

# The victorian fin de siècle "new woman" a middle-class phenomenon



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Amy Levy's *The Romance of a Shop* demonstrates the Victorian era "new woman" arises primarily from a growing Victorian middle class, exploring the plights of such an intersectional position, filled with contradictions and unprecedented difficulties stemming from such an economic, social and gendered fin de siècle position. While class dynamics ultimately create the new woman, these same class dynamics combine to work against her.

It's clear the women each embody aspects of the Victorian era new woman, representative of the fracture of multifaceted ideals the new woman is meant to embody. "The New Woman as a category was by no means stable... complex, and by no means free of contradictions." (Ledger 23). Yet, all the women's journey begins out of middle-class economic necessity after their father's death, choosing independence, tying into the class conflict and plight of the working middle-class woman of the fin de siècle. Levy paints the crisis of Victorianism at the fin de siècle conflict as rooted in economics. "Both labor and woman are seeking to throw off the slavery arising from economic dependence; both are demanding...education shall be free; both desire equality and opportunity." (Ledger 39). Indeed, Gertrude describes her ideal society to Lord Watergate "a society not of class, caste, or family – but of picked individuals." (115).

So, naturally middle-class is unsurprised by the appearance of the new woman because it is the middle-class that produced her. "Like most people of their class, they had seen too much of the ups and downs of life to be astonished at anything...these ladies playing at photographers and house decorators was only one more scene in the varied and curious drama of life which it was their lot to witness." (60). The new middle-class embodies the

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ideals of the new woman, freedom and pursuit of happiness, viewing her as the next societal progressive step. This working-class outlook contrasts the Lorimers' aunt Caroline, who's upper-class education keeps her in the traditional feminine role of a bygone era. The upper class sees poverty as the "greatest calamity." (102). For the new woman, constraint is more to be feared, even if freedom means risk and enterprise.

The women living together exemplifies another class conflict – on one hand they're communal, even Marxist in their shared photography work, yet they function as a capitalist enterprise, (facing sexism) always under pressure to succeed just to stay afloat. Reminders of economic fragility of middle-class women holds an inextricable part in women's emancipation. "In short, there is for us only the working-class movement." (Ledger 39).

Aunt Caroline, silly denizen of old conservative Victorian ideals seems absurd to the modern middle-class Lorimers. Caroline reminds the Lorimers the horrors which could befall them if their business fails, absurdly suggesting they search for a husband in India. The women triumphantly prove her wrong, but the reality of such fears holding true is present in the Lorimers' neighbor the dressmaker who could not pay her bills, and the governesses story, a young Irish woman forced to leave Ireland due to economic hardship, fates which could have easily befallen the sisters if they had less luck or tenacity. "Only a plank was between them and the pitiless, fathomless ocean." (95). For the middle-class new woman, bringing ruin upon herself is a serious economic possibility.

Besides the difficulties of financial liberation, accusations of decadence are now applied to the middle class new woman. Phyllis is the synecdoche for this concept, a “sexual decadent.” (Ledger 23). Phyllis sickness can be read as the degeneration of the beautiful, once strong and fertile human race, and her near sexual eloping with Daryll is out of some combination of boredom, indulgence and vanity, as Wildean as it gets. However, all the sisters reference the arts, poems, plays, and literature, inviting pushback against new woman’s desire for education because such works signal degeneration. Indulgence in photography itself is seen as vain and decadent. The intermingling of the middle-class sisters and upper-class Lord Watergate transmits decadence. Yet unlike in Oscar Wilde’s “The Picture of Dorian Gray,” in which the upper-class Dorian Gray occupies protects him from accusations of decadence, the middle-class the Lorimers inhabit has no similar caste shelter. While the Victorian middle-class may have birthed the new woman, her progenitor would offer little help; she would have to fight tooth and nail to survive in her own dominion.

## Works Cited

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