"She had suffered so many humiliations for want of money": The Quest for Financial Independence in Sarah Grand's The Beth Book

By Melissa Purdue

Sarah Grand's *The Beth Book* (1897) is a New Woman novel deeply concerned with money—particularly women's lack of it. Financial concerns are explicitly tied throughout the novel to the New Woman's push for further rights and independence. The novel, a semi-autobiographical *Künstlerroman* focusing on the progressive heroine Beth Caldwell, details the many ways in which Beth, and other women in the story, are often deprived of the money, material goods, and sustenance they need to be comfortable and successful. In particular, economic instability is aligned with discourse about hungry bodies, food, and consumption. Women's bodies, depicted as being at the mercy of financial circumstances largely outside of their control, are almost always shown to be deprived. Beth, however, through a successful career as a writer and feminist orator, is ultimately able to triumph over this system of deprivation. Mirroring the coming-of-age structure of the novel, this essay follows Beth's complicated relationships with money and food throughout her childhood in Ireland and her time on her greedy uncle's estate, into her brief marriage to a doctor employed at a Lock Hospital, her time alone writing in London, and her final home—a cottage by the sea that she rents with her own earnings.

Heather Evans and Abigail Dennis have both explored discourses surrounding food, appetite, and starvation in Grand's fiction in interesting ways. Evans concentrates on *Babs the Impossible* in her article "'Nor Shall I Shirk My Food': The New Woman's Balanced Diet and Sarah Grand's *Babs the Impossible*" and finds that "Grand associates feminine powerlessness, dependence, and oppression with a woman's inability to satisfy the needs of her body for nourishment and pleasure, while she celebrates women who acknowledge and address their own appetites without compromising their womanly duties" (138). Dennis looks specifically at *The Beth Book* in "'A Study in Starvation': The New Girl and the Gendered Socialisation of Appetite in Sarah Grand's *The Beth Book*" and ultimately concludes that Beth's narrative "shows how the New Woman (or girl-becoming-woman) must be divested of bodily appetite, and transcend the hazards of physicality in order to gain the moral authority required of her" (19). While I find Dennis's arguments useful and illuminating, this essay will move in some different directions. First, I am interested in exploring the ways in which these discussions of food and appetite are nearlyalways accompanied by mention of money and finance. Second, I am not convinced that Beth transcends physicality in order to gain moral authority like some previous Victorian heroines. Like Evans, I find that Grand commends women who acknowledge and address their own appetites. 1 Beth's legitimate appetite is celebrated throughout the vast majority of the text and the reasons for which she sometimes does deny herself are framed differently than in other nineteenth-century narratives. It is Beth's attitude toward money that signals her moral worth and authority rather than her supposed transcendence of physicality.

As Mary Poovey and other scholars have pointed out of earlier nineteenth-century literature, "novelists used a character's attitude toward money to indicate moral worth, and, more often than not, only a character's indifference to—or even repudiation of—money can signal virtue" (373). While this is certainly true of much nineteenth-century literature, this relationship with money seems to change in New Woman literature at the end of the century. In this body of

literature, a heroine's character is often marked by her ability to successfully earn money. The sisters in Amy Levy's *Romance of a Shop* and Mary Erle in Ella Hepworth Dixon's *The Story of a Modern Woman*, for example, are quite concerned with money as they work to provide for themselves and their family members. The goal in these texts is not to marry to alleviate monetary concerns as in earlier nineteenth-century fiction, but to engage in meaningful work to support oneself and others. The characters' drive to make money is shown as a positive attribute because it is directly linked to independence—a primary goal in New Woman fiction. Thus, financial independence and what one does with money, rather than one's distance from money, become important signals of feminine virtue in New Woman literature.

