

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

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

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**Abstract**

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

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

The New Woman sought partnership and fellowship with a suitable male who valued her companionship - one who was enlightened or who

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

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## Introduction

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

To many men and women of the 1890s, whether traditional or avowedly radical, it sometimes seemed as if the New Woman was an entity in and of herself. It appeared to some as if she burst into existence sexually aware, Aphrodite from the sea foam. She demanded her freedom from the burden of what she claimed were unnatural and oppressive Victorian laws, ideals and conventions. Those who feared her envisioned her tearing off her corset as she insisted on rational dress. That supposed femme fatale whom Victorian mothers had warned their daughters never to become, rejected marriage, and some asserted that in so doing she threatened the entire fabric of reputable society. Articles with titles such as "The Revolt of the Daughters" suggest the fear of rebellion. Critics of The New Woman often considered her an unfit mother who perpetuated the degeneracy that was reputedly dooming the human race. These same critics did not understand why she did not accept her role and responsibility as dutiful daughter and obedient wife. When told to suffer and be still she writhed and resisted. She became the prototype for the hysterical woman, a being most feared. Hugh

E.M. Stutfield warned in his article entitled “Tommyrotics” in 1895, “Society[’s] ... most dangerous and subtle foes are beyond question ‘neurotics’ and hysteria in their manifold forms” (234). She was the predecessor for what would be considered the sexual deviant who would follow at the beginning of the twentieth century, the supposed ‘pathological’ lesbian. “In the guise of a bicycling, cigarette-smoking Amazon”, Angelique Richardson and Chris Willis, identify the New Woman as “a cultural icon of the *fin de siècle*” (12).

The New Woman was an awe-inspiring figure both to her critics and her admirers. Her critics’ disgust was rooted primarily in their own fears and taboos. While the real New Woman was not the writhing, hysterical, sexual deviant and femme fatale her critics painted her to be, she was not the opposite either. She was not the asexual, demure, sycophant much of society desired women to be. The New Woman in society was not one stereotypical being; she was human. Faithful and fair representation of this flesh and blood New Woman was the central purpose for the writing of a considerable portion of novels written between 1880 and 1914. These novels were greedily devoured by much of the reading public affirming some success in the accurate representation of frustrations and desires experienced by the women of the period. Lucy Bland notes that “many of these novels ... are today unknown, but at the time they sold in their millions” (144). The popular success of these authors was valued primarily as large scale communication and education since “these female ‘new woman’ writers

thought of their fiction as didactic in intent and as a political contribution to the women's 'cause'" (144). This study will attempt to isolate the identity of the New Woman, drawing extensively on apt contemporary criticism and on close critical readings of the central New Woman texts of the fin de siècle. Consequently, the study will also try to undo the misconceptions about the New Woman while identifying the character of the New Woman presented in feminist fiction of this period.

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

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

Periodization has always been a problem for the fin de siècle

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

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

Throughout the study it is necessary to examine the contexts in which the novelists wrote, the social climate, their lives and their polemics, but the novels are most influential and effective at conveying the identity and conflict of the New Woman. The disjunction between female nature and the patriarchal social structure ultimately established an internal conflict in the woman of the fin de siècle. As long as the New Woman sought out her true nature and as long as society would not allow for it then the conflict would remain insoluble. The craftsmanship in the development of internal conflict and scrutiny of character promote sympathy in the reader and allow him/her to relate to the fictional New Woman's experience while simultaneously recognizing her/his own personal struggle. In the female reader of the day the novels inspired the courage to enter into this treacherous conflict with the hope to find a personal resolution. The conflict held fascination as a socially dangerous yet necessary approach to life. The realism of many of the novels is the foundation on which the novelists establish this sympathy. This realism juxtaposes despair with the hope immanent in the exploration of self and the search for an alternative future for women as well as a future for the relationship between men and women. Since the novels are attempts at representing fin de siècle society, the outcomes are often tragic. The necessary tragedies are as much a part of the realism as the exploration of and the optimistic character's desire for a truer self. While one might predict that the apparent pessimism in these conclusions would likely discourage a

reader from a similar search for self, the opposite seems to have occurred. The iconic New Woman became established not as an entirely tragic or grotesque figure, as some unsympathetic authors portrayed her, but as a symbol of hope and a voice of the era.

