

# New Woman Fiction and *Fin de Siècle* Urban Commodity Culture

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The New Woman as a literary representation and journalistic myth has been typically constructed as well-educated, socially privileged upper-middle-class women in the last years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century who radicalized political and social issues like the female suffrage, elimination of inequality in marriage, advocacy of social and moral purity, and expansion of education and employment possibilities for women. New Women fiction is also duly perceived as written by and/or about these New Women, a genre of fiction that highlights the political and social rebelliousness of these radical women. The official christening of the New Woman as a capitalized term is traced to a 1893 article entitled "The Social Standing of the New Woman," published in the women's press *Woman's Herald* (Tusan 170), though a more widely known source takes the form of a May 1895 debate in the pages of *North American Review* between anti-feminist sensation writer Quida [Marie Louise de la Ramée] and New Woman writer Sarah Grand over the importance of the Woman Question. That same month, the politically conservative mass humor magazine *Punch* parodied the debate in cartoon forms and helped catapult the term into the popular imagination as a highly visible though controversial concept that crystallizes many of the conflicting political, moral and cultural attitudes over the woman issue in the *fin de siècle* period. The genesis of the concept also partly explains the crucially constitutive importance of mass media construction and literary representation to the phenomenon of the New Woman, as well as the frequent blurring and conflation between the phenomenon's discursive dimension and its existence as a historical fact. The New Woman thus often refers both to the press and literary New Woman characters featured in fiction and media discussions, and also to the New Women writers, journalists and political activists themselves who write such fiction and articles.

The naming of the New Woman and much of the textual configuration of the New Woman by the periodical press does reflect attempts by the conservative press to ridicule and negate the late 19<sup>th</sup> century women's movement. But the density of such media coverage also forces attention on the woman issue to an extent that has been unprecedented. Feminist writers, journalists and the women's press quickly joined in, many sympathetic to the New Woman and defending her from the masculine press, so that a discursive space and what Sally Ledger, using Foucault, calls a "reverse" discourse is prised open (10). With the popular press in heated discussions over the

New Woman, and more and more New Woman fiction getting published and becoming bestsellers, the New Woman as a phenomenon does become a site saturated with multiple strands of sometimes mutually conflicting positions and issues. If novels published in the 1880s and dealing with the women issue are included, over 100 New Woman novels were published in the 17 years between 1883 and 1900 (Ardis 4). Sarah Grand's *The Heavenly Twin* (1893), for example, ran to six editions in the first year of its publication and sold well over 20,000 copies inside England alone after just one year (Flint 305). The *Westminster Review* wrote in 1895 that "it is not possible to ride by road or rail, to read a review, a magazine or a newspaper, without being continually reminded of the subject which lady-writers love to call the Woman Question. "The Eternal Feminine," the "Revolt of the Daughters," the Woman's Volunteer Movement, Women's Clubs, are significant expressions and effective landmarks" (Sykes 396).

Conservative, masculine press as well as some literary portrayals by male writers tend to parody and ridicule the New Woman who is usually presented as upper-middle-class (thus socially privileged) and disruptive of established gender order (thus politically and socially radical). The critic Juliet Gardiner summarizes the conservative perceptions in the following way:

[The New Woman] eschewed the fripperies of fashion in favor of more masculine dress and severe coiffure. She had probably been educated to a standard unknown to previous generations of women... She was financially independent of father or husband... She affected emancipated habits, like smoking, riding a bicycle, using bold language and taking the omnibus or train unescorted. She belonged to all-female clubs... She sought freedom from, and equality with, men. In the process, she was prepared to overturn all convention and all accepted notions of femininity. (4)

More negative ridicule is evidenced in mass cartoon journals. An 1895 cartoon by *Punch*, for instance, depicts a severely dressed New Woman wearing college ties and smoking a cigarette and discussing books piled high on the table, while the man of the house is forced to the servant's quarter for tea and gossip (qtd. in Ledger 16). Another magazine *Idler* published a cartoon in 1894 captioned "The Man of the Future", which shows a small, tearful man pleading "I *will* be good! Oh, I *will* be good!" to a group of angry women who hurl at him New Women novels like *The Superfluous Woman* and *The Heavenly Twins* (qtd. in Bittel 31). Such discourse, which demonizes the New Woman as the emasculating, gender-binding and anti-nature Shrieking Sisterhood, actually projects onto the New Woman an anxiety and unease that has been accumulating over the decades since the rise of the women's movement in the mid-century. Thus although the New Woman as a phenomenon only arose in the *fin de siècle* period, its popular image has nevertheless inherited stereotypes first forged several decades ago. It also follows that when this paper discusses later the fluidity and multiple dimensions embedded in the concept of the New Woman, a contrast between dimensions that are new to the *fin de siècle* New Woman and earlier traits of the women's movement is also intended.

Such a contrast is actually corroborated by some New Woman writers

themselves. Chris Willis quotes an 1893 popular New Woman novel *Ships that Pass in the Night*, which describes its New Woman heroine, the Girton girl Bernardine, as eagerly objecting to conservative press's stereotypical dismissal of the ugly bluestocking:

The writers who rail against the women of this date are really describing the women of ten years ago. Why, the Girton girl of ten years ago seems a different creation from the Girton girl of today. Yet the latter has been the steady outgrowth of the former...The Girton girl of ten years ago ... was a somber, spectacled person, carelessly and dowdily dressed .. She was probably not lovable; but she deserves to be honored and thankfully remembered. She fought for women's right, ... and I cannot bear to hear her slighted. The fresh-hearted young girl who nowadays plays a good game of tennis, and ... is book learned without being bookish, and ... who does not scorn to take a pride in her looks because she happens to take a pride in her books ... she is what she is by reason of that grave and loveless woman who won the batter for her. (qtd. in Willis 56)

This New Woman character is obviously also socially privileged and of upper-middle-class stock, as Girton, the first female college in Cambridge, is often equated with the birth-place of radical New Women. Other female-penned New Woman literature depicting less socially privileged New Woman characters may paint a less rosy and more gloomy picture of the life awaiting these independent women, but one thing uniting them all is their shared departure from the mannish, aggressive rioters attacked and ridiculed by the conservative press. The New Woman characters these female-penned novels portray are often highly feminine, highly talented though also extremely sensitive and vulnerable, wedged painfully between their restless dissatisfaction with the established gender categories and frustration over the prospects and high costs of change. Reflecting both the impact of tradition and also their desires for change, these women are emphasized for their womanliness which also seems to be demonstrated in their very feminine attitude to fashion and appearance, as is attested to by the above quotation.<sup>1</sup>

Critical scholarship on New Woman literature has traditionally prioritized works on the New Woman written by more canonical male writers. George Meredith, George Gissing and Thomas Hardy are three oft-mentioned and discussed writers (Cunningham, Stubbs).<sup>2</sup> With the rise of feminist scholarship in the 1970s that

<sup>1</sup> *Fin de siècle* New Women seem to embrace fashion in an often studied attempt to distinguish themselves from the earlier, much maligned women's movement activists. The New Woman writer Sarah Grand, for instance, both depicts highly feminine and elegantly attired New Woman characters in her fiction, and also herself embodies that image in many of the press interviews she gives, where she is emphasized as a knowledgeable modern woman of wide interest, including interest in fashion, "her figure set off to the best advantage by the new cycling costume," and "her friends consult[ing] her taste on questions of the toilet with as much confidence as on literary matters" (qtd. in Heilmann 2000b: 212, 237).

