
User

Username

Password

Remember me

Login

Journal Content

Search

Search Scope

All

Search

Browse

By Issue

By Author

By Title

Other Journals

Information

For Readers

For Authors

For Librarians

Article Tools

Print this article

Indexing metadata

How to cite item

Related Items
"A Study in Starvation": The New Girl and the Gendered Socialisation of Appetite in Sarah Grand’s The Beth Book

Abstract

British feminist author Sarah Grand was regarded at the fin-de-siècle as one of one of the boldest revolutionaries of the New Woman movement. Modern feminist scholars have generally endorsed and emphasised this perceived radicalness. However, Grand’s subversiveness is negated by the conservative discourse that is given focus in her second novel, The Beth Book: Being a Study of the Life of Elizabeth Caldwell Maclure, A Woman of Genius (1897). Utilising the form of the Künstlerroman (or "artist’s novel"), this semi-autobiographical work follows the development of its heroine, Beth Caldwell, from a rebellious child to a "woman of genius"—Grand’s idealised New Woman.

Using the interpretive lens of food and eating in the novel, this essay illuminates the ways in which the author censures the "childish" appetites—physical, spiritual and intellectual—of her embryonic New Woman. The awakening of Beth’s feminine subjectivity is tied to inherited, particularly Victorian notions of womanliness and admirable sacrifice, and the heroine’s ultimate abnegation of self and appetite concludes a starvation narrative throughout which Grand is driven to subjugate and purify the evolving female subject. The author’s complex attitude towards the consumption of food, as well as to those who consume it, I believe reflects a latent ambivalence towards the goals of fin-de-siècle feminism. While her work does display elements of the subversiveness for which she has been celebrated, The Beth Book ultimately and clearly displays an innate distrust of womanly appetite and agency. This analysis casts a new light on the persistent and vigorous debate around claims made by feminist scholars pertaining to the extent of Sarah Grand’s radicalism.

Keywords

literature
The New Woman emerged during a time of great social change, when notions about sexuality and gender had become complicated through increased awareness of homosexuality and the rising number of women who were finally making their voices heard. There has been argument over when the New Woman was officially born, but the general consensus is that it was in 1894, when the social purity feminist and New Woman Sarah Grand and author Ouida wrote about her in the North American Review. The New Woman was imbued with the contradictions of the fin de siècle, at once too sexual and not sexual enough. Like Grand herself, Beth makes an early marriage to escape her unhappy childhood, becoming the wife of philandering doctor, Daniel Maclure. Disillusion soon turns to defiance, as Beth recreates herself as a woman of genius, with her rousing refrain of “I shall succeed!” After escaping to a room of her own, Beth becomes a New Woman, setting a high standard both for herself and for other women. The Beth Book deserves to be seen as a classic of the Victorian age. This new edition, the first for almost twenty years, includes: A critical introduction by Jenny Bourne Taylor. Despite having a large selection of new books available for immediate shipment and excellent customer service, people still tell us they prefer us because of our prices. Visit Seller’s Storefront. Terms of Sale Grand, Sarah. The Beth Book: Being a Study of the Life of Elizabeth Caldwell Maclure, A Woman of Genius. 1897. New York: The Dial, 1980. Google Scholar. “Visionary Desires: Theosophy, Auto-Eroticism and the Seventh-Wave Artist in Sarah Grand’s The Beth Book.” Nineteenth-Century Contexts. 26.1 (March 2004): 29–46. CrossRef | Google Scholar. Heilmann, Ann, and Forward, Stephanie, eds. Sex, Social Purity and Sarah Grand. 4 vols. New York: Routledge, 2000.