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

Stylistically the authors vary, and some are more successful than others in their approaches to the craft of writing the novel. One area where all the authors find their strength is the New Woman character herself, inspiring sympathy through the voice of a human being who is not self-righteous or all-knowing but is in a struggle for self actualization that is part of the human condition and one to which women especially could relate. New Woman heroine Lyndall in *The Story of an African Farm* makes the comparison: "We fit our sphere as a Chinese woman's foot fits her shoe... . In some of us the shaping to our end has been quite completed. ... but in

others ... we wear the bandages, but our limbs have not grown to them; we know that we are compressed, and chafe against them" (Schreiner 135-6). The chafing that Lyndall suggests is inevitable for some resounded far more universally than even Lyndall recognizes in her analogy. Many women at the fin de siècle were chafing against their bandages, and the New Woman writer was writing of this as a striving for self-identification. She wrote of the inevitable resistance against social constraints and of the determination for the foot to be a foot and not a malformed, crippled representation of its former self or of its potential. This striving in the novels is often fruitless for the heroines, but there is a sense that their struggle influences a world beyond their internal sense of self. That this influence is enough is not conclusive, but the authors suggest it is better to chafe and live in agony than submit to numbness and atrophy.

Olive Schreiner, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Mona Caird and Kate Chopin received letters in praise of their novels and their rendering of character. These were from their contemporaries, men and women, ranging from those of social prominence to those of little social significance. From the commentary by prominent reviewers to statements made by common folk, readers claimed that these authors had created a human voice that spoke a truth that readers had known. One woman said of *The Story of an African Farm*, "I read parts of it over and over," and she claimed the heroine's struggle was one familiar to many women: "I think there is

hundreds of women what feels like that but can't speak it, but she could speak what we feel" (quoted in First and Scott 121). Most significantly, the readers whose comments have been preserved suggest that the novelists brought forth a being unlike any they had read in fiction before, a *new* woman. One reviewer of Menie Muriel Dowie's *Galia* believed that to write this woman's story onto the page was to fill a void that existed in fictional representations of women. "At last the likeness of a new woman has been caught and committed to paper with audacity, fidelity, and literary skill" (quoted in Small xxv). W.T. Stead notes the distinction of the New Woman novelists' depiction of female experience in his review of Ella Hepworth Dixon's *The Story of a Modern Woman*. Stead highlights the newness and importance of this rendering of character: "The Modern Woman novel is not merely a novel by a woman, or a novel written about women, but it is a novel written by a woman, about women from the standpoint of Woman" (193). Stead aptly recognizes Dixon's successful rendering when he states "she has studied [woman], painted her, and analyzed her as if she had an independent existence, and even, strange to say, a soul of her own" (193). Stead's "strange to say" is at the heart of the matter. There is a tone of a shamefaced embarrassment for his society at being surprised by a presentation that identifies a woman as having a soul of her own. In a letter responding to Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wall-paper" a medical doctor wrote, "When I read 'The Yellow Wall Paper' I was much pleased with it;

when I read it again, I was delighted with it, and now that I have read it again I am overwhelmed with the delicacy of your touch and the connectedness of your portrayal” (Dock 93). The public was startled by the New Woman novelists’ heroines, by the authenticity of the presentation of their voices and their souls. Some were comforted by it, some discomforted by it, but these New Woman heroines struck a chord that rang true to many readers.

This New Woman was not a creation; she was not the progeny of a fictional birth. These novelists unearthed a being that had always existed; only, she had been buried alive by Victorian mores. She had not washed herself completely clean of the residue of these Victorian ideals either. “Late Victorian feminism was full of contradictions and conflicts”, Showalter illustrates: “These were women who made maternal instinct the basis of their ideology. Yet many of them were disgusted by sex and terrified by childbirth” (*A Literature* 190). The perception and manipulation of sexuality and motherhood were two of the essential aspects of female existence that feminists adamantly fought to change, but were not areas with which feminists were entirely comfortable.

This New Woman did not merely burst onto the scene in the fiction of the New Woman novelist. The New Woman as a term had been applied negatively to any woman challenging the norm and social dictates for women. The concept of the New Woman gets muddied by this association, and occasionally the New Woman novelists were mired in the debates and

discussions that became petty and mudslinging. As Richardson and Willis point out in *The New Woman in Fact and Fiction*, one of the fictive New Women, very different from the one written in the novels of the New Woman novelists, was the one found on the pages of the periodical press.

