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"A Very Old Woman Indeed": The New Woman as Surprising Continuation of Victorian Values, 1890-1914

Sarah Tkach

Every week, nine million listeners tune in to hear radio talk show host Dr. Laura Schlessinger argue that motherhood is the preeminent gift that women offer the world.¹ Schlessinger argues that women “are the spiritual center of the family,” “that their love and attention cannot be replaced by hired help,” and that women ought to “re-establish their sacred place in the universe” and “enjoy the esteemed pedestal once again.”² Modern women face pressures to achieve in the workplace while providing at home the quality childrearing they are told only mothers can bestow. Despite women’s successful entry into many areas of employment and wider recognition of women’s workplace achievements, an attitude still persists that a woman’s true value, her highest calling, comes from being a wife and mother. Schlessinger continues the traditional rhetoric emphasized during another era of great change for women. The late 19th century witnessed its own wide-ranging debates on the Woman Question—a broad term encompassing conflicting definitions of woman’s true nature, and her proper role

in marriage and work. An examination of the tension between the traditional Victorian woman and the New Woman of more than a century ago offers insight into current debates about woman’s proper role based on her nature.

Stretching like the seams of their corsets, middle-class American women sought new experiences at the turn of the 19th century, leading to the emergence of the New Woman. The New Woman was a young, middle-class woman exploring new opportunities in the public sphere, often by means of a college education, work in new white-collar industries like offices and department stores, participation in reform movements, and engagement in outdoor activity like bicycling. Visually distinct from her Victorian True Woman sisters because of her sensible shirtwaist and more moderately flared skirts, the New Woman entered realms decidedly foreign to the Victorian Woman. Many condemned her as unnatural.

The ideals of the Victorian True Woman remained strong despite economic, political, and social change, as evidenced in numerous newspaper and magazine articles criticizing the New Woman. Americans expressed growing concern that these “emancipated” women threatened the very fabric of society. Many acknowledged woman’s equality before God, but claimed that her place was firmly in the home. They

argued that woman’s nurturing nature and pure morality best served her own family, not people on the streets of urban slums.

As both an abstract cultural representation and a label for actual women, the New Woman invites scholarship from diverse perspectives and disciplines. Susan M. Cruea places the New Woman on the continuum of idealized womanhood in “Changing Ideals of Womanhood During the Nineteenth-Century Woman Movement” (2005). Jean V. Matthews views the New Woman as part of the larger movement for rights and equality in *The Rise of the New Woman: The Women's Movement in America, 1875-1930* (2003). In *The American New Woman Revisited: A Reader, 1894-1930* (2008), Martha H. Patterson presents a valuable collection of primary documents demonstrating the enormous variety of perceptions of the New Woman, revealing the paradoxes of New Womanhood. However, little research investigates how reactions to the New Woman reflected deeper beliefs about woman’s true nature. This paper shows that the variety of reactions of ordinary Americans to the definitions of the New Woman of 1890-1914 reveals the persistence of traditional definitions of woman’s true nature.

The mid-1800s saw the growth of industrialization, urbanization, and social movements including abolition, women’s suffrage, and temperance. Many men emigrated to cities or the far West, and the unprecedented number of Civil War casualties created “surplus” or “redundant” women. As a result, women

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5 Susan M. Cruea, “Changing Ideals of Womanhood During the Nineteenth-Century Woman Movement,” *American Transcendental Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (Sep. 2005): 190-1, Academic
waited longer before marriage, and “needed to find sources of support and occupations compatible with their singleness and class status.” Increasingly, they looked for livelihood outside of motherhood. Progressive leaders established women’s colleges, and more middle-class women joined their working-class sisters at jobs outside their home. By the 1890s and early 1900s, department stores and offices were hiring young women as salesclerks and secretaries in increasing numbers. The New Woman also entered the male-dominated public sphere in the emerging field of social work as she sought to uplift the urban poor through dignified middle-class morality. Additionally, booming women’s clubs with outreach agendas experimented with various forms of publicity to attract attention to their cause. With new purchasing power combined with independence from chaperones, young women enjoyed going to the movies, buying consumer goods, and socializing in mixed-sex settings. This confluence of changes led to more women challenging the status quo of Victorian values.

Though the New Woman took many forms, her most striking and controversial characteristic was her belief that womanhood ought to exist outside the home. More specifically, many a New Woman demanded the right to a career “which met her personal needs and fulfilled her interests.” In contrast, the New Woman’s mother viewed true


womanhood as synonymous with domestic life: raising moral children and appeasing a husband who had to face the business world’s evils each day at the office. Historian Barbara Welter notes that a Victorian woman’s cardinal virtues were “piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.”8 Ironically, the New Woman had so internalized the message of her moral superiority and purity that she felt compelled to help those beyond her immediate family. She sought to “improve the world” via “direct action, professional accomplishment, and individual effort” rather than only through indirect influence on the men in her life.9 Her reformist tendencies naturally extended her role from family homemaker to social housekeeper.

