

The Rhetoric of the New Woman, 1890-1920

Research Thesis

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with research
distinction in English in the undergraduate colleges of The Ohio State University

by

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“When a phrase previously unknown suddenly appears in print, and is often heard in conversation, it becomes in order to ask what it means. How shall we precisely define so nebulous a being as the new woman? For nebulous she certainly is, melting away into thin vapor when one demands of her who and what she is, whence she hails, and where she is going. Among the thousands and tens of thousands who jostle us as we walk on the crowded highway, which is the new woman, and what business has she in the path, and whither is she leading those who follow in her wake?”

—“The New Woman” *Harper’s Bazaar*, July 27, 1895

From 1890-1920, a new conversation about the behaviors of women evolved from the 19th-century fanaticism with “the woman question.” Along with the push for women’s rights and women’s debut in the work force came an alternative understanding about woman’s role and function within society. During the Progressive Era, the archetype that arose from this transformative definition of gender was the New Woman. Coined during the debate between Sarah Grand and Ouida (the pen name of Maria Louise Ramé) in *The North American Review* in 1894, the New Woman was instantly a recognizable figure in a world that was changing quickly. On the surface, the New Woman was characterized as an educated, economically independent woman who followed a life path that was different than the traditional path laid out for women—that is to be married, have children, and live quietly in the home (Welter 21). In addition, the New Woman became more canonically well-known in the press for the activities in which she participated, which included sports, politics, business, and the growing workforce. Because she was such a contrast to the ideal Victorian woman (the True Woman), the New Woman’s identity and influence on American life sparked a zealous debate. In the debate, the New Woman became a symbol that represented a comprehensive compilation of the new choices women were making.

The conversation about women's new choices in this time certainly filled the eyes of feminists with hope for a more egalitarian future, but it frightened conservatives who clung to a more rigidly-gendered worldview. The rhetoric surrounding the New Woman's identity continued the Victorian obsession with women's behaviors. The 19th-century saw a huge movement to structure women's lives by strictly regulating their behavior. Therefore, the New Woman was a sharp contrast to what was previously enforced. Women now began to be a part of the workforce, marry later or not at all, and gradually rely on men less and less. As a result, the debate surrounding the New Woman performed a significant function in redefining women's place in the outside world and in domestic life. In many ways, the debate was the catalyst that would pave the way for new lifestyles and experiences to be made available to women. Thus, the discourse about the changing world and women's place in it serves as the underlying precedent when studying women's rhetoric in the late 19th-century. Typically, feminist rhetorical scholars pay more attention to the messages created by women and how the public reacted to these messages. In addition, feminist rhetoricians typically focus their studies on the progress women made in getting their voices heard. However, this methodology is not specifically targeted at understanding the gender barriers that arose from public conversations about womanhood, and a way to comprehend these influences is to analyze the rhetoric surrounding the stereotypes that were built by opponents of gender reform. Even though the societal context is typically considered in current feminist rhetorical research, studying the discourse about womanhood during a momentously progressive time offers a clearer and deeper cognizance of the reception of women's words that provides more context for further research in feminist rhetorical studies.

This further feminist rhetorical research would extend from the existing work of scholars' analyses of 19th-century women's rhetorical practices. For example, Shirley W. Logan

researched the distinctive rhetorical strategies and style of black women's discourse in the 19th-century in 1995. Kimberly Harrison, in *Rhetorical Rehearsals: The Construction of Ethos in Confederate Women's Civil War Diaries* (2003), makes an argument for diaries as rhetorical spaces in which Confederate women crafted ethos. Jacqueline Jones Royster (2000) looked at the rhetorical proficiencies of African American women in the 19th-century. Some of the most significant findings have been in works like *Appropriate[ing] Dress* (1998), where Carol Mattingly discusses the ethos created by women depending on what they wore and the value placed on women because of their appearances. In addition, Nan Johnson in *Gendering Rhetorical Space in American Life, 1866-1910* (2002) demonstrates that the domestic spheres in which women were placed gave them their own authority when they conformed to the feminine ideal. Sarah Hallenbeck more recently (2016) analyzed the rhetorical connotations placed on new technology—like bicycles—and women's use of it to transform social constructions about gender.