<sup>2</sup> The male writer Grant Allen wrote the most notorious and hotly contested New Woman novel

aimed to resurrect women's writings, female writers of New Woman literature were given unprecedented attention.<sup>3</sup> Yet despite the difference in approach to the New Woman phenomenon demonstrated by these male and female writers, the former more satirical and focusing on the New Woman's perceived unconventionality and radicalism, the latter much more sympathetic, often heavily autobiographical and defensively reacting against the mainstream vilification, one thing that seems to unite these more famous literary presentations, with the possible exception of Gissing, is that these New Woman characters are more likely to be of better social and economic positions and are often portrayed in domestic settings. The focus is always on marriage (or the rejection of marriage), free love and domestic issues, and however frustrated or unhappy these New Woman characters are, they are immune from financial worries should they choose to stay estranged from or not to marry a man. The 1890s novels by Hardy and Meredith that feature New Woman characters, notably *Jude the Obscure* (1895) and *Lord Ormont and his Aminta* (1894), prioritize marriage (or anti-marriage) and the New Woman's sexuality.<sup>4</sup> The novels of Sarah Grand, the most famous female New Woman writer, blame the failure of marriage on men, accusing men of sexual double standards and of infecting their wives with venereal disease and thus generally bringing misery and frustration to women

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*The Woman Who Did* in 1895, whose repercussions could still be felt 14 years later in 1909 when H. G. Wells wrote *Ann Veronica* wherein the heroine's father blamed all that press and fictional coverage and the "Women Who Did" on his daughter's restlessness (24). Yet by the time of Wells' work, most New Woman literature had petered out (Richardson and Willis 24). In Allen's novel, the most radical claim staged by the New Woman heroine is her rejection of marriage and insistence on free love. Such emphasis on the New Woman's radical, "unnatural," un-feminine and emasculating qualities characterizes most male-penned mainstream representations of the New Woman. Yet Allen's work is generally seen as of lower literary merit than the more famous male writers like Meredith, Gissing and Hardy,

<sup>3</sup> Yet despite such attention, many feminist literary critics of the 1970s tend to find the female-penned New Woman writings to be lacking in literary merit and not as complex as the male modern writers (Showalter 1977: 215). They all seem to have only one story to tell while exhausting themselves in telling it (*ibid*), and their form is compromised by and buckling under the weight of their feminist rhetoric (Stubbs 132). The New Woman character is also presented as a radicalized political vanguard waging her battles mostly in the upper-class drawing-room or club, the cloistered courts of the women-admitting colleges or the occasional political rallies in the public street.

<sup>4</sup> Hardy, famous for his descriptions of rural and small town life in the fictional Wessex, portrays the New Woman heroine Sue Bridehead in *Jude the Obscure* (1895). Though Sue worked for some time as an art-designer and teacher, she is, as Cunningham points out, less concerned with her career than with marriage and sexuality (110). Hardy himself acknowledged the centrality of the marriage question to the novel, and the contemporary reviewers focused on Sue's sexuality, or her distaste of sex altogether, and called Sue, after Grant Allen's free-love novel *The Woman Who Did*, as the woman who won't. Meredith's 1885 novel *Diana of the Crossways* features an aristocratic feminist, but it is his 1894 novel *Lord Ormont and his Aminta* that shows most clearly the New Woman rhetoric of the 1890s. Meredith's New Woman heroine likewise is shown as torn between different lovers and preaches anti-marriage and free love mostly in domestic settings. See Cunningham 104-26.

(Cunningham 2-3). Yet despite such opposing portrayals, marriage (or anti-marriage), sexuality and domesticity are still the paramount concerns for both these male and female writers.<sup>5</sup> While Grand's descriptions of marriage problems and frustrations do touch the hearts of her mass female readers, her mostly upper-class New Woman characters are still removed from the daily financial worries of her more ordinary, less well-educated and mostly lower-middle-class and middle-class women readers.

This paper seeks to point out that while the issues of marriage and domesticity are indeed crucial ones in the New Women's challenge of inequality and unfairness in the established categories, the phenomenon of the New Woman often presents a more complicated and variegated picture, and its multiple and changing nature reflects the volatile socio-cultural scene of the *fin de siècle*. Apart from marriage and domesticity, another strand of New Woman literature is increasingly concerned with the New Woman and her role as self-supporting worker in the commodified *fin de siècle* city. The New Woman novels by George Gissing, Ella Hepworth Dixon and Amy Levy, three works studied in this paper, belong to this strand. Such New Woman characters are usually less privileged and of lower-middle-class or middle-class origin. They have to work for their own livelihood, often as journalists or popular writers for the newly booming mass market provided by the big cities, and they equate self-supporting work with self-autonomy and female independence. These women thus participate in the urban commodity culture accelerating in the last years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and in their struggles and joys they are close to the heart of the expanding army of ordinary, less politically as conscious, working women who could no longer count on marriage but have to work for their own keep. The trials and hopes of such working and living experiences in the public spaces of the *fin de siècle* city is thus their top concern, a concern that also constitutes the main theme of this other branch of New Woman literature.

Indeed, apart from her more famous challenges of gender inequality, the New Woman is also very much a product of the modern city. Olive Schreiner, a key New Woman writer, has made it clear in her stories, for instance, that London lodgings and a silver cigarette case are the two essential marks of New Womanhood (qtd. in Showalter 1993: xvi), thereby underlining the importance of the urban ambience (particularly that of London) to the New Woman phenomenon. The rise of the New Woman writers and of New Woman literature has benefited from the escalation of urbanization, the spread of compulsory education, the entrance of educated women into the urban public sectors opened up by mass commodity culture, and the disruptions to established social and cultural categories all this has led to. Expanding commodity culture, in fueling the rise of popular journals and the mass market which caters to the growing urban population, has crucially provided a livelihood to many

<sup>5</sup> Though other female New Woman writers like Mona Caird reject marriage, Sarah Grand actually insists on the sanctity of marriage and home, contrary to mainstream perceptions of the New Woman as home-wreckers. Grand also calls for female sexual self-control instead of sexual self-expression and for the repression of unsanctioned desires. This rather conservative politics is seen by later critics as a failure to escape the biases of the race, class and sexual preferences that shape the gender politics she challenges (Mangum 13, 7; Bittle 35), but it also shows the complicated and multi-voiced nature of the New Woman literature. See also Tusan 172.

New Women writers and contributed toward their independence. This close relation to the market and to mass commodity culture is also a distinct trait marking most New Woman literature apart from more canonical literature and explains the often best-seller status of many New Woman texts. As such, the interaction between the New Women and the *fin de siècle* social scene should necessarily exceed a long-held political and moral dimension.<sup>6</sup>

From 1861 to 1901, the number of educated women finding employment in the professions (teachers, clerks and nurses) rose from 106,000 to 429,000. Of the professions, the clerk is a job most unambiguously belonging to the public sphere and used to be held exclusively by men. According to a 1901 census, the number of women employed as clerks in government agencies like the Post Office rose from 6,000 in 1881 to nearly 25,000 in 1901. With the expansion of commodity economy, women clerks employed by private companies also rose to 60,000 by the same year (Richardson and Willis 5). Yet the pay these professional women received was not ample and often not sufficient to maintain health, as is testified to by the findings of the late Victorian female social investigator Clara Collet (141-42). These independent yet struggling women no doubt provide a ready audience for the New Woman literature with its penchant for describing the struggles and longings of modern women. With the New Woman literature's popular nature and wide sales, its frowned-upon "popular" "new" status as opposed to the "classics" (Ardis 4), it is perhaps not very conceivable that such literature should consolidate its often bestseller status and its apparent appeal to the urban female reader upon an exclusion or neglect of the modern urban public space or the daily facts of urban living or, for that matter, the mass commodity culture that daily affects women and has enabled their entrance into the workforce.

In recent scholarship on the New Woman (Ardis, Heilmann 1998, 2000a, 2004, Ledger, Nelson, Vadillo), most attention tends to focus on more established writers like Sarah Grand with her primary concerns for marriage and domesticity. The last few years have witnessed a welcoming increase of critical attention in other, less well-known New Woman works that feature single, less socially privileged New Woman characters working for survival in the modern city (Leggins, Vadillo). While such scholarship sheds new light on the relationship between the New Woman and the modern city, further detailed research is necessary to attain a better understanding of this traditionally neglected yet important subject. This paper seeks to prove that aside from the New Woman's unconventional and radical challenges of established gender categories, a concern she duly replicates and carries on from the women's movements activists of the earlier decades, the *fin de siècle* New Woman has also increasingly come to harbor an image of a modern urban woman struggling for independence and tackling the facts of daily living in the *fin de siècle* city. While many New Woman novels continue to problematize marriage and question its unequal nature, other New

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<sup>6</sup> The women's movement since the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century focused on the political and economic position of women and called for the female suffrage, the expansion of education possibilities for women, and elimination of unfair provision in property and marriage laws which resulted in the passage of the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882. The women activists' moral reform focused on social purification, a higher moral standard for the nation and the salvation of prostitutes. See Richardson and Willis 6-9. See also Bittel 26-7.

Women works already start to move on to a serious exploration of the alternative to marriage and the tribulations as well as comforts entailed by self-supporting employment in a big city. This important shift from marriage to market marks the *fin de siècle* New Woman literature away from earlier feminist representations of the woman issue. The ambience of female struggle has changed, and the place where female autonomy is to be exercised and nourished, often accompanied by pain and frustration, is distinctly the great cities.