“Journalists and cartoonists played a significant part in establishing the cultural status of the New Woman. ... As far as her opponents were concerned, the more startling and vivid the picture, the better” (13). As Richardson and Willis elaborate, “the ‘journalistic myth’ ... simplified and satirized the New Woman’s real concerns over social and moral issues” (24). Patricia Marks suggests that the caricature of the New Woman is “as all caricature and satire are, an exaggeration,” but not so much an exaggeration of the New Woman’s character but of the New Woman as one who is “the embodiment of multifold fears of change itself” (205). In these desperate attempts at the preservation of a certain kind of woman “the caricatures and satires ... tried to represent the unthinkable, ... invert[ing] the characteristics by which women were superficially identified” (206). Marks suggests that the jabs of the satire focused more on what the satirist valued than on the values of the object of ridicule. Bluestockinged, monocled, smoking, in masculine dress, wearing a severe expression these caricatures promised a change devastating to those who created them and laughed at them.

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

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

In this battle of the old against the ‘new’ the multiple opposing representations of the New Woman took part in establishing the ultimate identity of the New Woman as represented by the closest thing to her - the New Woman novelist. Some elements of the caricatures were actively refuted; some were surprisingly embraced in the writing for the New Woman heroine. The New Woman cannot be entirely divorced from caricature, but her doppelganger in the periodical press was not the New Woman of the New Woman novel nor was she representative of the novelists themselves, both of which are the focus of this study. “By the late 1890s, the image of the New Woman as a beautiful bicycling Amazon seems to have taken over from

the image of her as an unattractive bluestocking” (Willis 54). While even this image cannot be considered consistent in all New Woman fiction, the attractiveness of the New Woman was a constant. Kate Chopin’s Edna Pontillier, a swimming Amazon, “was rather handsome than beautiful” (5); Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Herlanders in rational dress had eyes that were described as “splendid, wide, fearless” (*Herland* 18); and Olive Schreiner’s Lyndall, who looks “like a princess” (*African Farm* 130) exhibits physically more traditionally Victorian beauty.

### **Seven New Woman Novelists**

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

Kate Chopin is likely the most academically acclaimed of the New

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

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

Olive Schreiner enters into the discussion early on writing into fiction arguably the first New Woman in her character, Lyndall. Schreiner begins her foray into New Woman fiction at a young age, publishing her novel, *The Story of an African Farm*, in 1883. She had completed it three years earlier in South Africa, where she had been born to missionary parents (German and English) and had lived a somewhat independent, nomadic life due to her father’s economic failure. Schreiner left South Africa in 1881 to pursue a sense of meaningful purpose and a career in the medical field, and also with the intention of finding a publisher for her book. At this time she had already begun work on another novel, *From Man to Man*, which she revised repeatedly during her lifetime, never able to complete it to her satisfaction, leaving that novel unpublished until after her death. *The Story of an African*

*Farm* was completed, published, widely read and much discussed in London. With it Schreiner and Lyndall entered into the debates on marriage, motherhood and women's sexuality by denouncing the established institutions. In this novel Schreiner, unlike Chopin, uses Lyndall's bitter voice as well as her life decisions to convey her disgust with the social institutions. Lyndall is a much more self-aware character from the outset than Edna Pontillier, and she needs no awakening to the ills of her society. Feeling helpless against the enormity of their power that oppresses her, Lyndall is frustrated by how little she can effect change. Still, she refuses to conform in her own life, having a child out of wedlock that is sickly and dies very young. Lyndall rails against her lot verbally and with her steadfast decisions, but is ultimately defeated by it. This pessimistic approach to the situation for women at the fin de siècle represented in Schreiner's work is specific to this text. Schreiner's novel, *From Man to Man*, and her polemical tract, *Woman and Labor*, are written with a serious but optimistic tone, suggesting that all is not doomed, and the human race is not on an unalterable path to destruction. All the while Schreiner keeps that specter of doom in the background as a potential future if the approach society has toward women does not radically change. *Woman and Labor* was published in 1911 and profoundly influenced the women's suffrage movement at the time. The ideas presented in *Woman and Labor* are echoed throughout her fiction primarily relating to women's need for a purposeful existence, without which, the system would perpetuate

its “sex parasitism” and degenerate potentiality toward extinction. Schreiner's *Dreams*, short stories and dream visions that relate thematically to the experience of the New Woman, also were published and read in her lifetime and were used as inspiration by those women fighting for women's suffrage. However, these stray from the realistic approach to the New Woman and take on a more didactic, political approach.