The very first page of *The Beth Book* reveals the intertwined themes of money and women's rights as revealed through the discourse of consumption. We enter the story with a picture of Beth's mother, Mrs. Caldwell: she "was weak and ill and anxious, the mother of six children already, and about to produce a seventh on an income that would have been insufficient for four" (Grand 1). It is the eve of Beth's birth and her decidedly Victorian mother is suffering. Mrs. Caldwell is cold, ill, and uncomfortable in her advanced pregnancy, but decides she cannot afford a fire. Instead, she deprives herself and hurriedly orders six bottles of whiskey for her husband who will soon be home, afraid of his displeasure should he run out. Beth is born later that night into a world where women sacrifice their bodies and their comfort for others, to parents who view her as simply another financial responsibility. This depiction of Victorian femininity—self-sacrificing, quietly suffering—is depicted as clearly out-dated. Mrs. Caldwell, according to Teresa Mangum in *Married, Middlebrow, and Militant: Sarah Grand and the New Woman Novel*, is meant to represent the "self-abnegating, submissive, housebound image of middle-class Ideal Womanhood" that was epitomized at mid-century (2). Beth is starkly contrasted with, and disrupts, this ideal.

Inequality in marriage, education, and occupational opportunity are, of course, common themes in New Woman novels. What is interesting in this text is the extreme concentration on money and its direct connection to women's hunger. Beth is no heroine who stops eating out of heartbreak like Marianne Dashwood, Caroline Helstone, or Catherine Earnshaw; rather she continually fights for her own fair share in life. A large portion of the novel concentrates on Beth's childhood development and the ways in which the politics of money and hunger are taught to her early.

Beth's first lesson about money occurs when her father gives her a penny a week for pocket money. She "mastered the system of debit and credit, for, when she found herself in receipt of a regular income, and had conquered the first awe of entering a shop and asking for things, she ran into debt. She received the penny on Saturday, and promptly spent it in sweets, but by Monday she wanted more, and the craving was" extreme (19). That extreme hunger for more, and not having enough money to satiate it, is highlighted throughout her childhood. Further, her hunger is represented sympathetically. She is not depicted as greedy in her desire for more, rather she is portrayed as deserving of it. She understands early that it is only those with financial means that are able to gratify their desires. Her father, as breadwinner and head of household, controls the family's money and although he is indulgent with Beth, he reveals how wives are at the mercy of their husbands. Grand reinforces lessons about Victorian economy and women's dependent position within patriarchal society in Beth's childhood through interactions with Beth's uncle

James, her great aunt Victoria, and her brother Jim. Narratives of money and hunger mediate all of these relationships.

The financial worries of the family are elevated when Beth's father dies and the family must return to England to depend upon the charity of Mrs. Caldwell's brother, Beth's uncle James Patton. Here again the tenor of their stay is set from the beginning in a scene that at once ties together hunger, food, and financial dependence. Beth is cut a tiny slice of cake upon their first meeting. She comments on the minute offering, immediately annoying her uncle and securing the admiration of her great aunt Victoria. Her uncle proceeds to lecture her about cultivated minds and she responds: "Then, I suppose, when your mind is cultivated, Uncle James, you will give mamma more money . . ." (98). Rather than suffering patiently in silence, Beth time and again talks back and points out how unfair it is that the miserly Uncle James is in control of the wealth that should be distributed more equally amongst family members. While Uncle James takes this behavior as a mark of Beth's poor character—a young lady should not comment on money and should not reveal her desire for more—the narrator is clearly on the side of the New Woman character. We learn that Mrs. Caldwell and great aunt Victoria also share Beth's views behind closed doors, though they have been trained not to reveal their appetites publicly.

Characters like James continually try to indoctrinate Beth into a system of female self-denial. Beth's mother, sister, and aunts are all given tiny portions of cake as well, but they do not talk back. Beth, however, serves to disrupt outdated traditions. She repeatedly fights for what she considers to be her fair share of the wealth and fights for the comfort of her family as well. For example, sneaking out one night to commune with nature, Beth overhears her uncle proclaiming his love to a servant girl. The next day at breakfast she cunningly drops a line from their conversation, revealing to her uncle that she has discovered his secret. Once in a position of power, Beth demands another helping of meat for her sister, which her uncle gladly provides. The uncle's poor character is evidenced through his greed and mishandling of money, while Beth's superior character is revealed by her attempt to more equitably distribute wealth. This is an important point in her development. As a young child she hungers for more to fulfill her own desire, but as she grows she recognizes that she can be an agent for good by allocating resources in more just ways.