This paper also seeks to contribute a fresh argument to this latest scholarship on the New Woman and the modern city. While the shift in focus to the other branch of New Woman literature helps to lead to an increasing blurring of distinction between the New Woman and the mass army of ordinary, not as politically conscious, modern women who are similarly engaged in the day-to-day battle of urban survival, it is the position of this paper that such conflation needs to be adequately explored and explained and not just taken for granted. In most of the more recent critical scholarship, such conflation tends to be treated as natural and unproblematic and the two types of women are often discussed in the same context without much distinction. This paper argues that while such blurring of distinction between the two types of women is indeed increasingly evidenced in many contemporary texts by the last years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, other contrastive representations of the two also abound. The relationship between the New Woman and the ordinary modern women has undergone a process of evolution and is further complicated by elements like the acceleration of modern commodity culture and shifts in feminist tactics that mark the New Woman off from earlier feminists. This complexity warrants sufficient critical awareness and discussion, as it sheds crucial light on the multi-layered and volatile socio-cultural ambience of the *fin de siècle* city.

### **The New Woman and the Male Writer**

This paper uses three New Woman novels as the main texts for analysis, respectively George Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893), Amy Levy's *The Romance of a Shop* (1888) and Ella Hepworth Dixon's *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894). Gissing is chosen because male-penned literature featuring New Woman characters has traditionally constituted the mainstream representation of the New Woman and thus impacts strongly on how the New Woman is perceived, against which female writers often feel the need to offer a contrastive or different representation. A better understanding of the female-penned New Woman literature would not be achieved if the male version is not first analyzed. A second, more important reason is that, as has been mentioned, Gissing is the only major male writer of New Woman literature who features lower-middle-class New Woman characters having to work for their own keep in the public markets of London. This is what warrants his inclusion in this paper's study, for the same reason that warrants the inclusion of the other two female-penned novels.

Gissing has always been known for his naturalism, and his dogged pursuit of accuracy almost to the level of the social investigator, but it is his paramount preoccupation with London and its bustling urban life that is of crucial concern here. Always preoccupied with "how to get into a lifetime the work suggested by this

myriad-voiced London,”<sup>7</sup> Gissing was commended in 1897 by the *National Review* as a writer to whom there is “not a corner of the metropolis which, with observant eye and quick ear, he has not explored, nor a phase of its varied existence that he has not studied”.<sup>8</sup> The new phenomenon of the New Woman and particularly her interaction with the urban scene are thus captured in his so-called “Woman’s Question” works of the 1890s (Harmon 373), most of all in *The Odd Women* (1893). In this novel, generally seen as the most representative male-penned fiction on the New Woman,<sup>9</sup> Gissing carries on the male writers’ concern with the New Woman’s sexuality and her stand on the marriage issue, but, probably reflecting his distinctly urban concern and his sympathy for the lower social strata of London’s population who are deeply embroiled in the daily struggles for life, Gissing also departs from the other male writers in starting to address the issue of the New Woman and urban employment.

This issue is discussed in the novel as part of his more passionate concern with the dilemma and plight of ordinary, lower-middle-class women struggling for survival in the modern city, and the example of the working New Woman is offered both as a contrast and also as a potential alternative. Gissing’s intention is to study the self-supporting, marriage-rejecting New Woman as an intriguing contrast to the many ordinary urban women still hoping for marriage, but his characteristic concern with the urban scene leads to a much more focused account, than most of his male peers, of the New Woman’s interaction with the modern city. Studies on Gissing’s portrayal of the New Woman have traditionally focused on her sexuality and anti-marriage attitude (Cunningham, Ledger). While recent critical attention has increasingly turned to Gissing’s treatment of the modern woman and the city (Liggins, Spiers), and even to his treatment of his women characters (including prostitutes, working-class women and educated female professionals) as individual workers in the urban market, not enough attention has been paid to the specific role of the New Woman herself as urban workers, the economics of her self-supporting work or her relationship with urban commodity culture. Nor has there been sufficient distinction between Gissing’s New Woman and her ordinary sisters in their interaction with the modern city.

Gissing’s stand on women in general is contradictory and he has been called both a misogynist (Linehan 360) and “a woman-worshipping misogynist with an interest in female emancipation” (Grylls 141), however limited that may be. His stand on the New Woman in particular is reflected in his depictions of the two feminists in the novel, Rhoda Nunn and her older, aristocratic companion Mary who together run a feminist vocational school in London and train women with practical skills for

<sup>7</sup> See his letter to Thomas Hardy on 25 July 1887. *Collected Letters*, Vol. 3, 139.

<sup>8</sup> *The National Review*, 30 (1897) 258-66. Quoted in Pierre Coustillas and Colin Partridge. Eds. *George Gissing: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972, 311.

<sup>9</sup> Gissing’s other novels like *In the Year of Jubilee* have sometimes been seen as also featuring the New Woman (Parsons, Harmon), but this paper argues that such female protagonists like Nancy belong to the bulk of modern women who desire less restriction in their personal freedom but are not as politically conscious as the New Women (who are often writers or journalists) nor as well-educated. The social rank of Nancy, the female lead of *In the Year of Jubilee*, is lower and hovers uncertainly between the lower-middle-class lady and the working-class shopgirl. For more on this, see my special issue for *Chung-Wai Literary Monthly* (34.2), 2005, pp.59-66.



financial independence. Echoing much of the mainstream perception, Gissing at first focuses on Rhoda's radicalism, her feminist anti-marriage principle and her call for women to shed their passive, traditional femininity and embrace masculine rationality, determination and independence. Even more radical than most other male-penned works where free love is advocated by the New Woman as an alternative principle to marriage, in Gissing's novel even free love is rejected and found to interfere with Rhoda's feminist work. Rhoda herself is emphasized for her masculine, aggressive qualities (*The Odd Women* 20), "intellectual keenness" (20) and vehement will (51), and almost nun-like, severe suppression of feminine desires "natural" to a young woman in her late 20s. She and Mary form a same-sex companionship and together they teach young ordinary women practical skills for decent employment, lecture regularly on women's emancipation and maintain a circulating library with books on the Woman Question and allied subjects (54). The two women, "fervid prophetess[es] of female emancipation" (50), are "strenuously opposed" to the Ruskinian ideal of docile femininity and advocate instead a model of women who are "militant," "defiant," "hard-hearted," "self-reliant," and "nobly independent," possessed of "intelligence," "honest effort" and "moral strength" (135, 37, 136).

Raising women as "an Invader", Rhoda and Mary believe that "[t]hings are changing for women", that they would try to "have our part in hastening a new order" (59) and to even effect "an armed movement," "an active warfare," "an invasion by women of the spheres which men have always forbidden us to enter" (135, 136). For that purpose they are particularly disdainful of sentimental, irrational qualities traditionally seen as feminine and warn their girl students not to be "enslaved by custom, by their weakness, by their desires" (136). "[S]elf-respect" and "self-restraint" should guide women to refrain from succumbing under "grievous temptation" (56), particularly temptation in the form of amorous relationships with men. Rhoda herself regards marriage as a form of bondage to the detriment of women because it subjugates them to the will and lordship of their husbands, and offers herself as a living example of positive female independence and freedom. When the male protagonist Everard proposes to her a union of intellects and free spirit without the form of marriage, Rhoda is first titillated, and then rejects the offer to emphasize her feminist gospel of independence.

The text's presentation of Rhoda's appearance and her determination to thwart the domination of men by cultivating masculine qualities of will and rationality echoes many press lampoons of the severely dressed, cigar-smoking, man-hating, blue-stocking New Women. The novel, for instance, abounds in descriptions of Rhoda's masculine, business-like and almost sexless appearance. Deliberately suppressing her feminine curves and advantages, Rhoda makes her first appearance in the text dressed in a nun-like black serge gown with white collar and cuffs and walking in strong, brisk, vigorous movements (20-1). When Rhoda is first introduced to her future admirer Everard, she is described to "have endeavored to liken herself to the suggestion of her name [Nunn] by the excessive plainness with which she had arranged her hair;" which makes her "look older," and sits in a "stiff" attitude on an "upright" chair (78). As Rhoda gradually becomes titillated by Everard's courtship, she changes her appearance and her "uniform black" dresses by wearing some "red silk blouse" (178) and arranging her hair in a more feminine fashion. By the end of the novel when she finally decides to reject Everard so as not to interfere with her

feminist work, she again reverts to her old, unflattering hairstyle (323) as if to assert her defiant independence and her disdain of any “feminine” efforts to please men.

