

The Metaphor of Syphilis in Grand's *Heavenly Twins*

By William Driscoll

A Theoretical Framework

<1>In her extended essay *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag argues that diseases, which have both physical causes and physical symptoms, often carry metaphorical baggage beyond their physiological reality. In this way, a disease such as tuberculosis (TB) was romanticized so that the wasting away of the patient's body became a metaphor for the spiritualization of the victim through the consumption of the animal body (Sontag 41). The representation of TB, as Sontag suggests, allows Hugo to "provide a redemptive death" for Fantine after a sinful (and more animal) life of prostitution (41).

<2>Amidst the syphilis epidemic of Victorian England, syphilis came to represent the physical counterpart to this redemptive spiritualizing disease. Syphilis metaphorically became a form of divine retribution for the unrepentant prostitute. In her novel *Heavenly Twins*, Sarah Grand uses the traditional connection between syphilis and illicit sensuality, but actively redeploys the metaphor against the overindulgent behaviors of male society. While she also uses syphilis to examine the unjust and sometimes dangerous limitations placed upon women in Victorian society, this essay will focus on the main target of the syphilis metaphor in *Heavenly Twins*—the sexual double standard.

<3>In order to grasp how syphilis, a disease caused by a particular microbe, can be spoken about as a metaphor, we must first abandon our twenty-first century concept of disease. Contemporary knowledge of the germ level of syphilis (and of diseases in general) blocks our understanding of the popular medical theories surrounding the disease in the late nineteenth century. Since germ theory of disease was only cemented in 1862 by Louis Pasteur, medicine and its treatment of disease was far less resistant to metaphorical, political and social influences. Indeed the line between science and fiction had become so blurred that "medical discourse can be shown to have constantly borrowed evidence and ideas from imaginative literature and art in order to construct and articulate [its] ideas" (Spongberg 14).

<4>In this sense disease metaphor can be seen as a tool used to assault or reinforce the entrenched beliefs of a society, which themselves are mostly metaphorical. Richard Rorty in

Contingency, Irony and Solidarity describes this form of rhetorical assault in his definition of the metaphor as a tool that allows the user

to redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behavior which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it, thereby, causing them to look for appropriate new forms of nonlinguistic behavior for example, the adoption of... new social institutions. (9)

Since *Treponema pallidum*, the spirochete organism that syphilis describes today, had not yet been discovered, syphilis quickly became the mysterious and unwanted guest of whom rumors spread quicker than truths. Much of this rumor and innuendo became an accepted part of a divisive medical discourse that had, as Russett points out, “utilized and adapted [contemporary theories] to explain how and why men and women differed...and what these differences signified for social policy” (10). These differences had become particularly important in a society where the rise of the “New Woman” compounded with the significant increase of women in the workforce led many to feel that the “cult of the true woman” was under siege (Russett 10).

<5>As a result the medical community, despite extensive scientific evidence to the contrary, repeatedly portrayed female reproductive organs as the site of contamination, a portrayal that reinforced, both in law and social taboos, the double standard that simultaneously allowed male profligacy while enforcing feminine virtue. Such an obviously inconsistent philosophy could only be sustained through a sleight of hand in which the diseased male is hidden (i.e. not spoken of) and the fallen woman is laden with all the blame. This sleight of hand, as Grand points out, was achieved by keeping women focused on maintaining their own innocence of body and mind. Grand highlights the society’s failure to educate women concerning sexually transmitted diseases in a third person omniscient description of Edith Beale, one of the central female characters in *Heavenly Twins*:

She might have done great good in the world had she known of the evil...But she had never been allowed to see the enemy. She had been fitted by education to move in the society of saints and angels only. (158-59)

Women were dissuaded from learning about “enemies” such as sexually transmitted diseases, because middle and upper class women were expected to be pure in both mind and body. Unfortunately, while this education prepared women for heaven, they had to live on earth. Edith’s education blinds her to dangerous realities of syphilis. As a result of ignoring her husband’s sexual history, she contracts syphilis and gives birth to a syphilitic child. The sexual double standard propped up by the “angelic” status of women, kills Edith and her child.

