auerbach, *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1978), p. 147.

we have all grown so weary of," others perceived her ostensible thriving as in fact a miserable failure, a Pyrrhic victory.⁴³ *The Academy's* reviewer claimed, "one feels that Mr. Gissing has deliberately denied to her the success which she ought to have had."⁴⁴ Because Rhoda ultimately withholds herself from the "success" of a traditional romantic or familial plot, *The Literary World* similarly viewed Rhoda as left "in the end chagrined, disappointed, and with a loss of self-respect."⁴⁵ Even the feminist library-goer Clementina Black protested that the "natural end" to Rhoda's storyline "would be a real marriage—that is to say, an equal union." Black believed that Gissing had betrayed Rhoda's character—making her "an ungenerous, a selfish, and especially an undisciplined woman"—in order to avoid giving her a "conventional 'happy ending.'"⁴⁶ In these critics' eyes, Rhoda is a victim, rather than an exemplar with whom women should or even could identify, and thus worthy of neglect.

Gissing anticipates the ambiguous critical response to Rhoda as an unalienated professional woman in Mary Barfoot's speech on "Woman as an invader": "I am *glad* that I can show girls the way to a career which my opponents call unwomanly. . . . A womanly occupation means, practically, an occupation that a man disdains" (*The Odd Women*, p. 152). Even though Rhoda is if anything a kind of surrogate Madonna figure in the final tableau of *The Odd Women*, her commitment to her profession renders her, if not positively masculine, certainly "unwomanly," even according to recent criticism of the novel, which recapitulates the concerns of Gissing's Victorian reviewers. Deirdre David and Karen Chase, among other critics, have claimed that the ending of *The Odd Women* undermines Rhoda's apparent fulfillment and confidence in her own future as well as that of womankind.⁴⁷ Coral Lansbury further contends that Rhoda is "left as an emotional and social neuter," a truly nun-like

⁴³ Annie Nathan Meyer, "Neglected Books: II. Mr. Gissing's 'The Odd Women,'" *The Bookman*, 3 (1896), 49.

⁴⁴ George Cotterell, "New Novels," *The Academy*, 43 (1893), 542.

⁴⁵ [Anon.], rev. of *The Odd Women*, *The Literary World*, 24 (1893), 178.

⁴⁶ Clementina Black, rev. of *The Odd Women*, *Illustrated London News*, 5 August 1893, p. 155; quoted in George Gissing, *The Odd Women*, ed. Arlene Young (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1998), pp. 338–39.

⁴⁷ See David, "Ideologies of Patriarchy"; and Chase, "The Literal Heroine."

Nunn.⁴⁸ Instead of accepting Rhoda's embrace of fruitful detachment, modern readers of *The Odd Women* persist in seeing her professional triumph in late-Victorian terms of emotional as well as physical barrenness.



The critical reaction to Rhoda and the denouement of *The Odd Women*, then and now, resembles the reception of New Woman novels of the same period in which women fictionalized their own experiences of authorship. In contrast with the Brontëan model of the woman writer consumed by literature, the New Women novelists as well as journalists were often portrayed as ambitious but uninspired hacks, copyists capable only of a self-reflexive, literal brand of realism as they depicted the careers of female artists like themselves. Although Gissing also fictionalized his own struggles within the literary profession, his work was taken to be part of what Amanda Anderson calls the respected "practice of critical detachment through the mode of realism, which aspired to a systemic representation of social life" (*Powers of Distance*, p. 45). The literary New Women, in contrast, were seen as fundamentally uncreative in transcribing their own lives and thereby making copies solely of themselves. In an 1894 article, for example, the mountaineer Hugh E. M. Stutfield criticizes "the lady writer" for "for ever examining her mental self in the looking-glass" and "relating [her] own mental experiences . . . without any attempt at concealment."⁴⁹ She became the emotionally devoid descendant of the "Silly" "Lady Novelists" that George Eliot had excoriated in 1856 for being simultaneously prolific and infertile, recirculating already-written narratives instead of creating new ones.⁵⁰ Gaye Tuchman and Nina Fortin, as well as many other critics, have argued that the 1880s and 1890s accelerated a centuries-

⁴⁸ Coral Lansbury, "Gissing and the Female Surrogate," *Gissing Newsletter*, 15, no. 1 (1979), 15.

⁴⁹ Hugh E. M. Stutfield, "The Psychology of Feminism," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 161 (1897), 105, 110.