It is obvious that the novel sets out to represent the New Woman as a contrast from the ordinary women, the difference spelt out clearly in terms of the New Woman’s radical political consciousness, her masculine determination and even appearance, her activism and work ethic, her sexual and emotional abstinence and principled rejection of unequal marriage. Ordinary women like Monica who relies on marriage and men to save her from destitution are thus shown to be doubly pathetic, helpless and passive. Monica, born of a doctor father but reduced to the menial job of a London shopgirl after his untimely death, marries in haste for purely financial considerations, while her two elder spinster sisters, utterly unable to support themselves in the big city, count on Monica’s marriage to relieve their circumstances. In stark contrast from the workaholic Rhoda who preaches relentlessly the doctrine of hard work, disciplined independence and an almost nun-like abstinence from desires and temptations, the delicate and feminine Monica also enjoys pleasurable and aimless “free wandering about London” (25), taking rides in omnibuses, trains and the Thames steamboat, drinking tea at the popular tea-shops, and generally doing things that seem to have no positive or productive value apart from individual pleasure. Even in her pre-married days when toiling in poverty as a shopgirl, Monica would rather bear the hardship at the shop than become a student in Rhoda’s feminist school which she regards as a “worse form of bondage” (36). Another student, a Miss Royston who has been with the school for some time, also cannot persist in the hard work but drops out after succumbing to the temptation of an easy life as mistress of a married man. Rhoda, of course, has no patience but complete disdain for such feather-headed weakness and refuses to take back the girl later when she is abandoned and ruined. Even the girl’s eventual suicide after Rhoda’s rejection would not dissuade Rhoda from her firm belief that to work for the coming of a “new order”, to raise women’s consciousness and cultivate their disciplined independence demands great but worthy sacrifices.

In such emphasis on the New Woman’s radicalism and distance from ordinary women, Gissing seems to inherit many established popular perceptions of the New Woman’s predecessor, the women’s movement activists of the earlier decades. In the feminist campaigns and rallies for women’s rights and equality since the mid-century, a perception lingers on of their radical idealism, their crusader-like discipline and militancy, and their stigmatization of marriage and often men in general that seems to remove them from the mundane reaches of ordinary life and ordinary women. *Fin de siècle* ideas of the New Woman often carry on this perception; however upon a closer reading, this Gissing novel also delineates dimensions to the New Woman phenomenon that is more particular to and aggravating in the *fin de siècle* period. Women’s movement activists have long called for female independence and autonomy, but while many upper-middle-class New Women’s own independence has been enabled and buttressed by a private income, for most ordinary women, marriage, however confining, still provides the only livelihood. By the *fin de siècle* period with the expansion of mass commodity culture and the creation of more jobs for women, that feminist goal seems to find more sympathy among ordinary women and reaches into wider ranks as viable alternatives to marriage look increasingly likely. Here the New Woman’s call for female independence, motivated by more political and social

concerns, and the ordinary women's desire for less restriction and greater freedom and self-determination, couched in more individually-based terms, seem to converge and expand, and that convergence is made possible by the greatly expanded scopes for employment for women by the *fin de siècle* period. Two strands of ideas about the New woman are thus interwoven into this Gissing novel, one a more generalized call for women's spiritual upraising and for the dismantling of weak femininity, which speaks of earlier, mid-century roots in the women's movement and which is also often lampooned by the conservative mass press as unfeminine, unnatural or disruptive of gender order, and the other a detailed discussion of practical, down-to-earth means of achieving a new means of self-reliance and independence, often through participating in the market and the commodity culture.

This is a distinct dimension that sets Gissing's novel off from many other male-penned New Woman works. Gissing's New Woman character is firmly located in the urban context of London and crucially recognizing the impact of modern market forces. No longer just confined to domesticity and agitating over marriage and sexuality, the New Woman character is shifting her feminist focus to an advocacy of female autonomy through self-supporting work in the modern city. Rhoda in *The Odd Women* may make fervent, idealistic calls for female emancipation and equality, but such idealism is also followed with practical prescriptions entirely predicated upon women's entry into the urban commercial world. That takes the form of learning the know-how and acquiring the funds of opening up small high-street businesses like the bookshop and chemist's, starting a popular magazine, or most commonly equipping oneself for hire in the public commercial world as typists, clerks and bookkeepers (141). Rhoda's feminist school is a vocational training school providing such skills, and it is able to prosper because her students, all non-feminists, are able to support themselves in the city with such skills. Most these women still desire marriage, but as is demonstrated in the case of Monica, increasing awareness of women's rights and particularly of possible self-supporting alternatives to marriage should the latter prove unsuccessful have made women less afraid and more self-assertive and more, as Monica's bitter husband sees it, accepting of a diluted form of feminist ideas (164). When Rhoda and Mary talk about women as the invader, it is specifically women as invaders into the urban, male commercial world that they have in mind. Such public invasion has not been possible in earlier decades, but with the participation of more ordinary women in urban employment by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, their social importance and expanding number do make an impact. Mary has made it clear that her school does not train women for traditional genteel and feminine jobs like governesses or lady's companions, which are still confined to the domestic area and which she regards as actually hampering women's survival on their own in the modern city. In the same way that she and Rhoda help launch their students into the public commodity world, the school itself, located as it is in Great Portland Place in the heart of the West End and containing a houseful of typewriters for students to practice on, looks like "comfortable offices" (54) of a modern business. Though Mary professes not to "look upon her enterprise as a source of pecuniary profit", the fact that it is indeed an enterprise, that it is "more than self-supporting" (55) and has made a profit, does serve to point to its business nature.

The result is that increasingly the New Woman's field of interest converges with that of the ordinary urban women, as both view the urban market as offering daunting

challenges as well as possibilities. This leads to the result that though Gissing sets out to distinguish the two types of women, the novel ends up presenting many links between the two. The New Woman may traverse into overtly political domains, but ultimately, what defines a woman's success and her autonomy in this novel is her independence and success in the market, her ability to financially support herself. As Rhoda's own example demonstrates, even any kind of heterosexual relationship, including the ideal free-love, can be relinquished in favor of independent work at the vocational school. This sacrifice, instead of being interpreted as testifying to the New Woman's sexual frigidity or unnatural abstinence, may actually mean that the New Woman in this Gissing novel has left behind the earlier preoccupation with marriage and sexuality and has instead embraced self-supporting employment as the most important subject for feminist attention and investigation at this stage. Urban work is now the new focus. When Gissing entitles the book *The Odd Women* and includes the New Woman among these odd women with whom there is simply "no making a pair" (37), he initially refers to their inability or refusal to get married. But by this stage, such grouping of the New Woman with the ordinary, single women also seems to refer to their shared need to face the challenge of working for self-independence in the modern city. Admittedly the better-educated and more determined New Woman is more favorably equipped, but the text unwittingly exposes the underlying links between the New Woman and her ordinary sisters.

This is particularly seen in the New Woman character Rhoda. Rhoda herself is not just an idealistic feminist but combines her idealism with shrewd, business skills. She knows enough about the market to be able to give advice to Monica's sisters on the feasibility of starting a kindergarten business. She promises to write for her student's future magazine, and very possibly on feminist topics, but as testified by the bulk of feminist or women-friendly popular magazines of the time, such ideas are often packaged in a way so that the New Woman's agenda on female emancipation is seen as not incongruous to ordinary women's not so politically conscious desire for less restriction on their spatial movement and enlarged possibilities for both employment and leisure. Many New Woman writers contribute both to feminist magazines and more mainstream commercial ones (more later), and the former, itself often borrowing the promotional and vision-oriented skills of the commercial ones, is more enthusiastic than not about allying with modern commodity culture and about what some feminists see as the emancipatory potential of women's participation in commodity culture.<sup>10</sup>

Admittedly, some feminists are also uneasy about the deceptive manipulation of ordinary women by business entrepreneurs. Rhoda, for instance, preaches hard discipline and disdains easy capitulation to desires for all kinds of frivolous pleasures

<sup>10</sup> An example of the feminist magazine of this period is *The Woman Worker*, published by the National Federation of Women Workers. Its first issue published in September 1907 looks familiarly similar to other non-feminist mass women's magazines in that ads and illustrations litter the page. Suffragette slogans like "WOMEN SHOULD VOTE" are arranged in the same eye-catching manner (in boldface and with exclamation marks) alongside ads for Fenning's Children's Powders (British Library, Newspaper Library). For information on differing *fin de siècle* feminist responses to the impact of commodity culture, see Rappaport 82-5, 94, 101, 166.