<6>In *Heavenly Twins* Grand strategically shifts the site of contamination to the male reproductive system and, therefore, spoils the illusion. The failure to educate women about sexually transmitted diseases no longer protects their innocence; it kills their children. Furthermore, the sexual double standard becomes complicit with syphilis itself and infects innocent wives. Ultimately, she engages in a unique form of revolutionary conservatism where she does not destroy the cherished ideal of “the true woman” but rather extends it in such a way

that curtails the sexual liberties of men. By creating a male monster, which neither class, religion, nor marriage guard against, Grand “re-describes lots and lots of things” (Rorty 9) in ways that will enable women to both *review* and reconstruct the Victorian model of marriage and male profligacy.

Fighting over the Sex of Syphilis

<7>During the Victorian era prostitutes and fallen women were repeatedly portrayed as the site of venereal contamination—a portrayal that secured the double standard. Even the doctor and social reformer William Acton, considered (at the time) to be sympathetic to prostitutes, illustrates the biases that saturated scientific discourse in his description of the prostitute as

a woman with half the woman gone, and that half containing all that elevates her nature, leaving her a mere instrument of impurity; degraded and fallen she extracts from the sins of others the means of living, corrupt and dependent on corruption, and therefore interested directly in the increase of immorality a social pest, carrying contamination and foulness to every quarter. (Acton 119)

Like many other social reformers, Acton uses a medical register by describing the prostitute as a “pest” (i.e. plague) that carries “contamination and foulness.” He binds the spiritual breakdown of the prostitute, who “extracts from the sins of others the means of living,” to the physical means of “contamination.” She is the sin and pathogen. The implication is not only that the prostitute is the disease, but also that the man is *her* victim.

<8>As illustrated in the passage above, the borders of moral, social and medical discourse were porous. Interestingly, Grand does not reject Acton’s characterizations. Similar to Acton’s prostitute, Edith Beale, Grand’s syphilitic, is a woman who has lost that which had once “elevate[d] her” and as a result, she has sunk into a state of animal sensuality:

Her [Edith’s] intellectual life, such as it was, had stopped short from the time of her intimate association with Menteith; and her spiritual nature had been starved in close contact with him; only her senses had been nourished, and these were now being rendered morbidly active by disease (280).

Edith’s fall from grace, however, is not the result of a sinful choice, but rather a product of naïve innocence. Although Edith, like the prostitute, is destroyed by syphilis, the causes of the illness are connected to a stunted “intellectual life” and “spiritual... starv[ation]” caused by “contact with” her husband Menteith. Additionally, by suggesting that Menteith had only “nourished” her sensual side and that syphilis, likewise, “rendered [her senses] morbidly active,” Grand turns Menteith into the pathogen and pushes the scope of disease beyond the realm of medical discourse into a social exploration of the inherent dangers of male sexuality and the sexual double standard. Such a description would have been almost perfunctory if the contagious, murderous syphilitic had been a prostitute; however, Grand makes a male soldier, Menteith, the carrier of “contamination of foulness” while Edith becomes *his* innocent victim. Not only does Menteith infect his wife, but also this infection turns her into Acton’s prostitute. The infection

reduces Edith Beale, the gentlewoman, the daughter of a bishop, to a “woman with half the woman gone” bereft of both her “intellect” and “spiritual nature.”

<9> Menteith’s ability to over-excite the sensual side to the exclusion of the “intellectual” and “spiritual” capacities ties him closely to the dominant representation of the disease itself. Furthermore, the spelling of Menteith suggests two possible pronunciations, men-teeth or men-tithe, both of which are metaphorically bound to the disease. The first pronunciation accentuates the vicious nature of the disease that tears at the flesh and leaves ghastly sores on the skin of the victim. This pronunciation is supported by the description of Menteith’s smile when he is first introduced to the reader: “I have not yet the pleasure,’ he answered, smiling so that he showed his teeth. They were somewhat discoloured by tobacco, but the smile was a pleasant one, to which people instantly responded” (Grand 162). While the “smile” excites a kind of pleasure that allows the casual innocent observer to be drawn in, the “teeth” [men-teeth] hint at his true nature.

