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FEMINISM, SOCIALISM, AND EVOLUTIONARY BIOLOGY: UNDERSTANDING
DEGENERATION IN EMMA FRANCES BROOKE'S *A SUPERFLUOUS WOMAN*.

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FEMINISM, SOCIALISM, AND EVOLUTIONARY BIOLOGY: UNDERSTANDING
DEGENERATION IN EMMA FRANCES BROOKE'S *A SUPERFLUOUS WOMAN*.

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	iv
Abstract.....	vii
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
1.1 The Dominant Discourse of Degeneration.....	5
1.2 Identifying the Counter Narrative of Degeneration.....	13
1.3 Socialism and Evolutionary Degeneration.....	16
Chapter 2: H.G. Wells, <i>the Time Machine</i> , and Evolutionary Degeneration.....	17
2.1 Brooke and Wells.....	21
2.2 Socialist Feminism, Degeneration, and Eugenic Redemption.....	23
Chapter 3: The Woman Question and the New Woman Novel.....	24
3.1 Sarah Grand.....	28
3.2 George Egerton.....	31
3.3 Mona Caird.....	32
Chapter 4: Emma Frances Brooke and <i>A Superfluous Woman</i>	35
4.1 A Superfluous Woman.....	38
4.2 Degeneration in <i>A Superfluous Woman</i>	44
4.3 Aristocratic Decay and the Institutions of Marriage and Motherhood.....	45
4.3.1 Marriage.....	48
4.3.2 Motherhood.....	51
4.3.3 Free Love.....	54
4.5 Female Sexual Selection.....	55
Chapter 5: Conclusion.....	58

Bibliography.....	61
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Abstract

With the growing concern about evolutionary degeneration in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, discussion turned to potential avenues by which society might be regenerated. For many, the new science of eugenics, built upon principles of natural and sexual selection as described by Charles Darwin, promised the answer. The predominant history of eugenics focuses on its application by white, middle class, males to maintain racial, class, and gender boundaries. However, in recent years, historians such as George Robb and Angelique Richardson have both highlighted ways that the language of evolutionary degeneration and eugenics was appropriated to counter the status quo, and call for social and political reform. While eugenics may seem at first opposed to the goals of feminism and vice versa, many feminist writers and thinkers employed eugenic principles and language in order to bolster the scientific validity and appeal of their arguments. Emma Frances Brooke, feminist, socialist, and New Woman author, used biological and eugenic language in her 1894 novel *A Superfluous Woman* to discuss the social and sexual boundaries that were set for women, as well as how these impacted gender relations and equality, female labor, reproductive rights, and the nature and meaning of marriage and of motherhood, ultimately leading to degeneration.

An historical analysis of Brooke's work that pays attention to the history of biology, and specifically to the history of evolutionary ideas about progress, degeneration, and their relation to eugenics, affords us a deeper insight into the social and political issues that were at stake in what was called the "woman question." Brooke's work is grounded in ideas of heredity, as well as natural relationships between men and women and the ways that society impacted these relationships. For Brooke, the threat of evolutionary degeneration was thwartable through the

education of women, and female choice in sexual partners, a more natural attraction based alternative to the contemporary male-led “marriage market.”

Chapter 1: Introduction

The predominant story of evolutionary degeneration as told through most of the historiography has been the story of repression, retribution, and efforts to maintain the status quo. Medical and scientific theorists of the Victorian era such as the ones exemplified in Daniel Pick, Elaine Showalter, and Robert A. Nye's works sought to use theories of biology and heredity to explain criminal and insane behavior, but also poverty and political radicalism.¹ The disenfranchised lower classes, categorized by the British economist Alfred Marshall (1842-1924) as "residuum," as seen in Gareth Stedman Jones' *Outcast London*, were a problem which many later sought to solve through eugenic programs of controlled breeding.² The term "residuum" was picked up by journalists and the media, as well as social reformers, statisticians, eugenicists, and other figures considering the state of England's urban poor.³ Otherwise respectable middle class people such as the members of the Men's and Women's Club sought to apply scientific principles and logical thinking to societal problems and gender relations, by meeting to discuss topics such as gender differences and sex.⁴ However, in more recent years, the historical study of degeneration has shifted to focus on the ways the language of evolutionary degeneration was appropriated to counter the narrative that runs through Pick, Showalter, and Nye's works. Notably, George Robb has written about the adoption of degeneration discourse by various factions within the socialist, feminist and aesthetic movements.⁵ Similarly, Angelique Richardson

¹ Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture*, (London: Virago Press, 1987); Robert A. Nye, *Crime, Madness and Politics in Modern France: The Medical Concept of National Decline*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

² Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship Between Classes in Victorian Society*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971). 11-13, 242-243, 282-290; Rita McWilliams Tullberg, "Marshall, Alfred (1842-1924)." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. 08 December 2022.

³ Jones, *Outcast London*, 11-13, 242-243, 282-290.

⁴ Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 135-137.

⁵ George Robb, "The Way of All Flesh: Degeneration, Eugenics, and the Gospel of Free Love," *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Apr., 1996, Vol. 6, No. 4, Apr., 1996, 589-603; Goutham Sukumaran, "Illusions of Progress and

has focused on degeneration and eugenic principles in feminist literature and the new woman novel.⁶ A number of scholars such as C.W. Saleeby and Clare Hanson have called this application of biological, specifically eugenic principles, to feminism “Eugenic Feminism.”⁷ While eugenics may seem at first opposed to the goals of feminism and vice versa, many feminist writers and thinkers employed eugenic principles and language in order to bolster the scientific validity and appeal of their arguments.⁸ Specifically, Richardson highlights the work of Sarah Grand (1854-1943), Mary Dunne Bright aka George Egerton (1859-1945), and Mona Caird (1854-1932), each of whom was a prominent “New Woman” author. Both Robb and Richardson focus on feminist and new woman literature, however, neither give more than passing reference to the very prominent work of Emma Frances Brooke (1844-1926).

An historical analysis of the work of socialist-feminist author Emma Frances Brooke that pays attention to the history of biology, and specifically to the history of evolutionary ideas about progress, degeneration, and their relation to eugenics, affords us a deeper insight into the social and political issues that were at stake in what was called the “woman question.” Brooke’s work is grounded in ideas of heredity, as well as natural relationships between men and women and the ways that society impacted these relationships. In this essay I focus on Brooke’s book *A Superfluous Woman*.⁹ Her novel *A Superfluous Woman* included ideas about “New Womanhood” and the social and sexual relations that were proper to society, female labor, reproductive rights,

Decline in Colonial India: Evolution and degeneration in the works of Pramatha Nath Bose, c. 1910-1930,” Master’s Thesis, (University of Oklahoma, 2024).

⁶ Angelique Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁷ C.W. Saleeby, *Woman and Womanhood : a Search for Principles*, (New York: M. Kennerley, 1911), 7.

⁸ Clare Hanson, “Feminism, Eugenics, and Genetics: from Convergence to Contestation,” in *Companion to Literature and Feminism* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2023), 263-274.

⁹ Emma Frances Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, (London: Heinemann, 1894).

and the nature and meaning of marriage and of motherhood.¹⁰ Specifically, Brooke's book deals with the incredibly limited choices available to women when seeking marriage and children. Brooke's work deals with questions of class and gender, and how these questions were tied to problems such as degeneration and the well noted decline in the birth rate among the middle class.¹¹ While Brooke's literary contributions have received due recognition, little attention has been paid to the biological arguments made in Brooke's work, or to how Brooke's understanding of Charles Darwin's (1809-1882) theories of natural and sexual selection, as well as a multitude of other influential scientific thinkers of the time, inform her writing.¹² In this essay I propose that through a close examination of Brooke's 1894 novel *A Superfluous Woman*, we can see one of the many ways that late 19th century feminists adopted biological language and knowledge into their own arguments and causes.¹³ This added scientific credence to arguments for women's rights. By comparing Brooke to other and better known advocates of eugenic socialism, such as the popular science fiction author H.G. Wells (1866-1946) and the feminist 'New Woman' author Sarah Grand, we can see the diversity of views on these topics that existed within the developing socialist and feminist movements. Much as evolution and eugenics were embraced by both the right and the left of the political spectrum, within the left it was interpreted in a variety of different ways, and to different ends. For example, writers such as Sarah Grand supported

¹⁰ Angelique Richardson, "Brooke, Emma Frances (1844–1922)" *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 Sep. 2004. For a detailed consideration of the development and reframing of marriage around motherhood, see Anna Davin, "Imperialism and Motherhood," *History Workshop Journal* No.5, (Spring 1978), 9–65.

¹¹ As Davin points out, not only did the decline in the birthrate become a major social and political concern at the turn of the twentieth century, but so too did the dreadful infant mortality rate. See Anna Davin, "Imperialism and Motherhood" in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 1997), 87-139, 88-90.

¹² Barbara Tilly, "Introduction" in *A Superfluous Woman*, (Brighton, Victorian Secrets, 2015); Kay Daniels, "Emma Brooke: Fabian, Feminist and Writer." *Women's History Review*. 12:2, 2003; Courtney J. Andree, "Reproducing Disability and Degeneration in the Victorian Fin de Siècle," *Literature Compass*. 19 April 2016; Sherri Catherine Smith, *Civic Fantasy: New Woman Fiction, Citizenship, and the Limits of the Aesthetic*, Ph.D. diss., (Indiana University, 2000).

¹³ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*.

eugenics and essential biological differences between the sexes, while Mona Caird was an anti-eugenicist who argued that womanhood was a learned and constructed category.¹⁴

It is important to note, however, that although Brooke is very much unknown today, in her time this was not the case; *A Superfluous Woman* was immensely popular both in England and in the United States.¹⁵ As scholars have shown, paying attention to this type of work is important because it can show the extent to which ideas about evolution and its mechanisms of progress, of degeneration, and of regeneration, were fundamental to how these men and women defined what it meant to be a socialist, and how they understood ethical and just social and sexual relationships.¹⁶ The fact that Darwinian ideas of struggle and competition and of natural and sexual selection were so frequently and even routinely appealed to to support social and political theory throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, meant that these ideas were often grounded in relation to what the speaker believed to be the natural condition of humanity. As I shall show here, however, and as one might expect given the diversity of views not only about evolution, but about what might constitute just and proper social and sexual relations, the ways in which they were held together and articulated were often complicated and produced sometimes contradictory conclusions within the movement.¹⁷ Some, such as socialist and radical writers, for example, argued that it was the imposition of unnatural and unjust social conditions upon society that could and should be remedied by a return to a more natural, just, and socialistic

¹⁴ Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, 98-99, 169.

¹⁵ Describing Brooke as unknown today serves as a comment on what historians have chosen to remember and draw our attention to; Barbara Tilly, "Introduction" in *A Superfluous Woman*, 5-6, 12.

¹⁶ For consideration of Wells in the context of evolutionary ideas see Piers J. Hale, *Political Descent: Malthus, Mutualism, and the Politics of Evolution in Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 155-205; Piers J. Hale, "Wells and the Politics of Evolution" Duncan Bell and Sarah Cole, (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of H.G. Wells* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, in press); on Grand see Angelique Richardson "Sarah Grand and Eugenic Love" *Love and Eugenics in the Nineteenth Century: Rational Reproduction and the New Woman*, 95-131.

¹⁷ The wide variety of evolutionary views available at the time can be seen in Vernon Kellogg's *Darwinism To-day*; Vernon Kellogg, *Darwinism To-day*, (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1907).

way of life. Others, often in the capitalist camp, argued more forcefully that the natural processes of evolution — that Darwin had shown to be based upon individualism, competition, and struggle, — needed to be overcome and managed by human social, political, and technological means. This latter speaks to the general position of the Fabian Society by the mid 1890s, but in the early years of what Stephen Yeo has called the “socialist revival” of the mid 1880s, both streams of thought appealed to members of the Fabian Society, and Brooke was one of them.¹⁸ By this reading of things, humankind needed to rise above nature, and control it to ensure the best outcomes for humanity. While it is tempting to frame only the latter of these sets of ideas as eugenic thought, here I want to make the case that both were eugenic in their ambitions, even if the former was arguably a much more benign approach to making the world anew.

Thus, in this essay I shall turn first to the established historiography of evolutionary degeneration, to provide context for the work of George Robb and then Angelique Richardson. This sets the stage for first a brief consideration of H.G. Wells and his 1895 novel *Time Machine* in particular, before I then turn to give a more detailed consideration of Richardson’s account of Sarah Grand, George Egerton, and Mona Caird. Following this I finally turn to Brooke and her novel *A Superfluous Woman*.¹⁹

1.1 The Dominant Discourse of Degeneration:

The conventional historiography of degeneration, as seen in works such as Daniel Pick’s 1989 *Faces of Degeneration*, holds that concerns about societal degeneration were aimed from the top downward, with the unwell, insane, political radicals, and criminals as a particular

¹⁸ Fabian Society, *Fabian Tract no. 70 Report on Fabian Policy and Resolution Presented by the Fabian Society to the International Socialist Workers and Trade Union Congress, London 1896*, (London: Fabian Society, 1896); Yeo, Stephen. “A New Life: The Religion of Socialism in Britain, 1883-1896.” *History Workshop*, no. 4 (1977).

¹⁹ H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (London: Heinemann, 1895).

target.²⁰ Pick in particular points to various scientific authorities to showcase the ways that the core concepts and language of degeneracy and degeneration formed across Western and Central Europe.²¹ Citing scholars such as psychologist Benedict-Augustine Morel (1809-1873), the criminologist-physiologist Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909), the psychologist Henry Maudsley (1835-1918), and philosopher and psychologist Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) Pick argues that the scientific language of degeneration developed simultaneously across the European continent as well as in England, and that the primary effect of this language was to reinforce and maintain the established status quo of racial, class, and gender divides.²²

One of Pick's examples, the French thinker, Bénédict-Augustin Morel published his work *Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles, et morales de l'espèce humaine* [Treatise on the Physical, Intellectual, and Moral Degenerations of the Human Species] in 1857, and while the book did not appear in English at the time, it gained significant attention from British and other European medical thinkers, and it was widely reviewed.²³ As Morel published his work before Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, his work was grounded in the ideas of French transmutationists such as Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744-1829) and Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire (1772-1844).²⁴ Because of this, Morel's understanding of physical and psychological attributes hung heavily on both the environment and on heredity. Transmutationist theory, which held that traits an organism acquired in their lifetime could be passed onto their offspring, informed not only Morel but a majority of early 19th century biological thought. It is important to understand the shift which came about with *On The Origin of Species* in order to understand the

²⁰ Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*.