which the commodity culture often promises to satisfy among its consumers. When she teaches commercial skills and aids the setting up of small businesses, it is more along the line of encouraging women to work and more likely based on a polarity between a privileged work ethic and a despised passivity or weakness for pleasure. But it must also be noted that such businesses the New Woman open or work for depend for their prosperity on the custom of ordinary shoppers and consumers, and in this sense even the pleasure-seeking, “passive” participation by ordinary women as consumers in the commodity culture is indispensable to and of benefit to the feminist agenda as the latter depends on the interaction and mutual promotion between the New Woman and the ordinary women. In this sense, though the novel on the one hand seems to set up a contrast between the New Woman’s focus on hard work and determined self-responsibility on the one hand, and the ordinary women’s lack of determination and easy capitulation to temptation and leisurely consumption, on the other, it also incorporates ideas that reflect the New Woman’s own increasing immersion in the market and the mutually supportive relationship between the New Woman and ordinary women.<sup>11</sup>

Already a difference is discernible between the more traditional New Woman Mary and the more modern and more urban Rhoda. Mary, like most women’s activists of the previous generations, is of upper-class origin and enjoys the privilege of a private income. Mary is mostly shown in domestic settings in the novel and surrounded by the cozy and well-furnished domesticity of her house which her private income makes possible. She rarely travels outside, and though she may advocate for women’s “invasion” into the public masculine realm and for public, political reforms, her feminism is also emphasized for its private, domestic nature. Mary is “no platform woman” and does her feminist work in a quiet way. She gives her talks in her own school to a dozen of her students, and even in terms of ordinary acquaintances, “[o]f society in the common sense Miss Barfoot saw very little” (54), preferring the secluded privacy of a gentlewoman not very dissimilar to traditional feminine domesticity.

By contrast, Rhoda is already showing signs of difference. Coming from middle-class stock whose circumstances suggest a closer affinity with those of Monica and her sisters rather than with the more aristocratic Mary, Rhoda is shown to be more a city girl than Mary. While Mary stays mostly indoors, Rhoda is in charge of all the errands of the school that needs her to take constant trips around London. Not just taking her typing work to her office or from prospective clients, Rhoda is also shown as knowing the city well when she visits friends around the town, follows the unhappy Monica to find out about the latter’s affair, and travels by herself to suburban towns or even farther away to seaside resorts alone.<sup>12</sup> Rhoda’s personal taste may

<sup>11</sup> New cultural studies scholarship has emerged in recent years to address the complicated relationship between feminists and modern commodity culture. See, for instance, Rappaport. This study tries to bring this subject to bear upon Gissing’s novels and to explore how this issue is given its literary representation.

<sup>12</sup> Sally Ledger has argued that Monica is more streetwise and mobile around London streets than the mostly domestically bound Rhoda, and that Gissing’s work “wishes to contain the New Woman” and “refus[es] to articulate her presence in the public spaces of the city” (168). But this paper seeks to point out that though the novel does not as often depict Rhoda’s

reflect a traditional, nostalgic preference for the country and for a rustic, slow-paced, pre-commercial way of life, but she leaves no doubt that it is London, with its unprecedented opportunities and freedom, that proves the magnetic destination for her as a professional and as a feminist. Just as the more pleasure-seeking Monica left her small town for London not just because she was tired of the “dull country life” and was drawn by the thrill and excitement of London’s “shops and the people”(73), but also because she was “obliged to conduct herself” with “extreme discretion” in the country (31) while London by contrast affords her greater freedom, the New Woman Rhoda also left her small town home first for the provincial city of Bath to work in a department store and then soon after to London to work in an office—“It was a move towards London, and I couldn’t rest till I had come the whole way” (22). It is definitely in the city and not in the country that is to be located greater possibilities for women. And when the New Woman like Rhoda advocates female emancipation, it is beyond doubt a type of emancipation located in and contributed to by the distinctly urban ambience of bigger cities at a time of accelerated commercial development.

Rhoda as the New Woman not just possesses a distinct urban identity, but her own previous experience as a clerk and bookkeeper and her closer affinity with Monica and her destitute sisters suggest that by the *fin de siècle* period, the line between the New Woman and the bulk of ordinary women may not be that clearly demarcated. The novel may focus on Rhoda’s strength and her determination, but her similar past suggests that she herself must have gone through the same physical hardships and mental uncertainties and fears that Monica and her sisters are going through in order to get a foothold in the modern city. At the same time Rhoda has also been drawn to the big city because of similar anticipation of greater freedom and less restriction. The New Woman who has to work for her own keep finds herself increasingly interacting and in sympathy with her ordinary sisters. And this seems to have led to a subtle shift whereby the formerly emphatic political and social focus of the women’s movement is now adjusted toward a broader agenda that sees opportunities for political appropriations in the escalation of urban commodity culture. This is certainly an important dimension in the *fin de siècle* New Woman phenomenon that adds complications to an earlier, more monotonous image of the politically and socially radical women’s movement activists.

### The New Woman and Female Writers

Male writings on the New Woman have traditionally constituted the mainstream

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mobility than Monica’s, there is already a difference in the presentations of the two New Women whereby the younger Rhoda, with her ex-shopgirl status and work experience in shops and offices in the past and as *de facto* business manager of the vocational school at present, is more streetwise. While the novel may give less space depicting Rhoda’s mobility than Monica’s streetwalking which so irritates and threatens her conservative husband, it may well be that the New Woman Rhoda’s freedom to roam the streets of her own as a single, unattached woman is taken more for granted and resigned to by men. Anyway her darting between Great Portland Street, Herne Hill, Mrs Cosgrove’s residence and Milly Besper’s lodgings when she tries to find out about Monica demonstrates her easy familiarity with the London streets.

representation of the New Woman, against which female writers in their “reverse” discourse often have to take up a defensive tone, highlighting qualities in the New Woman that deliberately depart from male representations. As has been mentioned, while many famous female-penned New Woman novels still revolve around marriage and sexuality, another branch of New Woman fiction has started to feature less socially privileged New Woman characters who are of genteel birth but are forced to struggle for economic survival in the modern city after disruptions to traditional class affiliations, often caused by expanding commodity culture, lead to drastic changes in their family circumstances. This type of writings thus necessarily revolves around the New Woman’s interaction with the modern city and urban work, and Amy Levy’s *The Romance of the Shop* and Ella Hepworth Dixon’s *The Story of a Modern Woman*, both bestsellers in their time, provide two female-penned examples.

Though both dealing with the same theme of the New Woman and urban work, the two female-penned novels also demonstrate tangible differences from Gissing’s novel. As has been pointed out, Gissing’s work sets out to portray the New Woman as distinct from her ordinary sisters. Though the text may eventually turn out to imply inherent links between the two types of women, Gissing’s presentation suggests that the New Woman, once she takes up feminist teachings and work, is much more assured in her financial prospects. All the bitter struggles and mental fears and frustrations that accompany urban survival on one’s own seem to be confined to only ordinary women like Monica (before her marriage) and her sisters. Rhoda as the New Woman is instead always shown as confident and steadfast once she joins Mary and leaves her early days behind. Her only worries and agitations are over her emotional entanglement with her lover as she fights to repress her feelings and reject his love. This leads to a rather optimistic picture of the working and living experience of the New Woman in the big city, against which the much more realistic portrayals of the heart-rending, day-to-day hardships of the Madden sisters are offered as a contrast. It is in this respect that the two female-penned novels show a marked departure. Indeed, the two heavily autobiographical novels by Levy and Dixon give a much more realistic and nuanced picture of the stark basics of the life of a New Woman working to survive in the big city. The New Woman characters still have progressive feminist ideas on gender and other social issues, but more space is devoted to the realistic details of their day-to-day urban struggle. Here the New Woman, despite her better education and feminist consciousness, are shown as not really transcendent of the struggles and bitter frustrations mirroring most ordinary, non-feminist women. The line between the two types of women is even more blurred, and the struggles, fears and joys of the New Woman as members of the ever expanding army of urban women employees are closer to the hearts of the bulk of the mass female readers.