<10> The second pronunciation, men-tithe, stemming from a more German pronunciation, implies that the man collects a tithe from his victim. The word “tithe,” unlike teeth, as a traditional institution passed down from generation to generation, highlights the hereditary aspect of the disease. This particular tithe, as we will discover later in the book, are the children of Menteith’s lovers. Mosley Menteith passes down a tradition so polluted that it kills his descendents. This pronunciation of Menteith may have appeared strained if not for Grand’s own slightly awkward use of the word “tithe” in Book IV “The Interlude” to represent the disease: “not a tithe of the crimes committed in it were ever brought to light...[and] the doctors were combating the wages of sin gallantly” (Grand 355). Connecting the “tithe” to the doctors’ battle against the “wages of sin” ties the word “tithe” to venereal diseases.

<11> Perhaps the most significant part of Menteith’s name is the first syllable, which symbolically shifts the traditional site of the disease from the woman to the man. The importance of this shift cannot be overstated. Without any knowledge of the *T. pallidum* spirochete, scientific discourse did little more than encourage contemporary biases by asserting that syphilis contamination began in the female reproductive system. Once syphilis was located in the female secretions, it followed that women must be treated as the root cause of the disease. In order to uproot syphilis the behaviors of women had to be regulated both formally (by law) and informally—by ensuring that women remained virginal before marriage. Women—such as prostitutes—violated traditional sexual taboos by having multiple partners, and they had to be punished. The character of Menteith embodies all the non-virtuous habits traditionally associated with the prostitute (promiscuity, excessive drinking, poor hygiene). The two women who have “commerce” are infected and die. By repositioning the disease in the reproductive organs of the male, *Menteith*, Grand attempts to invert the traditional disease tropes and mobilize the disease-fear against the patriarchal society that has fostered them. The female becomes the victim and it is her body that is in danger.

<12> One modern critic, Meegan Kennedy, argues that Grand fails to depict the pathological effects of syphilis on the male body. According to Kennedy, Grand’s attempt to correct “the naturalistic novel...forced her to deflect attention from the physical to the mental effects of

syphilis, as a result of which...the corrupted and corrupting body—virtually disappears from view” (268). However, as the “corrupted...body...disappears from view,” the “corrupting body” becomes exponentially more dangerous. It is precisely the lack of physical indicators for syphilis that make the male body a dangerous terrain for women to navigate. It should be noted that the hidden nature of syphilis was never absent from the rhetoric that surrounded the disease and was one of the most common weapons used by both medical practitioners and politicians against women. As Kennedy herself points out, “although Victorians traced [syphilis] conveniently to the prostitute, the rate of infection was much higher in men” (271). In response, scientists argued that the disease caused by prostitutes often went undetected. This belief manifests itself in Ricord’s argument that the failure of regulated prostitution in France resulted from the failure to use the speculum in examinations (Spongberg 39). In short, the belief that the woman was the site of contamination was not proven by science, but was the given around which science revolved.

<13> Kennedy credits Grand for “spotlighting the iniquitous effects of the syphilitic male body” (269). Grand’s narrative, through the characters of Colquhoun and more importantly Menteith, depicts how male bodies carry the disease from their bachelor years and infect or threaten to infect innocents. Kennedy argues, however, that Grand’s failure to depict the male syphilitic body diminishes her ability to shift the site of contamination to males (Kennedy 269). Not only does Grand hide the syphilis of her male characters, but she also dresses them up with all the hypocritical pleasantries of the Victorian period. Colquhoun is described as “agreeable naturally as all pleasure loving people are” (Grand 101), and Menteith had a “smile [that was] a pleasant one to which people instantly responded” (162). The affable qualities of Colquhoun and Menteith disguise the poison they carry.

<14> Kennedy realizes that “terms associated with syphilis saturate the text but only as figures of moral or social degradation” (269). For Kennedy the “but only” suggests a failure; however, it is precisely this move from the concrete to the abstract that allowed Grand to apply syphilis as a means of questioning the conventions of Victorian society. The silences in *Heavenly Twins* enable syphilis to move from pathology to metaphor, and as a metaphor to become a literary weapon that she brandishes against the conventions of the author’s time. She takes the highly visible sores of the syphilitic and projects them upon the patriarchy, and she mobilizes the fear created by the disease into a clarion call for women to demand male purity.