⁵⁰ See Catherine Gallagher, "George Eliot and *Daniel Deronda*: The Prostitute and the Jewish Question," in *Sex, Politics, and Science in the Nineteenth-Century Novel*, ed. Ruth Bernard Yeazell (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1986), p. 44.

old trend whereby the number of professional literary women became inversely proportionate to their prestige; women's writing came to be associated with the mercenary toil of New Grub Street instead of artistic endeavor.⁵¹

The New Woman writers also directly perpetuated the morbid reputation of their own careers by depicting female writers who achieve a professional status that often precludes or compromises their ability to maintain domestic happiness. The literary careers of these heroines usually coincide with the absence or loss of husbands and children, the attendant guarantors of the individual woman's womanliness as well as her evolutionary "fitness" through reproduction. Charlotte Riddell's *A Struggle for Fame* (1883) and George Paston's *A Writer of Books* (1898), for example, both feature a heroine's turbulent pursuit of a literary career as a major plotline. Yet while the heroines sometimes face a hostile or indifferent reception from the marketplace, they suffer most from the morbid effects of literary labor on their private lives. They are ultimately survivors, but at the expense of their families, which by the novels' ends are inevitably and irrevocably disrupted.⁵²

In Riddell's semi-autobiographical *A Struggle for Fame*, the author Glenarva Westley's professional breakthroughs occur with the deaths of her father and husband. Since this character is alive—and refuses to remarry—at the end of *A Struggle for Fame*, Linda H. Peterson contends that Riddell is consciously

⁵¹ See Gaye Tuchman, with Nina E. Fortin, *Edging Women Out: Victorian Novelists, Publishers, and Social Change* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1989). See also Penny Boumelha, "The Woman of Genius and the Woman of Grub Street: Figures of the Female Writer in British *Fin-de-Siècle* Fiction," *English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920*, 40 (1997), 177; Lyn Pykett, *The Improper Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992); Talia Schaffer, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 2000); and Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1977). More recently, Linda H. Peterson has complicated this account, noting the distinguished career of Alice Meynell, who skillfully positioned herself as the consummate woman of letters in writing both poetry and critical essays. In comparison with Charlotte Riddell and Mary Cholmondeley, whom Peterson also examines, Meynell seems to be the exception that proves the rule. See Linda H. Peterson, *Becoming a Woman of Letters: Myths of Authorship and Facts of the Victorian Market* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2009).

⁵² Mary Cholmondeley's bestseller *Red Pottage* (1899) also follows this pattern.

painting a new portrait of the woman artist refusing to encumber herself further with domestic ties and thus resisting the fatal end of the *Life of Charlotte Brontë* paradigm.⁵³ Yet Peterson also acknowledges that “the question of whether the life of the woman author must inevitably produce tragic death” is still insistently begged by the novel (*Becoming a Woman of Letters*, p. 167). Glenarva responds in an allegorical register to her husband’s demise: “O Lord! what was this? She knew—she knew! Once again FAME had crossed the threshold hand-in-hand with DEATH!”⁵⁴ At this point, however, and in explicit contrast with the attitude of fellow-author Barney Kelly, Glenarva’s initial ambition had already been sublimated into the desire to aid her family: “She valued fame merely for the sake of the only man, besides her father, she had ever cared for” (*A Struggle for Fame*, III, 342). While the novel makes clear that Glenarva continues to produce literature to support herself, the childless author is represented as merely biding time until her own death approaches. The very last line of the novel has a rejected suitor picturing her in elegiac terms: “Glen in her trailing black garments, with the sluggish river to her left hand and the darksome pine-woods to the right, with the sun westering behind the spot where she stood calmly waiting, with knowledge, but without fear, for the coming of that night which must preface the dawning of God’s Eternal Day” (*A Struggle for Fame*, III, 357–58). Glenarva is not only already arrayed in widow’s mourning, but also surrounded by natural symbols of waning vitality. Like Marian Yule at the end of *New Grub Street*, she exists passively in a state of suspended morbidity.

Perhaps the most lighthearted depiction of a female author in a New Woman novel, Paston’s heroine Cosima Chudleigh attains literary success without much attendant personal angst in *A Writer of Books*. Cosima literally grows up in a library, which her father curates, and becomes a regular worker at the British Museum Reading Room. Paston emphasizes how Cosima’s literary environment has shaped her development, in that

⁵³ See Peterson, *Becoming a Woman of Letters*, p. 169.