Perhaps more than even the New Woman herself realized, her justifications for her actions often reflected a continuation of True Woman values rather than a break from tradition. New Woman supporter Winnifred Harper Cooley believed unwaveringly in the “benefit to the home and to society” of women “broadening and deepening their life and experiences.”10 She praised the numerous women’s clubs and urged women to mobilize their organizations: “the machinery is awaiting women; it would be immoral waste to allow it to rust.”11 She argued that women were specially suited to improve

8 Barbara Welter in Cruce, “Changing Ideals,” 188.
society and fix its problems because they have the “training of the ages back of them in domestic economics.” City government, asserted Cooley, is “only housekeeping upon a large scale” while “political economy is the law of the household carried into the community.” While women must take charge and organize reform efforts, as well as petition for suffrage, Cooley anticipated New Women joining with men to address problems. She believed that the two sexes would come together in “social and intellectual companionship” and “If [emphasis added] there is a differentiation in the masculine and feminine intellect,” they will complement each other. Cooley had confidence in the New Women’s ability to ameliorate the country’s ills. Her conclusion reflects some acceptance of the otherness of men and women and their unique attributes, though her article as a whole supports a new view of woman’s nature.

The New Woman shared the ideology of the True Woman, but practiced it in a different context. The New Woman sought companionate marriage, for example, rather than a marriage for money, but marriage remained a goal, particularly because a woman’s wages were rarely enough to provide true economic independence from her family. While one commentator expressed concerns about the New Woman’s use of slang, she also praised New Women who “perform daily such acts of self-denial, good

12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., 380.
fellowship, and love towards others less fortunate."\(^{16}\) Not surprisingly, those actions conformed to hallmarks of acceptable True Woman nurturing behavior. Some supporters of a broader women’s sphere did not even consider the New Woman new because the extension seemed so natural. One such supporter beseeched her readers, particularly clergy, to recognize that the new woman with “the anathematized manners and mannishness” is in fact one who “prate[s] most persistently of ‘woman’s sphere,’” making her “a very old woman indeed.”\(^{17}\) New Woman supporters saw their heroine as the result of the natural progression of woman’s nature.

Despite the reassuring claims, responses to the New Woman were swift and scathing. Critics portrayed the New Woman and her values as irrational and ever-shifting. Differences within New Womanhood stemmed from its members’ diversity in ethnicity, age, class, and region, but detractors often viewed the variety of New Women as a sign of the New Womanhood’s instability and fallibility. For example, an annoyed letter to the editor of the *New York Times* accused the New Woman of being “as great a puzzle and perplexity to many of her own sex as to the opposite one.”\(^ {18}\) The author pointed out discrepancies between the New Woman’s actions and her speech, fuming that the New Woman


wants to “work by man’s side and on his level’ and still to be treated with the chivalry due her in her own kingdom—the home and society.” The writer begrudgingly granted woman a place all her own, however his word choice and patronizing tone show resentment towards women even in their traditional domestic “kingdom.” To opponents, the inconsistency and various forms of the New Woman detracted from her legitimacy.

Before the New Woman, middle-class women found employment in teaching and nursing, professions that extended their traditional domestic and childrearing roles. Gradually, the growing demands of a consumer-based economy drew women into fields unrelated to motherhood. Employers’ economic interests supported the New Woman’s entry into the workforce, as female workers would accept the significantly lower wages. By 1900, women made up about one fourth of the office work force.

Many men saw the New Woman’s efforts to enter traditionally male realms as an attack on their own manhood. Women parading as men threatened to emasculate men and desecrate accepted prescriptions of manhood, so men launched a counterattack. They wanted to continue to reign over their own spheres in paid work and politics and keep women from entering those fields. Writer John Paul MacCorrie typified traditional views of woman’s nature: “woman was created to be a wife and a mother; that is...her highest destiny” and “the first and most sacred principle of her

19 Ibid.
existence." Characterizing motherhood as a destiny shows the persistence of rigid, inescapable views of woman's nature. Another common argument promoted an idea of "separate but equal;" women and men were very different but they complemented the traits of the other. Thus, since man had reason, woman need not strive after political rights, but seek to temper man's rational mind just as he balanced her emotional nature. One editorialist supported increasing opportunities with the idea that it would "equip her for her own work—her own sphere," not for her entrance into male domains. Traditionalist writers urged women to embrace with dignity and reverence the designated domestic nature of their sex. Male detractors accused the New Woman of attempting to become a man when she pushed for broader life experiences.