<15> Grand reconfigures syphilis as an assault against those hypocritical conventions that allow men to be sexually promiscuous while demanding virginity from their future spouses. Grand is neither attempting to deflate the risks of morally dissolute behavior nor deconstruct feminine virtue, but rather extend that code of virtue to those who court women and beseech women to search for such virtue in men. *Heavenly Twins* demonstrates how the truth hiding behind this hypocritical double standard will kill both the virtuous spouse and her innocent child. Not only did syphilis endanger spouses who ignored their husbands’ sexual history, but also threatened the lives of their children and more generally the Victorian ideal of motherhood.

Syphilis and Maternity

<16> Although doctors and scientists were aware of the hereditary risk of syphilis, they had commonly (intentionally or not) downplayed these dangers. In the advertisement to his medical text, Holmes Coote, without any evidence, goes so far as to state “I am far from regarding them in that very serious light, which some would make us believe—that they [syphilis contaminants] ...pass out of one infection from generation to generation” (Coote). This type of unsupported rhetoric enabled the medical community to focus, as Coote does, on the dangers of prostitutes while ignoring the men they infect. More importantly such rhetoric suggested that syphilis had very little impact on the virtue of maternity.

<17> This laissez faire attitude toward hereditary syphilis began to crumble in 1881 when Dr. Alfred Fournier’s seminal work, *Syphilis and Marriage*, was translated into English. This medical text clearly stressed the risks of syphilitic husbands infecting both their wives and babies by stating that

a pregnancy would be the worst misfortune which could befall you. For, one of two things would happen: either your child will die before being born; or it would come into the world with the pox...the poor creature could not long survive. (Fournier 154)

Although hereditary syphilis was not discovered by Fournier, this text was pivotal in making it part of the public discourse (Liggins 178).

<18> As Jared Diamond notes in his ground breaking thematic history *Guns, Germs and Steel*, the ability of diseases such AIDS, rubella and syphilis to pass from the mother to the fetus “pose[d] ethical dilemmas with which believers in a fundamentally just universe have had to struggle desperately” (199). The dangers of hereditary syphilis haunted the language of marriage “from the 1880s onwards” (Liggins 177). Grand put these lingering fears, this haunted language, center-stage by moving the dangers of hereditary syphilis from the textbook, with its limited, typically male audience, to a best selling novel. By depicting the terrible death of two innocent babies, Grand brought Fournier’s conclusions to far wider audiences and made people realize that syphilis could reside within the conjugal circle just as easily as it did in a brothel.

<19> Upon realizing that Menteith has infected her with syphilis, Edith gathers a group of people together including “three gentlemen...the bishop, Dr. Galbraith and Sir Mosley Menteith” (Grand 300) and declares, “I sent for you all...to tell you, you who represent the arrangement of society, which has made it possible for me and my child to be sacrificed in this way. I have nothing more to say to you all” (Grand 300). It should be noted that Grand refers to Edith’s father as “the bishop” not as her father. As a result, “the gentlemen” shift from characters to allegorical representations of the “arrangement of society,” the church, the medical establishment, and sexual double standard (embodied by a military man). The deaths of Edith and her child become a kind of unholy sacrifice meant to reinforce the patriarchal establishment. Instead of a divine scourge sent to inflict fallen women, Grand exposes the metaphor for what it is—a method of maintaining the “arrangement of [Victorian] society.” The syphilis metaphor requires a silence and studied ignorance in the face of the deaths of innocent women and children. By rendering these innocent deaths visible, Sarah Grand ruptures the accepted

perception of the disease and forces the reader to create a new metaphor that can absorb new realities.

<20> As Emma Liggins argues, “the syphilis scare intensified the modern woman’s antipathy to the role of the innocent wife and highlighted the dangers of woman’s sexual ignorance” (176). Grand, through the death of the mother and child, transforms sexual “modesty” and “blissful ignorance” into the “dangers of sexual ignorance.” The innocent woman was in danger of committing infanticide. The *good* mother could no longer afford to be sexually ignorant. Grand’s refashioning of the syphilis metaphor creates a rupture between the twinned ideals cherished by the Victorian reader—the “innocent woman” and the “good mother.” Healing this rupture required a new metaphorical system, which *Heavenly Twins* begins to create.

