

Cometh up as wild
grass: defying
victorian sister
narrative
conventions.



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Christina Rossetti wrote “ For there is no friend like a sister in calm or stormy weather; To cheer one on the tedious way, to fetch one if one goes astray, to lift one if one totters down, to strengthen whilst one stands.” Following the century of the “ Rise of the Novel”, British women writers, who had been writing novels of Sensation or Manners, commonly used subplots of sister relationships to push their stories forward. Rhoda Broughton, is until this day, remembered as a sensational novelist with a knack for brazen heroines, who’s transgressive actions would eventually lead them to a conversion of passion to spirituality. Broughton’s work, thought of as wildly inappropriate due to her heroines exploring their sexuality fairly openly, was immoderately circulated amongst all classes. This popularity was mirrored in Broughton’s life. Although she never married, she was recognized for her parties and lively conversation. *Cometh Up As a Flower*, her second novel published in 1867, presents Eleanora Lestrangle (Nell), the youngest girl of a impoverished noble family, who is manipulated by her sister Dorothea (Dolly) into a loveless marriage. She falls in love with Richard M’Gregor (Dick), a soldier she instantly becomes infatuated with. Her frank expression of desires were the most controversial aspect of the novel in Victorian England, however, with time, it is the relationship between the naive Nell and her cold-hearted sister Dolly that has seemingly taken the forefront as the heart of the novel. *Cometh Up As a Flower*, is in appearance, following the long tradition of using a sister to the protagonist in order to direct her to an inevitable marriage. Broughton reverses the expectations by having Nell, the heroine, be manipulated into an unhappy marriage and having Dolly, an arguable antagonist, live out all her dreams. The story does not rely on sisterly love, but breaks the Victorian conventions, leading one to reflect on <https://assignbuster.com/cometh-up-as-wild-grass-defying-victorian-sister-narrative-conventions/>

the evolving gender roles, place of women's education and the desperation of women in the marriage market.

The novel presents a pair of sisters embodying the Victorian archetypes: The fair sister and the dark sister. In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, the protagonist Elizabeth Bennett is compared to her sister, the ethereal, even-tempered Jane, throughout the novel. Elizabeth however, is a bluestocking and plain brunette, whom Mr Darcy goes as far as characterizing her appearance as "barely tolerable". Broughton writes Dolly as the epitome of aristocratic beauty, defining her as "a very fair woman to look upon," and going as far assimilating Dolly's expressions as "nun-like, dovelike, Madonna-like." She is akin to purity itself, whereas her sister has "red hair and a wide mouth." Blonde beauty went back to Petrarchan sonnets, in which it not only symbolized virtue, it had an undertone of the unattainable. Red hair on the other hand, was attached to demonic connotations, and the lack of a soul. As Nell is the narrator, all the descriptions are subjective and the reader is often led to suspect her unreliability. The narrative is paved with reflections of her comparisons such as "Dolly was beautiful, and the Lestranges had always been beautiful, and it was right she should go forth and be a credit to the old house, and I was ugly, and the Lestranges had never been ugly, and it was meet that I keep in the obscurity, for which I alone was calculated," (49). She considers herself unattractive, feeble-minded as opposed to her fair, sociable and fashionable sister. Nell has been raised by her father, without her mother, or mother-figure. This had led to a permissive upbringing, which causes her passage to womanhood exceedingly difficult, as the rules that apply to child raised laxly would not

translate well to expectations lady in age of marrying. She becomes heavily anxious in the presence of other ladies, stating she prefers the company of men, as they seem to be less judging of her. The perceived inferiority is in her constant comparison to Dolly, and the latter's constant critic of her younger sister. Dolly on the opposite side of the spectrum, is a socially adept "femme fatale". She is highly pragmatic of her position in life as woman in this society, a position in which she cannot afford to make a misstep, lest it make her already precarious prestige lose its last advantage. The Lestrangle daughters, being impoverished, yet having an aristocratic background, leaves these women in the situation of marrying rich or resorting to working in undignified (in Dolly's eyes) professions. Dolly, being aware of this reality, uses her charms to her advantage and does not show remorse when her actions come off as questionable. Nell sees this characteristic of Dolly as something she should learn. As much as she repeats her dislike of her sister, she cannot help but admiring her all the same. Their relationship dynamic is what fuels the plot.

An advantageous marriage is the only option for Nell and Dolly to save their family name, causing the already tense dynamics between the sisters to bring out an unconventional "Sister Narrative". Nell moves throughout the novel, quite naively unaware of her involvement in her family's future. They are in a desperate predicament, as Dolly's fiancé passed away shortly before their nuptials. Nell seems oblivious to the extent of which her father and sister rely on her marriage to the aggressively average Sir Hugh. She is a teenage girl, who has fallen blindly in love with an inappropriate man. She had no sense of propriety as she repeatedly meets with Dick alone. Dolly is

