

Beth Caldwell's Reading Experience

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ABSTRACT

Near the end of the nineteenth century, Sarah Grand coined the phrase "New Woman," which was influential throughout the first wave of the feminist movement. This paper examines how Sarah Grand's representation of Beth Caldwell's reading habits in her novel *The Beth Book* acts as a metaphor for the subversive femininity of the New Woman. My project explores the ways in which Grand's feminist ideals are reflected in *The Beth Book* through the scenes where Beth is reading. I suggest that Beth's atypical engagement with books as textual and physical objects can be equated to social dissent. However, Grand also portrays Beth reading within educational and marital institutions. These experiences lead Beth's engagement with the text to become similar to common nineteenth-century reading practices. I conclude that Grand represents any personal engagement with a book, even if it is not especially radical, as capable of re-evaluating systemically-enforced interpretations.

Sarah Grand's *The Beth Book* is a vehicle for understanding the division between men and women during the nineteenth century. In "The New Aspect of the Woman Question," Grand suggests that this division exists because men limit women's access to education and then claim that women's ignorance is proof that men are naturally more rational, leading to the normalization of women's intellectual dependence on men (272). Grand uses the term "New Woman" to describe a woman who recognizes that the division of the sexes is unnatural and so can be bridged (Grand, "Woman Question" 271). A New Woman is not only "content to develop the good material which she finds in herself," but also recognizes the complicity of women who still passively assume that they need to depend on men (Grand, "Woman Question" 270-1). A New Woman will "demand...

proofs of the superiority which alone would give [men] a right" to subjugate women (Grand, "Woman Question" 271-2). This demand for proof will expose the fact that men are only more intellectual because their intellects have been developed in educational systems from which they bar women (Grand, "Woman Question" 272). Without the false belief of men's natural superiority, there is no excuse for men and women not to be equals. Grand argues that "there are, in both sexes, possibilities hitherto suppressed or abused, which, when properly developed, will supply either what is lacking in the other" ("Woman Question" 272). The New Woman sees it as her duty to help achieve these greater possibilities by thinking for herself and speaking out against men who claim that women are naturally inferior (Grand, "Woman Question" 272). The ideals of the New Woman are reflected and demon-

strated in Grand's novel, *The Beth Book*. Beth reads shilling shocker sensation novels, the works of William Shakespeare, and the Bible in defiant ways. Her subversive reading habits act as a metaphor for her subversion of nineteenth-century concepts of womanhood. This essay will explore the extent to which Beth Caldwell enacts or departs from the typical experience of a nineteenth-century reader and represents the role of a New Woman. It will illuminate the ways in which Grand characterizes Beth as a New Woman by representing her as a subversive reader.

The novel opens a day before Beth is born. This day without Beth serves as a basis of the typical conditions of women, to which Beth will be compared. The marriage of Beth's parents is an unhappy one. Mrs. Caldwell's only marital joy is listening to her husband read the latest number of Charles Dickens' serialized novels (Grand, *Beth* 10). During the nineteenth century, reading with the family after dinner was a common practice in households of all socio-economic standings (Crone 436). In fact, "to keep an entertaining volume to oneself was 'an act of selfish greediness on par with secretly indulged gluttony'" (qtd. in Flint 51). Reading aloud was a pleasurable duty which ensured that all family members were caught up with exciting new stories. This shared joy does not last for long between Mr. and Mrs. Caldwell. Once the initial excitement of the new number is over, Captain Caldwell realizes that he is out of whisky and flings the book across the room in anger (Grand, *Beth* 10). This use of books is not at all uncommon. From *David Copperfield* to *Jane Eyre*, nineteenth-century characters regularly have books thrown at them (Price 73). Grand's depiction of the world before Beth is a re-enactment of typical uses of books in the nineteenth century.