These works have provided a critical understanding about how 19th-century women have constructed messages, how those messages were received, and how successful women's attempts were to enter male domains. However, the significant figure of the New Woman, the fundamental representative of the change in women's behavior throughout the 19th-century—who was in fact rooted in the discussion of women's rhetoric—has not been given attention by rhetorical scholars. But historians have studied the prose and literature about the New Woman. For example, Carolyn Christensen Nelson in 2000 was first to edit a collection of drama, prose, and fiction from the Progressive Era that chronicles the contentious debate about the New Woman, titled *A New Woman Reader*. Jean V. Matthews in 2003 wrote *The Rise of the New Woman: The Woman's Movement in America, 1875-1930*. Her work documents the course of the

women's suffrage movement, the trials faced by the suffragists' campaigns, and their eventual victories in securing women's rights. Martha H. Patterson in 2005 wrote *Beyond the Gibson Girl: Reimagining the American New Woman, 1895-1915*, where she challenged the typical perception of the New Woman as a white, affluent, educated, and politically progressive woman, and explored the ways in which women from other ethnic, regional, and socioeconomic backgrounds also led lives indicative of modern women. In addition, Patterson also edited an anthology of New Woman texts in 2008 titled *The American New Woman Revisited: A Reader, 1894-1930*. This collection of texts and images about the New Woman sought to answer the question: who is the New Woman? However, though these works document the progression of 19th-century women as they became modern women who were stamped with the label "New Woman," these historians have misconceived the identity of the New Woman and its function as a stereotype in Progressive Era conversation—an identity that can be uncovered through a rhetorical study.

The New Woman was historically an important development in the progression of societal conceptions of femininity, so to fully understand women's rhetoric, one must understand the archetype of the New Woman and the consequences of her historical moments in the press. But, the New Woman is difficult to study according to typical rhetorical research methods because no individual woman in the Progressive Era was the quintessence of the New Woman. Unlike the other movements that have been studied—viz. the abolition movement and the suffrage movement—there was no organized New Woman movement whose main goal was to redefine femininity for an age that allocated new opportunities for women. In addition, rhetoricians have not rhetorically analyzed stereotypes of women: they have accepted the stereotypes as contextual information or perceived historical stereotypes from a contemporary

perspective that focuses on progress made by feminist movements and keeps the end result of modern society in mind; therefore, this common methodology ignores the influence these stereotypes had. Jessica Enoch has called for “a new feminist historiographic practice, one that examines the rhetorical process of gendering. This mode of historiography interrogates the rhetorical work that goes into creating and disturbing gendered distinctions, social categories, and asymmetrical power relationships that women and men encounter in their daily lives” (115). This essay responds to that call by applying a methodology that examines the development of the archetype of the New Woman and the reactions to the New Woman during the Progressive Era in the United States, particularly by considering the influences of the conversations that arose as a response to women who assumed agency over their own lives. Consequently, the New Woman had a different meaning in the Progressive Era than contemporary scholars attribute to her. Typically, when scholars speak of the New Woman of the Progressive Era today, she is illustrated as an emblematic icon of feminist reform. But applying a rhetorical methodology to the construction of the New Woman allows us to have a more accurate view of the social implications the stereotype had in the press. In applying this methodology, I argue in this essay that writers in the American popular press from 1890-1920 fashioned the term “New Woman” as a stereotype of the modern woman to denounce the choices modern women were making, while depicting the New Woman as the antithesis of the acclaimed True Woman of the 19th-century.

To understand the discourse about the New Woman, it is important to understand how formative True Woman ideas were during the 19th-century in dictating the preferred roles women ought to pursue. I begin by sketching the key rhetorical features of True Woman discourse, then I turn to explore the origin of the archetype of the New Woman as created by Sarah Grand in March of 1894. I then turn to an analysis of the rhetoric surrounding the New Woman,

specifically focusing on the common arguments used against the emergence of modern womanhood, followed by an analysis of the complicated relationship between Progressive Era feminists and the phrase, “New Woman.” Next, I explore the New Woman’s presence in the art world—both through magazine illustrations and comics and cartoons—which provided an additional layer to the identity of the New Woman. I conclude by discussing how a rhetorical study of the New Woman provides further insight into the progression of gender reform and how stereotypes such as the New Woman are utilized in conversations about womanhood.

The Genesis of the New Woman

The New Woman as a type metamorphosed from the meek, quiet, and pious Victorian woman. The New Woman was an obvious distinction from previous cultural assumptions about gender, as women’s mannerisms in the 19th-century were so fanatically structured by the likes of women’s magazines, newspapers, conduct books, and literature. Ideal womanhood in the 1800s was titled “True Womanhood.” According to Barbara Welter, “The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society, could be divided into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” (21). These passive virtues were reinforced into the identities of women by scientific scholarship of the time that stated that women’s minds were best suited to the home and the church, where these qualities would shine through. The True Woman was almost a holy, unhuman-like character who existed as a source of comfort and refreshment for the men who bore the toils of the real world. Her worth was placed in her abundant virtue, manifested by the religious environment in which she surrounded herself.

