

Exploring Gender Issues in Late Victorian Society through Patricia Murphy's *Poetry of the New Woman: Public Concerns, Private Matters*.

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Patricia Murphy's quarter-century engagement with literature on the Fin de siècle New Woman, and the works of Fin de siècle New Women writers, has culminated in her latest exploration, *Poetry of the New Woman: Public Concerns, Private Matters* (2023). This fourth installment in her series follows earlier works, such as *In Science's Shadow: Literary Constructions of Late Victorian Women* (2006), *The New Woman Gothic: Reconfigurations of Distress* (2016), and *Reconceiving Nature: Ecofeminism in Late Victorian Women's Poetry* (2019). Murphy's latest book stands out as a significant contribution, emphasizing the social responsibility of Fin de siècle New Woman poets and their commitment to reflecting the paramount issues of their time.

In the introductory chapter, Murphy skillfully navigates the controversies surrounding the portrayal of the New Woman in the 1890s. She conducts a concise survey of anthologies, critical essays, and studies focused on poetry by late Victorian women. The introduction concludes with a surprising twist, briefly addressing aspects of New Woman poetry that the subsequent chapters will not extensively cover. This sets the stage for a nuanced exploration of specific themes in the following chapters.

Chapter 2, "The Vagaries of Marriage," provides a profound analysis of New Woman poetry that reflects the emotional and intellectual burdens borne by married women in Victorian marriages. Edith Nesbit takes center stage, with Murphy expanding the discussion to include Nora Hopper, Amy Levy, and Dora Sigerson Shorter. Together, these poets offer valuable insights into the flaws of Victorian marriage, addressing constraints, estrangement, and infidelity.

Moving to Chapter 3, "The Workings of Desire," Murphy delves into the previously taboo theme of sexuality in New Woman poetry. Gender-fluid, bisexual, or lesbian poets like Olive Custance, Amy Levy, Alice Meynell, Dollie Radford, and Michael Field are spotlighted. This chapter navigates the complexities of expressing erotic desire within the restrictive Victorian society, showcasing the poets' ability to articulate such themes in veiled terms.

Chapter 4, "Social Responsibility for the Destitute," focuses on the socio-economic problems of the late 19th century addressed by New Women poets. Isabella J. Southern's works are explored, emphasizing her critique of societal apathy towards the destitute and her advocacy for women's emancipation. This chapter serves as a lens into the multifaceted societal challenges of the era.

Chapter 5, "Grim Stories of the Fallen Women," takes a closer look at New Woman poems addressing societal judgments on women perceived to have violated prevailing norms. Mathilde Blind's verses provide a comprehensive view of the complexities surrounding the "fallen woman," shedding light on societal abhorrence and hypocrisy.

Chapter 6, "Poets on Poetry," focuses on the underappreciated poet A. Mary F. Robinson, highlighting her significant contributions and New Woman perspectives. Robinson's metapoetry explores challenges faced by serious female writers, emphasizing her rejection of misogynistic assumptions and alignment with strong female models.

In Chapter 7, "The Promise of London," Murphy explores how New Women poets celebrated London as a source of exhilaration and exploration. Amy Levy's collection, *A London Plane-Tree and Other Verse* (1889), is highlighted as a unique guidebook for New Women, challenging traditional gender roles and providing a comprehensive guide for

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engaging with the city. This chapter showcases Levy's role in challenging gender norms and her praise for spaces like the British Museum's Reading Room.

The concluding chapter serves as a thoughtful reflection on glimpses of hope and concerns for the future found in New Woman poetry. Poems by May Kendall, Dollie Radford, Emily Pfeiffer, Amy Levy, and "Ellis Ethelmer" envision advancements, changing eras, and a future of equality and shared destiny between men and women. Murphy reflects on the progress made since the New Woman poets' era and acknowledges the ongoing work needed for true equality.

In *Poetry of the New Woman: Public Concerns. Private Matters*, Patricia Murphy offers a comprehensive and insightful exploration of the diverse themes within New Woman poetry. Beyond the thematic analysis, Murphy highlights the social responsibility of Fin de siècle New Woman poets, emphasizing their commitment to addressing the societal issues of their time. The book not only serves as a valuable resource for scholars and students interested in late Victorian women's literature but also contributes to a broader understanding of the complexities of women's experiences and aspirations during this transformative period.

Throughout the book, Murphy's meticulous research and nuanced analysis shed light on the nuances of New Woman poetry, providing readers with a deeper appreciation for the poets' contributions. By weaving together themes of marriage, desire, social responsibility, fallen women, and the promise of urban life, Murphy creates a rich tapestry that captures the essence of the New Woman movement. The inclusion of lesser-known poets and a variety of perspectives adds depth to the narrative, offering a more comprehensive view of the era.

In conclusion, *Poetry of the New Woman: Public Concerns. Private Matters* stands as a significant addition to the scholarship on late Victorian women's literature. Patricia Murphy's expertise in the field and her ability to present complex themes with clarity make this book accessible to a wide audience. The exploration of New Woman poetry through the lens of social responsibility is a distinctive and valuable contribution that enhances our understanding of the literary, social, and cultural landscape of the Fin de siècle period.