²¹ Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, 2.

²² Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, 2-3.

²³ Benedict Augustin Morel, "On the Degeneracy of the Human Race," *Journal of Psychological Medicine and Mental Pathology*, 10 (April 1857), 159–208.

²⁴ Morel, "On the Degeneracy of the Human Race," 161-162.

evolutionary understanding and fears of degeneration that came increasingly to the fore in the second half of the century.²⁵ This change is especially important to understand because while Pick's sources begin as early as the 1850s, degeneration discourse reached its height in the 1880s and 90s.²⁶

Lombroso's 1876 work *Criminal Man* (*L'uomo delinquente*), for example, detailed the development of the study of crime into a science, based on empirical data.²⁷ Specifically, Lombroso was interested in physical features and metrics which could be used to identify criminal –degenerate– tendencies.²⁸ Lombroso's criminological approach combined these physical observations and measurements of mental patients and criminals with psychological interviews.²⁹ The goal was to demonstrate the primitive physicality that accompanied habitual or born criminal behavior, a concept Lombroso described as the atavism of the criminal type.³⁰

Lombroso, perhaps more than other thinkers of the time, has been misrepresented by the historiography. This has to do both with his portrayal in the work of Stephen Jay Gould and the available English translations of his work in the 19th century.³¹ Despite a right wing reputation in the modern day, the goal for Lombroso was not only to identify the born criminal in society, but also to change the way these criminals were handled in the legal system of the time.³² According to Lombroso's work, crime was not the result of moral failing or conscious choice as had been previously thought. Instead, it was the result of animalistic or savage instincts remaining in the

²⁵ Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, (London: John Murray, 1859).

²⁶ Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, 2.

²⁷ Nicole Hahn Rafter and Mary Gibson, "Editor's Introduction," *Criminal Man*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 7.

²⁸ Cesare Lombroso, *L'Uomo Delinquente*. (Milano: Ulrico Hoepli, 1876); Cesare Lombroso, *La Donna Delinquente, la Prostituta e la Donna Normale*. (Tourin: L. Roux & Co. 1893).

²⁹ Rafter and Gibson. "Editor's Introduction," *Criminal Man*, 7.

³⁰ Rafter and Gibson. "Editor's Introduction," *Criminal Man*, 7; Lombroso. *L'Uomo Delinquente*; Lombroso. *La Donna Delinquente, la Prostituta e la Donna Normale*.

³¹ Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1981), 152-156.

³² Rafter and Gibson. "Editor's Introduction," *Criminal Man*.

memory of human development. Individuals could be born before they fully developed through all stages of human existence, causing primitive or atavistic physicality and behavior.³³ This argument was in line with contemporary scientific beliefs drawing on such theories as Charles Darwin's theory of evolution and German romantic notions of embryologic recapitulation.³⁴

In Lombroso's work, certain exaggerated features or characteristics can be used to determine a criminal's culpability for a crime, and to determine criminals who can be rehabilitated from "born" criminals who cannot. However, atavism was not only denoted by physical traits. The mental and behavioral degeneracy and savagery of future generations was also a major concern, and this concern is passed onto Jessamine Halliday, Brooke's heroine.³⁵

Herbert Spencer, another of Pick's subjects, like Lombroso, was a noted progressivist in his time. Unlike Lombroso, Spencer's progressive reputation has lasted to the present day. However, as Piers Hale has pointed out, historians have often overlooked the importance that fears of evolutionary degeneration played in Spencer's work, due in large part to this enduring positive reputation as a prophet of progress.³⁶ Spencer has so often been cast as the prophet of progress that scholars have been hesitant to tie him to concepts which would later spawn into eugenic science, with all of its terrible and complex history.³⁷ However, it is crucial to understanding Spencer's work to keep in mind that Spencer, in his work as a social philosopher and radical journalist, built his entire conception of society around evolutionary ideas. Spencer's writings on subjects such as treatment of the poor show an understanding of evolution different

³³ Lombroso. *L'Uomo Delinquente*; Lombroso. *La Donna Delinquente, la Prostituta e la Donna Normale*.

³⁴ Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*; For more on embryonic recapitulation see Stephen Jay Gould, *Ontogeny and Phylogeny*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977); Robert J. Richards, *The Meaning of Evolution: The Morphological Construction and Ideological Reconstruction of Darwin's Theory*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

³⁵ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 106.

³⁶ Goutham Sukumaran, Emily R. Laiben, and Piers J. Hale, "Herbert Spencer" *Evolutionary Degeneration in Victorian Britain*, (Oxfordshire: Routledge Press, 2025), in preparation.

³⁷ Sukumaran, Laiben, and Hale, "Herbert Spencer" *Evolutionary Degeneration in Victorian Britain*.

from that of Charles Darwin. Spencer's understanding of evolution and degeneration, which predated the publication of Darwin's work, was closer to the work of Lamarck and of Robert Chambers (1802-1871), the anonymous author of the *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*.³⁸ Spencer was a firm believer in the inheritance of acquired characteristics, in line with Chambers and Lamarck. Guided by these beliefs, Spencer argued that social programs of state intervention were in fact detrimental to the lower classes and to society.³⁹ Programs designed to educate and shelter the poor, in Spencer's view, interfered with the natural progress of human development. State welfare was preventing the lower classes from developing their own skills of survival and instead created a race of people entirely dependent on the state. Spencer's work shows his belief that policy impacted biology, and the nature of human evolution.

In Elaine Showalter's 1987 book *The Female Malady*, Showalter highlights the impacts of Charles Darwin's work and natural selection on English psychology, especially as it pertained to women and changing ideas of insanity and gender.⁴⁰ Like Pick, Showalter's work focuses on the scientific authorities John Conolly (1794-1866) and Henry Maudsley, and their changing theories of the root causes of insanity. However, and unlike Pick her focus is on the ways in which this discourse was adapted and applied specifically to women. The first half of the nineteenth century was a time of humanitarian and moralistic management for those sent to insane asylums for treatment. The idealistic theories of asylum superintendents such as John Conolly held that through paternal care, and a regiment of chores such as laundry and cleaning, women suffering from mental conditions could be lifted up out of the squalor of the neglectful

³⁸ Robert Chambers, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, (London: John Chruchill, 1844).

³⁹ Sukumaran, Laiben, and Hale. "Herbert Spencer." *Evolutionary Degeneration in Victorian Britain*.

⁴⁰ Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 106.

madhouse and the disorder of insanity.⁴¹ This focus on the environment is in line with contemporary theories of behavior and heredity such as those of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck.

However, Victorian psychiatry soon saw the rise of a generation inspired by Charles Darwin against the importance of milieu and towards the overarching control of heredity and physical cause.⁴² Following Darwin's theories of evolution not just in biology but also in the social sciences, the men of science sought to explore an understanding of insanity through scientific interrogation, observation, and experimentation. As Henry Maudsley pointed out in his 1874 work *Responsibility in Mental Disease*, insanity was not the product of random happenstance.⁴³ Rather, mental disease was the result of material and hereditary causes. Applying Charles Darwin's laws of natural and sexual selection to the mental and social world, Showalter shows that "Darwinian psychiatrists" like Maudsley held that madness was a biological trait that marked out the impotent and the unfit.⁴⁴ Due to the hereditary nature of insanity as it was understood in a Darwinian world, earlier treatments which relied on rehabilitation and domestication of lunatics were no longer viable. Instead programs of "studied neglect and population control" were promoted to lead to the eventual dying out of the degenerate altogether.⁴⁵

Showalter's work on the scientific study of the insane and the development of British psychology at the hands of men like Maudsley provides an important context for understanding Victorian fears of social, cultural, and biological degeneration. Insanity came to be defined as the inability of a person to control their base natural and emotional instincts.⁴⁶ In the Victorian era

⁴¹ Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 28.

⁴² Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 104.

⁴³ Henry Maudsley, *Responsibility in Mental Disease*, (Boston: D. Appleton & Company Publishing, 1874), 28.

⁴⁴ Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 104.

⁴⁵ Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 110.

⁴⁶ Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 77, 105.

self control and the ability to hold reason over and above emotion were the highest signs of masculinity, civilization, and mature development.⁴⁷ This was the case not only in terms of evaluating the developmental status of individuals, but could be and was often also applied to other cultures, nations, and races. A mastery over oneself — and of one’s animal instincts and desires — showed a place high on the chain of evolutionary progress. Thus, insanity found in “civilized” society was not simply a state of being, it was emblematic of a regression or degeneration backwards down the evolutionary ladder.⁴⁸ Following Lombroso’s work, these steps backwards, the removal of the trappings of a more complete evolution, were often foreshadowed by physical markers.⁴⁹ Maudsley cautioned men in particular to look for warning signs of future insanity in women they might wish to marry, as these physical markers of degeneration were especially visible in the female population.⁵⁰ What was particularly alarming, though, was that whereas the hallmarks of the criminal man often presented in the form of irregularities in the physical structure that went against the middle class masculine ideal, the female degenerate was often marked out by a particular and enticing beauty.⁵¹ The importance of work such as Lombroso’s and Maudsley’s shown in *The Female Malady*, for our purposes, is the warning against careless breeding.⁵² A major theme in Brooke’s *A Superfluous Woman*.

As we can see in Pick, Showalter, and Jones’ work, the scientific language of degeneration in Victorian England, particularly from the 1870s to the 1890s, was ubiquitous. In Robert Nye’s *Crime, Madness and Politics in Modern France: The Medical Concept of National*

⁴⁷ Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind: 1830-1870*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 93-109.

⁴⁸ Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 106.

⁴⁹ The widespread relevance of this theory can be seen in the contemporary work of Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso; Cesare Lombroso, *L’Uomo Delinquente*; Cesare Lombroso, *La Donna Delinquente, la Prostituta e la Donna Normale*.

⁵⁰ Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 106-107.

⁵¹ Henry Maudsley, *Body and Mind: An Inquiry into Their Connection and Mutual Influence, Specially in Reference to Mental Disorders*, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1873).

⁵² Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 106-107.

Decline he focuses on degeneration specifically in a French context.⁵³ In France, like in England, evolutionary degeneration and biological/hereditary determinism had major ramifications for social programs, criminal justice, and society.⁵⁴

However, one point of conflict was where exactly the source of societal degeneration lay. The established theory of societal degeneration, grounded in the works of men such as Cesare Lombroso and Augustine Benedict Morel, held that the biggest threat to society's progress could be found in the lower classes, criminals, socialists, homosexuals, and the insane.⁵⁵ This is the dominant discourse that has been so well documented in the contemporary historiography of scholars such as Pick, Nye, and Showalter. The best example of the blame leveled against these groups, the "residuum" of society, can be found in Gareth Stedman Jones' 1971 book *Outcast London*.⁵⁶ The residuum, as Stedman Jones explains it, was those members of society who were either unable or unwilling to move with the flood of progress, and they posed a tremendous problem for the greater society.⁵⁷ These elements, whether they be prostitutes, violent gangs, beggars, or drunks, made up a not insignificant portion of the population and, in particular, London became a literal and figurative breeding ground for the residuum.⁵⁸ This residuum, and the middle class concerns about their impact on society have comprised a majority of the dominant historiography on Victorian degeneration discourse.

⁵³ Nye, *Crime, Madness and Politics in Modern France*, xi.

⁵⁴ Nye, *Crime, Madness and Politics in Modern France*.

⁵⁵ See, e.g., Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*; Showalter, *The Female Malady*; Robert Nye, *Crime, Madness and France: The Medical Concept of National Decline*; J. Edward Chamberlin And Sander Gilman, eds., *Degeneration: The Dark Side of Progress*; Kelly Hurley, "Hereditary Taint and Cultural Contagion: The Social Siecle Degeneration Theory," *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 14 (1990), 193-214.

⁵⁶ Jones, *Outcast London*, 11.

⁵⁷ Jones, *Outcast London*, 11.

⁵⁸ Jones, *Outcast London*, 13, 282.

1.2 Identifying the Counter Narrative of Degeneration:

However, and counter to this dominant discourse, it was in Robb's 1996 essay "The Way of All Flesh" that he called into question how unified the theory of degeneration truly was. In the previous historiography the concern being discussed by scientific thinkers was for the residuum or dregs of society, those who were unemployed, homeless, and reliant on the state or on others to support them.⁵⁹ Early concepts of eugenics can be found in the Neo-Darwinian wake of the dissolution of ideas of the inheritance of acquired characteristics, but also in certain branches of Lamarckian thought.⁶⁰ While Darwinists and Neo-Darwinists focused on heredity, Lamarckian eugenicists such as E.W. MacBride (1866-1940) argued that species change came from changes in habit caused by exposure to a new environment, and that a sedentary lifestyle would always lead to degeneration.⁶¹ If the lower classes, degenerate either by their nature or their lifestyle, could not be improved through education, training, or other social programs, then the conversation must by necessity turn to how to prevent them from overtaking the country. This concern was made worse by contemporary surveys, such as Charles Booth's (1840-1916) survey of London and Seebohm Rowntree's (1871-1954) survey of York, as well as censuses, which revealed the alarming fact that the middle class' birth rate was dropping, while the lower class' remained the same.⁶² These were the elements which were contributing to degeneration with their out of control breeding, which far outstripped that of the respectable middle class. However, as Robb demonstrates, this theory of degeneration did not go uncontested. While there was indeed a general agreement that English culture and society was in decline, counter cultural

⁵⁹ Jones, *Outcast London*, 11.

⁶⁰ Peter Bowler, *Evolution: The History of an Idea*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Peter Bowler, "E. W. MacBride's Lamarckian Eugenics and its Implications for the Social Construction of Scientific Knowledge" in *Annals of Science*, 1984-05, Vol.41 (3), p.245-260; Caden C. Testa and Piers J. Hale, *Evolution in Victorian Britain Volume 1: Evolution Before Darwin*, (London: Routledge, 2025).

⁶¹ Bowler, "E. W. MacBride's Lamarckian Eugenics and its Implications for the Social Construction of Scientific Knowledge," 248.