Perhaps because of this affinity, these New Woman works often adopt a complicated, nuanced approach to the situation of working women in the modern city. While Gissing’s New Woman more optimistically predicts an emancipated future for modern women if they have the right skills and consciousness, in the female-penned works, emotions are more mixed. The greater, unprecedented freedom brought by women’s entrance into the urban public realm is indeed positively appreciated and advocated as necessary for female autonomy, but these works are also weighed down with frustration and even bitterness over the hardness of the struggle and the loneliness plaguing the female characters. Two traits seem thus to characterize such

New Woman writings. One is that these New Woman characters, all emphasized to be highly feminine and thus different from the mannish, determined women in Gissing's and other male writers' works, view self-supporting employment and urban survival in the *fin de siècle* market economy as beneficial to female autonomy and feminist consciousness-raising. Second is that this appreciation is also combined with a heavy sense of frustration and pain wherein such work is recognized as offering no easy solution but is instead costly and fraught with weighty problems.

Amy Levy's novel *The Romance of the Shop* features such a New Woman character Gertrude whose unconventionality rests less with her explicit political or sexual radicalism than with her rejection of traditional marriage for independent survival in London through self-supporting work and employment. Critics have commented on Gertrude's attempt at being a female writer as typical of the heroines of most New Woman novels (Parsons 92-3; Vadillo 213-18). Gertrude and her three single sisters are forced to sell their comfortable suburban house after the sudden death of their father. Rejecting their aunt's and uncle's offer to find them suitable husbands or to accommodate them as poor relatives, the sisters decide to try their hand at business by moving from the suburbs right to the heart of the London city center and using their last funds to open a photography shop in Upper Baker Street. Gertrude is not avowedly anti-marriage nor does she attend politically or socially radical activities; rather, she comes across as intensely feminine and much adorned with feminine virtues and attractions. Still, she is vocally critical of traditional expectations of genteel, dependent womanhood and has resolutely taken the lead in persuading her sisters to opt for a life of independence, even if this means economic uncertainty and a loss of caste and social standing.

Here the intertwining of the class and gender dimensions is especially poignant. The sisters' rich aunt is scandalized that her dead sister's daughters should go into business as single women, thus damaging their marital "prospects" (35). More than just the usual snobbish contempt for business is involved here but rather the dangerous association between business, women and female "publicity", and the resultant disruption of the middle-class gender boundary of the separate spheres. To the aunt, to go into business is "dangerous and unwomanly," for it entails not just the "loss of caste, damage to prospects—vague and delicate possession of the female sex", but more importantly "complicated evils which must necessarily arise from an undertaking so completely devoid of chaperons." (35) It is the undeclared but much troubling threat of female sexual depravity that is worrying the sisters' aunt, a threat perceived as directly resultant from women's "unchaperoned" public exposure as shop-keepers and workers in London's city center.

Levy portrays Gertrude as "intensely modern" (15), to be contrasted with her old-fashioned aunt and family. But with her otherwise traditional background, Gertrude's most distinct "modernness" and difference seems to reside mainly in her contrasting approaches to commodity culture and the public spaces of the city. Instead of viewing their entry into commodity culture as humiliating and socially degrading, Gertrude welcomes the greatly enlarged liberty brought by the change. She has defiantly declared themselves as no longer "anachronis[ti]c" young ladies who "played the harp, wore ringlets, and went into hysterics" (15), and remarks that to feel scandalized, as their snobbish aunt does, by the thought of opening a shop is "behind the age," for it is now thought as "quite distinguished," and that "Girton students



make bonnets, and are thought none the worse of for doing so" (13). Gertrude presents modern commodity culture as beneficial to the future of women's work because it is "progressive," "a creature capable of growth," the "very qualities which women's work is dreadfully lacking" (14). She is passionately disgusted with the "dull little ways by which women, ladies, are generally reduced to earning their living." These to Gertrude comprise traditional jobs of respectable domesticity like teachers or companions which the sisters are actually urged to become by relatives. In contrast with these, to go "public" and participate in modern business promises greater freedom and opportunities for personal growth, and therefore a much more viable means of acquiring female independence.

Half-way into their working experience and much sobered from her initial, rather romantic expectations of the future as "an undiscovered country of purple mists and boundless possibilities (33), Gertrude still cherish the greater freedom as well as responsibilities their changed circumstances bring. No longer cushioned and protected with expensive carriages, the sisters prove themselves able navigators of the busy streets of London. At Baker Street Station, Gertrude parts from her younger sister Phyllis, who disappears to the underground railway for a different errand, while Gertrude herself mounts boldly to the top of an Atlas omnibus, determined not "to be shut up away from the sunlight and the streets." (43) Indeed, for Gertrude,

[T]he humors of the town had always possessed a curious fascination. She contemplated the familiar London pageant with an interest that had something of passion in it; and, for her part, was never inclined to quarrel with the fate which had transported her from the comparative tameness of Campden Hill to regions where the pulses of the great city could be felt distinctly as they beat and throbbled. (43)

Yet although business and work in the public urban space is seen by Gertrude as contributing to female independence and the greater opportunities and freedom entailed much appreciated, the novel still makes it clear that such new exposure carries great risks and often exacts painful prices. Passages abound in the novel where the sisters are often gnawed by the awareness of the huge risks their gamble is exposing them to, and of the threat of economic destitution if the shop does not take off. It is in these passages, perhaps more than in the euphoric passages where the emancipating dimensions of self-supporting urban life are eulogized, that the reader gets to understand the realistic details of the life of the working New Woman, and of what it means when, grand ideals aside, only seeming trifles, small incidents or an expected order that fails to materialize, are needed to throw the New Woman over the brink and threaten not only her independence but even her very survival.

In *The Romance of the Shop*, worries about uncertain prospects, about the pressing need to make ends meet on a daily basis and to keep up with the latest fashion so as not to lose business, constantly plague these inexperienced, naïve girls who are also beset with loneliness and helplessness now that they are all on their own in the big city. Fanny, the oldest of the sisters and most decorated with traditional, feather-headed femininity, is simply frightened and resorts to constant crying. Even the strong Gertrude is often awake at night, shaken and sick at heart by the grosser

realities of life and aware that “only a plank” lies “between them and the pitiless, fathomless, ocean” “into whose boiling depths hundreds sank daily and disappeared, never to rise again.” (60) Life as self-supporting working women in the big city also brings greater risks, not just financial but also moral and sexual. The sexual danger that the sisters’ aunt only hints at does become a reality when the youngest and prettiest sister Phyllis tries to elope with a rich, amoral, married artist and dies of shock and consumption later.

Such worries, fears and anxieties associated with the very daily survival in the big city aligns the New Woman character closer with their ordinary, non-feminist urban sisters. By joining the expanding ranks of urban working women, Gertrude as the New Woman is forced to confront the real facts of life and thus better equipped to tap into and speak for the misery and longings of their fellow sisters. This means that in the *fin de siècle* culture, the term New Woman as described in such female-penned writings increasingly conjures up or is at least closely associated with, rather than distinguished from, an army of unattached, independent, “odd” women who are united in their struggling, day-to-day navigation of the commodified city. While the New Woman like Gertrude may sublimate this everyday experience into eloquent calls for greater female autonomy and more demolition of unfair restrictions, and her more ordinary sisters are less eloquent but equally desirous of change, both the two types of women face shared struggles and both locate conflicting dimensions in the market economy of the *fin de siècle* city – while the city offers to women broader scopes and possibilities as alternatives to traditional dependent domesticity, it also exacts painful costs and is often impersonal and inhospitable.<sup>13</sup>

This is further seen in another bestselling New Woman novel of the *fin de siècle* period, Ella Hepworth Dixon’s *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894). Heavily autobiographical like most other female-penned New Woman literature<sup>14</sup>, this novel features the New Woman Mary who is left on her own after her famous scholar-father (in Dixon’s case, a famous editor father) suddenly dies. Forced to put off her engagement now that she is poor and has also to support her younger brother, Mary first tries to learn painting at the Royal Academy in London but then finds writing and journalism to be the only livelihood she is capable of. Living almost from hand to mouth, and always pressed to come up with the next article in order to have a roof over her head, Mary suffers from ill health and tense nerves, and is gnawed with bitter disillusionment when the lover she waits for finally marries a rich, vulgar girl. The novel is littered with passages crying out with helpless loneliness, bitterness and even pessimism over the lot of women. As Dixon herself claims in her autobiography, the novel is “a somewhat gloomy study of the struggles of a girl alone in the world and earning her own living” (qtd. in Farmer 22).

After sustaining physical and psychological pains as a self-supporting woman, Mary goes to see her doctor who warns her that urban living is hurting her health and nerves. “You live too much in London. There is too much strain on your nervous system.” (Dixon 143) The gloomy tone of these passages suggests deep suspicions

<sup>13</sup> Levy’s work is preoccupied with the loneliness and struggles of such female urban experience, and her own life testifies to the painful costs of such struggles. For more on this and on Levy eventual suicide, see Vadillo.