Beth also secretly hunts on her uncle's property to provide for her mother, aunt, and sisters. The group, all living together in a small home owned by Uncle James after he has pushed them to leave his estate (and being charged rent), struggles to get by on their meager combined incomes. While Beth at times refuses food in this setting so that everyone can have his or her small share, she does not pitifully accept her lot. Her suffering is given voice, and she takes action, too. For example, Beth goes out on her own and kills, skins, and cleans a rabbit and prepares it for dinner (157). Upon witnessing the happiness and relief of the family, she continues to poach secretly on her uncle's property, taking what she feels they rightfully deserve. It is significant that in both of these instances the "payment" that Beth demands is food. Shut out from systems of monetary exchange as a dependent, female child, food becomes a sort of currency for her. Poaching revises Victorian expectations in interesting ways—Beth unconventionally hunts and provides for family, but also cooks and prepares food in traditional fashion. She steps into the role of provider without abandoning the more traditional role of nurturer.

Not only does Beth fight against the source of her discomfort in Uncle James, she also gives voice to injustice, anticipating her later career as a speaker for women's rights. For example, Beth explains to her great aunt that "Mamma is the eldest, and ought to have had Fairholm, but she was away in Ireland, busy having me, when grandpapa died, and couldn't come; so Uncle James frightened the old man into leaving the place to him, and mamma only got fifty pounds a year, which wasn't fair" (100). She speaks about what the other women leave unsaid—rebelling against rather than accepting her lot quietly. She reveals the family's poverty and the causes behind it to others outside of the family as well. One day chatting with Count Gustav, a local man who has befriended her, she is offered tea and sandwiches, which she devours. Surprised, he asks if she has had any breakfast to which she replies, "Milk and hot water and dry toast" (150). She proceeds to tell him that her family does not have lunch either, "'Oh, we don't lunch. Can't afford it, you know. The boys have got to be educated, and Uncle James Patton won't help, though Jim's his heir" (150f.). Beth's hunger is publicly revealed and her starvation is directly tied to the selfishness of her uncle and brother. She does not suffer in silence and is admired by the narrator for her resistance.

A large part of the reason why Beth, her mother, and her siblings suffer is the inordinate amount of financial support that Mrs. Caldwell gives to her eldest son Jim. She reproduces Victorian patriarchal power relations in raising Beth. As the narrator explains:

Mrs. Caldwell had determined to give her boys a good start in life. In order to do this on her very limited income, she was obliged to exercise the utmost self-denial, and even with that, there would be little or nothing left to spend on the girls. This however, did not seem to Mrs. Caldwell to be a matter of much importance. It is customary to sacrifice the girls of a family to the boys, to give them no educational advantages, and then to jeer at them for their ignorance and silliness. (114)

Again, Mrs. Caldwell's behavior is described as antiquated by the narrator and the unfairness of the situation is stressed. Jim is depicted as clamoring for pocket money so that he can "smoke, drink beer, play billiards, and do all else that makes boys men in their own estimation" while Beth goes hungry and dresses shabbily so that he might have these luxuries (121). Her suffering is described as unjust rather than noble.