⁶² Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, 35.

theories as to exactly who were society's degenerate members, and who was responsible for the downfall of society were mounted in opposition to the dominant middle class framing that occupied Stedman Jones, Pick, and Showalter. As Robb has shown, socialists, feminists, homosexuals, and others — the very people who had variously been identified as the degenerates in the dominant discourse — now maintained that in fact if they were in any way degenerate (and many of them denied that this was the case), it was the result, variously, of capitalism, the effects of a degenerate aristocracy, or the denial of women's equality that were the main drivers of moral and therefore social, and ultimately biological decline.⁶³ Especially among socialist thinkers, the capitalist was seen as the prime degenerate, and the capitalist class as parasitic to labor.

Aside from socialism, the other key point where Robb's work focuses upon and overlaps with the work of Emma Frances Brooke is his focus on feminism and feminist authors. When discussing the importance of literature in his discussions of degeneration discourse outside of scientific channels, Robb points out that female authors' contributions have historically been overlooked.⁶⁴ While the "New Woman" novelist Olive Schreiner (1855-1920) was a noted member of Karl Pearson's (1857-1936) Men's and Woman's club, a group that gathered specifically to discuss the differences between the sexes, many other female thinkers were not invited to join, as they were considered too radical by club leadership.⁶⁵ Emma Brooke, for example, was not invited to join the Men's and Women's club, although she kept correspondence with club founder Karl Pearson and occasionally attended or spoke at club meetings.⁶⁶

⁶³ Robb, "The Way of All Flesh," 589-603.

⁶⁴ Robb, "The Way of All Flesh," 598.

⁶⁵ Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 139-141.

⁶⁶ Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*, 141-142.

Robb makes note of Emma Frances Brooke's novel *A Superfluous Woman*, specifically, pointing out that it predated male-written novels such as Grant Allen's (1848-1899) *The Woman Who Did*.⁶⁷ *The Woman Who Did* tells the story of an educated woman who rejects marriage in favor of living with her partner and having a child out of wedlock. Due to legal and social prejudice she falls into poverty after her partner's death and ends the story by committing suicide. Brooke reportedly saw this novel as an important statement on the "woman question" and the situation of women in society.⁶⁸ Robb argues that Brooke's novel is an argument in support of free love as a solution to degeneration. Free love in this context, before the modern "bohemian" connotations of the phrase, was a term associated with the freedom to choose one's partner, usually through sexual attraction, rather than for money or social position.⁶⁹ In this article Brooke is counted not just among feminists, many of whom, like Grand, opposed free love, but among thinkers such as H.G. Wells, George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), Catherine Gasquoine Hartley (1867-1928) and others who understood degeneration to be the result of the status quo, rather than a reason to uphold it. However, while Brooke is mentioned in passing in the essay, Robb spends very little time actually deeply examining the ways in which Brooke conceptualised degeneration, its implications, and solutions in her work, noting only that Brooke "treated the themes of degeneration and free love a year before Allen's *The Woman Who Did* and in a manner strikingly similar..." and provided a brief synopsis of the novel.⁷⁰ Further, Robb does not discuss the significance of Brooke's greater career as an author and feminist.

⁶⁷ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*; Grant Allen, *The Woman Who Did* (London: John Lane Publishing, 1895).

⁶⁸ Daniels, "Emma Brooke: Fabian, Feminist and Writer," 154.

⁶⁹ Robb, "The Way of All Flesh," 598; Grant Allen, *The Woman Who Did*, 593.

⁷⁰ Robb, "The Way of All Flesh," 598; Grant Allen, *The Woman Who Did*.

1.3 Socialism and Evolutionary Degeneration

Understanding the influence of socialism on the critique of top-down theories of degeneration is crucial, for, as the historian Stephen Yeo has long since pointed out, from the middle 1880s there was a socialist revival in England, and socialists had a lot to say on this issue. From 1884 a number of explicitly socialist organisations came into being in England, including the Fabian Society, the Social Democratic Federation, the Socialist League, and, from 1893, the Independent Labour Party.⁷¹ As Yeo pointed out, socialist arguments were not only based upon the advantages and the justice of a different economic system, but rather presented socialism as a different way of living, a different culture, and a different morality. This was frequently framed in explicitly religious terms, which fueled a language of “religion of socialism,” even though for many members of these organisations it was a secular religion.⁷² In his 1977 article “A New Life: The Religion of Socialism in Britain 1883-1896” Yeo attempted to frame out for his readers the full extent, in width and in depth, of the “religion of socialism,” which served to fulfill the role that many socialists felt a corrupt establishment Christianity had failed to do.⁷³ Men like Edward Carpenter (1844-1929), William Morris (1834-1896), Sidney Webb (1859-1947), H.G. Wells, George Bernard Shaw, Robert Blatchford (1851-1943), Edward Aveling (1849-1898), and Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921) and women like Beatrice Potter Webb (1858-1943), Katherine Conway (1867-1950), Annie Besant (1847-1933), Eleanor Marx (1855-1898), Olive Schreiner (1855-1920), and Charlotte Wilson (1855-1920), amongst many others, each and all argued that capitalism and industrialism had failed to improve the lives of vast swaths of the British population.⁷⁴ Indeed, it was life under capitalism that they found morally, spiritually, and

⁷¹ Yeo, “A New Life: The Religion of Socialism in Britain, 1883-1896,” 7-8.

⁷² Yeo, “A New Life: The Religion of Socialism in Britain, 1883-1896,” 5–56.

⁷³ Yeo, “A New Life: The Religion of Socialism in Britain, 1883-1896,” 7.

⁷⁴ Yeo, “A New Life: The Religion of Socialism in Britain, 1883-1896,” 9-10.

physically degrading. As Robb has pointed out, this context of a deeply held faith in socialism not only as a critique and indictment of capitalism, but as the means by which society might recover itself is crucial for grasping the breadth of the discourse of degeneration in Britain, and which gives us quite a different understanding of the history of degeneration than that documented by Pick, Nye, Showalter, and others. Rather than a tool to bolster and reinforce the status quo, in socialist and feminist circles, the language of degeneration was appropriated to describe the consequences of life under capitalism and the result of the adoption of middle class Victorian values and virtues. Importantly, and, as Piers J. Hale has pointed out in his own work on the British socialist movement, this socialist understanding of degeneration was routinely framed in explicitly evolutionary terms.⁷⁵ And, in the context of academic studies of the subject, it is therefore unsurprising that the science writer and science fiction author H.G. Wells has received the majority of the attention.

Chapter 2: H.G. Wells, *the Time Machine* and Evolutionary Degeneration:

Far more prevalent in Robb's essay is the work of H.G. Wells, specifically his 1895 novel *The Time Machine*, which could perhaps be described as the quintessential novel on degeneration from the Victorian era.⁷⁶ Scholars studying evolutionary degeneration have often highlighted Wells' *The Time Machine*. This is understandable as the novel is easily understood as a clear exploration of Wells' concerns about the potential evolutionary degeneration of humanity. Wells

⁷⁵ Hale, *Political Descent*, see chapters 4 & 5 especially; Piers J. Hale, "William Morris, Human Nature and the Biology of Utopia," Bennett P. & Miles R., (eds), *William Morris in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010), 107–28; Piers J. Hale, "Of Mice and Men: Evolution and the Socialist Utopia. H.G. Wells, William Morris and George Bernard Shaw," *Journal of the History of Biology*, 43, 1, (2010), 17–66; Piers J. Hale, "The Search for Purpose in a Post-Darwinian Universe: George Bernard Shaw, 'Creative Evolution', and Shavian Eugenics: 'The Dark Side of the Force,'" *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences*, 28, 2, (2006), 191–214; Piers J. Hale, "Labor and the Human Relationship with Nature: The Naturalization of Politics in the Work of Thomas Henry Huxley, Herbert George Wells, and William Morris," *Journal of the History of Biology*, 36, 2, (2003), 249–284.

⁷⁶ H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine*, (London: Heinemann, 1895).

is also favored by historians of science because he had the clear scientific background and credentials to write knowledgeably on the subject, and in light of the latest developments in the scientific community.⁷⁷ Wells was not only himself a science teacher, but also a student of some of the greatest scientific thinkers of his time.

In 1884 Wells had enrolled in the Normal School of Science and studied under anatomist and ardent Darwinian evolutionist, Thomas Henry Huxley (1825-1895). It was here too that he met with the zoologist E. Ray Lankester (1847-1929), who had written the controversial 1880 work, *Degeneration. A Chapter in Darwinism*.⁷⁸ It was in this work that he defined degeneration as “a gradual change of the structure in which the organism becomes adapted to less varied and less complex conditions of life.”⁷⁹ Huxley, Wells’ teacher and mentor, had been instrumental in developing the program for educating science teachers of which Wells was a student, and Lankester had worked for a time as Huxley’s demonstrator.⁸⁰

As Hale has pointed out, the work of August Weismann (1834-1914) was much discussed by the students at the Normal School, and both Weismann’s rejection of the Lamarckian inheritance of acquired characters and his theory of degeneration based on what he called “panmixia.” “Panmixia” described the circumstances in which change or changes to an environment would lead natural selection to stop favoring or selecting a particular characteristic.⁸¹ According to Weismann’s theory, natural selection was not only responsible for the creation of new species or traits, but for maintaining them. Therefore, if conditions became

⁷⁷ Piers J. Hale, “H.G. Wells and the Politics of Evolution” *Oxford Handbook of H.G. Wells*; Peter Kemp, *H. G. Wells and the Culminating Ape: Biological Imperatives and Imaginative Obsessions*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996).

⁷⁸ H.G. Wells, *An Experiment in Autobiography*, (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1934); E. Ray Lankester, *Degeneration : a Chapter in Darwinism*, (London: Macmillan, 1880).

⁷⁹ Lankester, *Degeneration*, 32.

⁸⁰ Adrian Desmond, “Huxley, Thomas Henry,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 14 September, 2023.

⁸¹ August Weismann, *Essays Upon Heredity*, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1892); Frederick B. Churchill, *August Weismann: Development, Heredity, and Evolution*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

such that less fit individuals survived and reproduced, where previously they would have been destroyed by virtue of natural selection, then their less fit traits could be passed on and integrated into the species as a whole.⁸² This would in turn lead to the degeneration of the species.

This theory later had a major influence on Wells.⁸³ This was in large part due to the fact that Lankester was a foremost translator of Weismann's works into English. Weismann took a strong stance against Lamarckian ideas of the inheritance of acquired characteristics, a position that was accepted by Wells' teachers Huxley and Lankester.⁸⁴ Weismann's insistence on natural selection as the only means by which new species came to be created a school of "neo-darwinist" thought which could perhaps be described as more Darwinian than Darwin.⁸⁵ This distinction is important, because Darwin, unlike the neo-Darwinians, always held onto some belief in the Lamarckian principle of the inheritance of acquired characters, and the direct adaptation to the environment through use and disuse.⁸⁶ During Wells' time at the Normal School, Weismann's theories were controversial, but on the rise, as Wells points out in his autobiography.⁸⁷ As Hale has shown, Weismann's work deeply impacted Wells' views on socialism, as well as his education in biology. In contrast to William Morris' *News from Nowhere*, for instance, Weismann's writings on heredity and natural selection showed that the processes of evolutionary change must of necessity be much slower than could be the case by Lamarckian means, and from this point onwards, Wells became skeptical of socialist strategies of change that relied upon them.⁸⁸

⁸² Weismann, *Essays Upon Heredity*; Hale, *Political Descent*, 275-276.

⁸³ Hale, *Political Descent*; Hale, "H.G. Wells and the Politics of Evolution" *Oxford Handbook of H.G. Wells*.

⁸⁴ Hale, *Political Descent*, 271.

⁸⁵ Hale, *Political Descent*, 273-274.

⁸⁶ Hale, *Political Descent*, 273-274.

⁸⁷ Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, 163.

⁸⁸ William Morris, "News from Nowhere" *The Commonweal*, 1890; Piers J. Hale in *William Morris in the Twenty-First Century*, (Lusanne: Peter Lang, 2010).

The influence of Huxley, Lankester, and Weismann in H.G. Wells' *Time Machine* has been highlighted by Wells scholars in the past.⁸⁹ *Time Machine* is the story of a time traveller who leaves the nineteenth century and travels forwards in time to a period in which, as it gradually becomes apparent, humanity has degenerated into two distinct species, the Eloi, who inhabit the surface of the planet, and the troglodyte Morlocks, who carve out their existence in the bowels of the earth. The Eloi, the distant descendants of the Victorian middle classes that the Time Traveller first encounters in his journey are not, as he had hoped, masters of technology and the world around them. Instead, they are a fragile, effeminate race which has lost many of the greatest traits of the human species.⁹⁰ The lack of struggle in the Eloi's lives has caused them to become complacent and docile, living off of the world's bounty but unable to defend themselves or overpower the dreaded Morlocks.⁹¹ The Morlocks, on the other hand, are an apelike subterranean race. They only venture to the surface after dark, and, as the Time Traveller comes to discover, they prey on the Eloi, who they keep as livestock.⁹² The Morlocks, the Time Traveller hypothesises, are the descendants of the working class. He points to a litany of evidence to support this conclusion, including the fact that even in Wells' own time the poor and "less ornamental" parts of civilization were being pushed underground, both in their labour in mines, but in their workshops and cellar-dwelling housing as well.⁹³ Wells classifies these two groups, the above ground and the underground, as the haves, and the have-nots.⁹⁴ The divergent degenerations of the Eloi and the Morlocks, show two major societal concerns of which Wells was aware; that of evolutionary degeneration, and that of class division.⁹⁵

⁸⁹ Hale, *Political Descent*, 268, 274; Hale, "H.G. Wells and the Politics of Evolution" *Oxford Handbook of H.G. Wells*.

⁹⁰ Wells, *The Time Machine*, 25-27.

⁹¹ Wells, *The Time Machine*, 54.

⁹² Wells, *The Time Machine*, 46.

⁹³ Wells, *The Time Machine*, 52-53.

⁹⁴ Wells, *The Time Machine*, 53.

⁹⁵ Maren Linett, "Wells and Bio-Utopianism: Eugenic and Transhumanist Modes" *Oxford Handbook of H.G. Wells*.

The idea that acquired characteristics could be passed onto offspring shaped public policy and progressive and reform movements.⁹⁶ Following Lamarckian ideas, programs such as the education and support of the lower classes would yield increasing improvements, as subsequent generations inherited traits and behaviors acquired by their parents. This made reform, rehabilitation, education, and social improvement projects beneficial to society. However, while Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* still held many of Lamarck's ideas, (and indeed he emphasised these from the 5th and 6th editions in 1869 and 1872 in particular in response to Sir William Thomson's (1824-1907) thermodynamic calculations that the age of the earth could simply not be as old as Darwin and Charles Lyell (1797-1857) believed it to be), for a number of key commentators the work of August Weismann moved Darwinism away from the idea of acquired characteristics.⁹⁷ As we have noted, Wells was notably among them. This was a change that was especially important for ideas of social reform and biological determinism.