<sup>14</sup> For more, see Felbeaume’s biography of Dixon.

over the heavy costs of independence and a hinted nostalgia for a past life of well-cushioned protection. Indeed, the vast, foggy and wet London, with its “clatter and roar of the street” (107), its “hundreds of acquaintance and but few intimate friends” (69), exacts a huge price from single women struggling to stand on their feet.

Yet despite the brooding tone of the novel, it must be noted that the novel does not simply advocate a return to traditional domesticity through marriage. Mary may patiently hope for marriage with her lover and is bitterly disappointed when he marries another, but that does not mean that she is ready to accept any marriage just so that she may be relieved of the need to struggle for her own living. Critics like Sally Ledger have argued that Mary lives alone by necessity rather than by choice, that she cannot rather than would not marry, and that she actually dreams of conventional marriage in the suburbs (Ledger 1997: 16). But this paper argues differently. As is shown by the novel, a fellow student in her Royal Academy days becomes immensely successful as a professional painter and does ask Mary to marry him when she goes to interview him for a journal article. As he puts it, he would really like to “have saved her from the struggle of the woman who works, the fret and the fever, the dreary fight for existence” (Dixon 136) That Mary should reject him, and the “undisturbed possession” of his name and fortune, the comfortable “Venetian drawing-room,” the “amber and gold dining-room,” the “Japanese boudoir on the first floor,” while she is embarrassingly conscious of her own damp boots and dripping waterproof on his “polished parquet floor and eastern rugs,” all sharp reminder that her misery and hardship would be simply behind her and easy life within her grasp if she would just say yes, means that Mary could only accept marriage with real love, and that she would rather choose independence and self-autonomy, however hard it may be, than a traditional meal-ticket marriage.

Herein lies one of the many signs in the novel that suggests the simultaneity of both traditional and modern qualities in Mary as the New Woman. Rather than the man-hating radical much maligned in conservative constructions, Mary keenly desires marriage with the man she loves and is long suffering and self-sacrificial in order to wait for her true love, an image that quite befits traditional expectations of femininity. At the same time Mary is fully aware of and dissatisfied with the degradation and hypocrisy of her lover and of the many marriage and gender relations she observes around her. The New Woman is thus stranded in a painful situation, as she is pulled in contrasting directions by her desires for love and protection and her need to maintain integrity, self-respect and autonomy. Inasmuch as the *fin de siècle* urban commodity culture offers an alternative to marriage and a means of making the second desire possible, the novel makes a study of the two dominant forces of marriage and market, and the final result obviously tips toward market and female independence.

Indeed a closer look at the novel reveals that working for one’s own livelihood in the big city, after all sides are weighed, is still a more preferable path to women like Mary. When the doctor warns Mary to leave the city in order to regain health, he points to an idealized picture of a “happily married” life in the countryside, “with no mental worries,” as the life “all you young ladies” should be leading, and blames “our boasted civilization” for making modern life “unnatural,” “wrong,” and especially “[n]ot fit for girls” (144). The doctor may seemingly advise against city life and for more open air for all people, but here the implication that women especially are unsuitable for the city, that they are inordinately susceptible to stress, stimulation and

“ideas” (144), and that they tend to suffer more from nervous diseases if not kept away, suggests that to men like the doctor, himself a successful professional in London, the disruption on gendered separate spheres brought by modern urban civilization and the widespread entrance of women into the urban public space of work and employment is highly undesirable. Considering the fact that women’s movement activists are campaigning against evils in marriage and against the stress and pain brought on women from domineering, syphilitic husbands, and that in the novel the two marriages portrayed turn out to be both highly stressful, with Mary’s lover unhappy with his rich wife and seeking comfort in debauchery, and Mary’s best friend Alison dead from contracting pneumonia from her fiancé’s abandoned-lover-turned-prostitute, the idolization of marriage as a life of bliss with “no mental worries” by the doctor in order to admonish Mary against urban work turns out to be highly ironic.

Mary may feel chronic fatigue and constant stress (a lot of it from her miseries in love), but strangely life outside London does not seem to agree with her. The only time in her life when she left London for a year in a small, quiet, simple German town, she actually got extremely ill and nearly died. And while the novel does often portray the dreary fogginess of London, the more gloomy words are reserved for the interior or indoor scenes while the outdoor scene of London and its busy, thronging streets are often also remarked for their exciting allure. Mary’s cramped, shabby apartment where she is stuck trying to beat the editor’s deadline feels suffocating, but even in upper-class drawing-rooms with their luxurious decorations and expensively-attired guests, places that Mary has to frequent in order to write gossip columns for mass journals, a similar sense of suffocation and dreariness hangs. This would be the kind of place that Mary, if she marries before her father’s death or accepts her painter friend, would also be living in as a hostess and treasured guest. That suggests that while Mary’s poor life as a self-supporting woman as evidenced by her mean living quarters may be miserable, domestic life as an upper-class married woman is as mentally shackled.

In contrast from this shared suffocation of the indoor life, the novel’s outdoor scenes describing Mary’s walks on the street and her visits to the journal offices for work and pay offer a different sense of openness and anticipation, of movement rather than stasis, and of always changing scenes and varying possibilities. The streets of London may be noisy and impersonal; “[a]n ever-moving procession of people poured like a torrent up and down the street; journalists, country folk, office boys actors, betting men, loafers—all the curious, shifting world of the Strand was jogging elbows on the pavement,” but Mary “stepped along with a certain sense of adventure” (104). At the funeral of her father after Mary leaves her house, with its “narrow London staircase,” the “strange, unmistakable odor of death, mixed with the voluptuous scent of waxen hot-house flowers” (45), she and her young brother climb the high ground of the cemetery and look down at the huge panorama of London spread out beneath her. Though the buildings look murky, Mary feels a sense of courage and hope and even great love for the huge city:

“Jim,” said the girl suddenly, taking the boy by the arm, “there’s London! We’re going to make it listen to us, you and I. We’re not going to be afraid of it—just because it’s big, and brutal, and

strong.” (48)

This may be the optimistic words of an inexperienced girl at the beginning of her independent life, but it does speak volumes about Mary's deep feeling, even admiration, for the biggest city in the world. It is particularly the “shrill whistle of an engine”, which “spoke of the bustle of journeys, of the turmoil of railway stations, of partings, of arrivals, of the change and travails of human life, of the strangers who come, of the failures who must go” (ibid) that evokes the above words and feelings from Mary. With the death of her father and loss of financial support, the sight of London seems to offer her fresh hope that new ways may always be found, and that London, of all places, best epitomizes life itself, with its constant comings and goings, successes and failures, but never lacking in new beginnings and fresh starts. Indeed London does in the end provide her with a new way of supporting herself as well as the expensive Oxford education of her brother in the form of working as a journalist for a popular weekly. Mary earns 2 guineas for the first time in her life after selling a story to the magazine and is excited by the commercial possibilities of the mass media:

And what lots of papers there were. Fleet Street was full of them. They lurked up alleys and in quaint little squares at the back. Here they were: The Daily Telegram, The Observer, The graphic, Black and Hite. Why should she not walk in and demand some work to do? The idea was fearfully alluring. She passed a poster of Illustrations, with the name of her story in bright blue print, and Mary stood still and read it over and over again with a quickened pulse, until she was pushed aside by the tide of human beings eddying along the street. (110)

Though later on Mary is dismayed by the way her writing is treated as a commodity and by the many compromises she has to make to cater to the market, this still suggests that the *fin de siecle* city, however harsh and inhospitable, does harbor wider opportunities for single women than anything available in the past.

Some critics have argued that Mary's aristocratic friend Alison is more of a typical New Woman than Mary, because of Alison's assured upper-class position and her more politically conscious social work as a philanthropist and volunteer worker in London's East End slum areas (Flint x; Ledger 160). But this paper seeks to point out that while Alison does fit a more conventional image of the New Woman, Mary's character represents a new addition that is increasingly evident in the *fin de siecle* period. Apart from the fact that she takes up writing, a profession that almost all *fin de siecle* New Women share but which is not available to feminist activists of the previous generations (nor to Alison in the novel), and the fact that she would rather forgo love and dependency in order to insist on her own self and work out her own destiny, Mary's character also demonstrates the increasing trend among *fin de siecle* New Women to identify and bond with ordinary modern women for whom positive social values are to be found as much in their struggles for self-supporting urban survival as in political activities. When the novel was first published in 1894, reviews proved wide-ranging and contradictory. Some reviews attacked its feminist platform,

finding it too radical, while others noticed that the “heroine has little in common with the self-assertive, heartless, sexless thing whom various writers have...almost tempted the public to regard as the typical modern woman” (qtd. in Bittel 223), remarking on its distance from the conventional image of the radical New Woman. This paper argues that such responses, rather than disqualifying Mary, actually prove that she is not the New Woman of conventional construction and may represent a new image of the New Woman that is in closer sympathy with, rather than radicalized alienation from, the bulk of ordinary women.