four years her senior, and infinitely more jaded. Her personality is split by a flirtatious, worldly socialite in the Public Sphere and a cold-blooded (not so) mother-figure. As an elder sister with much knowledge of society to impart on to Nell, Dolly is disinterested in teaching her, considering it to be but one step above working as a governess. She does not miss an opportunity to critic Nell's appearance, to the extent of greeting her after a long absence with "How are you? Much the same as usual, I see —hair arranged with a pitchfork and dress with a view for ventilation," (114). One could argue that Dolly's animosity could be fuelled by jealousy of her younger sister as she approaches spinsterhood rapidly. Others may defend Dolly as having Nell's best interest at heart, albeit with questionable methods, however, she had also been left motherless since childhood, therefore creating a gaping whole in her education in empathy. One must add that Nell is not entirely interested in Dolly's mentorship, but prefers to know how she learned this, and read up on the subject herself. She is too fond of her freedom to abide by the many social restrictions that her elder sister revels in. Nonetheless Dolly becomes the novel's main antagonist when she discovers her sister's attraction to Dick, a union that would cause a scandal and deter Sir Hugh from marrying her. This would destroy their reputation, the only semblance of dignity they had, but most importantly too Dolly, this would destroy all her prospects. She then sets herself on a mission to create as many obstacles as possible, starting with simple flirtation to redirect Dick's affections, escalating to her forging Nell's signature in a letter to Dick, asking him to keep his distances from her. This would be considered a grave offence, and when Nell finds out, after her reluctant marriage to Sir Hugh, she threatens to expose her. Although she is aware her crime could cause her engagement

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to a wealthy aristocrat to be called off, she shows no sign of remorse for her actions. This leads to Nell coming to the realization that her revenge would not adjudicate her from betraying her own sister, and it would not mend her broken heart. She decides to forgive her, resigns herself to an unhappy yet advantageous marriage and Dolly is wed into the situation she had been striving for all along.

Towards the end of the novel, as per convention, both sisters are in respectable situations, despite the fact that they both arrived to this point via sensational actions. This suggests a provocative premise, in which Broughton may be arguing the idea that traditional values are inevitable, and perhaps that resisting this passage to adulthood is to the detriment of the soul. Following Dolly's marriage, and Nell learning that Dick has passed away, the novel skips two years to which Nell is now dying. She has become deeply religious, suggesting this novel as a conversion narrative. She writes " Since then, I have been sorry for my sin; at least I have tried to be," (330). Nell does show signs of acknowledgement of her past transgressions with propriety though she longs to see Dick when her time comes. This appears as an unconvincing conversion, as Nell is also dying of consumption, an illness long considered to be caused by a broken heart, due to the rapid weight loss. This gave an impression of people withering away and being consumed by their feelings, suggesting her heart is not as pious as she may want to appear. Dolly, despite her machiavellian actions, is the one who not only survives, but is rewarded with all the superficialities she had wanted and most importantly, she survives knowing her sister had forgiven her long ago. Christina Rossetti writes her version of this convention of sisterhood in

her children's poem "Goblin Market". Her premise, although different from most sister narratives that end with weddings, she does not write marriage as the core of her protagonists' happiness. It is Lizzie's selfless actions of love that save her sister Laura from becoming a fallen woman after tasting the Goblins' fruit. *Cometh Up As a Flower* does a similar take on the sisterhood being much more important than the romance. Broughton makes an interesting paradox in which she uses these two archetypes of sisters, the rebel and the angel, pushes them to their extremes to highlight the flaws in the idealization of sisterhood in a world in which all women are rivals in the marriage market. They are but two sides of the same coin. This rings even more true for sisters, considering they would likely have similar dowries and would be bringing the prestige of their family name to the marriage. Such circumstances would entail the sisters being distinguished by their beauty and mannerism. Although in this case, the sisters are not competing for the same match, the constant comparison is a recurring theme. Dolly and Nell exchange insults, and attempt to manipulate each other to meet their goals. Broughton takes the convention of sisterly love in a courtship setting, but exploits the realities and not the romanticized version that influenced the women of the time. She also takes the opportunity to make a serious commentary on the crucial aspect of the public sphere in courtship, juxtaposing the many masks a woman must wear in order to be successful. Dolly is the epitome of a social butterfly, but who's selfish disposition weighs heavily on her entourage at home. Nell is at her most free at home, but finds social gathering, especially in the presence of other women to be source of great anxiety. The Lestrangle sisters therefore fail to wear all the masks necessary to be the quintessential Victorian woman, something most women

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would have probably found some source of relief, as no one could be perfect at all times. It does seem as though Broughton takes a stance on which mask one should prioritize.

Sisterly love in a time of radical social shifts is dubitable, albeit not unimaginable. The Victorian Era, is one that follows violent decades of decolonization, revolution and scientific progress. The aristocracy, unless they made the progressive choice of joining the industrial revolution, often found their wealth depleted. This made the daughters of these families particularly vulnerable and highly dependent on a great match if they were to secure a prosperous future. Nell is naive in the way that she prioritizes her passion and desires until womanhood is forced unto her when her father is on his death bed, leading her to realize just how important her union with Sir Hugh would be. Dolly on the other hand, is not concerned by developing a meaningful relationship with her sister, and manipulates her and Dick expertly in order to achieve her goals. Broughton, draws on this desperate reality, one she may have felt close to due to her being a spinster living with her married sisters, to emphasize just how the education of women was severely flawed and the lengths to which their environment pushes them beyond the limits of morality. Even though Nell is the one who may seem the indisputable victim with a tragic ending, whereas Dolly may come off as the mercenary villain, one must remember the context. In a Victorian milieu, Nell's end is a punishment for her transgressions of passions, and Dolly's actions are not only in the best interest of her future, they are in the best interest of her sister's future and their family's as well. Dolly followed the rules, Dolly reaped the massive rewards. In her book *Sororophobia*:

Differences Among Women in Literature and Culture, Helena Michie studies female dynamics in Victorian Literature. She writes “ Feminine passivity will reap the very rewards that female aggression seeks and fails to achieve”. Dorothea Lestrane would beg to differ.

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