New Woman advocates argued that men ought to raise their own standards of behavior, for the New Woman "asks but, ere she reproduce a man, / He truly be one, so a woman can." Chastising men in such terms suggests that the New Woman's rise was in response to men failing to live up to Victorian manhood. In fact, writer Sarah Grand, to whom some attribute the origin of the phrase "new woman," practically mocked man, calling him "morally in his

23 MacCorrie, "War of the Sexes," 614, 617.
infancy” and in need of woman’s help, with “infinite tenderness and pity,” to teach him morality. Grand conceded that part of the misery of woman’s situation rested in her acquiescence to man instead of truth. However, she refuted the idea that the modern woman was mannish and countered that the trouble stems from “men grow[ing] ever more effeminate.” Faced with a morally weak man corrupted by society’s ills and resting on his own aggrandized sense of self, woman had to “set the human household in order.”

Some acknowledged that women were more moral than men, but in the same breath criticized women for pompously congratulating themselves on a so-called superiority that could not be proved. They express contempt for the New Woman’s understanding of history, rejecting her search for historic examples of women having equal status with men. Further, detractors condemned the New Woman’s presumed disregard for Biblical gender prescriptions, as when MacCorrie wrote, “God himself has said” that woman “is not and never can be man’s co-equal or superior” and “for most people his word is sufficient.” In addition, critics disparaged what they saw as the New Woman’s childish willfulness to destroy social stability. Some anti-New Woman commentators even ironically rejected traditional claims of female moral superiority,

26 Ibid., 271-272.
27 Ibid., 275.
28 Ibid., 276.
30 Ibid., 607.
yet readily praised womanliness: that “undefinable but exalted...finest resource of the race—the inspiration and the reward of [man’s] labor,” and the embodiment of “the tender, loving, self-sacrificing, altruistic side of human nature.”

While men scorned the New Woman’s quest for power as an effort to become a man, female critics decried what they saw as the New Woman’s betrayal of her own sex. They charged the New Woman with not appreciating the importance of domestic work and the special privilege of being the Angel of the Hearth. Many women wanted special rather than equal treatment and feared that the New Woman’s desire to enter male fields of work, campaign for the franchise, and live away at college would weaken the main realm in which women did have power: the home. Rather than offering emancipation, the New Woman threatened women who wanted to retain the prestige and strength they derived from their roles as wives and mothers.

Like male critics, female detractors laid a thick layer of blame on the New Woman for misrepresenting and thereby betraying her sex. In a piece entitled “Foibles of the New Woman” published in Forum, Ella Winston argued against suffrage as the cure-all for societal ills. She claimed that women deserved blame for social problems. Because of their special role as mothers, women shaped children before they went “out to be contaminated by the evil influences of the world.” With her claim that the “most effectual way to

31 Winchester, “New Woman,” 370, 368.
33 Ibid., 188.
keep [society] clean is not to allow dirt to accumulate,” Winston refuted the New Woman’s modern view about the power of suffrage to create positive change.\textsuperscript{34}

Some New Women themselves were skeptical of New Womanhood. As a professional writer, Mary Wilkins Freeman engaged in work traditionally deemed unfeminine. In her novel \textit{The Selfishness of Amelia Lamkin} (1909), she critiqued the New Woman’s semblance to the True Woman, ultimately arguing for an abandonment of all constructions of femininity. Freeman noted the irony of the True Woman’s dependence, as “selflessness from women only fosters dependence, not independence or growth, in others.”\textsuperscript{35}

Researcher Martha J. Cutter describes Freeman’s New Woman as new, vibrant, and independent from men “financially, personally, linguistically, and intellectually.”\textsuperscript{36} Yet by the novel’s end, the New Woman laments her “selfish” desire for independence. The New Woman “had taken on some of the ideology of the True Woman, and the rhetoric surrounding the image begins to sound strikingly familiar.”\textsuperscript{37} For women like Freeman, the New Woman was merely another stereotype that prevented women from attaining an “identity as an autonomous individual.”\textsuperscript{38}

True Woman ideology extolling woman’s virtuous, pure qualities formed the basis of the New Woman; woman

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 192.
\item \textsuperscript{35} Martha J. Cutter, “Beyond Stereotypes: Mary Wilkins Freeman’s Radical Critique of Nineteenth-Century Cults of Femininity,” \textit{Women’s Studies} 21, no. 4 (Sep. 1992): 387, Academic Search Elite Online Database.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 390.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 391.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 392.
\end{itemize}
remained "the saviour [sic] of the world, the moral force in a tainted society."\textsuperscript{39}