<21> In light of hereditary syphilis and the invisibility of the disease in the carrier, a healthy maternal instinct would demand male purity, would demand an “immodest” knowledge of sexual diseases—in short, would demand the ability to avert this type of disaster. One realizes that a healthy Church would demand that women be taught about venereal diseases. The death of the innocent demands the reevaluation of the entire system. By engaging conventions and revealing their internal contradictions, Grand makes demands on the most conservative to reconfigure their concepts of marriage, maternal instinct and even Christianity, which imposes an ideal of “blissful ignorance” on its “angels.”

Syphilis and Sin: Killing the Angel in the House

<22> The moral double standard is abundantly clear in the misogynistic ‘science’ of Holmes Coote, an army surgeon and syphilis expert, who further advances the moral component of syphilis by arguing that:

it can be shown that the poison acquires a positive virulence through the habits of excess in promiscuous intercourse *by the woman* [therefore] *I see no difficulty in imagining* that this is the source whence the poison may have originated from the beginning: *that nature has established laws*, the transgression of which is followed by the vitiation of the natural secretions, producing a poison capable of acting upon the human frame...as the decomposition of vegetable matter will produce miasmata, the breathing of which will produce marsh fever (emphasis added). (Coote 7)

The presence of the phrase “I see no difficulty in imagining that” within a paper purporting scientific significance is not only offensive, but also illustrates the manner in which political and moral concerns saturated the discourse of the day. Science, if this can even be called that, was nothing more than a seal of approval for the sexual double standard. The phrase “nature has established laws,” referring to both promiscuity and the excessive habits of women, conflates the laws of nature with the moral standards of the time and then completes the rhetorical illusion by using a simile to connect moral degradation to the very physical “decomposition of vegetable matter.” Ultimately, Coote replaces the laws of nature with the scholastic concept of natural law that bridges divine to human law. The scientific register of this discourse creates an illusion of objectivity against which Grand must contend.

<23> Though not directly stated, this scientific promulgation (or effortless “imagining”) implies that the “miasmata” that causes syphilis is akin to a scourge from God. The result of this metaphor is that the sufferer of syphilis is less an object of sympathy than the recipient of divine justice. Connecting syphilis to female both demonized the fallen woman and encouraged the soothing belief that “the body of the virtuous woman...[was] desexualized, her sexual characteristics co-opted as maternal instincts” (Spongberg 45).

<24> Simultaneously demonizing fallen women and desexualizing virtuous women helped create an atmosphere where Coventry Patmore’s poem *The Angel of the House*, originally published in 1855, could become the dominant image of the ideal woman for the late Victorians. In fact this was so potent that in 1942 Virginia Woolf still felt that she had “to do battle” against it in order to gain the freedom to write about male authors (*Death of a Moth and other Essays*, 278). In the poem the ideal woman is described:

Her modesty, her chiefest grace,
The cestus clasping Venus’ side...
Wrong dares not in her presence speak,
Nor spotted thought its taint disclose
Under the protest of a cheek
Outbragging nature’s boast—the rose (Patmore Canto IV.i)

The woman of Patmore’s poem is so “modest” that “wrong” dares not speak in her “presence.” While Patmore’s word “wrong” certainly suggests the kind of rumors that might spread around a “fallen woman,” it dovetails perfectly with the medical discourse surrounding venereal diseases and the fear they generate. In the rhetoric of Coote, a woman can escape disease by avoiding excessive behaviors and promiscuity. The virtues of the angel protect her from the wrongs of both rumor and syphilis. The sinful woman is diseased. The moral woman is healthy.

<25> Grand applies Patmore’s vision in a new way, shifting the onus of the sin-syphilis metaphor onto the shoulders of the male characters. By creating the character of Edith, a virtuous upper class woman who is infected with syphilis by Menteith, Grand transforms syphilis from the scourge of sensual sins into a disease that kills the sexually naïve angel. The infected husband murders both his wife and child. Thus, Grand perverts one of the most beloved images of Victorian femininity—the angel of the house.