After her marriage to Dr. Dan, Beth relives her mother's duty of communal family readings. But, Beth takes no pleasure from their evenings of shared literature. Dan forces Beth to "read [three-volume novels] aloud to him in the evening, one after the other – an endless succession" (Grand, *Beth* 381). Beth is bored by the novels that her husband chooses for her to read. For

her, the typical act of reading a book of shared interest is destroyed by her husband's selfish book choice. Unlike her mother, Beth cannot put up with her husband's ill usage. Once her husband gives up his trips to the library, Beth goes to choose books for herself. Her access to a library without the intervention of her husband sets her apart from a typical nineteenth-century woman, who would have relied on her family to choose and provide reading material (Flint 191-2).

Beth's private readings are also defined by the places in which she reads. Young Beth tests her reading comprehension against that of the school boys who claim that they are more capable than women. Before Beth attends school, the narrator describes Beth carrying a book in public as "a pose, for she could not read out of doors, there were so many other interests to occupy her attention" (Grand, *Beth* 282-3). Beth's "pose" (Grand, *Beth* 282) is an imitation of the school boys. She knows that they have not read the books that they pride themselves on discussing. The book becomes a mere prop, adding to her aesthetic without ever being read. However, she cannot completely copy the school boys because she is honest about what excites her. It is no qualm to Beth to admit that books are not as entrancing as the real world around her. When she is not in a space that is dedicated to reading, Beth is distracted by other activities. Beth becomes a more engaged and critical reader when she finds privacy from Dr. Dan in a secret room on the top floor of their house. Beth fills her new space with "her books of reference, desk, notebooks, and writing materials" (Grand, *Beth* 358). It is significant that Beth covers her table with "books of reference." She is no longer surrounded with books that make her look good. Instead, she focuses on books that are necessary to have on hand. This depiction suggests that being surrounded by the tools for reading and writing help a reader to discover their own interpretation of the text. When she was younger and not allowed to go to school, Beth did not have this advantage, and so was stuck in a world full of distractions, while the boys got to experience a space dedicated to study. Once she has a studious space of her own, Beth is able to dedicate herself to improving her reading and writing skills.

Once Beth is no longer using books as props to pose as a reader, it is interesting to consider how the physicality of her books reflects her reading habits. After she has made a safe reading space for herself, Beth becomes comfortable reading within her home. She reads a shilling shocker that Dr. Dan has left on a table (Grand, *Beth* 449). Shilling shockers were popular in the nineteenth century for their cheap price and their exciting, violent plots ("Shilling Shocker"). To better understand the materiality of these cheap books, I explored the collection of cheap nineteenth-century yellowback novels in the Bruce Peel Special Collections Library. Walter Besant's *Dorothy Forster*, published by Chatto and Windus in 1887, was particularly striking. The text is tiny and cramped. Some pages are even printed at an angle. The small letters and their haphazard printing suggest that these books were not meant to be aesthetically pleasing or to be kept in library collections. Instead, they were printed with emphasis on practicality. As long as all of the words were on a page, these books served their purpose. This novel also has pages of advertisements for household items, such as tooth powder and baby soothers, before the title page, as well as a list of books published by the same printing house after the main text of the novel. This disregard for the book's appearance emphasizes Beth's shift to caring more about the book's content than how others view her "pose" as a reader.

It is intriguing that Beth is "reading [this] shilling shocker of Dan's" because "she had taken it up casually and become interested in [it]" (Grand, *Beth* 449). In 1893, a speaker at a conference for schoolmistresses insisted that shilling shockers were a "reckless waste of hard-earned money" and that their readers ought to find "something better worth doing" (qtd. in Flint 50). It is unusual, then, that Beth so "casually" enjoys such a subversive genre. Grand's narrator describes:

The story was of an extremely sensational kind, and she found herself being wrought up by it to the highest pitch of nervous excitement. At the slightest noise she jumped; and then she became oppressed by silence, and

found herself peering into the dark corners of the room, and hesitating to glance over her shoulder, as if she feared to see something... she heard at intervals what seemed to be a human voice... although she continued to read, she found herself waiting involuntarily, with strained attention, for it to be repeated. When it occurred again, she thought it sounded suspiciously like a cry of pain; and the next time it came she was sure of it. Instantly forgetting herself and her nervous tremors, she threw down her book and went to see what was the matter. (*Beth* 449-50)

That sensation novels could cause irrational emotion was expected, because female readers supposedly found "it far easier than a man would do to identify with characters and incidents in her reading material" (Flint 38). Therefore, a nineteenth-century woman would be expected to be "wrought up... to the highest pitch of nervous excitement" and "fear[ing] to see something" (Grand, *Beth* 450). Beth's overwrought nerves reflect the general worry that women could be affected by irrational fictional emotions. However, it is this identification with the overwrought emotions of the fictional novel that draws her attention to the real horror that her husband has been vivisectioning a dog (Grand, *Beth* 450). Even while feeling the supposedly foolish emotions of a stereotypical woman who has been overtaxed by a sensation novel, Beth is able to put an end to her husband's horrific experiment. It is not necessarily negative, then, that women can emotionally relate to their reading material. Beth does not have to entirely throw off the typical nineteenth-century woman's reading experience in order to fulfill the role of a New Woman. Even in moments when her actions and reading habits are not radical, her independence from Dr. Dan is still legible.

Beth continues to embrace and reinterpret gendered stereotypes in her discussions with female writers and activists such as Ideala. Ideala introduces Beth to the distinction between literature that lasts in the reader's mind and literature that physically lasts because nobody takes it off of the shelf. She teaches

Beth that there is a direct correlation between a book's physical look and the reader's relationship to the text. Ideala argues that stylized books, written by pretentious novelists and praised by pompous academics, have "no marks in them, no signs of wear and tear" (Grand, *Beth* 474). If a book is "the mere mechanics of literature," then "nobody cares about [it] except the mechanicians" (Grand, *Beth* 474). So, it is no shame to women if they read the books that are well-loved and full of comfort and emotion. Following Beth's casual relationship with shilling shockers, Ideala reiterates the point that the content of the book is more important than how it appears to others. The education system that Beth experiences does not agree, instead enforcing a belief that certain books must be loved for their mechanical prowess.

Beth's experience of reading Shakespeare's writing at school is a turning point in her literary career. "[F]or many nineteenth-century readers Shakespeare was an exciting new discovery made outside the classroom" (Murphy 138). However, Shakespeare's writing shifted from being an entrancing emotional experience to a canon that children were forced to appreciate. Shakespeare became a "cultural substitute for the Bible" (Murphy 138), and his writing became a staple of the school experience. Beth experiences this shift when she attends school. She arrives at the school already interested in Shakespeare's writing (Grand, *Beth* 125). But, "[w]hen she left school Beth was fastidiously refined. She hurried over all the hateful words and passages in the Bible, Shakespeare, or any other book she might be reading" (Grand, *Beth* 331). After she has been taught that she is expected to enjoy Shakespeare's writing, she finds his words "hateful." At school, she is taught that reading Shakespeare's writing is a matter of appreciating and agreeing with the teacher's interpretations. Unlike her ability to express her genuine disinterest in the books that she tries to read outdoors (Grand, *Beth* 282-3), Beth's experience at school teaches her to "read and enthuse... over good literature not because [she] liked it, but because [she] ought to like it" (qtd. in Flint 219-20). This takes away the excitement and beauty of his words and leaves only a sense that

reading Shakespeare's writing is a performative duty. Her education instills common reading practices in Beth. Her ability to read and interpret Shakespeare's writing is overthrown by an education that insists that all girls must approach Shakespeare in the same way.