2.1 Brooke and Wells

The solution that Wells saw to these dangers was for humanity to, as Maren Linett has described it, "step up to the evolutionary plate" and take the reins of its own development.⁹⁸ Despite his loss of faith in the inheritance of acquired characters, Wells believed in the possibility of a utopian future for mankind.⁹⁹ The tools by which Wells believed this utopia could be reached were the tools of state socialism and eugenics, views he made explicit in both his 1905 novel *A Modern Utopia*, and his 1906 essay, *Socialism and the Family*.¹⁰⁰ Wells's goal with

⁹⁶ Peter Bowler, *Evolution: The History of an Idea*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 94, 127, 159.

⁹⁷ Susan W. Morris, "Fleeming Jenkin and 'The Origin of Species': A Reassessment," *The British Journal for the History of Science*, (Sept.1994), vol.27, no. 3, 313–343.

⁹⁸ Linnet, "Wells and Bio-Utopianism: Eugenic and Transhumanist Modes," 1.

⁹⁹ Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, 561.

¹⁰⁰ H.G. Wells, "Socialism and the Middle Classes," *The Independent Review*, 1906; H.G. Wells, "Socialism and the Family," *The Independent Review*, 1906; H.G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, (London: Chapman and Hall Publishers, 1905), 33.

his essay *Socialism and the Family* was to define the relationship between socialism, the socialist movement, and the middle classes.¹⁰¹ In particular, Wells highlighted the importance of the changing roles of women and children in society, advocating for the state to take more responsibility for children and for greater financial and social independence for women.¹⁰² Wells' presentation, *Socialism and the Family*, alternatively titled *Socialism and the Middle Classes* dealt heavily with "the sex question" and the importance of the role of women as mothers.¹⁰³ A key piece of Wells's argument was that women should be paid by the state for their work as mothers, rather than having to work outside of the house to support their family and taking care of their children "in their spare time."¹⁰⁴ He also discussed the various opinions under socialism about how parents should divide responsibility over child rearing.¹⁰⁵ The conclusion he reached was that there would presumably be some kind of division of labour between the mother and the father.¹⁰⁶ Wells had also made these arguments in his 1905 novel *A Modern Utopia*, advocating for state wages paid to mothers, education reform, and state responsibility for childcare.¹⁰⁷ Emma Frances Brooke witnessed H.G. Wells give a talk to the Fabian Society in 1906 on this topic, and found both him and his opinions deeply underwhelming.¹⁰⁸ The issues Wells presented were neither new nor unimportant to Brooke. In fact, in the 1880s and 1890s she too had written multiple papers and led and supported campaigns for equal rights for women and, in the 1880s, for the state support and control of motherhood.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, in her 1888 essay "Women and Their

¹⁰¹ H.G. Wells, *Socialism and the Family*, (London: Fifield, 1906), <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/61347/pg61347-images.html>, Section 1.

¹⁰² Wells, *Socialism and the Family*, Section 1.

¹⁰³ Wells, *Socialism and the Family*, Section 1.

¹⁰⁴ Wells, *Socialism and the Family*, Section 1.

¹⁰⁵ Wells, *Socialism and the Family*, Section 1.

¹⁰⁶ Wells, *Socialism and the Family*, Section 1.

¹⁰⁷ H.G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, (London: Chapman and Hall, 1905), 49, 95.

¹⁰⁸ Daniels, "Emma Brooke: Fabian, Feminist and Writer."

¹⁰⁹ Daniels, "Emma Brooke: Fabian, Feminist and Writer," 153-168; E. Fairfax Byrre, "Women and Their Sphere" *Our Corner*, January Vol. IX (1888) 5-13, and February Vol. IX (1888) 64-73.

Sphere,” which was published in Annie Besant’s journal *Our Corner*, Brooke argued, in a similar vein to Wells, that the state should claim responsibility for children, as well as for the support and education of women.¹¹⁰ However, by 1906 Brooke felt that Wells’ arguments showed his ignorance of the work that female writers such as herself had done in the previous decades to advance this aspect of “the woman question” both in fact, in their own political action, and in fiction.¹¹¹ Even in 1888 Brooke’s critique of motherhood had been much more radical than Wells’ own. While both felt that motherhood and mothers must be supported by the state, Brooke’s view of motherhood was that the importance put on women as mothers was used to restrict female sexuality and expression as well as subjugating women’s rights and limiting their opportunities.¹¹² Motherhood was a deeply important piece of labor, but for Brooke, who herself never married or had children, it was not the end all be all or female work or contribution to society, and this was something she increasingly emphasised in her critique of capitalism and patriarchy.

2.2 Socialist Feminism, Degeneration and Eugenic Redemption:

Although there has thus been good reason to pay close attention to Wells and his ideas on the process of evolutionary progress and degeneration, as well as on motherhood and eugenics, as Angelique Richardson has argued, and as we see too in Brooke’s case, Wells’s views were far from being representative of the breadth of socialist ideas about evolution and degeneration. Indeed, and as she has made clear in her book *Love and Eugenics*, socialist feminists extended this evolutionary critique into their contributions and responses to the “woman question” in ways

¹¹⁰ Byrre, “Women and Their Sphere,” 64-73.

¹¹¹ Daniels, “Emma Brooke: Fabian, Feminist and Writer,” 153-154.

¹¹² Byrre, “Women and Their Sphere,” 64-73.

that were quite different than Wells had proposed.¹¹³ Not only did feminists like Sarah Grand, Mary Dunne (who published under the name George Egerton), and Mona Caird make notable contributions to the debate about the rights and wrongs of women's lives under Victorian capitalist patriarchy, but, as I wish to emphasise in this essay, so too did Emma Frances Brooke.

Chapter 3: The Woman Question and the New Woman Novel

Richardson's aim in her book *Love and Eugenics*, was to demonstrate the importance of the history of science and biology to the woman question. Emphasizing the work of Sarah Grand, George Egerton, and Mona Caird, Richardson has shown the wide diversity of ways in which the scientific and political language of degeneration and eugenics were used in popular fiction. A key point of Richardson's argument is that the issue of early British eugenics was, in large part, a matter of rhetoric and of representation, that was explored in novels and stories much more so than it was in practice.¹¹⁴ While scientific publications and discussions took place in the halls of academia, the vast majority of the English population was introduced to evolutionary ideas through popular science writing in journals, but more often through works of art and fiction. One major avenue for evolutionary, as well as feminist and socialist ideas to reach the public was through the novel. And one figure which not only understood but in a way created (and was created by) the power of the novel was the "new woman." At nearly exactly the midpoint of the nineteenth century, the 1851 census revealed the alarming fact that there were more women in England than men.¹¹⁵ This guaranteed that a percentage of the nation's young women were destined to live and die unmarried and childless, unable to fulfill what some commentators

¹¹³ Richardson, *Love and Eugenics*, 1-32.

¹¹⁴ Richardson, *Love and Eugenics*, xvii.

¹¹⁵ Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, 35.

described as their life's true purpose. The very existence of these "surplus" women (or as Brooke referred to her in the novel in question, the "superfluous" woman), raised a great number of questions, primarily, what was to be done with them, what, if not a future of married life and motherhood, was their purpose?¹¹⁶ This was the crux of the woman question; not only these questions of course, but also the answers that the women themselves put forward. Unmarried young women from the lower and working classes entered the new urban workforce, supporting themselves in the cities and living away from their families. New woman writers like Olive Schreiner and George Gissing (1857-1903) commented on middle class anxieties about unchaperoned young women living and walking the streets on their own, vulnerable to being preyed up by their factory owner employers. Middle class women, rather than becoming factory workers, often took work as governesses or working in shops.¹¹⁷

Out of this surplus came the "new woman," a figure who sought through various scientific, social, and political tracts to solve or answer this newly prominent "woman question." The term "New Woman" for the purposes of this paper begs defining. There are three distinct categories which can be sorted under the banner of "New Woman." First, there is the genre of works as a whole. These are the novels and short stories which present a commentary on the ways women are harmed or influenced by the existing constraints of society. While many authors in this genre were female, men such as George Gissing and Grant Allen also contributed to the body of New Woman literature. Secondly, there is the New Woman as a character. In novels such as Allen's *The Woman Who Did* and Sarah Grand's *The Heavenly Twins* the main female characters are representative of progressive or feminist values and behaviors. These are women

¹¹⁶ Judith Worsnop, "A Reevaluation of "the Problem of Surplus Women" in 19th-century England: The Case of the 1851 Census," *Women's Studies International Forum*, Volume 13, Issues 1-2, 1990, 21-31.

¹¹⁷ Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, 37; Olive Schreiner, *The Story of an African Farm*, (London: Chapman & Hall, 1883); George Gissing, *The Odd Women*, (London: Lawrence and Bullen, 1893).

who think for themselves, buck tradition in such scandalous ways as sporting men's clothes, and shirk conventional society by either living and sleeping with men out of wedlock, or refusing to sleep with men at all. Oftentimes, in literature, this "New Woman" character is a more extreme representation of our third category, the "New Woman" in reality. Brooke's main character, interestingly, is not a New Woman, though Mrs. Cornerstone, the doctor and narrator's wife, decidedly is. The "New Woman" as author of the aforementioned literature is the group, most importantly, who by various means sought to actually live the values espoused in the new works of literature. Angelique Richardson foregrounds Sarah Grand, George Egerton, and Mona Caird as prominent new women in her study, and of course the central new woman of this paper is Emma Frances Brooke. Groups were also founded to seek answers to the woman question, most famously, Karl Pearson's Men's and Women's club founded in 1885. The Men's and Women's club was a group of educated middle class individuals who met to discuss ways in which society might be improved by utilizing logic and biological knowledge.¹¹⁸ In the words of Judith R. Walkowitz, Pearson founded the club "to talk about sex."¹¹⁹ However, while sex lay at the heart of the women question, new women were concerned more broadly with woman's place in society, and understood that this had major ramifications for and could perhaps also provide solutions to issues of poverty, sickness, national efficiency, morality, and labor capacity.¹²⁰ Pearson himself wrote in the *Fortnightly Review* that "There has never been a Labour question without a Woman's question also."¹²¹

A powerful tool of the new woman was the novel. The "new woman" novel, featuring and often written by the new woman, is a distinctive literary genre of the second half of the

¹¹⁸ Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*, 135-137.

¹¹⁹ Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*, 135.

¹²⁰ Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, 4.

¹²¹ Karl Pearson, "Woman and Labour," *Fortnightly Review*, 61, 1894, 561-577, 563.

nineteenth century. These novels, focusing on the struggles and choices facing the young women of the middle class, made fictionalized arguments for furthering female autonomy, for altering the institution of marriage, and, of special importance, often advocated for the control a woman should exert over her selection of a mate, and the creation of her children. As Richardson has noted, heredity and breeding, in light of Malthusian and Darwinian theories of population and natural and sexual selection, sat center stage in the new woman's mind and work.¹²² The new woman's work began with the recreation of the novel as a useful and improving tool, one which could benefit the reader and at its furthest reach, society. As Richardson has pointed out, though, new woman writers had to overcome the fact that both the reading and writing of the Victorian novel was seen as a superficial pastime, not for betterment but for entertainment.¹²³ Indeed, at its worst the sensational novel itself was seen as a degenerate and corrupting influence. Romances and love stories were dangerous, as they exposed women to provocative and sensational material which could lead to impurity in thought or action.¹²⁴ Inward immorality, as a result of licentious reading, equated to and could forewarn of immoral acts.¹²⁵ This concern with the immorality of novels created an uphill battle for new woman authors of the time. Sensational "dangerous" novels dealt with such shocking subjects as illness, insanity, gender, sex, female passion, inter-class, and same sex passion, as well as the less than attractive realities of motherhood. New woman novels, with eugenic messaging against careless breeding, dealt with many of the same subjects, and thus risked being judged by the same standard.¹²⁶

¹²² Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, 85.

¹²³ Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, 86-88.

¹²⁴ Jim Secord, *Victorian Sensation : the Extraordinary Publication, Reception, and Secret Authorship of Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2000), 11-12.

¹²⁵ Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, 88.

¹²⁶ Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, 88-92.

The new woman was a figure of varied and complex politics, rooted in the middle class and running the full gauntlet of liberal, radical, socialist, feminist, and middle class values.¹²⁷ The New Woman, and feminist thought in general, was not a monolith of theory, argument, and proposed solutions. Instead, the New Woman movement was a vast and varied collection of (usually) female thinkers with a wide range of opinions. In her book *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, Angelique Richardson examines three feminist New Woman authors who exemplify this depth and width of thought.¹²⁸ By examining the political stances and literary works of Sarah Grand, George Egerton, and Mona Caird, Richardson demonstrates the many ways theories of natural and sexual selection were applied to discussions of surplus women and women's labor.

3.1 Sarah Grand:

Sarah Grand, the first of Angelique Richardson's subjects, was an unrelenting proponent of biological determinism. Grand, born Frances Elizabeth Bellenden McFall, was the author of the New Woman novel *The Heavenly Twins* (1893), as well as the president of the Writers' Suffrage League and a member of the Rational Dress Society, the Pioneer Club, and the National Council of Women.¹²⁹ Grand's popular novel *The Heavenly Twins* was a novel which warned against the dangers posed to women from diseased and immoral husbands.¹³⁰ Similar to *Superfluous Woman*, Grand's heroine marries a wealthy aristocrat and catches syphilis as a result of her husband's unfaithfulness and promiscuity. Sarah Grand is also often credited with being the first to coin the term "New Woman," though she later expressed dismay at the way it had

¹²⁷ Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, 8.

¹²⁸ Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*.

¹²⁹ Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, 98-99; Sarah Grand, *The Heavenly Twins*, (New York: The Cassell Publishing Company, 1893).