<26> Edith Beale was not one of the dissolute women described by Coote, but one “who had been born in the palace and grown up there, under the protection of the great cathedral” (Grand 154). Edith may be the angel of the house, but her modesty is presented as a willful and reinforced ignorance. As the daughter of the bishop she seeks “protect[ion] [even] ...from knowledge of all things unholy” and is surrounded by people “who never allow themselves to think or to know...anything that is evil of anybody” (Grand 155). In case the ironic tone of this passage was not enough to illustrate the dangers of such “modesty,” a third person omniscient narrator interjects, “when they refused to know and to resist, they were actually countenancing evil and encouraging it” (Grand 156). Through this interjection Grand reconfigures the

traditional value of feminine modesty and ultimately transforms Edith's modesty, the angel's "chiefest grace," into both suicide and maternal neglect.

<27> Clearly, Edith does not fit into the traditional representations of the syphilitic, precisely because her disease cannot be attributed to feminine vice. She is an upper class, religious, modest young woman who surrounds herself with images of Christianity. Edith is not responsible for her disease, and yet Grand may hold her responsible for her willful ignorance. Through a proleptic dream sequence Grand transforms Edith's "modesty" and "innocence," two words frequently employed in Patmore's poetic idealization of femininity, into negligence and denial:

she took [the child] from him, smiling, raised its little velvet cheek to hers, and then drew back to look at it, but was horrified because it was not beautiful at all as it had been the moment before, but deformed, and its poor little body was covered with sores...she awoke, and sprang up, clutching at the bedclothes, but was not able to find them at first, because they had fallen on the floor...She jumped out of bed and stood a moment...the first thing she saw distinctly was the picture of the Saviour on the wall... she went and knelt there..."Dear Lord...keep me from all knowledge of unholy things. (156)

Initially horrified by the dream, she is immediately characterized as "clutching at her bedclothes" in panic, but she is unable to "find them at first because they had fallen on the floor." Her immediate response to clothe herself (similar to Eve, after having eaten from the tree of knowledge) is a symbolic attempt to hide herself from the knowledge of the disease, the very knowledge of which is considered shameful and immodest for women.

<28> Like the predictions of Tiresias, or perhaps more apropos, Cassandra, the dream gives Edith a chance of escaping her fate, a chance she will ultimately deny. Instead she "prayed passionately 'keep me from the knowledge of all unholy things.'" The prayer, unfortunately, is answered and she is "purged of all earthly admixture of doubt and fear" (Grand 157). The "wrong" from Patmore's poem, however, despite Edith's "modesty," will make its presence known. Grand uses the metaphoric value of syphilis to set the core values of feminine virtue in contradiction. Feminine modesty and innocence collude to murder Edith's baby. In other words, Edith's modest reaction, which Patmore and many Victorians would have praised, is set against the maternal instinct.

<29> For the reader, Edith's dream creates a complex network of modesty, the maternal instinct, Christianity and the metaphor of syphilis. As a result, syphilis becomes entangled with Christianity and its efforts to enforce an attitude of sexual ignorance. Coote's moral purity/health paradigm is inverted. Syphilis is no longer an affliction resulting from the sin of the individual, but an affliction caused by the immorality of men, the sexual double standard, and the willful "feminine" ignorance/innocence that countenances and encourages male immorality. Patmore's archetype of moral purity, Edith, becomes the by-product of a diseased and immoral society. "Modesty" and "innocence" no longer protect the angel but are now complicit with the monster — Menteith.

Syphilis and Class Warfare

<30> The conservative rhetoric surrounding lower class women created an environment that allowed misogynist readings of venereal disease to flourish. In the 1890s poverty and immorality were nearly synonymous, such that prominent women like Mrs. Humphry Ward, in writing against the extension of suffrage to women, concluded that “if votes be given on the same terms as they are given to men, large numbers of women leading immoral lives will be enfranchised” (121). This statement implies that working class women lead immoral lives. The angel of the house was an angel precisely because she was “in the house.” The importance of *insulation* is stated clearly in Ouida’s assault on *public* education for women, where she argues that the experience can only be “hardening and deforming” (157).

<31> Like syphilis, exposure to the world and its business has a “deforming” effect. Alongside Christian innocence (a form of mental insulation), class itself provided a defensive barrier against the disease by enabling the woman to escape the “public” environment that threatened her virtue. This classist element of the syphilis metaphor in fact had been legally formalized with the Contagious Diseases Act (CD Act) of 1864, which allowed plainclothes policemen to force any woman *suspected* of prostitution to undergo a physical exam or face confinement.