Mary’s affinity to the more ordinary women is seen in her marked womanliness, her patience and self sacrifices, and her very feminine attention to her appearance and clothes. Even in her straitened circumstances, she does not hide her infectious pride and pleasure in the one little white silk dress she is able to save so that she could wear it and look “radiant” for the society events she frequents as a journalist of gossip columns (Dixon 138). The delight she takes in her pretty appearance and her lament over its vulnerability to tear and wear speaks to the heart of any ordinary female reader. Even Alison, the more politically active New Woman social purifier, is described to attract people with her “intense womanliness” and exquisite softness. As if intentionally seeking to rebuke the conservative stereotype of the mannish New Woman, the novel dwells over Alison’s “sweetness,” her beautiful clothes which “always seemed to suit her as its feathers do a bird,” and particularly stresses the fact that she “never smoked,” does not know anything about guns, hunting or the billiard room or any other masculine habits, and “hated playing the man” (69, 70).

That the New Woman is increasingly merged with the ordinary women is further seen in the book’s emphasis on shared dilemmas and on a sense of solidarity between the New Woman and her ordinary sisters. Mary rejects a conventional meal-ticket marriage, but she would not allow her desire for true love to override her principles, either, when years later she refuses to elope with the unhappily married lover to the Continent. Interestingly, it is not conventional morality that Mary is worried about disrupting. “It isn’t that I mind what people would say – that’s nothing.” Instead, she refuses out of a sense of solidarity with the lover’s wife. “All we modern women mean to help each other now. We have a bad enough time as it is, surely we needn’t make it worse by our own acts.” (Dixon 184) Critics like Bittel and Kranidis have remarked that the *fin de siècle* New Woman tends to increasingly differ politically from mid-century women’s movement activists in her “new identification with the ‘masses’” (Bittel 28), particularly her sense of solidarity with her fellow women. Indeed, 19<sup>th</sup> century women’s movement has always based its feminism in bourgeois individualism, but increasingly late century feminist terms couching women’s protests parallel the “socialist political working model of the oppressor versus the oppressed” (Kranidis 18), whereby the destiny and struggles of the New Woman and her ordinary sisters are yoked together. All the four women characters in the novel, for instance, are linked together in shared misery and oppression despite huge class differences. Alison may view her own privileged life as free from the unfair lot of poor women who are forced to be “dependent” on men (Dixon 71), but her bond with her fiancée’s shopgirl-lover-turned prostitute is obvious, as both are cheated by the same man and both die from pneumonia. Even Mary is hinted at running the risk of ending up like the prostitute if she relinquishes her own self and becomes her lover’s “little girl.” And Mary refuses to hurt the wife of her lover, however vulgar that woman is, out of

a sense of female solidarity and of sympathy with women's unfair subjugation. At her deathbed, Alison says to Mary: "If women only used their power in the right way! If we were only united we could lead the world. But we're not. (164)" In answer Mary replies: "our time is dawning---at last. All we modern women are going to help each other, not to hinder. And there's a great deal to do---. (164)"

This last message is what the author Ella Hepworth Dixon would later call the "keynote of the book," for the book is her "plea for a kind of moral and social trades-unionism among women."<sup>15</sup> Indeed, when the New Woman Mary is faced with the choice of comfortable, loving dependency and lonely, harsh self-autonomy, the latter, however hard, still wins out. For Mary, the decision not to make the former, easier choice is motivated by a refusal not just to compromise her own independence and selfhood, but also not to hurt another woman with whom the New Woman feels a moral sense of bond and solidarity. The novel ends with Mary still plodding along in her urban struggle, alone, emotionally battered but still carrying on, one member of an increasing army of struggling urban women.

### Conclusion

The above analysis has demonstrated that the New Woman characters in many female-penned New Woman literature tend to increasingly share an affinity with the ordinary urban women in the *fin de siècle* city, that they are intensely feminine rather than masculine, and that though they desire change and are unsatisfied with the *status quo*, they do not simply seek change through political or social agitation but increasingly through personal struggles in everyday experiences where they often view self-supporting work, however hard it may be, as essential for female autonomy. The broadened scope offered to women by urban commodity culture is abundantly recognized in these New Woman works, but the accompanying high costs of independence, the risks and emotional fluctuations women on their own face in the big cities are also candidly exposed.

A comparison with the male-penned New Woman writings demonstrates that this image is significantly different in that the latter tends to emphasize on the New Woman's anti-marriage, even man-hating principles, her vanguardism and distance from the bulk of ordinary women, and her radical agitation in political and social issues. Even in Gissing's work, where he departs from his male peers by also describing her interaction with the modern city and with the market economy, an inherent distinction between the New Woman and her ordinary, non-political sisters is embedded whereby the New Woman is seen as largely free from the real problems and worries of the ordinary working women. By contrast, the New Woman writings by some female authors that also focus on the New Woman and modern city present a much more realistic and complicated picture, wherein the New Woman is presented as increasingly merging with her ordinary sisters. The acceleration of modern urban commodity culture, the increased possibilities brought to women in terms of

<sup>15</sup>. This statement appears in "The Book of the Month: The Novel of the Modern Woman," a review by W. T. Stead for *Review of Reviews* 10 (1894): 64-74. In her 1930 autobiography Dixon credits Stead's essay for much of her novel's success. See footnote 1 to Steve Farmer's "Introduction" to the 2004 edition of *The Story of a Modern Woman*, p.10.

employment and education, and the subtle shift in the tactics of *fin de siècle* feminists that seeks to broaden their scope of engagement to the cultural and everyday level of women's urban experience, all contribute, as has been demonstrated above, to the new emphasis on the New Woman's increasing alliance with the ordinary urban women and on their shared tackling with issues of daily urban struggle. The result is that a complicated and nuanced picture of the New Woman is presented, one that serves as testimony and witness as the New Woman negotiates the volatile, fast-changing *fin de siècle* urban scene in an ongoing, restless and often painful process of self exploration and self modification.

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陳音頤。〈軌馬路、消費景觀和女性的現代市景：吉辛筆下世紀之交的倫敦城市小說〉。《中外文學》。32卷1期2003。71-108頁。

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### Abstract

The New Woman has been traditionally constructed as a more or less homogenized image of a radicalized, privileged figure with heightened political consciousness whose vanguardism is predicated upon her distance from the bulk of ordinary, non-political and less well-educated women. This paper argues that a contrastive, multi-layered and complicated image of the New Woman is presented in many female-penned New Woman writings of the *fin de siècle* period, writings that seek to de-radicalize the New Woman, to emphasize her femininity and her embodiment of both tradition and change, and to stress her convergence with ordinary modern women by casting her in the light of a representative urban woman struggling for livelihood and independence in the commodified *fin de siècle* city, where both broadened scopes and heightened dangers are recognized and candidly portrayed. This convergence reflects the impact of accelerated urban modernity but is also the result of shifts in feminist tactics, a situation that deserves detailed analysis.

**Key words:** New Woman, Modern London Literature, George Gissing, Ella Hepworth Dixon, Amy Levy

### 摘要

「新女性」傳統上被塑照成具有高漲政治意識、主張極端社會改變、及享有社經特權的色彩鮮明的形象，其前衛形象也是建立在超越及區分於大部分普通中下層女性的基礎之上，本文則試圖指出，新女性形象其實相當多面及錯綜，在許多世紀末新女性作家筆下的新女性，是以去極端化、強調其女性氣質和傳統美德、強調其和普通中下階層女性日益合一的形象出現，尤其新女性作為在現代商品化都市里必須自立生存和工作的獨立奮鬥女性形象，更是濃縮及代表了普通女性進入

現代城市空間所面臨機會和危險並存的錯綜經歷。這種合一性，展現出世紀末都市現代性加速發展的外在影響，也體現女性主義策略的調整位移，值得深入探討。

關鍵詞：新女性、現代倫敦文學、吉辛、愛拉狄克森、艾美列薇

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