SARAH GRAND
[Francis Elizabeth Bellenden Clarke McFall]
(10 June **1854**–12 May **1943**)

Feminist Sarah Grand's influential and politically charged novels, essays, and speeches exposed to direct sunlight the most sensitive issues of Victorian sexuality, ranging from the education of women to Victorian marriage laws and customs to the sexual double standard to venereal disease to vivisection to and temperance—in short, all the changing roles and behaviors related to women in both private and public life. Indeed, she coined the term "the New Woman" (in 1894, along with Ouida) and hailed the phenomenon as an inevitability, becoming in the process one of the most important Victorian voices in the fight for women's rights. Between 1888 and 1900 Grand published six novels and several other works, which have been variously described as psychological realism, propaganda, melodrama, and problem fiction.


Sarah Grand 1894

The woman who became "Sarah Grand" was born Frances Elizabeth Bellenden Clarke in the spacious "Rosebank House," Donaghadee, County Down, Northern Ireland, the fourth of five children of well-educated middle-class English parents Edward John Bellenden Clarke (1813–62), a Royal Navy lieutenant, and Margaret Bell Sherwood Clarke (1813–74), who nevertheless, if later autobiographical characterizations are to be believed, raised their children in an atmosphere of squalor and alcoholic violence. Her father died when she was seven, whereupon the family returned to her mother's native eastern Yorkshire in a state of rather impoverished, shabby gentility. After being educated at home until age 14, Frances Clarke was sent in 1868 to a stifling naval boarding school in Twickenham, from which she was soon expelled for organizing groups supporting Josephine Butler's protests against the notorious Contagious Diseases Act (which treated women as the sole cause of sexually transmitted diseases). She was then sent to a typically mindless finishing school in Holland Road, Kensington, dedicated to preparing girls for their "true career of marriage." Very unhappy, in August 1870 (at age 16), she married Lieutenant-Colonel David Chambers McFall, a 39-year-old army surgeon and widower, who was considered at the time to be "a good catch" and an escape from mother and school but whose soon-manifested tyrannous character she later described in *The Beth Book* (1897). McFall brought with him two sons, age 8 and 10, from a previous marriage; her own son Archie was born a year later on 7 October 1871. She became increasingly more unhappy as her new family traveled from 1873–78 to Hong Kong, Singapore, Ceylon, and Japan before returning to England in 1879 to settle first in Norwich in 1879, then in 1881 Warrington, Lancashire, where her husband retired and where she became unalterably estranged in the marriage from his generally coarse behavior, including his sexual demands.

In 1890, after finally managing to garner for herself a small sum by self-publishing anonymously her first novel, the rather preachy *Ideala* (begun in 1880, but not published until 1888) and bolstered by the 1882 Married Woman's Property Act (which enabled women to retain their own property after marriage), Francis McFall was able to leave her husband, young son in tow, and begin a new, independent life and career in London. *Ideala* (1888), which was successful enough to be twice republished commercially, is a controversial story of mismarriage and female sexual awakening. Her second novel, *A Domestic Experiment* (1891), was also perceived, like *Ideala*, to be a justification of adultery, even though the heroine does not succumb to that temptation. Far from supporting adultery, divorce, or "free love," Frances sought to have men adopt stricter standards of sexual and moral conduct, and to have both men and women be adequately prepared to choose the right mate, to be able to recognize their true value to each other and to the human race.


Frances McFall 1884

Her reputation was made with the appearance of the "scandalous" *Heavenly Twins* (1893) under her new pen name Madame Sarah Grand (a pseudonym suggesting feminist pride and aspirations). The novel illustrates the heartache that ensues when one is not prepared to protect herself—the highly intelligent and self-educated heroine marries a brutish man whom she barely knows, only to discover that he has syphilis; she refuses to consummate the marriage but nevertheless must stay in it to maintain the appearance of respectability, thus sacrificing love, sexual fulfillment, and motherhood. In challenging the very manliness of men, Grand reminded women of their duties not to men, but to the sisters and daughters who could benefit from their experience. Despite the fact that her novels describe women that are trapped in unhappy marriages, Grand supported marriage, an institution she endorsed in an 1894 article "The Modern Girl" published in the *North American Review*, as the "holiest and most perfect state for both men and women" (706). Her belief was that the modern girl should "rebel if she is pressured against her will, and should not imprisoned in a sphere that is distasteful to her" (708, 711–712). The article serves as a counterpoint to the famous 1894 debate she carried on in the press with Ouida over the place and value of the New Woman. Grand continued to showcase the New Woman novelistically in *The Beth Book* (1897), a thinly veiled autobiographical novel, which is another probing exploration of the social and psychological forces that shape a young girl into a successful feminist writer and lecturer. Her later twentieth-century work, some of which addressed land reform and the last of which appeared in 1922, is noticeably toned down, lighter in tone, and generally did not receive nearly as much attention.

Sarah Grand 1893

Sarah Grand 1896

Sarah Grand never divorced her husband, but when he died in 1898, she moved to comfortable Tunbridge Wells and increased her feminist activism although in the political sphere much more than through her fiction, a turn that was not atypical for feminists of the time. She took prominent roles in the battles for suffrage, rational dress, and social purity, among them as president of the local branch of the National Union of Suffrage Societies. She also undertook an arduous lecture tour of the United States. In 1920, after suffrage was granted, her time of celebrity ended. She moved to Bath, Somerset, where she was six times elected "mayoress" serving under widower Cedric Cheevers, her role as a provincial dignitary contrasting significantly with her earlier prickly personality and literary-feminist fame. Sarah Grand died on 12 May 1843 at the age of 88 in Calne, Wiltshire, where she had fled to escape the Blitz.

Sarah Grand 1941

George Bernard Shaw considered Sarah Grand a genius on the order of Whistler, Ibsen, and Wagner. Her feminist trilogy, *Ideala*, *The Heavenly Twins*, and *The Beth Book*, whose heroines all come to know one another, remains a poignant portrayal of the turmoil that existed during the ascendancy of the New Woman. The earnestness of ideology and experimental narrative techniques in Grand's books, characterized by daring innovative style and aggressive wit, made them politically and literarily significant in their day and made Grand herself a central figure in the nineties debates about what women were, should be, and could be.