In addition to these virtues, the Cult of True Womanhood included “society’s emphasis on training young ladies in the arts, especially vocal and instrumental music, literary study, drawing, painting, and dance,” as Karen Blair writes (qtd. in Kitch 20). Thus, though elite and middle class women were educated, the areas in which they were educated did not lend themselves to careers in the outside world. Rather, marriage and motherhood were the defining staples of women’s lives. Much time was dedicated in the training of young women to prepare them for their wifely roles. Marriage, as a vocational domain specifically carved out for women’s true purpose, “was the proper state for the exercise of the domestic virtues” (Welter 37). A recurring trend in the rhetoric of the cult of True Womanhood was the justification for the outwardly roles in which women were placed by proving that those roles were compatible and innate within the internal characteristics of women collectively. As Nan Johnson writes, the regulations and (specifically, rhetorical) educations given to women were designed and perpetuated to keep women in their spheres:

The most frequently asserted arguments were that women were intellectually incapable of the analytical skills on which the logic and development of argumentations and oratory depended and that women were delicate (or worse, beguiling) and lacked the emotional and moral forces to convince others of their ideas. These assumptions supported the notion . . . that women should receive only the kind of training that helped them become more effective in their sphere. (24)

Therefore, women were expected to perform low-demand tasks that (according to the beliefs of the time) suited their capabilities and required women to stay in a domestic sphere. By embodying such ideas the True Woman was a compilation of the total 19th-century discourse about women’s identities, capabilities, and optimal roles.

This aggregate conversation about women's behaviors in the Progressive Era under the new term, the New Woman, paralleled the rigidity to which the Victorian True Woman was defined. Commentators on womanhood wrote at great length about the depth of the True Woman and how she ought to behave in each situation. Likewise, debaters of the New Woman spoke either favorably—or, most often, poorly—about the demeanor of the New Woman in every situation. The pertinent “woman question” evolved in the nineteenth century as an overarching discussion about who women ought to be and what they ought to do. Nonetheless, the degree to which people talked about the ideal roles and rights of women into the 20th century still tended to be as obsessive as before, since women have historically been systematically controlled by the cultures in which they were placed. Therefore, much time was devoted to defining who the New Woman was and what her effect would be on society. As Blanche Lane acknowledged about the New Woman debate in 1896, “. . .We aver that the modern woman is an evolution from all previous types, and represents in her fullest growth the nineteenth century phase of womankind. But she is not an abnormal excrescence of the social structure.” Here, Lane indicated and addressed the major questions surrounding the existence of the New Woman—who is the New Woman, is she new, and furthermore, would her identity single-handedly lead to the downfall of society? These major questions were posed in a way that begs for answers that relate to the rhetorical style of the 19th conversation about True Womanhood. Women's identities had historically been defined in static and generalized terms, and by doing so, the behaviors of all women were discussed in extreme or superlative terms. From this perspective, the debate surrounding the New Woman is a continuation of the 19th-century fixation on women's ideal roles, behaviors, and purposes. Therefore, the fanatical and hyperbolic style of the rhetorical discussion around women's roles continued into the late 19th and early 20th century, even though

the behavior of women was becoming more popularly recognized as the opposite of the Victorian woman.

1894: The Call for “New Women”

Nevertheless, the New Woman was not always a stereotype that rhetorically mirrored the True Woman. In its beginnings, the debate about the New Woman started out as a critical analysis of the current arrangement of gender roles, and how these gender roles were disadvantageous to women. Sarah Grand in 1894 is credited with putting this change in gender into words. Grand had published successful novels with protagonists that resembled modern women (*Ideala*, 1888 and *The Heavenly Twins*, 1893), which pointed out flaws in the traditional domestic structure and the sexual double standard prevalent in society’s understanding of men and women. “The New Aspect of the Woman Question” published in *The North American Review* served as an exposé to these inequalities and a call for women to take action against them. Grand began this article by criticizing men’s dichotomous and limiting categorization of women. In one category, there were the “cow women”—those who arbitrarily conform to the standard set out for them, and the other category, the “scum women” were those who may be prostitutes or beggars, whom men used and took advantage of, and then “judg[ed] us all by them” (30). Grand wrote:

Both the cow-women and the scum-women are well within range of the comprehension of the Bawling Brotherhood, but the new woman is a little above him, and he never even thought of looking up to where she has been sitting apart in silent contemplation all these years, thinking and thinking, until at last she saw the problem and proclaimed for herself

what was wrong with Home-is-the-Woman's-Sphere and prescribed a remedy. ("The New Aspect of the Woman Question" 30)

This remedy that Grand spoke of is the New Woman's role as an educator of man. Her job was to give men insight into women's capabilities and their inherent equality with men. This was not to say who exactly the New Woman was, but rather to call upon women to indicate the fallacies of the patriarchal structure to men in hopes that they will see the error of their ways. The New Woman's task was to take an active role in redefining woman's place, not simply to begin to lead lives in the style that's typical of men. Grand's New Woman was designed to enlighten men about their unfair perceptions about women in a gentle way, not to embody characteristics of men as a means of achieving equality. The emblematic character of the mannish, grotesque New Woman would not develop until later.

Therefore, Grand's revelations were very precursory, as they served as the basis for what the problems were within a patriarchal structure and how the New Woman was a response to these problems. Grand outlined that men are to blame for holding women back, and that women are to blame for letting the men take control. Grand wrote this piece to reveal the problem with the current state of domestic life. She set up men as the perpetrators of gender inequality, then ended the piece with an interesting metaphor that called for women to clear out the "dark corners"—meant to represent the inequality men has thus far fostered. "We are bound to raise the dust while we are at work, but only those that are in it will suffer any inconvenience from it. . . . For the rest it will be all benefits. The Woman Question is the Marriage Question, and shall be known hereafter" ("The New Aspect of the Woman Question" 34). Thus, Grand set the tone for the decades-long debate about the New Woman. She called for women to make their own decisions to defy patriarchal attitudes. In 1894, the New Woman was not yet the independent,

career-driven suffragist the popular press made her out to be, but rather indicative of the responsibilities a new class of women in changing gender dynamics.

Instead of painting a picture of her New Woman in terms of her vocation, virtues, and demeanor—the way women were typically described—Grand called upon women to take up a critical role in addressing the issues of authority within the patriarchy. However, eventually, the instinctual response of the audience in years to come would do the work for Grand in depicting the New Woman in terms of her vocation, virtues, and demeanor. The debate would create an archetype of the New Woman to not only make her a figure that is easy to understand, but also easy to vilify. The invention of this subsequent stereotype of Grand's New Woman was a simplistic yet aggregate interpretation of modern women and was a direct contrast to the True Woman. By revealing these issues in a way that relies on the history of womanhood, Grand left the readers to interpret their own understanding of her claims, whether she was right, and what these claims meant for women in the world. Thus, the responses to Grand's piece throughout the Progressive Era would come to be part of a larger understanding of women as one identity. As a result, Grand's rhetorical catalyst about the New Woman soon meshed into the rhetorical style most common in conversations about women in the press. Grand's instructive, omniscient New Woman meant to press the status quo eventually evolved into a hyperbolic stereotype of the modern woman who—though variously depicted—meant to defiantly unearth the predetermined organizational structure for gender.

The New Woman as a Stereotype

In order to comprehend the significance of the New Woman, one must understand that the New Woman was not necessarily synonymous with the modern woman of the day and was

thus a stereotype. Historians in the past have freely applied the term to the suffragists and the college women of the day, but doing so only allows us to track the trajectory of the first wave of the feminist movement. To specifically understand how the term “New Woman” was used, one must understand the rhetorical strategies used to describe women that create these female stereotypes. The conversation about the New Woman as a stereotype focused more on modern women as a cultural phenomenon that must be defined in unequivocal terms, and less on the ways in which women used their voices to gain traction in the feminist movement. Thus, studying the New Woman extends far beyond looking at the behaviors of modern women at the fin de siècle.