<32> In a letter to her sisters, Josephine Butler highlights the classist element of the CD Act: “the ladies who ride their carriages through the streets at night are in little danger of being molested” (Jordan 125). According to Butler, the title of “lady” and the ownership of “carriages” protected the privileged class from the assaults against their dignity. It was not merely titles and money that protected their “dignity”; it was language. The language surrounding venereal disease put such ladies beyond suspicion of the disease. The rhetoric did not merely provide a false sense of security, but it also elevated the middle class woman above the “deform[ed]” and “harden[ed]” multitudes. A metaphor that transformed the female prostitute into the pathogen and conflated dignity with health was comforting not only to males, but also to middle-class women.

<33> The disease and the CD Act, meant to quarantine the disease, pitted women against one another based on class. The carriages, chaperones and other forms of insulation that protected upper-class women from the indignities of the CD Act also became the pride of class. As a result, many ladies supported misogynistic policies. By the time Grand published *Heavenly Twins*, the CD Act had been repealed, but the double standard that they represented remained.

<34> The double standard employs a “chivalric” language to make the man appear self-sacrificing for engaging with the business of the world. The man is portrayed as protecting a woman’s purity from all the influences that would “lower the high standards of womanhood” (Winston 170). The woman’s purity comes from her isolation, and “purity” of the “upper class woman” protected her from disease. It is precisely this syllogism that Grand must tear down in order to collapse the double standard. Grand must not merely apply reason, but must offend her reader’s vanity by infecting an upper class “angel” and reveal the way that syphilis levels all class distinctions.

<35> In using the same Victorian trope as Butler of “ladies in their carriages,” Grand illustrates how the failure to generate sincere solidarity among the ranks of women results in the destruction of both poor and rich women. Edith’s first physical encounter with syphilis occurs on an excursion into the country in which

Edith noticed a beggar, a young, slender, very delicate-looking girl, lying across the footpath...A tiny baby lay on her lap...her hands had slipped helplessly on the ground on either side of her, releasing the child, which had rolled on to its face and so continued inertly. (Grand 159)

The sight of the syphilitic beggar incapacitates both women. The only language available to these upper-class women is a language of helplessness: “‘Can’t we do something’ Edith exclaimed. ‘But what can we do?’ Mrs. Beale responded” (Grand 160). It should be further noted that the helplessness ends up putting them into the hands of the driver—a man. The man steps in and insulates them. They are relieved of the difficulty of having to make decisions. The scene concludes with a sarcastic and chastening description by Grand: “the incident, however, had made a painful impression upon them both; and when they returned to the palace they ordered tea...feeling they must have something” (Grand 161).

<36> If Grand had ended there, merely chastening the women for their class hardened attitudes against the syphilitic woman, the novel would have been readily acceptable. Instead she uses this scene to illustrate the deadly irony in the classist vision of syphilis, and to excite the fear of the upper-class that their body can be changed into the diseased body of the lower-class prostitute as a result of the sexual double standard. After marrying Menteith and having his child, Edith meets the beggar again and discovers that the diseased baby is named none other than Mosley Menteith. “I called him then after his father, then, didn’t I?” (Grand 290) she explains. Ironically, the carriage and ladyship trope that protected them against the degradation of the CD Act may have protected Edith from knowledge that could have saved her life. Had Edith and Mrs. Beale taken the beggar into their carriage, they might have discovered that the progenitor of the syphilitic baby was Menteith. She may have realized that he was poisoned and poisonous. She may have lived.

<37> While the irony makes the story more interesting, the metaphor derives its force from the fact that Edith, an angel of the house, must suffer the same degradation as a “French dressmaker.” More significant than the call for solidarity is the insinuation that syphilis ultimately “destabiliz[es] class distinctions, as both upper- and lower-class women are seen to be unfit mothers and the victims of hereditary contamination” (Liggins 179). The image of a lower class woman on the side of the road not only foreshadows the doom lying down the road for Edith, but worse, it positions Edith’s upper middle-class fate against that of the commoner. By representing both classes in a closed circuit, with Menteith as the monster/conduit, Grand both depicts the need for class solidarity and excites classist fears. This contradiction is not harmful because both readings strike at the same target—the sexual double standard. The scene adds a classist element to the syphilis metaphor by illustrating how the male syphilitic body destroys the class distinctions held so dear by many ladies.