¹³⁰ Grand, *The Heavenly Twins*.

been misappropriated, and was being used to represent women she felt did not accurately exemplify the values she held so highly.¹³¹ Grand valued womanhood and femininity, and felt that the “New Woman” so often depicted in the Victorian media was a mockery of women who maintained their traditional feminine traits, such as beauty, grace, and kindness, while also seeking increased societal influence and responsibility.¹³² Grand’s “New Woman” was not men’s property nor was she seeking to lead men into temptation.¹³³ Rather, the new woman was just slightly above men, for the most part out of their vision as she floated in contemplation.¹³⁴ Grand is described in her in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, written by Jane Eldridge Miller, as a novelist and women’s rights campaigner.¹³⁵ As Richardson points out, however, Grand’s legacy has often excluded the “eugenic” part of what she calls Grand’s eugenic feminism.

As Angelique Richardson has explained, Grand’s work is today recognized as deeply important to the feminist movement. However, an element in her writing which Richardson pointed out had hitherto been overlooked is the deeply eugenic themes and beliefs which Grand held.¹³⁶ Grand’s discussions of topics such as sex and gender have been isolated from her arguments about class, population and national health, painting Grand as an “unproblematic feminist.”¹³⁷ However, acknowledging Grand’s eugenic politics are crucial for developing an accurate understanding of her work. Grand’s longstanding insistence on the distinct and inherent differences between men and women is only one example of her belief in biological

¹³¹ Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, 106.

¹³² Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, 106.

¹³³ Sarah Grand, “The New Aspect of the Woman Question.” *The North American Review* 158, no. 448 (1894): 270–276, 271.

¹³⁴ Grand, “The New Aspect of the New Woman Question,” 271.

¹³⁵ Jane Eldridge Miller “McFall [née Clarke], Frances Elizabeth Bellenden [pseud. Sarah Grand],” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 Sep. 2004.

¹³⁶ Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, 96.

¹³⁷ Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, 96.

determinism. Grand, a eugenic feminist, was deeply critical of nineteenth-century marriage, feeling that giving men all of the power and women none had led to intense degeneration. Men's natural instincts were split between the protection of women and the domination of them. Women's instincts and natural attractions, in contrast, were a natural mechanism by which they might select a healthy and fit mate. Therefore, for the good of the nation, women needed to be given the power to tend to the homefront, while the men looked after the empire.¹³⁸ The purpose of female self improvement, according to Grand, was not to increase the proximity of men and women, but to serve both the marriage relation and the British empire.¹³⁹ It was woman's responsibility, having found and come into her own power, to reach out a hand and lift man up to all that he could be.¹⁴⁰

In her 1894 article "The New Aspect of the Woman Question" Grand explained the vision she had for women's changing place in society, as well as the difficulty she had seen in men struggling to understand such a vision.¹⁴¹ Woman, in Grand's view, was inherently different from man, and this was not something that she should strive to change. Instead, it was because of the natural differences between men and women that women must be afforded a place in public society as well as the political sphere.¹⁴² Women, Grand argued, were already shaping political opinion as early as the nursery, where they taught their children about life in the world.¹⁴³ And beyond the nursery, Grand argued that allowing women into the public sphere would also allow an increase in feminine morality, to counter men's natural vices.¹⁴⁴ In the same vein, a woman's ability to select a mate based on factors of health and the strength of future offspring would

¹³⁸ Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, 107-108.

¹³⁹ Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, 103-107; Anna Davin also discusses the importance of motherhood for the British Empire, see Davin, "Imperialism and Motherhood," 83-97.

¹⁴⁰ Grand, "The New Aspect of the Woman Question," 273-275.

¹⁴¹ Grand, "The New Aspect of the Woman Question," 270-276.

¹⁴² Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, 103-105.

¹⁴³ Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, 107.

¹⁴⁴ Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, 103-107.

balance out men's process of selecting a mate through passion and desire.¹⁴⁵ Women, according to Grand, would be able to solve the problems of population which men had proven to be helpless against.¹⁴⁶ Women, according to Grand, were rational and virtuous enough to make decisions based not on lust but on scientific metrics.¹⁴⁷ According to Grand, the removal of "free lust" was the key to a successful program of controlled reproduction. Scientific knowledge, reason, and logic, in Grand's argument, should dictate sexual relations and reproduction, with women deciding on their mates based on metrics such as their health and family history.¹⁴⁸

3.2 George Egerton

George Egerton is Richardson's second subject, and a very different type of eugenic feminist from Sarah Grand, but a eugenicist nonetheless. Egerton, born Mary Chavelita Dunne Bright, is best known for her collections of short stories, dealing with girlhood, womanhood, sex, sexuality, and pregnancy.¹⁴⁹ While Egerton agreed with Grand about the fundamental differences of women from men, she took a different approach to the topics of sexuality and attraction.¹⁵⁰ Women, in Egerton's view, were a natural, almost spiritual enigma, beyond a man's ability to understand.¹⁵¹ Women's sexuality, according to Egerton, was a biological mechanism, the reproductive drive which would lead to racial regeneration.¹⁵² Elements of this can also be seen in Brooke's work. Unlike Grand, Egerton felt that passion and attraction were key biological

¹⁴⁵ Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, 103-104.

¹⁴⁶ Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, 104.

¹⁴⁷ Sarah Grand, "Marriage Questions in Fiction" *Fortnightly Review*, 63, (1898) 386; Sarah Grand, "The Tree of Knowledge," *New Review*, 10, (1894) 680.

¹⁴⁸ Grand, "Marriage Questions in Fiction," 386; Grand, "The Tree of Knowledge," 680.

¹⁴⁹ Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, 156.

¹⁵⁰ Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, 157.

¹⁵¹ Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, 164-165.

¹⁵² Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, 169.

tools, and should be the driving force behind mating and reproduction.¹⁵³ Societal conformity and middle class conventional morality, Egerton argued, hindered racial regeneration.¹⁵⁴

Richardson holds Egerton and her many collections of stories such as *Symphonies*, *Discords*, and *Keynotes* up as an example of how eugenic language could be used in a wide variety of contexts and messages.¹⁵⁵ Controversially, Egerton's work celebrated female sexuality, derided monogamy, and glorified illegitimacy.¹⁵⁶ However, the end goal was always reproduction and racial regeneration through the birth of healthy babies.¹⁵⁷ Women's sexuality, while good and natural, was there to drive reproduction, and then to be put aside in favor of raising the next generation.¹⁵⁸

3.3 Mona Caird:

Mona Caird was a noted novelist, feminist, and anti-vivisectionist.¹⁵⁹ Caird's primary concerns were with the rights of women, the institution of marriage, and the state of the family.¹⁶⁰ However, according to Angelique Richardson, Caird was, in contrast to Grand, an avid anti-eugenicist, taking tremendous issue with concepts such as biological determinism and the selection of ideal human breeding stock.¹⁶¹ As seen in her article "Marriage" which was published in the *Westminster Review* in 1888, Caird found that all arguments about natural human behavior fell flat.¹⁶² However, while Richardson describes Caird as making an "active and

¹⁵³ Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, 169.

¹⁵⁴ Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, 159.

¹⁵⁵ George Egerton, *Symphonies*, (London: John Lane, 1897;); George Egerton, *Discords*, (London, John Lane, 1895); George Egerton, *Keynotes*, (London: John Lane, 1893.)

¹⁵⁶ Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, 156.

¹⁵⁷ Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, 169.

¹⁵⁸ Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, 169.

¹⁵⁹ Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, 181.

¹⁶⁰ Mona Caird, *The Morality of Marriage and Other Essays on the Status and Destiny of Woman*, (London, George Redway, 1897). ix-xvi.

¹⁶¹ Richardson, *Love and Eugenics*, 184-185.

¹⁶² Mona Caird, "Marriage" *The Westminster Review*, 130 (1888): 186-201.

sustained attack” on eugenics, much of the basis of Caird’s arguments comes from the same biological grounding as Grand and Egerton.¹⁶³ Charles Darwin and Jean-Baptiste Lamarck were key sources in Caird’s arguments about the importance of the environment, and adaptability of the species.¹⁶⁴ Ultimately, Caird’s arguments were predicated on the rejection of overruling instinct, and the belief in the capacity for reason and change not only in future generations, but in the present as well.¹⁶⁵

While it was not her first piece of writing on the topic, Caird’s 1888 essay sparked a major controversy which pushed her into the spotlight. In the article Caird argued that not only was contemporary marriage a social construct, but it was also an absolute failure.¹⁶⁶ Caird traced the roots of modern marriage back to the reformation, and tied them to ideas such as “commerce, competition, the great bourgeois class, and that remarkable thing called “Respectability.”¹⁶⁷ Caird objected to the use of terms such as “human nature” and “woman’s nature,” arguing that both were inherently flexible, and shaped by customs and cultures agreed upon by a society.¹⁶⁸ Social sciences, Caird argued, were to a fault guilty of abandoning their scientific and logical reasoning when faced with women. As Caird described it, “ideas of evolution, of natural selection, of the well-known influence upon organs and aptitudes of continued use or disuse...” are all put aside when discussing women, in favor of arguing that their nature is static and unchanging.¹⁶⁹ While Caird was not a eugenicist in the way that Grand and Egerton were, she was arguing on the basis

¹⁶³ Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, 182.

¹⁶⁴ Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, 182. Mona Caird, “The Suppression of Variant Types,” *The Morality of Marriage and Other Essays on the Status and Destiny of Woman*, 193-211.

¹⁶⁵ Mona Caird, “The Tyranny of Instinct,” *The Morality of Marriage and Other Essays on the Status and Destiny of Woman*, 221-230; “The Human Element in Man,” 231-239.

¹⁶⁶ Caird, “Marriage,” 186-201; Beverly E. Schneller “Caird [née Alison], (Alice) Mona” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 Sep. 2004.

¹⁶⁷ Caird, “Marriage,” 186; Mona Caird, “Marriage Before and After the Reformation,” *The Morality of Marriage and Other Essays on the Status and Destiny of Woman*, 73-91.

¹⁶⁸ Caird, “Marriage,” 186-201.

¹⁶⁹ Caird, “Marriage,” 187.

of women's evolution, that womanhood is not a collection of essential characteristics but instead a historical and socially constructed identity. This static image of women's nature is apparent in the work of writers like Grand and Egerton who, as seen above, argue that women are not only essentially different from men, but also essentially like others of their gender.

However, as Caird argued, what was perceived in the 19th century as "natural" behavior for women was actually the result of experience, and social conditioning. Caird used the example of a dog chained to a house, which sits quietly when chained and, when released, "gets into mischief and runs away."¹⁷⁰ It is not in the dog's nature to lie around lethargically and allow itself to grow weak. However, when the dog is noisy or active it is punished, and so it learns to behave.¹⁷¹

Woman, over the course of history, had been systematically stripped of power and influence, she argued, chained to man like a dog to a house, and made into a creature of instinct, which must be protected from herself.¹⁷² These injustices, Caird maintained, are the roots of almost all of society's evils.¹⁷³ Women, captured in the service of man and left in the home to rear children, were able to "pay back the injury with interest. And so she does, item by item."¹⁷⁴ Society's ills, in Caird's estimation, were the result of undereducated and overcontrolled women, channeling what little agency they were afforded into the creation of a future race which would inevitably carry out the same cycles as their parents.¹⁷⁵

The solution Caird proposed was to establish "free marriages." Marriage, Caird argued, should be built on love, trust, and friendship, and should need no further bonds to hold it

¹⁷⁰ Caird, "Marriage," 64.

¹⁷¹ Caird, "Marriage," 187-188.

¹⁷² Caird, "Marriage," 187-188.

¹⁷³ Caird, "Marriage," 188.

¹⁷⁴ Caird, "Marriage," 188.

¹⁷⁵ Caird, "Marriage," 188-189.

together.¹⁷⁶ A woman should have complete ownership and control over her body, and ideals such as duty and moral imperative should be removed from the topic of marriage altogether.¹⁷⁷ Women must be economically independent, in order to enter into a free marriage, as well as educated in the same ways and under the same roofs as men.¹⁷⁸ If women were truly free, and marriage could be entered into under mutual attraction, trust, and companionship, then Caird argued that the institution would be beneficial to all, rather than a shackle for women to bear. Here, we can see Caird's views in direct opposition to those of Sarah Grand. Caird's "free marriage" was based entirely on personal attraction and friendship, while Grand campaigned for mating which would produce healthy, middle class offspring.

Chapter 4: Emma Frances Brooke and *A Superfluous Woman*:

For all that Angelique Richardson wrote the entry on Brooke in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, and acknowledged in her book *Love and Eugenics* that there were many hundreds of New Woman novels published in the last decades of the century, she does not make either Emma Brooke or *A Superfluous Woman* a focus in her study.

While not a primary focus of the book, Richardson does list Emma Frances Brooke alongside New Woman authors such as Grand, Caird, and George Egerton, and thus because of the work of scholars like Richardson, Emma Frances Brooke's work has found its place in feminist discourse. Indeed, Brooke's name is commonly found either immediately preceding or following names such as Grand and Caird in discussions of feminist literature. Courtney J. Andree, in her article "Reproducing Disability and Degeneration in the Victorian Fin de Siècle" equated Brooke and Grand's views of contemporary society, class, and gender relations. Andree

¹⁷⁶ Caird, "Marriage," 197-198.

¹⁷⁷ Caird, "Marriage," 198.

¹⁷⁸ Caird, "Marriage," 198-199.

described both Brooke and Grand's work as dealing with "the degeneracy of the British upper classes as they traced the reproductive consequences of excess, dissipation, moral laxity, and inbreeding."¹⁷⁹ Authors such as A.R. Cunningham and John Kucich, along with Richardson and Andree consider the impact of Brooke's work and its context in the New Woman movement, highlighting Brooke's emphasis on total emancipation, and the death that comes with capitulation to societal standards.¹⁸⁰

Emma Frances Brooke came from a middle-class cotton manufacturing family. Her father was a wealthy industrialist and her mother's family was likewise successful.¹⁸¹ After her father's death in 1872, Brooke attended Newnham College, Cambridge as part of a class containing seven other women and studied literature, psychology, political economics, and logic.¹⁸² While at Newnham College she met and befriended her classmate and future noted anarchist-socialist editor Charlotte Wilson.¹⁸³ It was Wilson who invited Brooke to join the Karl Marx Club, which later became known as the Hampstead Historic Club while Brooke was living in Hampstead.¹⁸⁴ Other members of the club included George Bernard Shaw, noted socialists Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Graham Wallas (1858-1932), and Sydney Oliver (1859-1943).¹⁸⁵ These individuals would remain Brooke's lifelong friends, as well as being members of other organizations to which Brooke belonged.¹⁸⁶ Brooke was a dedicated socialist, active in thinking through and discussing what socialism should look like in light of evolutionary ideas. An

¹⁷⁹ Courtney J. Andree, "Reproducing Disability and Degeneration in the Victorian Fin de Siècle," *Literature Compass*, 19 April 2016, 10.