⁵⁴ Mrs. J. H. [Charlotte] Riddell, *A Struggle for Fame*, 3 vols. (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1883), III, 346.

“her solitary studies and the atmosphere of the library so wrought upon her growing mind that in time books became to her the realities of life, and human beings merely the shadows.”⁵⁵ Cosima’s delayed emotional maturity is treated comically, rather than tragically. Her lesser degree of quixotism does not make her a victim; instead, she benignly instrumentalizes others in service of her art. Her acceptance of a proposal has no romantic premise, but is primarily based on the potential benefits of the union in terms of acquiring necessary worldly wisdom (if not emotional experience) for her authorial vocation:

If, however, she were to resolve never to marry until she fell passionately in love, it seemed likely that she would be doomed to remain a spinster all her life, and so lose an experience that must be valuable to any woman, and practically indispensable to a novelist. Of course, it would be unfair to marry a man merely for the sake of gaining “copy,” but there were many other excellent reasons why she should hesitate before refusing Tom’s offer. (*A Writer of Books*, p. 147)⁵⁶

While Cosima initially identifies more with heroines like Lucy Snowe, Elizabeth Bennet, and Maggie Tulliver than with actual people, she eventually forms close friendships with other literary types, and falls in love with another author—while already trapped in the loveless marriage. The plot then becomes more conventionally lugubrious, as Cosima suffers a miscarriage, learns that her husband has been unfaithful to her, separates from him, and declines to pursue a relationship with the man whom she does love. Yet Paston refuses to leave her romantically thwarted heroine lachrymose and passive: “Her love was as true and as strong, though her suffering was considerably less,

⁵⁵ George Paston, *A Writer of Books* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1899), p. 7.

⁵⁶ Cosima adopts a similarly scientific view towards another admirer earlier in the novel: “She felt a sort of maternal solicitude for this apparently well-meaning, weak-minded young animal, mingled with genuine gratitude for the information that he had given her. The uncomfortable bachelor lodgings, the conventional circle of acquaintance, the ‘fooling’ of the other fellows, the agreeable variety, sentiment or sensuality apart, of unchaperoned feminine society—yes, it was all quite natural and comprehensible. She was glad that she had made his acquaintance, even though it were in unceremonious fashion; she had not spent an altogether unproductive evening” (*A Writer of Books*, p. 57).

because, instead of saturating her pillow with useless tears, or consuming her heart in vain regrets, she was already beginning to think seriously about her next book" (*A Writer of Books*, pp. 341–42). Cosima's romantic disappointment enriches her work, and her work is presented as a healthy sublimation of the emotions she is ultimately capable of possessing.

Though female writers still experience emotional identification with literature within the New Woman novels, Victorian critics accused the genre of thwarting the reader's affinity with its protagonists. Riddell's heroine Glenarva "fails to fascinate" the critic James Ashcroft Noble, or provoke in him any sympathy for her troubles; more significantly, his review of the novel does not even include the central character's name, while mentioning various secondary male characters.⁵⁷ *A Writer of Books* was Paston's last novel, though she continued her literary career, mainly as a biographer. *The Academy* complained that Paston herself was too detached from her story, merely using it as a convenient medium to disseminate her political point of view:

... she is not primarily interested in fiction. It happens to be the accepted vehicle for thought, and so she uses it—and uses it very cleverly. But she does not, we think, care for it. . . . What does interest "George Paston" is the question of "woman's rights"—the inequality of women with men before the law and before social custom. The existing condition of affairs, whether right or wrong, arouses—not her indignation, for she is too serene to be actively indignant, but—a certain calm, mordant bitterness of spirit, a bitterness which is coldly resentful against men, and which despises women while it pities them.⁵⁸

Even though the indefinite, generic title of her novel, like *A Struggle for Fame*, seems designed to attract an audience of both genders, Paston's narration is deemed too cold while at the same time too colored by personal grievance in the "contemporary masculine eyes" of the same reviewer; according to him, it sets both men and women at a disdainful distance.

⁵⁷ James Ashcroft Noble, "New Novels," *The Academy*, 24 (1883), 93.

⁵⁸ [Anon.], "Some Younger Reputations: 'George Paston,'" *The Academy*, 55 (1898), 520.