“Redescribing Lots of Things:” A Model for Feminine Empowerment

<38> While the source of the syphilis that kills both Edith and her baby, is Menteith, Grand widens the scope of her attack. “The arrangement of society,” which allows the sacrifice, is a collusion between the ideals of the “gentlemen” and the mother. When Menteith and Edith are engaged, it is the mother rather than the father that touts the murderous double standard. When Evadne tries to reason with Edith she argues:

“Your parents are content to let you marry a man of whose private life they have no knowledge whatever—”

Mrs. Beale interrupted her: “This is not quite the case... We do know that there have been errors...”

“I can make him all that he ought to be,” Edith exclaimed, “I know I can! (Grand 235)

The mother translates male profligacy into “there have been errors,” a phrase one might use for typos. The same profligacy in a woman would have doomed her chances of making a happy match. As a result of insulation of the church and her own lucky marriage, Edith’s mother has been co-opted by the misogynistic discourse that surrounds her.

<39> After Edith’s passionate appeal, “I can make him all that he ought to be,” Evadne “kissed them both then left the house” (Grand 235). The kiss and the silence surrounding it is a recognition—full of pathos—of the terrible forces that the new women will encounter. The silence in this scene plays two important roles. As part of the narrative, it is the silence that will lead to Edith’s sacrifice; however, it is simultaneously the barrier between entrenched tradition (the patriarchal discourse) and reason. While Edith will refuse to listen to Evadne, and as a result die, the silent and prophetic kiss resonates with all the most powerful arguments of Evadne and Sarah Grand for male purity. By making the mother an accomplice in her daughter’s death Grand directs her rhetoric not at men, but at the patriarchal discourse—a discourse that favors one gender but is employed by both. *Heavenly Twins* exposes one of the most deadly forms of misogyny—the misogyny that has inculcated itself into the thoughts and feelings of the women who it oppresses.

<40> Mrs. Beale, who represents the traditional acceptance of the sexual double standard, (“there have been errors”) encourages a marriage with a syphilitic soldier that will destroy her daughter and grandchild. Through this character Grand highlights the murderous aspect of traditional sexual relationships. She uses the syphilis metaphor to generate a fear that will actively encourage a new sexuality in which women must warn their children *not* to countenance evil. They must encourage them to demand sexual purity from the man, just as men had always demanded sexual purity from their potential spouse.

<41> While Grand makes the argument for many political reforms, including the education of women and extended suffrage, she focuses the majority of her language on enhancing one of the powers that women did possess, namely the power to select a mate and educate their children.

Virginia Woolf points out that in the nineteenth century, “it was no longer the exception for women of the middle and upper class to choose their own husbands” (Woolf, *In Depth*, 791). While the power to choose one’s mate cannot be equated with suffrage, it did enable women to pick men they considered worthy of them. It did enable them to reject an oppressive spouse and the sexual double standard that was the touchstone for many other difficulties facing women in Victorian England. By giving women not only the right to choose, but a language that renders the dangers of male profligacy more visible—the fact that men can infect their wives, that innocence does not protect the woman, and that this infection can kill their children—Grand creates a language in which women are no longer rendered helpless victims.

<42> Ultimately Grand uses syphilis as a metaphorical weapon to destabilize Victorian assumptions about sexuality and the social practices and institutions that supported those assumptions. Grand, by making the male body into the site of contamination, assaults the language that had reinforced the sexual double standard. Moreover, by relocating the disease from the brothels of military outposts to the “palace...under the protection of the great cathedral” she forces the reader to reevaluate contemporary beliefs that the disease was somehow a scourge of God. This reevaluation of the sin-syphilis connection likewise compels the reader to reexamine the traditional web of beliefs surrounding class, marriage, innocence, and maternity. Most important, Grand does not merely appeal to the misogynistic forces that governed her society and that created the untenable situation that new women were trapped in, but rather arms women with a language capable of exposing and overcoming those social institutions of oppression.

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