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

Mona Caird is most commonly associated with the marriage debate because of her article, “Marriage,” published in the radical quarterly, the *Westminster Review*, in 1888, which thoroughly examined the flaws in nineteenth-century marriage. This piece, written in a “plain-spoken, pithy, scathing, learned, and authoritative voice - a voice perfectly calibrated to its audience” (Gullette 493), inspired such a fervor of debate that this is often what Caird is noted for in history. However, her novels, as with Schreiner

and Chopin, also connected her with the reading public. *The Daughters of Danaus*, her most widely read novel and the only one still in circulation, touts a New Woman heroine, Hadria, whose speech has a good deal to do with the marriage debate. "Love! ... Do you suppose I could ever love a man who had the paltry, ungenerous instinct to enchain me?" (131) Hadria asks her less enlightened peer. Though laden with much of Caird's own politics the strength of the novel, as with Chopin and Schreiner's novels, lies in the struggle and the humanity of the New Woman heroine. Hadria might have a strongly held political agenda, but she still lives in a nineteenth-century world. This conflict propels her into a situation similar to Edna and Lyndall's in which an enlightened view of the world and of one's self serves to tighten the noose for struggling. While Hadria survives the novel, her fate is one of torture in which "the long playing of a fatiguing role" and "long self-suppression" result in "the spirit of tired acquiescence" and a cynicism contrary to her former hopeful and rebellious nature (470). The novel ends with a hopeful insight imparted on Hadria by one of her mentors, Professor Fortescue, on his deathbed. In reference to lives that never fulfill themselves he states "If the effort has been sincere, and the thought bent upon the best that could be conceived by the particular soul, then that effort and that thought must play their part in the upward movement of the race" (488-9). Shortly thereafter the novel closes. Though Hadria is living a hypocritical life that has entrapped her and goes against all she professes, the narration suggests that the

striving must go on and cynicism fought at all cost. Though it is torture and barely a life, Caird allows her New Woman heroine a narrow beam of hope symbolized by a sunbeam at the end of the novel. Fortescue explains to a frustrated Hadria: "We have room for hope; indeed it insists upon admission; it falls into the shadow of our life like that blessed ray of sunlight" (489).

Gullette suggests that Caird creates "a countertradition that privileges not martyrdom but endurance" (518). Hadria's mentor, her voice of inspiration and reason, insists on his deathbed that she endure: "Hold fast to your own colours. Don't take sides, above all, with the powers that have oppressed you" (Caird, *Daughters* 489).

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

As a New Woman figure whose fiction was widely read on both sides of the Atlantic, Sarah Grand is described by her biographer, Gillian Kersley, as "a proud and beautiful woman with the courage to break the mould of accepted behaviour and attempt to improve the imbalance between the

sexes...” (3). Grand did not find “fulfillment in marriage, or in motherhood either” (Senf xxix), and this is likely to have influenced her unconventional ideas on the two subjects. Often considered an autobiographical novel, Grand’s *The Beth Book*, follows a heroine, Beth, “who believes in her right to learn to work and to love” (Showalter, Introduction ii), a truly New Womanly approach to self. *The Beth Book* examines the life of a New Woman who finds success and love without sacrificing her New Woman identity. This is unlike much of the other New Woman fiction in this study, including *The Heavenly Twins*, Grand’s most popular New Woman novel considered “one of the most widely read of the New Woman novels” (Dowling 50). Both novels address the double sexual standard of the period particularly in relation to venereal disease. *The Heavenly Twins* focuses its commentary primarily on marriage while avoiding a reassessment of female sexuality often found in New Woman novels, but as Showalter notes Beth in *The Beth Book* exhibits a “healthy and assertive sexuality” (iv), nontraditional by its very existence, since the traditional view of the wife was a woman who did not experience sexual desire.

Though in *The Heavenly Twins* Grand presents an acquiescent return to what seems to be the “happy marriages of earlier Victorian fiction” Senf claims that “the stories in *The Heavenly Twins* resemble real life more than they resemble earlier fiction” (x), and when Grand gives her heroines the fate of an inescapable marriage, she is not suggesting that these are happy