Great aunt Victoria's suffering is also highlighted and tied to financial distress brought on by Uncle James. We learn that at one point she had a comfortable income and, because of James' hope that she might make him her heir, was invited to live on his estate. However, she loses a large sum of money after James convinces her to invest it recklessly in stocks. Shortly after the loss she is pressured to leave his home, his mistreatment of her emphasizing how fully he sees women only as potential income or drains on his resources. Aunt Victoria and Beth develop a strong bond. Beth attempts to provide for her in any way she can, sneaking tea from the pantry when she looks poorly and begging for a fire in her room even though there is no money for fuel. Aunt Victoria eventually dies of "failure of the heart" and the doctor "might have added, if the feelings of the family had not had to be considered, that the disease was accelerated by privation and cold" (219). Great aunt Victoria is clearly presented as a sacrifice to the greed of Uncle James.

As often happens to nineteenth-century heroines, Beth then conveniently inherits her aunt's estate. Victoria leaves everything to Beth:

Miss Victoria Bench, spinster, being of sound mind, did will and bequeath everything of which she might die possessed to her beloved great-niece, Elizabeth Caldwell, commonly called Beth. Should Beth marry, the money was to be settled upon her for her exclusive use. The present income from the property, about fifty pounds a year, was to be devoted to the education of the said Elizabeth Caldwell, commonly called Beth. (221)

Rather than allowing Beth to go to school, however, she is again sacrificed to her brother. Her mother, committed to instilling "proper" behavior, convinces her to give her small income to her brother telling her, "the money is of no use to you just now, and it would have made all the difference to Jim" (223). The narrator, clearly sympathetic to Beth's plight, explains that a woman of Mrs. Caldwell's time was expected "to earn her livelihood by marrying a man and bringing up a family…" (119). Beth has no need for an independent income, in her eyes, as she is supposed to move ahead through marriage. Mrs. Caldwell continually instructs Beth to view herself as currency rather than an individual capable of generating or spending her own income. Grand, however, constructs a different outcome for Beth—quite different from previous marriage plots.

Marriage is thrust upon Beth when she unluckily catches the eye of Dr. Dan Maclure. His lackluster proposal foretells the unhappiness to come: "I don't think I can do better than take you away with me. You've a head on your shoulders, and an original way with you that would be sure to bring people about the house, and you're well connected and look it; --all of which would be good for my practice" (329). Like Beth's uncle and brother, he is clearly focused on what Beth can do for him—how she can help his financial standing. Although Beth does not want to marry him, she gives in when her mother has sobbing fit (336).

As a wife, Beth initially tries to work within the system her mother and others have promoted, but she ultimately breaks tradition during this period of her life as well. Married life is an extension of the deprivation Beth has suffered previously and drives home the lesson that Beth must achieve financial independence. There is *constant* talk of money between Beth and her husband. While Uncle James spent too little, Dan's vice is spending too much. Dan continually begs for more money from her, allows her "no pocket-money at all," constantly runs up debt, and finally resorts to stealing from her (342).

Dan's hunger for money leads him to invade her privacy as well. He opens all of her letters in hopes of finding more money and he also won't allow her to lock doors: "I've a legal right to come here whenever I choose," he tells her, which prompts Beth to realize "what the law of man was with regard to her person" (345). Surprised and annoyed, Beth exclaims, "one would think he had bought me"' (ibid.). But, of course, this is exactly how Dan views her and other women—as subhuman and to be used or profited from for his own pleasure. Grand emphasizes this attitude in his dealings with Mrs. Caldwell and the women he "treats" at the Lock hospital. He borrows money from Mrs. Caldwell claiming he needs money to pay off debts, but ends up spending it on "amusements" in town. Proud of his behavior, he announces to Beth: "I can

always get anything I like out of old ladies" (352). Beth also learns the true nature of Dan's job. She is aware that he is a doctor when she marries him, but she does not know the purpose of the hospital until a neighborhood woman, Mrs. Kilroy, reveals the truth and tells her "we thought you were content to live on the means your husband makes in such a shameful way" (398). Again, Dan's poor character is emphasized by the way he profits from the unethical treatment of women in his life. He financially drains his wife and earns his income by confining and controlling women at the hospital.