¹⁸⁰ A.R. Cunningham, "The 'New Woman Fiction' of the 1890's," *Victorian Studies* 17, no. 2 (1973): 177-86; John Kucich, "Feminism's Ethical Contradictions: Sarah Grand and New Woman Writing," *The Power of Lies: Transgression, Class, and Gender in Victorian Fiction*, 239-79, Cornell University Press, 1994.

¹⁸¹ Tilly, "Introduction" 6.

¹⁸² Tilly, "Introduction," 6.

¹⁸³ Angelique Richardson, "Brooke, Emma Frances (1844-1922)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 Sep. 2004.

¹⁸⁴ Tilly, "Introduction," 7.

¹⁸⁵ Tilly, "Introduction," 8.

¹⁸⁶ Tilly, "Introduction," 8.

important part of this was the place of sex and sex relations in that discussion. Brooke was also involved with the Religious Tract Society, as well as serving as the default secretary for the Female Middle Class Emigration Society.¹⁸⁷ Brooke served as the secretary of the Hampstead Historical Society for the four years the club was in operation, and, like Hampstead Historical Society founder Charlotte Wilson, joined the Fabian Society in 1885.¹⁸⁸ Brooke was one of two women to serve on the Fabian Society's Executive Committee, her term lasting from 1893-1896.¹⁸⁹ In 1908 Brooke helped to found the Fabian Women's Group, an organization dedicated to understanding women's class differences, furthering women's educational opportunities, and supporting the overall mission of the women's suffrage movement.¹⁹⁰

As Barbara Tilly explains in her introduction to the 2015 Victorian Secrets edition of *A Superfluous Woman*, Emma Brooke's work emphasized issues of class and gender inequality, and the day to day struggles faced by groups such as workers and women.¹⁹¹ Brooke was a committed socialist as well as an advocate of women's equality, and these two schools of thought are often combined and conjoined in her writing. As Tilly and others have pointed out, in Brooke's writing there was no way to extricate the "woman question" from questions of labor and socialism.¹⁹² Brooke wrote extensively on the subjects of motherhood and a woman's role in society. Motherhood, she argued, and the social constraints that went with it, were designed to restrict and subjugate female sexuality and women's rights. In 1888 she published the essay "Women and Their Sphere" in Annie Besant's socialist journal *Our Corner*.¹⁹³ Brooke's arguments on motherhood, as seen in "Women and Their Sphere" focus on motherhood as labor,

¹⁸⁷ Tilly, "Introduction," 7.

¹⁸⁸ Tilly, "Introduction," 8.

¹⁸⁹ Tilly, "Introduction," 8.

¹⁹⁰ Tilly, "Introduction," 9.

¹⁹¹ Tilly, "Introduction," 6.

¹⁹² Tilly, "Introduction," 17-18.

¹⁹³ Byrre, "Women and Their Sphere," 64-73.

labor for which women were not receiving due recognition or compensation. This emphasis on labor is indicative of the deep impact socialism had on Brooke, and on her ideas of feminism and gender equality. Brooke's socialist beliefs, as well as her feminism and support of the "New Woman" figure are visible throughout *A Superfluous Woman*.¹⁹⁴

4.1 A Superfluous Woman

In her 1894 novel *A Superfluous Woman* Emma Frances Brooke raised several key issues relating to degeneration and possible avenues for regeneration which she relates to the main issues of the woman question.¹⁹⁵ Namely, the concerns Brooke addresses are with the moral and physical decay of the British aristocracy, the class and economic factors that made up the contemporary institution of marriage, and women's lack of choice in the matter of sexual and reproductive partners.¹⁹⁶ Brooke's understanding was that evolutionary degeneration was the product of men holding the power of sexual selection, unlike in other species, where the female chose her own mate. This unnatural pattern had caused the degeneration of humanity, as men were driven by lust, vanity, and the desire to dominate women rather than the natural attraction which would indicate a good match and result in healthy children. The solution, therefore, was to institute social changes which would enable women to select their mate based on biological fitness and attraction, rather than financial, familial, or class obligations. This would allow the natural biological mechanism of sexual selection, which Charles Darwin described in *The Descent of Man* to work to regenerate the human race.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁴ Tilly, "Introduction," 12-13; Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*.

¹⁹⁵ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*.

¹⁹⁶ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 119, 164, 272, 277.

¹⁹⁷ Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, (London: John Murray, 1871), 253-321.

A Superfluous Woman is the story of Jessamine Halliday, a young woman suffering from a bout of ennui who seeks to improve herself by studying socialist literature. Tiring of her life in the city, Jessamine runs away to Scotland to work the land. There, she meets Colin MacGillvray, a Scottish highlander with whom she falls madly in love. Jessamine loves Colin deeply, and even fantasizes about having a child with him that she can take back to London and show off to her friends and family. Jessamine does not want to be legally wed to Colin, however, dreaming of living as his “true wife” with a spiritual connection, even though after her return to London she would want to stay there and raise their baby, not seeing Colin again. Colin is either unwilling or unable to accept this version of a relationship with Jessamine, and begs her to become his wife. His entreaties hurt her “as [if lashed] by scorpions” and she flees from him, into the night and out of his life.¹⁹⁸ When Colin insists on marrying her, Jessamine feels herself lose all affection for him, and leaves, returning to London. In London, deciding that motherhood out of wedlock with the man of her choice is not possible, Jessamine agrees to marry the man she was engaged to before her trip to Scotland, the aristocratic Lord Heriot. Heriot, the son of a degenerating family, is in poor physical health and mentally and emotionally weak and lacking. He and Jessamine have two children together, a daughter who is mentally handicapped and a physically handicapped son. When Jessamine is pregnant with their third child, she tells her doctor that she knows this child will also be unhealthy. Jessamine asks the doctor for help, asking him to give her something to make sure that neither she nor the baby survives. When the doctor refuses, Jessamine determines that she herself will prevent the pregnancy from reaching full term. Jessamine dedicates all of her mental effort to willing the child to die. She succeeds, and the child dies. After the miscarriage of her third child, and the subsequent deaths of her son and daughter, Jessamine wills herself to die as well.

¹⁹⁸ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 227.

A Superfluous Woman is an interesting addition to the New Woman literary canon because, while Brooke herself was undoubtedly a New Woman, her protagonist, Jessamine Halliday is not. Jessamine attempts to live her life as a New Woman, to educate herself in feminism and socialism and to live a quiet and self-sufficient life in Scotland. She dreams of finding a true spiritual match with a man without the constraining shackles of a conventional contemporary marriage. She even imagines a world where she might have a child with this man and raise it on her own. However, for all of the desire that Jessamine voices, in the end she makes the decision to return to London society and live her life exactly as she would have before. Jessamine's inability, seemingly, to find an alternative to marrying either MacGillvray or Heriot stands out especially strongly when we remember that Brooke herself never married or had children. Unlike her author, though, Jessamine is not a "New Woman." Instead, the figure which represents New Womanhood in the novel is the wife of Jessamine's doctor, a Mrs. Cornerstone. Much like her husband, Dr. Cornerstone, is the voice of science and education in the novel, Mrs. Cornerstone represents feminist thought and the fight for equality. It is Mrs. Cornerstone who challenges her husband and his male companion to discuss matters of equality between the sexes, and who calls out male assumptions about women throughout the conversation.¹⁹⁹ The problem, as Mrs. Cornerstone sees it, is that men view women not as people, but as items or as functions. This is the core of the problem which must be solved.²⁰⁰ At the end of the novel, Mrs. Cornerstone voices her regret that she never met Jessamine, as she believes that she, unlike her husband, could actually have saved her from her unfortunate fate.²⁰¹ "I would have taught her," she says, "that no man had a right to call her 'superfluous.'"²⁰² Mrs.

¹⁹⁹ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 311-320.

²⁰⁰ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 311-320.

²⁰¹ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 315.

²⁰² Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 315.

Cornerstone, unlike the men in *A Superfluous Woman*, points out that the fault in the story does not lie with Jessamine. And, also unlike the men, Mrs. Cornerstone is representative of the importance of female connection and friendship, and the feminist community, which could have given Jessamine the guidance she needed to transition into a New Woman.

Aside from the differences between Jessamine and Mrs. Cornerstone, an element of Brooke's *A Superfluous Woman* which has not been explored in depth is the importance of 19th century biology and eugenic thought to the book. A key point of this thesis is, as Angelique Richardson has done for Sarah Grand and George Egerton, to place Brooke in her contemporary evolutionary context. This is important work, as much of Brooke's feminism was informed and shaped by her knowledge of biology. Throughout *A Superfluous Woman*, Brooke uses language which describes dangers of careless reproduction to the human race.²⁰³ Like Grand, Brooke's arguments for female reproductive choice and rights stems from an objection to the idea that male sexual selection is natural or beneficial to mankind.²⁰⁴ Brooke also takes time in *A Superfluous Woman* to argue against pre-Darwinian theories of species change and evolution.²⁰⁵ It is heredity which causes the degeneracy, physical weakness and deformity, moral failings, and insanity of the Heriot family and Jessamine's own children.²⁰⁶ Even Lord Heriot's marriage to Jessamine, a young, beautiful, intelligent, and educated young woman cannot salvage the bloodline, and by bearing more degenerated and unfit children for her husband even while knowing him to be unhealthy, Jessamine has committed a grave reproductive "crime."²⁰⁷ Indeed even beyond the immediate scope of Jessamine's experiences, Brooke's characters, most prominently Jessamine's doctor, Doctor Cornerstone, decry the existence of "the pauper, the

²⁰³ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*. 123.

²⁰⁴ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 119, 272, 277.

²⁰⁵ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 123; Testa and Hale, *Evolution in Victorian Britain Volume 1: Evolution Before Darwin*.

²⁰⁶ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 199, 277.

²⁰⁷ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 272-274, 291.

imbecile, and the rogue,” in modern society.²⁰⁸ According to the doctor, the very existence of the degraded “beneath stultify the refined product above.”²⁰⁹ This is a sharp departure from the pre-Darwinian reform language that was so often based in Lamarckian theories of the inheritance by children of their parents acquired characteristics. Rather than raising up or educating the poor, mentally challenged, criminal, or drunk, the doctor demands that the only solution is to remove them, and that the failure to do so is the greatest shame of English society.²¹⁰ This is an opinion he also holds and voices for the British aristocracy, which are just as degenerate as the lowest criminal. Again, the only solution is to allow the aristocracy to fade from existence, and to disallow them from reproducing.²¹¹ Her discussion of atavism, through Jessamine’s research and education, concludes in a realization that the elevation of the residuum, of drunks of thieves, for example, will always fail because of the inevitable return to habit, or type.²¹² This argument falls more in line with Weismann and Neo-Darwinism, and can be interpreted as a rejection of Lamarckian ideas of the inheritance of acquired characteristics.²¹³

The three devices which Brooke uses to convey her arguments about degeneration, eugenics, and feminism are Jessamine Halliday herself, Doctor Cornerstone, Jessamine’s physician, and Mrs. Cornerstone, the doctor’s wife. Jessamine, who at the beginning of the novel is utterly bored, stifled, and unaware of her own class and place in society, is representative of the middle class Victorian women held in place by rigid morality and social convention.²¹⁴ As Jessamine seeks to educate and improve herself she serves as a device for Brooke to convey

²⁰⁸ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 249.

²⁰⁹ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 249.

²¹⁰ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 250.

²¹¹ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 284.

²¹² Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 122-123.

²¹³ Weismann, *Essays Upon Heredity*; Testa and Hale, *Evolution in Victorian Britain Volume 1: Evolution Before Darwin*, 5-9.

²¹⁴ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 12.

scientific knowledge, as well as the considerations of a woman's place in society.²¹⁵ Doctor Cornerstone, aptly named, serves as the foundational voice of science in the text. From his earliest conversations with Jessamine he is raising questions of her nature and how it has been shaped by her upbringing, as well as how she might overcome the trouble caused by her "excessive high breeding."²¹⁶ His conversations with his wife, as well as his friend Carteret, serve as commentary on the story of Jessamine Halliday, dissecting the different ailments and difficulties faced not by Jessamine but also by her husband who also suffers from hereditary sickness.²¹⁷ The main, and most important conversation which Cornerstone and his party have, however, is that of the matter of equality between the sexes. While Cornerstone and Carteret are happy to discuss this matter, they both hold a certain academic removal from the issue; it is Mrs. Cornerstone who gives the conversation a distinctly human touch.²¹⁸ When first beginning the discussion, the men suggest that they all speak as equals, and Mrs. Cornerstone poses the question "As though we were three men? Or as though we were three women?"²¹⁹ This is a reminder, not just for her companions, but for the reader, that a man and a woman will have very different views on the matter of equality of the sexes.

Like her husband, Mrs. Cornerstone is careful in her treatment of natural versus artificial behavior, especially in the context of femininity and womanhood.²²⁰ Nature, they both agree, is not responsible for the inequality of the sexes.²²¹ Rather, it is society, "artificial – hot-bed – culture" which is responsible.²²² Though nature has not caused the problem, it is the feeling of all three conversants that it will eventually solve it. Equality, they posit, will be the result of women

²¹⁵ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 30, 122-124.

²¹⁶ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 11-12.

²¹⁷ Brooke, *Superfluous Woman*, 273.

²¹⁸ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 311.

²¹⁹ Brooke, *Superfluous Woman*, 311.

²²⁰ Brooke, *Superfluous Woman*, 11-12, 312.

²²¹ Brooke, *Superfluous Woman*, 11-12, 311-312.