While the New Woman's detractors flooded the American press with passionate condemnations, a few New Women refuted those claims with arguments stressing woman's likeness to man, not her special, "exclusive" traits. Unlike moderate True Woman advocates, suffragist Josephine K. Henry did not accept that women's club involvement was sufficient exercise of woman's talents. She bitterly lamented that the conscientious creation of club governance made up "this parody on the exercise of individual liberty," as club members had the potential for worthwhile involvement in actual politics, not mere "mimicry."\textsuperscript{40} In Henry's eyes, the New Woman of the New South believed "with Emerson that 'all have equal rights in virtue of being identical in nature.'"\textsuperscript{41} The New Woman understood that "liberty regards no sex" and that in the "duality of life there is a unity of purpose."\textsuperscript{42} Henry's characterization of men and women as equal sides of a triangle is one of the few instances of a New Woman advocating for equality. Another New Woman, Lena Morrow Lewis, believed that economic equality between men and women would provide women the certainty of "ideal marriage" and "perfect romantic

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{40} Josephine K. Henry, "The New Woman of the New South," \textit{The Arena (1889-1909)} 2, no. 3 (Feb. 1895): 355, American Periodicals Series Online.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 354.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
Women who sought equality could be empowered to choose a spouse based on personal interests, rather than social pressures. Like Henry, Lewis was not content with women having some economic power and still having to marry for money. She wanted to level the courting field with economic equality. Equality differs greatly from the True Woman’s talk of fundamental differences and superiority or inferiority.

The hostility to the New Woman proves the ironclad grip that Victorian values had on people at the turn of the 19th century. Editorials, letters to the editor, and caricatures aimed at ridiculing and demonizing the New Woman show how her desire for public personhood profoundly threatened the Victorian view of woman’s nature.

A balanced appraisal of the New Woman and her detractors yields inconsistencies on both sides. Some New Women argued for increased public access because they believed in gender equality, but most reflected a persistent grounding in True Woman values. New Women based their arguments on the Victorian prescription for womanhood. Many in support of increasing women’s presence in the public sphere sought to capitalize on the idea of women as fundamentally different from men. Both the New Woman and her opponents used similar thinking to support very different ends. However, as contemporary political scientist Simon N. Patten observed, “all great

American decisions have been evolutionary instead of revolutionary,” and the New Woman was a product of her times.  

Patten supported the New Woman. He urged an end to the antagonism between men and women and instead suggested common ground. He supported just the sort of companionate marriage the New Woman desired, as well as women’s suffrage and a new womanhood defined by more vigor and substance than in the past. Nonetheless, he emphasized that the value of those characteristics lay in how they made the New Woman a better mother, concluding, “Give the new woman a chance and her superiority as a mother will be as marked as in other fields.”

Even progressive thinkers framed pro-New Woman rhetoric in terms of Victorian morality.

The New Woman may have gained some acceptance precisely because she represented a developmental stage in woman’s progress rather than a long-term push for broader opportunities. One critic complained that young New Women “think everyone but themselves narrow and old-fashioned” but time “tones them down and often makes fine women of them,” turning them into “the most conscientious of mothers” and “the most faithful and devoted of wives.” Stronger, healthier women would become better wives and mothers.


45 Ibid., 121.

Particularly because of her elusive and changing nature, the New Woman must be studied in the larger context of her times. Scholars ought to research women’s motivations for attending college to determine whether those reasons reflect New Woman or True Woman values. Additionally, historians should search for more of the New Woman’s own voice, and how her experience of New Womanhood varied based on her race, class, age, and location. Labor historians have a rich opportunity to study the shift as middle-class New Women entered the paid workforce.

The experience of the New Woman mirrors, and illuminates, many of the same challenges faced by modern proponents of gender equality. Like New Women, feminists today sometimes advocate for broad societal changes, such as universal single-payer health insurance and paid family/maternity leave. However, change has come slowly, and it is often rooted in traditional messages. As one editorialist in The Washington Post points out, American culture has not "relinquished the idea that caring for children—or for anyone in need—is women’s responsibility, with men ‘helping’ occasionally, if asked." For example, some people who advocate for paid maternity leave do so only because they believe that women ought to be able to fulfill their primary purpose in life: to bear and raise

children. They emphasize the mother's femaleness, rather than the importance of an infant's relationship with a parent. Similarly, "work-life balance" is often framed exclusively as a woman's problem.\textsuperscript{49} The New Woman and True Woman debate remains strong, and the modern women's movement must recognize the continued presence of traditional viewpoints as an important factor, sometimes impeding and sometimes helping women's progress. Beneath the "mommy wars" falsely pitting homemakers against salaried female workers lies a deeper debate about the woman's true nature. Most acknowledge that men and women are different, but whether women ought to be treated equally with men, or "fairly" but differently remains an ongoing debate.

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