The New Woman was often portrayed as a legendary creature, who could not solely be indicative of all modern women because not one person can fully be the epitome of a stereotype. Many writers often questioned who the New Woman was and where she was to be found. Thus, as historian Martha H. Patterson writes, the New Woman could be characterized as a combination of many different identities, such as a “suffragist, prohibitionist, clubwoman, college girl, American girl, socialist, capitalist, anarchist, pickpocket, bicyclist, barren spinster, mannish woman, outdoor girl, birth-control advocate, modern girl, eugenicist, flapper, blues woman, lesbian, and vamp” (*The American New Woman Revisited* 1). Nonetheless, the New Woman was a stereotype, and it gained traction through a cultural obsession with women’s identities and behaviors, and by continuing to reduce all women by defining them in short terms, such as “mannish woman,” “suffragette,” and “flapper.” Teresa Perkins explains that “the strength of a stereotype results from a combination of three factors: its ‘simplicity,’ its immediate recognisability [sic] (which makes its communicative role very important), and its implicit reference to an assumed consensus about some attribute or complex social relationships.

Stereotypes were in this respect prototypes of ‘shared cultural meanings’” (qtd. in Kitch 5). Thus, the New Woman did not accurately represent all women, but uprooted people’s understanding of womanhood. As a columnist for *Harper’s Bazaar* wrote in 1895, the New Woman could be so easily described in clear terms as an educated, career-driven woman who may have abstained from marriage, “but so elusive when she is sought. . . .She is absent from our drawing-rooms, where to-day, as in former years, gracious matrons and fascinating maidens impart to society the ease, the flavor, the sweetness, which make the intercourse of well-bred people with one another equally reposeful and stimulating” (“The New Woman” *Harper’s Bazaar*). Again, because the New Woman was an aggregate personification of all of the various choices women were making outside of the historical place society provided for them, the debate about the New Woman may not reflect the accuracy of modern women’s behaviors. Nonetheless, in late 19th-and early 20th-century culture, the New Woman was meant to stand as the representative of the myriad of real choices women were making that countered traditional definitions of womanhood.

In many ways, the debate surrounding the New Woman was the 19th-century’s “Cult of True Womanhood” continued—yet, to a more fanatical degree. Even though the New Woman was a counter-response to the Victorian woman, the degree to which people obsessed over the behavior and exposure of women in society not only paralleled the Victorian Age, but intensified. The True Woman of the Victorian Age stood as the figural consensus of a shared idea of how women should be—submissive, pious, and virtuous. Because this standard stood for a long time, the possibilities that opened up for women at the *fin de siècle* created controversy that sought to press the historical traditions of womanhood. Therefore, in the light of

controversy, public opinion about the New Woman from 1890 to 1920 still heavily possessed the idea of the True Woman countered against this New Woman.

As a result, a significant aspect about the New Woman conversation was that it possessed the same rhetorical style as the conversation about True Womanhood—women were lumped together as a whole and they were all expected to follow the same roles. For example, Jesse T. Pice in 1853 wrote about all the characteristics the True Woman, or to him, the “universal woman” possessed: “But woman, timid and shrinking, is meant for kindlier labor, where delicate sentiment, deep-felt sympathy. . . universal woman may find ample scope for her most profound abilities. . . in the works of piety and benevolence. . . The home is her sanctuary.” Though Pice acknowledged that there are “many manifestations of universal woman,” he implied that these manifestations complied with the current societal structure: “they accord with the general sense of humanity.” By contrast, in Ella W. Winston’s 1896 article “Foibles of the New Woman,” she summarized who the New Woman was by referring to her in third person as a single entity representative of all modern women:

The New Woman tells us that the present century is her own. . . ‘Woman’s vote will purify politics.’ This is her favorite cryThe New Woman has a mania for reform movements. . . .The New Woman refuses to believe that duty, like charity, begins at home, and cannot see that the most effectual way to keep clean is to not allow dirt to accumulate. The New Woman professes to believe that all women are good and will use their influence for noble ends,—when they are allowed the right of suffrage. . . .It was the New Woman’s earliest, and is her latest, foible that woman is superior to man (100-101).

Hence, Winston’s long list of criticisms lumped all modern women together into the amplified, antagonistic character of the New Woman. Winston attempted to characterize all modern women

by having constructed a list of traits that the New Woman had. As a result, the only rhetorical tools that writers in the New Woman debate possessed when talking about societal conceptions of women's actions were those left over from the 19th-century—mass, complex regulation of women's behaviors according to religion and society's dictation. Often written in third person, much like the True Woman texts, articles about the New Woman created a character that was meant to stand in for all of womankind. Consequently, because this rhetorical style trickled over into the Progressive Era's conversation about women in the popular press, the general opinion from writers in the press tended to parallel the traditional opinions of the 19th-century.