²²² Brooke, *Superfluous Woman*, 312.

embracing their full and well rounded nature, developing the parts of themselves which society would restrict, and taking their place as men's equal.²²³ This claiming of women's rights will solve not only the problem of the inequality of the sexes by breaking the "enforced inequality of development," but will also improve society as a whole.²²⁴ The biological causes of degeneration that Brooke addresses in her novel: aristocratic decay, the inequality of marriage, the shackles of unsupported motherhood, and the lack of female choice in mates, all find their root cause in the unequal rights of women. The way to prevent a story like Jessamine's which is not only tragic but also wasteful, which results in the birth and death of deformed children and the willful death of the third child and the mother, is for women to gain the right to determine the path their own lives will take. A crucial step in this, as Mrs. Cornerstone points out, is understanding the artificiality of the inequality, and instilling women with the knowledge that they are more than the function of sex and motherhood, that they cannot be deemed superfluous.²²⁵

4.2 Degeneration in *A Superfluous Woman*

We can see Brooke's thoughts on the importance of the education of women by paying attention to the education of Brooke's protagonist Jessamine Halliday. When reading about human biology, Jessamine learns of the degeneracy and atavism seen in the work of Cesare Lombroso.²²⁶ She reads that "behind the mounting steps of Evolution creeps the stealthy shadow Atavism, like old guilt which can never be repudiated any more."²²⁷ As discussed above, the fear of atavism, or "backward movements" along humanity's evolutionary scale, came about in the nineteenth century, along with contemporary fears about the implications of evolution and social

²²³ Brooke, *Superfluous Woman*, 311-314.

²²⁴ Brooke, *Superfluous Woman*, 311.

²²⁵ Brooke, *Superfluous Woman*, 312-315.

²²⁶ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 123.

²²⁷ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 123.

decline.²²⁸ Perhaps most famously, atavism had been described in Cesare Lombroso's work as the physical characteristics which can denote or even predict criminal traits and tendencies.²²⁹ As Jessamine learns, however, even though bodily atavism is uncommon, "no mind can call itself safe from the reversionary principle."²³⁰ Reversion to type, Jessamine discovers, is the most inescapable of prisons. Even if a degenerate criminal or drunk is rehabilitated, he will almost always fall back into his old immoral habits.²³¹ Brooke's explanation about the insidious nature of habits, on the face of it seemingly very Lamarckian, can in fact be read as an argument against Lamarckian ideas of acquired characteristics. Brooke explains that rehabilitation efforts, often popular among Lamarckians, are ineffective against degenerate groups such as criminals and alcoholics, who are inherently prone to crime, violence, and drinking. The habits of degeneracy, in Brooke's work, are not traits which can be removed or retaught. Rather, they are a base state which the degenerate mind is always going to revert to.

4.3 Aristocratic Decay and the Institutions of Marriage and Motherhood:

Brooke's depiction of the aristocracy in *A Superfluous Woman* is as both morally and physically degenerate.²³² Indeed in her depiction of the Heriot family, we can see evidence of the "counterparadigm in which degeneration was actually attributed to traditional morality" which was described by Robb.²³³ Rather than a paragon of good, strong, English manliness and virtue, the aristocrat who Jessamine ends up marrying is weak, effeminate, and so corrupted by vice as

²²⁸ Cesare Lombroso, "Atavism And Evolution." *The Contemporary Review*, 1866-1900 68, (07, 1895): 42; Testa and Hale, *Evolution in Victorian Britain Volume 1: Evolution Before Darwin*; Bowler, *Evolution: The History of an Idea*.

²²⁹ Lombroso, *L'Uomo Delinquente*; Lombroso, *La Donna Delinquente, la Prostituta e la Donna Normale*.

²³⁰ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 106, 123.

²³¹ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 122.

²³² Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 273.

²³³ Robb, "The Way of All Flesh," 590.

to be beyond redemption.²³⁴ While the Scottish highlander Colin MacGillvray is described as endlessly good, strong, and wise, the Heriot family is described as having degenerated to “a depth too low... for even the tonic kick of mankind.”²³⁵ As Andree describes it, “London society is revealed to be both corrupted and corrupting in *A Superfluous Woman*, as its leading families fester with venereal disease and display quintessential degenerative traits.”²³⁶ This, of course, is a radical inversion of the classic understanding of class and degeneration. London society in Brooke’s novel is degenerate not due to the irredeemability of the poor, but because of the inbreeding of the upper classes and society’s perpetuation of a culture in which the unfit are socially desirable, even if they are biologically undesirable.

Aside from Brooke’s description of the degenerate Heriot family, her stance on the aristocracy can be seen in the language used to describe Jessamine’s marriage and children. While by contemporary moral standards, Jessamine had done the correct thing, marrying a respectable man in polite society rather than absconding with the Scottish highlander, neither Jessamine nor anyone else in the novel aside from Lord Heriot himself seem to think her choice was correct. After all, Jessamine knows that Lord Heriot is himself a degenerate before she marries him, and had read about atavism in her earlier studies.²³⁷ However, despite having educated herself in many things, Jessamine is not well educated in hereditary theory, or in the radical critique of the aristocracy as inbred and degenerate.²³⁸ As such, Jessamine does not seem to recognize or know the danger that the Heriot family’s degeneracy poses.²³⁹

²³⁴ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 284.

²³⁵ Andree, “Reproducing Disability and Degeneration in the Victorian Fin de Siècle;” Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 284-285.

²³⁶ Andree, “Reproducing Disability and Degeneration in the Victorian Fin de Siècle.”

²³⁷ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 123.

²³⁸ Andree, “Reproducing Disability and Degeneration in the Victorian Fin de Siècle.”

²³⁹ Andree, “Reproducing Disability and Degeneration in the Victorian Fin de Siècle.”

After the birth of her children, however, it becomes obvious that the hereditary issues of the Heriots are too strong for Jessamine to have overcome. And, Brooke describes both of the children as harboring a blame and anger directed particularly towards their mother for the state in which they were born. With the birth of their first child Jessamine hopes that the birth defects are her own fault, and that maybe there is no inescapable hereditary issue in her husband.²⁴⁰ When voicing this to her doctor, he opines that Jessamine's only "crime" was "to become a mother by that effete and dissipated race?"²⁴¹ Jessamine and Heriot's daughter, the result of that crime, is described as drooping and as "at times...malicious."²⁴² Jessamine herself seems afraid of her, warning the doctor off from touching her. Her son as well, though not capable of violence, watches his mother with "perpetual reproach" as she moves through their nursery.²⁴³ It is with the birth of this second son that Jessamine seems to accept that any child she has by her husband is going to be malformed in body and mind. Indeed, even the third child, which Jessamine is still pregnant with during the story, is already described as unhealthy and degenerate, despite not yet being born.²⁴⁴

Brooke's proposed solution for degenerate aristocrats such as the Heriot family is seemingly very eugenic. In the novel, Brooke suggests that there is no possible solution other than the prevention of the degenerate aristocrats from reproducing their kind. When speaking of reform with Lord Heriot, the novel's doctor character thinks to himself that the Heriot bloodline cannot be reformed at all. "The important thing was... that he and his race should pass into annihilation."²⁴⁵ Brooke's argument seems to be not that the degenerate aristocrats be shown the error of their ways, but that they be allowed and encouraged to die out entirely.

²⁴⁰ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 272.

²⁴¹ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 273.

²⁴² Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 271.

²⁴³ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 271.

²⁴⁴ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 291.

²⁴⁵ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 284.

4.3.1 Marriage

The class-based and economically controlled institution of Victorian marriage is the second factor contributing to the degeneracy seen in *A Superfluous Woman*. The economic necessity of marriage for many women, exchanging their domestic, sexual, and reproductive labor for financial security, kept it from being a true partnership between men and women, as seen in Jessamine's relationship to Lord Heriot, with whom she has no true connection or partnership. Women's financial dependence on their husbands also kept them vulnerable to being taken advantage of by their suitors or husbands, who were able to control them through economic means. In her essay in Annie Besant's journal *Our Corner*, Brooke described the existing nature of marriage as reducing women to "a slave or chattel" to be held by men.²⁴⁶ This, Brooke argued, was the primary cause for the continuing subjugation of women and inequality of the sexes.²⁴⁷

Brooke was not alone in her critiques of marriage, as many new woman writers such as Mona Caird, Victoria Crosse (1868-1952) and countless others also argued that men and women's goals and views of marriage were fundamentally misaligned.²⁴⁸ While Mona Caird did accept the possibility of a happy marriage, she wrote that "In most cases, the chain of marriage chafes the flesh..."²⁴⁹ While men and women could find true love and respect and enter into a truly beneficial and fulfilling marriage, Caird's conclusion was that marriage as a concept, in its current form, was a "vexatious failure."²⁵⁰ It is worth noting here, as Robb has pointed out, that Victorian, and later Edwardian society, was deeply impacted by the works of thinkers such as

²⁴⁶ Byrne, "Women and Their Sphere," 6.

²⁴⁷ Byrne, "Women and Their Sphere," 6.

²⁴⁸ Caird, "Marriage," 186-201; Victoria Crosse, *The Woman Who Didn't*, (London: John Lane, 1895); Smith, *Civic Fantasy: New Woman Fiction, Citizenship, and the Limits of the Aesthetic*.

²⁴⁹ Caird, "Marriage," 197.

²⁵⁰ Caird, "Marriage," 197.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and Sigmund Freud (1856-1939).²⁵¹ Under these influences a number of “iconoclasts” of the Victorian age developed a view of their contemporary traditional values, such as repression of sexuality and the institution of marriage, as “the problem rather than the solution.”²⁵² Marriage, deeply relevant to this paper because of the key role it plays in Brooke’s novel *A Superfluous Woman*, received special ire as many believed it directly stood in the way of the natural process of the creation of healthy children.²⁵³ Namely, the system by which wealthy men had their choice of women and women were forced to marry to support themselves, rather than with their future offspring’s health as a priority led to the creation of degenerate children.²⁵⁴ Robb describes the institution of marriage as “based on material and cultural considerations such as property, class, and religious belief.”²⁵⁵ These foundations were important for maintaining contemporary class divides as well as societal and religious authority and the moral status quo. However, the consequence of prioritizing economic and social concerns was that people were unable to consider factors such as health and heredity when deciding on a mate.

It was Mona Caird, in her essay “Marriage” who described marriage as a form of legal prostitution.²⁵⁶ In Victorian society, Caird saw that there were two established roles for women. There were the illegal prostitutes, and the legal prostitutes, who were wives. Both groups were held to impossible double standards, and seen as less than their male counterparts.²⁵⁷ Marriage, according to Caird, was a form of legal prostitution, as it afforded a woman a place to live, money, and stability in exchange for bearing a man’s children.²⁵⁸ In this system, there was no room for women to seek healthy or attractive mates, which might give them healthy or attractive

²⁵¹ Robb, “The Way of All Flesh,” 590.

²⁵² Robb, “The Way of All Flesh,” 590.

²⁵³ Robb, “The Way of All Flesh,” 592.

²⁵⁴ Robb, “The Way of All Flesh,” 592; Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*.

²⁵⁵ Robb, “The Way of All Flesh,” 592.

²⁵⁶ Caird, “Marriage.”

²⁵⁷ Caird, “Marriage,” 193-194.

²⁵⁸ Caird, “Marriage,” 193-194.

children. Instead, they were left to look for the wealthiest available men with the highest possible status, with no concern for the reproductive consequences of mating with unfit men. This “legal prostitution” and consequent decay is seen in *A Superfluous Woman* both in Jessamine’s relationship to Lord Heriot and her relationship with Colin MacGillvray.

A key argument for Brooke, as well as a key struggle for her protagonist, Jessamine Halliday, is the seemingly inescapable presence of marriage which looms over her for no other reason than that she is a woman. There seems to be no avenue for Jessamine that does not involve ending up as somebody’s wife. Even after escaping from her societal and mental constraints living as a woman in London, and finding a physically suitable mate in her Scottish highlander, Jessamine is faced with the hard reality that she will always exist in his view as, “My wife — my wife!”²⁵⁹ Colin will not accept her as anything more or less, and refuses to have a relationship with her without first becoming her husband.²⁶⁰ Jessamine, who has no desire to become Colin’s wife in the conventional sense, is faced with the rude realization that he is never going to give her what she wants, which is a “true” spiritual marriage based on mutual love, attraction, and virtue.²⁶¹ If Jessamine truly wants to have a child with MacGillvray she will have to accept a future with no material comfort, of hard labor, living in a small farmhouse with both of Colin’s elderly parents. This will not only drastically change Jessamine’s life, but severely disadvantage her child.

With Lord Heriot, Jessamine experiences no attraction or love whatsoever. Indeed, she explains to her doctor multiple times that she feels nothing for him but loathing before she marries him.²⁶² And yet, before running away to Scotland Jessamine is “as near as possible

²⁵⁹ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 227.

²⁶⁰ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 227.

²⁶¹ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 164.

²⁶² Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 29-30.

engaged to Lord Heriot.”²⁶³ The reason for this engagement, as Jessamine explains it, is quite simple. Lord Heriot, although he is diseased and weak, is “the greatest catch in Europe” because of the tremendous value society places on status and wealth.²⁶⁴ And, because Heriot is of a high status and extremely wealthy, he is able to marry any woman he so chooses. And, because Jessamine is very beautiful, Heriot chooses her. Though Jessamine despises Lord Heriot, and has no true desire to have children with him, he affords her a life of comforts he is accustomed to, and a continued position in London society. Jessamine faces the same plight Brooke explained in her essay “Women and Their Sphere,” that of being a woman at the mercy of a man with financial control over her.²⁶⁵ Indeed, in that essay, Brooke argued that women were never going to truly be free or equal to men without first achieving economic independence.²⁶⁶ This is in addition to all of the struggles she highlights in *A Superfluous Woman*, where the main character was from a healthy class, and still unable to pursue her own ideal version of motherhood or conduct her life as she saw fit. It was Brooke’s hope that reform of marriage laws would change the goals of said laws from preserving a marriage no matter what to “provide escapes” to the married parties should they be needed.²⁶⁷

4.3.2 Motherhood

Inextricably linked with the question of Victorian marriage is the question of Victorian motherhood. Brooke’s views on motherhood are deeply tied not only to her feminism, but also to her socialist ideas. Indeed, in her essay for *Our Corner* the crux of Brooke’s argument was that women’s place in society had been defined by their role as mothers.²⁶⁸ Similarly, at the beginning

²⁶³ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 28.

²⁶⁴ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 22.

²⁶⁵ Byrre, “Women and Their Sphere,” 6-9.

²⁶⁶ Byrre, “Women and Their Sphere,” 9.

²⁶⁷ Byrre, “Women and Their Sphere,” 13.

²⁶⁸ Byrre, “Women and Their Sphere,” 5-13

of *A Superfluous Woman*, Jessamine is described as little more than her potential for childbearing, a “pretty piece of sexuality.”²⁶⁹ Motherhood was a deeply important issue for Brooke, and sat at what she saw as the crux of the issue of gender equality.