These injustices prompt Beth to begin to generate her own income doing sewing work and writing in a secret attic room she has discovered in their home. She is successful and Dan, of course, wants this money too. He begs for her earnings from her first article for some stationary and when she hesitates he revealingly exclaims, "It *was* a swindle . . . Where are the seven or eight hundred a year [the amount Beth would receive if her aunt's stocks recovered] I married you for?" (393). Beth bursts out laughing in response: "'Dear Dan," she said, offering him the cheque, 'you shall have the thirty shillings all to yourself. You deserve it for telling the truth for once. I consider I have had the best bargain, though. Thirty shillings is cheap for such valuable information'" (393).

She here realizes how completely marriage is a financial transaction, and herself the currency. It is at this time that Beth begins to save for herself: "She had suffered so many humiliations for want of money, it made her feel safer to have some by her" (394). Her choice to keep money for herself demonstrates her growth. She transcends the self-sacrificing model of her mother. Beth can, as we have seen, be generous to those who are in need, but she has no patience for gluttonous appetites.

If he was not abhorrent enough already, Dan also proves unfaithful early in the marriage. He brings into their home for care a young neighborhood woman suffering from a nervous condition, leading Beth to believe that she is a paying patient. Beth discovers, however, that not only is Bertha living off of her income rather than contributing to it, she is also Dan's mistress. From her secret attic room window, she witnesses Dan kissing Bertha and giving her a present of a gold bracelet. It seems to be the gift of the gold bracelet and Bertha living off of her income that anger Beth more than the kisses. This financial injustice prompts Beth to refuse to give him money the next time interest from her aunt's inheritance arrives. He is furious, but he stands firm:

"Here is the butcher's bill for the last month, and the baker's, the milk, the wine, the groceries, all nearly doubled on Bertha's account. If adding to your expenses in every way makes a good patient, she was excellent, certainly. I'll leave you the bills to console you; but, if you value your peace of mind, don't dare to worry *me* about them. You were quite right when you said I was too young to be troubled –especially when they are matters, like these bills, for which I am not responsible." (422)

Dan is certainly persistent--days later he complains that an order for whisky he has sent was denied due to debt and begs Beth's help. Mirroring the beginning scene of the novel between Mr. and Mrs. Caldwell in interesting ways, Beth again breaks with tradition and refuses. Dan then pushes her to use her body as a form of currency. He asks her to dress up nicely and go and flirt

with the man so that he can get what he wants. Again, Beth refuses: "You must beguile your creditors by other means than my personal appearance" (444). After suffering countless injustices at Dan's hands, Beth decides to move to London to pursue her writing and live independently.

She rents an attic room in London and forms a friendship with her landlady's daughter, Ethel Maud Mary. The narrator tells us "poverty was pleasant in her big bright attic, where all was clean and neat about her. There she could live serenely, and purify her mind by degrees of the garbage with which Dan's habitual conversation had polluted it" (489). While this description denies the real trauma of true poverty in problematic ways, it does also emphasize the New Woman's prioritization of supporting herself. The pursuit of her art nourishes her and she lives off of her small inheritance happily. With Ethel Maud Mary's help she finds cheap furniture, a stove, and writing desk. Ethel Maud knows the value of money and they form "a female Utopia of restrained and simple pleasures" and "class-inclusiveness" focusing on fulfilling professional and artistic potential (Dennis 28).

It is also during her time in London that she meets Arthur Brock, an artist and fellow lodger in her building. It is Beth's relationship with him that is often read as subverting many of the other progressive elements of the novel. He falls ill and Beth cares for him, denying herself food and spending her own little income on his treatment after his own savings is depleted. She does indeed sacrifice a great deal for him claiming she "would die of hunger rather than spend two precious shillings on herself while there was that poor boy at home, suffering in silence, gratefully content with the poorest fare she brought him, always making much of all she did" (Grand 507). She even cuts her hair to provide for them after all of her other possessions have run out. Yet, just as Beth has worked within and against convention before, she does so here as well. She sacrifices her body, but she does so for different reasons than those of her mother. Most importantly, she does so by choice. Many other women in the novel are forced to suffer because of men's greed. She is not bound by duty to support Brock—a relative stranger—but does so out of a sense of compassion and her own memories of suffering. As Beth Sutton-Ramspeck points out, "her own experiences of physical privation enhance her compassion for even hungrier people" (169).