The Rhetorical Relationship Between the Fear of the Masculine Woman and the New Woman

To understand the fear that the New Woman posed, one must understand the foundation of the fear of the masculine woman. The 19th-century panic about “the woman question” extended into the Progressive Era, and with it came the same speculations about what might happen if women forwent their place in the home. The primary fear that opponents of modern womanhood held was that these modern women would abandon traditional femininity in the pursuit of becoming more like men—therefore not marrying or having children, leading to a societal crisis. Much emphasis was placed on the “mannish” woman becoming an unattractive and repulsive figure to men and a disgrace to womankind, and femininity was upheld as the ultimate standard of living for women. Laura H. Behling analyzes this fear in the context of the suffrage movement. In her research in *The Masculine Woman in America, 1890-1935*, she explores how women's insistence on entering domains commonly inhabited by men created a fear that women would forego traditional femininity:

The confusion about femininity and masculinity, however, was clearly connected to the woman suffragists, and because they worked for political enfranchisement, a heretofore male domain, they were considered masculine. Antisuffragists worried that women's maternal duties would be abandoned once they gained access to the ballot box and, even more worrisome, that women's femininity would be lost. (2)

Much of the conversation about masculine women was already in progress before the term "New Woman" made its debut and continued well after. However, to understand the arguments posited against the New Woman, we must dissect the fear of women assuming a masculine role.

For instance, much of this fear was rooted in a question of how men would be affected by the masculine woman. Case in point, a writer for *The New York Observer and Chronicle* in 1896 stated, "While it is not difficult to determine which one of two affectations [mannishness or typical femininity] to which woman is prone is most harmful to herself, that of mannishness undoubtedly most repels men" (Martyn). One can deduce that a "mannish woman" of which this writer was speaking was one who lives outside of the home and does not lead a life in submission to men. This writer goes on to say that granting women power that was tantamount to the power that men have in society—namely, giving women the right to vote—would not only violate the laws of nature, but absolutely disgust men. Therefore, the fear of "mannish women" was deeper than mere disapproval of their lifestyles. In addition, this "mannishness" argument implied that the heteronormative gender binary also depends on men finding women attractive and wanting to marry them, which will prompt them to want to fill out their biological role as a wife and mother. If men do not find women attractive, women will not be married and fulfill the traditional roles assigned to them. Another example of this argument was displayed in an 1894 article by Charles F. Thwing, who asserts a strong opposition towards women who went to

college: “Mannishness in woman is as deplorable as womanishness in man is ridiculous. All mannishness she is to utterly eschew. The finer a civilization the greater differentiation between men and women. Differentiation helps to measure the progress of civilization.” Again, this fear of women who behave like men was rooted in the comfort of such a dichotomous society, and traditional femininity was often upheld as the moral standard for living.

When derogating modern womanhood, not only did writers continue to use the same 19th-century rhetorical strategy by lumping groups of women together, but they also still heavily glorified the characteristics of the True Woman and vilified any characteristics that may sway from this ideal. In 1899, a writer for *Maine Farmer* explains why a masculine woman is a disturbance to society: “A masculine woman has always been the abhorrence of men and women alike. She is as repellent to nature as an effeminate man. The woman who dresses in mannish garb, who walks with a stride, who talks in a loud, harsh voice, who assumes an air of business importance, who is always threatening to do things that are unrefined or difficult because they have been man’s privilege, is a subject of amusement for some and of aversion to others” (“The Mannish Woman”). For some opponents of the New Woman, “mannish women” represented a grand fear for the presumptive disorganization of society by the existence of women who live outside of the typical pattern, and the best way to combat this trend was to make a grand comparison by generalizing women and grouping them into categories: venerating the True Woman as the preferred lifestyle for women and vilifying characteristics of modern women as “abhorrent.”

Marriage, Motherhood, and Morality

The main concerns that opponents had when it came to the ramifications of modern women's behaviors were centered on how women would choose to live their lives in the areas of marriage, motherhood, and morality. These concerns were also relevant in the 19th-century conversation about "the woman question"—though the difference is that as time went on, this fear progressively seemed to become reality as more and more women assumed agency over their own lives. Many feared that the possibilities now available to modern women would encourage them to forego marriage and motherhood, and therefore prompt them to lead immoral lives. A classic representation of the New Woman in the press was either as a bad wife and mother or as a foolish woman choosing to not have that traditional life. Frau Anna, a German-American writer for *New Yorker Staats-Zeitung* in 1917, speculated about the New Woman's maternal instincts and pondered as to whether a "New Woman" life will lead to happiness: "Whether the modern woman will find herself enriched with happiness . . . who can tell? The fact remains that the maternal element still constitutes the basis of our nature, and the more it penetrates our civic and communal lives, the more dignified our lives will be as woman" (154). Opponents of the New Woman who disliked the implication that gender roles were shifting often spoke dramatically about the effect the New Woman would have on men and children. Even popular figures like Theodore Roosevelt felt the same concern. In 1912, he wrote, "*But* in general these women who counsel the delay of the marriage age are opposing the facts of feminine development and psychology. They are indirectly encouraging male immorality and female prostitution, with the appalling consequence for those directly concerned, for hosts of absolutely innocent women, and for the unborn" (109). Concurrent through these texts were arguments about how newly available options for women would prompt them to stray from their respective spheres and corrupt the outside world in which men dwell.

