NINETEENTH CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

ISSUE 15.2 (SUMMER 2019)

Wound Culture and The New Woman

Gray, Alexandra. *Self-Harm in New Woman Writing*. Edinburgh University Press, 2018. 237 pages.

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<1>*Self-Harm in New Woman Writing* examines novels, short stories, and poems written by New Women of the *fin-de-siècle*, all of whom deployed the trope of self-harm in reference to their female heroines. Through a broad engagement with works by authors such as Sarah Grand, Amy, Levy, Victoria Cross, and George Egerton, Gray argues that fictional acts of self-harm were responses to the cultural expectations of the late nineteenth century, which placed strong patriarchal and religious pressures on women. By tracking how these writers incorporated images of self-starvation, drunkenness, and self-mutilation into their narratives, Gray positions Victorian wound culture and fictional acts of self-harm as resistive literary strategies. These representations reflect a traumatized female psyche and the New Woman's struggle to escape an external world that marginalized them in science, medicine, the law, and other areas of public life.

<2>Chapter One develops the socio-religious framework within which Gray's later chapters consider instances of self-starvation, excessive alcohol consumption, and self-mutilation. These works were brimming with references to sacrifice and martyrdom, and it is within this context that Gray positions Christianity as a central force in the daily struggle faced by Victorian women and in their "recourse to and expression of self-harm" (32). The chapter analyzes Mona Caird's *The Wing of Azrael* (1889) and *The Daughters of Danaus* (1894), before moving to Victoria Cross's *The Woman Who Didn't* (1894) and *Anna Lombard* (1901). Through these close readings, Gray shows that New Woman Writers both internalized Christianity and actively criticized it through the qualities that they ascribed to their female protagonists. By relating

themes of self-sacrifice in these texts to Cartesian dualism and to examples of suffering in more familiar works like Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854) and Algernon Charles Swinburne's "Dolores" (1866), Gray establishes how suffering and self-damage were "deliberately gendered" (47). Caird's novels, for instance, represent women's "indoctrination" into the Christian religion (55). Her heroines ultimately fail to transform sacrifice into something that enables an escape from patriarchy, as is the case for Viola Sedley in *The Wing of Azrael*, who is pressured to marry for financial security and who dies by alleged suicide after murdering her husband in self-defense. Similar pressures afflict Hadria Fullerton in *The Daughters of Danaus*, for whom self-harm elicits sympathy, but not change. More successful in this respect were Cross's two novels. For example, although it is less overtly religious, *Anna Lombard* rewrites the traditional narrative of female sacrifice by switching gender roles: it is her male character who commits acts of self-harm and self-denial here. This reversal allows Cross's heroine to challenge the social order; however, as Gray points out, Cross relies on binaries that are too often found in Victorian literature and art, such as the angel and the demon, and the saint and the sinner (74). The dramatization of the female body was therefore especially complicated during this time period. Rebelling particularly against the institution of marriage, these writers' heroines attempted to escape the male gaze and to "downplay the primacy of the female sexual body" by exhibiting bodies that were harmed or broken (48). But while martyrdom was seen as a strategy through which "honour could be attained in body suffering" (49), fictional acts of self-denial rarely overcame the power of patriarchy.

<3>Chapter Two moves to the first of three categorical examples of the trope of self-harm: self-starvation. Starving female protagonists will not come as a surprise to those who have followed the journeys of Jane Eyre, Nell Trent, or Lucy Snowe, nor would they have been shocking to Victorian readers, who were surrounded by periodicals and pamphlets related to the "new culture of dieting," which figured the slim woman as an "asset" to the middle-class home (78). This chapter reads three novels by Sarah Grand—*Ideala* (1888), *The Heavenly Twins* (1893), and *The Beth Book* (1897)—with this social backdrop in mind. In contrast to the thin body, the overweight female body signaled an inability to control appetite, sexually and gastronomically.

By writing about the female body in this way, Grand's *Ideala* "valori[zed] the new disease of anorexia" and "romantici[zed] self-sacrifice as a form of activism" (86). The connection between consumption and sexuality is even more pronounced in *The Heavenly Twins* and in *The Beth Book*. In the former, relationships are represented through food-related imagery, and frailty signals sexual frustration for Grand's female protagonist, Edith Beale. In the latter, the eponymous heroine "eats less so her family might eat more" (115), but her starvation enables romantic success and fulfilment. For Gray, Grand's graphic descriptions of female starvation are a feature of the genre, uniquely possible within the space of the triple-decker realist novel. Accounts of self-harm went relatively unnoticed simply because these texts were so long.

<4>Chapter Three considers not the suppressed appetite, but rather excess consumption, through the figure of the drunk Victorian woman. While anorexia signaled self-control, the Victorian female drinker indicated the opposite: "the breakdown of womanly virtue" (126). While drinking was heavily associated with the working-class body, where it was often fictionalized in nineteenth-century slum narratives, "women of all classes who drank committed the sin of having independent needs" (127). The drunken woman was a symbol of degradation, dangerous to her family and threatening to the domestic ideal that expected women to carry "future generation[s] of strong and healthy Englishmen" (127). By comparing the middle-class "odd woman" (132), an unmarried woman without financial support who could not adhere to social conventions, to the New Woman, Gray concludes that while odd women received sympathy from those who knew them, the New Woman "was like a drunk woman, useless to a society that privileged obedience and self-sacrifice" (134). In examining these beliefs as manifested through the figure of the female inebriate in George Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893) and in short stories by George Egerton and Mary Angela Dickens, Gray suggests that alcohol was a means of escaping a world full of gendered, financial, and religious pressures. Toward the end of the chapter, Gray also reflects on the advantages of the short story form, which, in contrast to the novel, wherein the body "curiously escapes textual embodiment" despite its many pages (157), allows for detailed descriptions of self-harm that cannot be overlooked.

<5>Finally, Chapter Four tracks the rhetoric of self-mutilation in poetry and short stories. Whereas self-starvation and drunkenness were, for Gray, comparatively passive forms of resistance to cultural conditions, self-mutilation emerges in these texts as a "means by which to rip apart both the fictional female body and the bodies of [the] narrative[s] within which it had been traditionally represented" (159). The argument of this chapter reveals as much about self-mutilation in New Woman Writing as it does about the ways these female authors navigated the literary marketplace. The chapter also addresses gaps in our historical knowledge of self-mutilation. Although cases of self-mutilation were seldom recorded, except for in cases linked to hysteria, fictional examples imply that self-mutilation was common among Victorian girls and women. Gray identifies images of suicide, biting, and self-wounding in Amy Levy's poetry and in four short stories by George Egerton. She argues that, in representing self-mutilation in short texts, these New Woman Writers rejected the conventions of the male-dominated nineteenth-century literary market, but they risked self-sabotage in the process.

<6>The term 'New Woman' cannot be mentioned without conflict, for these were women who "rarely shared political viewpoints" (1) but, as Gray's study makes clear, had one thing in common: their use of the trope of self-harm. While the novelists, poets, and short story writers whose works *Self-Harm in New Woman Writing* surveys all deploy rhetoric of self-harm for different purposes, these authors were alike interested in protesting the socio-religious and gendered expectations of the late nineteenth century. Most effective were literary portrayals that were contained within short forms, but, as Chapter Four indicates, these representations were risky because female writers had an unstable position within the literary marketplace. Gray's account of self-harm is thus wonderfully interdisciplinary, combining scholarship on New Woman writing with Christian mythology and the history of medicine. In doing so, Gray encourages us to see the paradox of self-harm in feminist writing as a resistive strategy and as one more layer of clarity for the overflowing category that is the 'New Woman.'