The scene in which Beth cuts her hair also echoes an earlier one in which Beth cut and sold her hair to help pay off the debt she accrued funding her childhood group, the "Secret Service of Humanity" (Grand 277). She has no problem cutting off this marker of her femininity for the greater good. She is willing to sacrifice for others who are in need of charity, but not for those who demand unquestioning obedience. Further, Beth's suffering during her time with Brock is given voice. She admits her hunger rather than hiding it in martyr-like fashion.

Certainly, Arthur is not without flaws. He does not, for example, recognize Beth's suffering and is content to be mothered by him. However, he is sharply contrasted with James, Dan, and Jim. As Ann Heilmann points out, Arthur is a "New Man with human blemishes, though with none of the serous moral failings of the Old Man" (83). Further, by drawing attention to Beth's romantic love, Grand was attempting to "counter the conservative stereotype of the feminist as frigid man hater" (ibid.). It is also important to emphasize that the two do not form a romantic relationship until Beth has made her own fortune. Grand waits to hint at a possible relationship

until Beth is financially independent. Her writing becomes popular, the inheritance from her aunt recovers in the stock market, and she becomes a successful speaker on behalf of women's rights. Thus, her moral authority does not here come from her moments of starvation or a transcendence of physicality; instead, it comes from her career and income and what she does with it.

For example, in another parallel to Beth's childhood in Ireland, Beth gives money to an old Irish laborer whom she passes every morning and even brings him food one night when she thinks he might be hungry. She witnessed the suffering of Irish laborers at the beginning of the novel as a child and here, as an adult, attempts to alleviate suffering when she finally has the financial means to help. The novel begins with deprived and hungry characters but ends with abundance--Beth looking over fields of barley and apple orchards from her cottage window.

The final paragraph briefly informs us of Arthur's return (he actually rides into the picture on horseback). This scene, as strange or clichéd as it might be for modern readers, does not imply that Beth's "happiness must ultimately lie in the successful fulfillment of wife- and motherhood" as Dennis argues (Grand 30). It is important to note that the novel does *not* end with a marriage. Beth does not marry Arthur and, based on her earlier failed marriage, we have no strong indication that she is in any hurry to marry again. Further, Beth is not a mother and she expresses no desire to become one. Rather, she has a successful career as a feminist orator, rents her own cottage, and is in control of her own finances. Her happiness is depicted, first and foremost, as a result of her financial independence and the good she can achieve with it. She expresses feelings for Arthur, but he is not her savior. He is Grand's attempt at constructing a "New Man" who appreciates the independent New Woman. Beth triumphs because she is financially independent and her achievements are not undercut by her desire for companionship.

The Beth Book is a coming of age story primarily concerned with Beth's financial education. All of her relationships and the lessons she learns along the way are mediated through discourses about money. They are also carefully contextualized within the outdated ways of the past in which women had to rely on others and constantly deny themselves. Grand's new model allows for and promotes female independence, while still also stressing a human duty to care for others. In *The Beth Book*, Sarah Grand does not argue for the end of the institution of marriage like some New Woman writers did, but instead strongly pushes for reform.

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1 Although she does not focus specifically on discourse surrounding food or currency in her article, "Feminist 'Cant' and Narrative Selflessness in Sarah Grand's New Woman Trilogy," Lauren Simek also weighs in on female agency in the novel. Simek argues that "Grand's novels work to debunk traditional views of women as selflessly passive angels" and that "Grand's novels suggest that women's active shaping of their moral character through the public articulation of moral belief is the best alternative to this ideal of passive virtue" (340, 342).

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