For example, William Lee Howard, M.D. in 1900 used his knowledge of biology to argue that women are best suited in their traditional role:

The female possessed of masculine ideas of independence; the viragint who would sit in the public highways and lift up her pseudo-virile voice. . . the female sexual pervert, are simply different degrees of the same class—degenerates. . . .When a woman neglects her maternal instincts, when her sentiment and dainty feminine characteristics are boldly and ostensibly kept submerged, we can see an antisocial creature more amusing than dangerous. . . .Should this female be unfortunate enough to be a mother, she ceases to be merely amusing, and is an antisocial being. She is then a menace to civilization, a producer of nonentities. . . until disgusted Nature, no longer tolerant of the woman who would be a man, or the man who would be a woman, allows them to shrink to death.

(280-81)

Hence, Howard was not simply saying that modern women should just surrender their modernity and get married and bear children, but that they should renounce their more masculine traits so as to not corrupt society. Thus, Howard's fear was not necessarily women's abandonment of their traditional roles—creating a shortage in the human population—but it was that if these masculine women were to reproduce, they would breed a new generation of “degenerates” that would lead to the downfall of society.

Opponents of modern womanhood tended to heavily glorify the biological role women played as wives and mothers. By deeming this role as “noble” and “sacred,” conservatives tried to epitomize the behavior of the True Woman to subliminally persuade women to act in this way. A *Zion's Herald* column published on March 7, 1894 discussed this “modern offering to women” before Sarah Grand's term for modern women came into play. This writer utilized the

common rhetorical strategy of the 19th-century of glorifying the traditional role for women: “But this modern offering to women of so wide a choice in occupations, and the emancipation that springs from it, should not be suffered for a moment to dim the brightness of the truth that her noblest function, her chief profession, still is to be a wife and mother” (“WOMAN’S KINGDOM”). Hence, even though there were many opportunities opening up for women, and even though those might seem appealing, wifehood and motherhood were the ultimate vocations for women.

These writers especially sought simply to organize the lifestyles of women into two categories—that of the New Woman and that of the True Woman. A woman was either modern or traditional, and one lifestyle was clearly better than the other—there is no wife and mother who also went to college or now fought for women’s suffrage. The adulation of the True Woman was, again, a rhetorical strategy borrowed directly from the conduct books of the 19th-century about the True Woman, and the True Woman was often referenced when discussing the New Woman as still the epitomic standard for women. For example, a writer for *Appleton’s Popular Science Monthly* in 1897 compared the New Woman and the True Woman in terms of her sphere in the home:

Then as to the home. Here is where we want woman with new knowledge, but not—we speak with all due fear and trembling—“new” women. The “new woman” would set every one discussing rights; but the *true* woman with adequate knowledge would see what the best women have always seen, that the home requires a principle of unity and not a system of scientific frontiers or an elaborately arranged balance of power. (“Editor’s Table: ‘The New Woman and the Problems of the Day’”).

Therefore, with the assignment of one's gender came the implication that one's life was mapped out from the start, and for American women, that life was heavily structured and reinforced all throughout the 19th-century.