It is ironic, then, that the perception of New Women's writing as too personal prompted an impersonal response. The broader implications of these books—their appeals outside the literary realm for other kinds of enfranchisement—are even now viewed as creating an emotional distance between them and their readers. Kate Flint argues that the “relatively down-beat endings” of the New Woman novels prevent “total identification with the central character,” and instead stimulate the reader's critical understanding of the social, political, and economic factors that forestall the protagonists' fulfillment (*The Woman Reader*, p. 297). Although identification with an unhappy protagonist, like Marian Yule for example, is hardly impossible or even unusual, other critics also claim that the New Woman novels solicit a reader's analysis at the expense of his or her absorption within the narrative. More damningly, Elaine Showalter, echoing the reviewer of Paston quoted above, contends that such “feminist” novels have low canonical status today because they produced “rhetoric,” as opposed to art, and that “all the feminists had but one story to tell, and exhausted themselves in its narration” (*A Literature of Their Own*, pp. 214, 215). Molly Youngkin and Ann L. Ardis have since argued convincingly for the New Women writers as important (if largely unacknowledged) precursors to Modernism in their emphasis on subjective consciousness.⁵⁹ But the figure of the professional New Woman within these novels seems to remain aloof from the sympathetic embrace of her audience inasmuch as she loses or outright rejects marital or familial attachments. Though women writers and readers had been and continued to be pilloried for their excessively emotional response to literature over the course of the nineteenth century, the perceived absence of sufficiently affecting material in New Woman novels still prompts assessments of creative barrenness.

Professional women writers were deemed incapable either of feeling “naturally” feminine identification with literature or of eliciting that type of identification from their readers.

⁵⁹ See Molly Youngkin, *Feminist Realism at the Fin de Siècle: The Influence of the Late-Victorian Woman's Press on the Development of the Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 2007), p. 8; and Ann L. Ardis, *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1990), p. 3.

New Grub Street adheres to this narrative of nullification in the slow withering of Marian Yule's potential for sexual or artistic productivity along with her literary affinities. In *The Odd Women's* Rhoda and her professional circle, Gissing begins to envision the creative possibilities of women's professional detachment, creating an ideal audience of discriminating readers, and perhaps writers, of his brand of realism. Yet as the female authors of New Women novels that portrayed the vagaries of the literary market were charged with the inability to create anything truly new, much less sympathetic, Rhoda and her enterprise became emblematic of the same kind of futility to readers inclined to fit her into the literary pattern of the morbid female professional.

The troubled response to women's possible dissociation from emotional identification with literature, as well as its continuing pervasiveness, indicates the usefulness of the idea of readerly identification in fortifying the boundaries of gender categorization. As women had been defined by their inherent susceptibility, they were pronounced more vulnerable to external conditioning, even to the extent of becoming—paradoxically and pathologically—insusceptible. Perhaps the only escape for female literary professionals from accusations of morbid detachment was the embrace of another kind of detachment: a Modernist detachment from gender itself. Instead of using “Anonymous” as a mask for feminine identity, writers such as Virginia Woolf would explore the idea of femininity as another kind of mask to lay aside at will, or a subject which they could, as true Wildean artists, stand outside of and thus vitally transform. As Woolf explained with heavy irony in her advocacy of a new kind of androgynous voice for women writers in *A Room of One's Own* (1929): “It is fatal for a woman to lay the least stress on any grievance; to plead even with justice any cause; in any way to speak consciously as a woman. And fatal is no figure of speech; for anything written with that conscious bias is doomed to death.”⁶⁰

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⁶⁰ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1929, 1991), p. 114.

ABSTRACT

Marisa Palacios Knox, “‘The Valley of the Shadow of Books’: George Gissing, New Women, and Morbid Literary Detachment” (pp. 92-122)

Victorian consternation about the physiological—especially reproductive—repercussions of women readers’ affective involvement with fiction is well documented. This essay contends, however, that at the fin de siècle a new cultural anxiety developed around the possibility of the woman who under-identifies, that is, refuses or is simply incapable of a stereotypically feminine standard of personal identification with literature. As the number of women entering vocational training as well as higher education increased exponentially in the late nineteenth century, the threat of women’s influx into the workplace expressed itself in a discourse of concern for the vitiation of women’s “natural” responsiveness to reading as a symptom of emotional as well as physical barrenness. George Gissing’s *New Grub Street* (1891) and *The Odd Women* (1893), in addition to the New Women novels of Charlotte Riddell and George Paston, engage with and complicate the idea of professional women’s literary detachment as a kind of morbid pathology, a trope that nevertheless continues to influence the reception of these works.

Keywords: George Gissing; New Women; detachment; professionalization; women readers