As Barbara Tilly explains, Emma Brooke’s work focused intently on issues of class and gender inequality, and the day to day struggles faced by groups such as workers and women.²⁷⁰ Brooke was a committed socialist as well as an advocate of women’s equality, and these two schools of thought are often combined and conjoined in her writing. As Tilly and others have pointed out, in Brooke’s writing there was no way to extricate the “woman question” from questions of labor and socialism.²⁷¹ Brooke wrote extensively on the subjects of motherhood and a woman’s role in society. Motherhood, she argued, and the social constraints that went with it, were designed to restrict and subjugate female sexuality and women’s rights. Brooke’s arguments on motherhood, as seen in “Women and Their Sphere” focus on motherhood as labor, labor for which women were not receiving due recognition or compensation. The value of women to men, Brooke claimed, was primarily their sexuality, with their capacity for labor as a distant second.²⁷² However, women’s sexuality held a value to society which was not being compensated.²⁷³ This emphasis on labor is indicative of the deep impact socialism had on Brooke, and on her ideas of feminism and gender equality. Brooke’s socialist beliefs, as well as her feminism and support of the “New Woman” figure are visible in *A Superfluous Woman*.²⁷⁴ Colin MacGillvray, for example, pleading with Jessamine to become his wife, sees her as a woman first, and a person

²⁶⁹ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 12.

²⁷⁰ Tilly, “Introduction,” 6.

²⁷¹ Tilly, “Introduction,” 17-18.

²⁷² Byrre, “Women and Their Sphere,” 6.

²⁷³ Byrre, “Women and Their Sphere,” 7.

²⁷⁴ Tilly, “Introduction,” 12-13; Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*.

second.²⁷⁵ Colin doesn't see Jessamine as a fellow farm worker or laborer, but as a wife and mother waiting to be made so.

According to Brooke, it was women's potential "function of reproducing and nourishing the new life of the State," which fundamentally differentiated them from men.²⁷⁶ Indeed, the potential for motherhood constituted an "eternal difference which cannot be got over."²⁷⁷ The only way forward, as Brooke saw it in 1888, was for the state itself to take responsibility for the support of mothers and of motherhood.²⁷⁸ It was the state's responsibility not only to limit and control population, but also to maintain the lives of the children born.²⁷⁹ And, in Brooke's ideal model, children should be considered not only the property of their parents, but also the property and responsibility of the state.²⁸⁰ Men's work as soldiers was recognized by the state, Brooke argued, so too should women's work as mothers.²⁸¹ This would allow all children an advantage over the "common hounds of ancestry" which pursue them.²⁸² This argument can also be found in *A Superfluous Woman*, where Brooke argues that the surest way to doom a child to a life of degeneracy is to leave it to its "own flesh and blood" where wealthy children will be pampered and spoiled and poor children will be mistreated and hungry.²⁸³ This was a point of view, as said above, which she had moved on from by 1906 when she saw Wells speak.

²⁷⁵ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 227.

²⁷⁶ Byrre, "Women and Their Sphere," 66-67.

²⁷⁷ Byrre, "Women and Their Sphere," 66.

²⁷⁸ Byrre, "Women and Their Sphere," 67.

²⁷⁹ Byrre, "Women and Their Sphere," 67.

²⁸⁰ Byrre, "Women and Their Sphere," 67.

²⁸¹ Byrre, "Women and Their Sphere," 67-68. This argument was also made by H.G. Wells in 1905, see H.G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, (London: Chapman and Hall, 1905).

²⁸² Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 123.

²⁸³ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 123-124.

4.3.3 Free Love

The solution for the inequalities of marriage and motherhood proposed by thinkers such as Mona Caird, George Egerton, and Emma Frances Brooke was the institution of “free love” or the radical acceptance of committed relationships outside of the conventional structure of marriage. Free love was based on mutual attraction and respect, rather than status and financial wellbeing. The economic and class driven institution of marriage was, in radical eyes, as explained by Robb, “extraneous to the primary goal of eugenics, which was reproduction.”²⁸⁴ If the goal was to reverse the effects of moral and physical degeneration, and get human development back on its positive track, then “they needed to discard much of the cultural baggage that retarded racial progress.”²⁸⁵ This baggage, which consisted of ideas such as not marrying below one's status and allowing men to select their mates, was hindering the evolution of humankind. To solve these problems, proponents of free love advocated for the reform or even abandonment of traditional marriage.²⁸⁶

Brooke's work shows the negative impacts of marriage through the destruction of not only Jessamine's life, but also the horror and destruction of both of her living children and the willful miscarriage of the child yet to be born.²⁸⁷ And, in showing the consequence of marrying Lord Heriot, Brooke also makes a case for free love. After all, it is only in Jessamine's time with the lowly Scottish highlander Colin MacGillvray that Jessamine sees her future as a mother as a hopeful and joyous thing.²⁸⁸ The child she imagines having with Colin is beautiful, healthy, and happy, in sharp contrast to the unborn child Jessamine already knows will be deformed and sickly.²⁸⁹ That union, however, which Jessamine believed would have created a healthy child,

²⁸⁴ Robb, “The Way of All Flesh,” 592.

²⁸⁵ Robb, “The Way of All Flesh,” 593.

²⁸⁶ Robb, “The Way of All Flesh,” 593.

²⁸⁷ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 164, 227.

²⁸⁸ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 164.

²⁸⁹ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 164.

was not realistically possible for her, as the man refused to accept sex and procreation outside of a traditional marriage.²⁹⁰ Here, we see not only love and passion, but also reproduction and motherhood thwarted by the constraints of marriage.

4.4 Female Sexual Selection:

Brooke's *A Superfluous Woman* is filled with ideas of sexual selection and the role of the status quo in degeneration. Like other radical and progressive thinkers, Brooke treated sexual attraction as an indicator of healthy matches, which would produce strong and healthy offspring.²⁹¹ Like Grand, Brooke also believed that women needed to be educated about biology and evolution as tools alongside attraction, so that they can make rational and intelligent decisions about their choice of mate.²⁹² As Courtney Andree explains "Brooke encouraged women to educate themselves about reproduction and equip themselves with the knowledge to make informed decisions on the marriage market."²⁹³ H.G. Wells similarly argued that a lack of education, along with an economic dependence on men, was what pushed women into hasty, unhappy, and unproductive marriages.²⁹⁴

In 1871 Charles Darwin published *The Descent of Man*.²⁹⁵ In this book Darwin described his theory of sexual selection in greater detail than he had in *Origin*, as a mechanism which worked in tandem with natural selection. As explained by Darwin, "[sexual selection] depends on the advantage which certain individuals have over other individuals of the same sex and species, in exclusive relation to reproduction."²⁹⁶ Rather than fitness/unfitness being determined

²⁹⁰ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 164.

²⁹¹ Robb, "The Way of All Flesh" 590-591.

²⁹² Andree, "Reproducing Disability and Degeneration in the Victorian Fin de Siècle."

²⁹³ Andree, "Reproducing Disability and Degeneration in the Victorian Fin de Siècle."

²⁹⁴ H.G. Wells, *Socialism and the Family*. Section 1.

²⁹⁵ Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, (London: John Murray, 1871).

²⁹⁶ Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, 256.

by the environment, and the adaptations best suited for survival being passed forward, the most attractive males of a species were selected for reproduction by the females of the species.²⁹⁷ In Darwin's theory of sexual selection, males in nature compete for the affection of females, the latter of which ultimately make the choice of who to reproduce with based on secondary sexual characteristics which bolster attractiveness.²⁹⁸ In birds, for example, this might include more striking plumage or better coloration. "By having long selected the more attractive males," the females passed on their looks, and over time, as Darwin described it, added to the overall beauty of the species.²⁹⁹ In humans, however, which Darwin argued were a higher and more advanced species, it was the male's prerogative to decide on a mate for reproduction.³⁰⁰ According to Robb and Richardson, as well as scholars in the American context such as Kimberly A. Hamlin however, Darwin's explanation of the differences of human sexual selection were not universally accepted.³⁰¹ Feminists, in particular, argued that rather than having a uniquely different version of sexual selection, humans had moved to an unnatural method of deciding mates. This would explain the human deviation from the law of sexual selection seen everywhere else in nature, as well as accounting for the pattern of human degeneration. Human men, it seemed too overridden with lust and vice to be able to make suitable decisions when it came to a mate, a point made most strongly by Sarah Grand but outlined by a number of female thinkers.³⁰² Rather than taking the scientific approach and time to find a suitable mate, men chose either for social standing or for sexual gratification, and were able to choose with authority granted them by their station. This allowed sickly and unhealthy individuals such as Lord Heriot to breed with very beautiful

²⁹⁷ Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, 256.

²⁹⁸ Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, 256-257.

²⁹⁹ Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, 259.

³⁰⁰ Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, 323-328.

³⁰¹ Robb, "The Way of All Flesh;" Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*; Kimberly A. Hamlin, *From Eve to Evolution: Darwin, Science, and Women's Rights in Gilded Age America*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press 2014).

³⁰² Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, 104-105.

young women such as Jessamine Halliday, even though she would never have chosen him of her own free will..

By examining *A Superfluous Woman* and comparing Jessamine's feelings for both Colin MacGillvray and Lord Heriot, we can situate Brooke's position, rather than aligning with Sarah Grand's, more in-line with physician-eugenicist Havelock Ellis (1859-1939), as a proponent of sexual attraction as an indicator for compatibility. While Jessamine never has a child with Colin, there are moments in the book when, through her imaginings, the audience is shown what that child might have looked like.³⁰³ First as she fantasizes about bringing their child back to London Jessamine imagines a happy baby.³⁰⁴ Then, as she lays dying, Jessamine again imagines a healthy, happy little boy.³⁰⁵ While it is not clear if this is supposed to be Colin's child or simply a healthy Heriot heir, we can see into "the next world" where Jessamine has birthed and raised a baby that will not die tragically in childhood, a victim of degenerate heredity.³⁰⁶

Brooke uses these scenes to show possibilities had Jessamine been able to decide for herself how and with whom she would reproduce. Her sexual and romantic attraction to Colin MacGillvray implied as indicators that they would have created beautiful children together. In her non-fiction writing Brooke also proposed the equality of the sexes as a potential solution for overpopulation and "bad population."³⁰⁷ It was, she argued "in the last degree unlikely" that a woman who had been educated, and was free to choose for herself the nature of her sex life, would become "a mere machine for the production of superfluous children."³⁰⁸ The education and sexual emancipation of women, therefore, was not only beneficial for generating a higher

³⁰³ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 164, 307.

³⁰⁴ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 164.

³⁰⁵ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 307-308.

³⁰⁶ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 308.

³⁰⁷ Byrre, "Women and Their Sphere," 71.

³⁰⁸ Byrre, "Women and Their Sphere," 71.

quality of children, but would also serve as a natural check on the population.³⁰⁹ This phenomenon was also noted by H.G. Wells, who argued, although much later, that if given education and a free choice many women who were married would have chosen to remain single.³¹⁰ Although he looked with alarm on the shrinking family size and what he called a “Strike Against Parentage.”³¹¹

Chapter 5: Conclusion

With the growing concern about evolutionary degeneration in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, discussion turned to diagnosing the problem, as well as the potential avenues by which society might be regenerated. For individuals such as Emma Frances Brooke, feminist, socialist, and biological/eugenic thought and knowledge were inextricably tied to one another. The solution, as Brooke suggested, is in accordance with these connected fields, and was to work towards complete equality of the sexes. In Brooke’s argument, the woman question was the answer to nearly all of the problems facing society, including evolutionary degeneration.³¹² In this, her feminism, socialism, and knowledge of evolutionary biology informed and reinforced each other, as can be seen in her arguments for the education of women as a natural check on out of control birth rates among the lower class and declining birthrates in the middle class.³¹³ Similarly, Brooke’s advocacy for female choice in sexual selection would not only prevent men from leveraging their financial and social status against women — Socialism and feminism would in fact change social and economic relationships so they would no longer have this power

³⁰⁹ Byrre, “Women and Their Sphere,” 71-72.

³¹⁰ Wells, *Socialism and the Family*, Section 1.

³¹¹ Wells, *Socialism and the Family*, Section 1.

³¹² This view in particular separated Brooke’s stance from the official views on the woman question espoused by the Fabian Society in their Report on Fabian Policy issued in 1896; Fabian Society, *Fabian Tract no. 70*, 1.

³¹³ Byrre, “Women and Their Sphere,” 71.

— but would also allow for the natural generation of healthy children.³¹⁴ The patriarchal system of marriage, after all, had so obviously failed to maintain good breeding, as, as Victorian radicals pointed out, wealthy aristocrats took their pick of healthy young women and produced degenerate and unhealthy children.³¹⁵ Female instinct, according to Brooke, coupled with the aforementioned education and sexual liberation of women could provide the necessary biological regeneration to recover from these problems. As for the aristocracy, Brooke's proposed solution of allowing the degenerate bloodlines to fade out and end themselves is distinctly eugenic.³¹⁶

However, this essay is not intended to demonstrate Brooke's eugenicist views simply for the sake of doing so. Historians and scholars gain a greater understanding of Brooke's literature, as well as her political work and writings from understanding the ways her feminism and view on the Woman Question influenced and was influenced by eugenic thought. And, as Angelique Richardson has shown, this is true not only for Brooke but for a great number of feminist and New Woman writers in the nineteenth century.³¹⁷ The historical trend of attributing eugenic thought solely to the political right has had the consequence of absolving the left and leftist thinkers of these same thoughts and beliefs. However, as we see highlighted in works such as Robb's and Richardson's, and in the novels of figures such as Emma Brooke, the fear of degeneration and the salvation that eugenics promised were embraced on all sides of the political spectrum. The Woman Question was, in the Victorian Era, tied to a greater discourse on social, scientific, and biological change. Historians and literary scholars of this period can benefit greatly from examining the New Woman through the lens of the history of biology. And, though it has been natural to do so, Feminist scholars shouldn't and indeed can't shy away from the

³¹⁴ Sarah Grand, "Marriage Questions in Fiction" *Fortnightly Review*, 63, (1898) 386; Sarah Grand, "The Tree of Knowledge" *New Review*, 10, (1894) 680; H. Havelock Ellis, "Eugenics and St. Valentine," *Nineteenth Century and After* 49 (1906), 785-786.

³¹⁵ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 164, 227.

³¹⁶ Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 284.

³¹⁷ Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, 1-32.

eugenic history of so many primary figures. To do so not only omits major pieces of feminist history, but also makes all understanding of literature such as Brooke's much more shallow.

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