Beth's common reading experience of Shakespeare's canon continues after her marriage to Dr. Dan. The narrator depicts Beth, hidden in her private room:

[W]hile she sewed she occupied her mind in a way that was much more beneficial to it than the purposeless acquisition of facts, the solving of mathematical problems, or conning of parts of speech. Beside her was always an open book, it might be a passage of Scripture, a scene from Shakespeare, a poem or paragraph rich in the wisdom and beauty of some great mind; and as she sewed she dwelt upon it, repeating it to herself until she was word-perfect in it, then making it even more her own by earnest contemplation. These passages became the texts of many observations; and in them was also the light which showed her life as it is, and as it should be lived. (Grand, *Beth* 369)

Beth is sewing pieces of art to sell and pay off her husband's debts. This pairing, of literal meticulous handiwork with the mental activity of reading, parallels the laborious approach that Beth's schoolmistresses would have taken to Shakespeare's writing. Beth reads Shakespeare's writing in the same contemplative way that she does the Scriptures, in the hope of illuminating the way to a good and successful life. Many people in the nineteenth century believed that one's approach to literature could be mirrored in one's approach to life (Flint 315). Once she has attended school and entered into the institution of marriage, Beth's reading habits become more and more like those of a typical woman of her time.

Nevertheless, Beth's atypical relationship to books remains manifest in her interpretation of the Bible. The Bible was often taught by rote, with more em-

phasis on learning the proper interpretation than understanding the text itself (Flint 121-2). Beth's Aunt Victoria, representative of old-fashioned educational practices, believes that it "would hardly be desirable" for children to "read the Bible from beginning to end" without the help of an interpreting adult (Grand, *Beth* 121). Beth unwittingly challenges this norm when one of her teachers, Miss Crow, tries to convince her to reject her friend Count Gustav Bartahlinsky's uncommon reading of the Old Testament. Miss Crow insists that Beth must believe the accepted interpretations of the Bible because they were presented by "the best and greatest men that ever lived" (Grand, *Beth* 315). Beth does not immediately reject Miss Crow's ideas, but she refuses to blindly believe that one interpretation is more valid than the other. Beth "determine[s] to read the Bible through from beginning to end, and see for herself" (Grand, *Beth* 315). The exact repetition of her Aunt's fears in Beth's reading style, "from beginning to end," emphasizes the fact that young Beth's approach to texts is rather unusual. Yet, this radical approach to the text does not result in a radical interpretation. When she reads the verse "God is love" (*King James Version*, 1 John 4.8, 4.16), Beth experiences a spiritual reawakening. "[S]he clasped her hands over the passage and laid her head on them" (Grand, *Beth* 538). Beth interacts with and touches the pages of her Bible in a way that signals her adoration for the words that are printed on them. Beth learns to revere the Bible, just as Aunt Victoria and her teachers wanted her to do. The only difference is that Beth does not accept the Bible's sacredness "in blind unquestioning faith" (Grand, *Beth* 315). Instead, she discovers it through a personal and private interpretative journey.

Beth Caldwell's reading experiences act as a vehicle through which we can understand the typical nineteenth-century reader and the manner in which atypical textual interpretations could be equated to social dissent. Beth's reading of sensation novels and sacred texts displays her ability to read as an individual. But, her eventual distaste for Shakespeare suggests that she has been forced to approach certain texts as a typical nineteenth-century woman. By

portraying Beth as neither a typical nor a fanatical reader, *The Beth Book* argues that it does not take a completely radical reader to re-evaluate institutional interpretations of literature. Grand uses Beth's uncommon interpretations and reading habits as a metaphor for her subversive role as a New Woman. Beth's reading experiences reflect a new ideal, in which women and men are given an equal opportunity to learn how to read and are allowed to interpret texts for themselves. It is only by allowing women and men alike to interpret texts that readers can challenge the systematic suppression and abuse (Grand, "Woman Question" 272) of both sexes. For Beth, approaching the Bible in her own manner or enjoying a subversive sensation novel is a subtle affirmation that she is a New Woman.

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