Woman's role as wife and mother was deeply intertwined with her identity as a pious woman, as both were the defining functions of women in their respective spheres. Therefore, opponents of modern womanhood often argued that a woman's choice to forego marriage and motherhood led to an immoral life. As Barbara Welter contends, in the 19th-century, "religion or piety was the core of woman's virtue, the source of her strength" (21). For instance, a collection of quotes about True Womanhood that appeared in an edition of *Beauty and Health* in 1904 said, "The woman who faithfully assumes the duties of motherhood is attempting the greatest work in which human skill and power can be employed. . .which shall not only please the eye and charm the hearts of men, but on which God and angels shall look with complacency and delight" ("The Value of True Womanhood"). The True Woman was certainly considered a vital aspect to the function of society, as dictated through scripture. As a mother, she ensured the continuation of the human race. As a wife, her role as a housekeeper, cook, and supporter of her husband allowed him to go out in the world and create his own life. The New Woman, hence, threatened this secure reliance men had on women—a reliance that was ordained by the scriptures. Thus, the New Woman's contrast to this identity prompted many to believe that the New Woman was a sinful being. For example, a New York bishop named Bishop Doane stated,

When a new Bible shall have been translated into a denial of the original record of creation. . .when constitutions shall have been altered to disturb the equipoise of the relation between man and woman; when motherhood shall be replaced by mannishness;

when neglected homes shall furnish candidates for mismanaged offices; when money shall buy the votes of women as it does now themselves; then the reaped whirlwind of some violent political reaction will be gathered in tears, by those who are sowing the wind in the mad joy of the *petroleuse* of the French revolutions. (BISHOPS DOANE AND COXE ON ‘THE NEW WOMAN’”)

Therefore, according to this bishop, the suggested implications of the New Woman’s intentions would be implications that revolutionized the order of the world in a way that is ultimately destructive. Furthermore, Bishop Doane justified the propriety of the current domestic structure through the Bible. Bishop Coxe elaborated on Bishop Doane’s statement, stating, “The effort to establish the ‘new woman’ has, it must be said, been accompanied by a desire on the part of the agitators to emancipate themselves from religion.” Similarly, a writer for *Michigan Farmer* in 1908 also addressed woman’s new tendency to venture into the outside world while referring to God as the ultimate authority: “Do you think God ever intended that women should be rulers of our nations? I don’t. . .No; the home must come first, for God instituted that. Sisters, when the home duties are attended to there isn’t room for anything else. . . . That’s her place, for it’s the little corner in the great world that God intended she should fill” (“Woman’s Duty Vs. Woman’s Rights”). The “woman’s sphere,” therefore, was God’s direct intention for the way the world was to be set up. Thus, by appealing to God’s ultimate authority, opponents of the New Woman who used these arguments were not drawing upon their own reasoning as to why womanhood must be kept the traditional way, but on the reasoning of the religious authority that most people adhered to at the time. In this way, opponents of the lifestyles of modern women made their arguments by pitting the New Woman against the True Woman (whose character was heavily supported by the

Bible), and furthermore, these writers made their arguments by using the language typically used in the 19th-century to describe the True Woman.

Similar to the Victorian writers' rhetorical strategy to regulate women's behavior through making sweeping generalizations about all women, opponents made overarching claims about the New Woman's current behavior, instead of assessing the numerous ways in which women who fell under the "New Woman" trope lived. For example, Ella W. Winston in 1896 generalized who the New Woman was and deconstructed her image: "The New Woman is oftentimes the victim of strange hallucinations. She persists in calling herself a 'slave,' despite her high position and great opportunities; and she maintains that, because she cannot vote, she is classed with lunatics and idiots,—until those who are weary of hearing her constant iterations of these themes feel that. . .it might not be unjust" (99). By stating this, Winston was assuming that all "new women" were fierce and angst-filled pundits for women's rights—when in actuality, "new women" lived various lifestyles. What made them "new women" was their unconformity to the uniform lifestyle of the Victorian Age. Therefore, within the arguments of the opponents, there was this trend of simplifying and reducing the New Woman to a stereotype and implying that the stereotype was an accurate representation of all modern women.

Rejection of the Term "New Woman"

Most commonly, contemporary scholars use the phrase "New Woman" to refer to the modern woman—her identity and her involvement in education, politics, and workplace—of the late 19th-century to the early 20th-century. To today's reader, she may appear to be a feminist icon who was indicative of the ways women were changing. The modern woman or the suffragist were indeed representative of the new-found independence that women were embracing, and yet,

this independence is what made them “new.” However, the ways in which the Progressive-Era public used the phrase took on a different connotation. “New Woman” may have been synonymous with “suffragist” or “modern woman,” and though the public’s nebulous definition of the New Woman may include those titles, the term was most often used in the press as a form of criticism. Martha H. Patterson briefly mentions in *Beyond the Gibson Girl: Reimagining the American New Woman, 1895-1915* that “the popular press used the term more often as an accusation than as an accolade” (2). Because the term “New Woman” was, by definition, a direct response to the old ways of womanhood, rhetoric that specifically used the phrase “New Woman” tended to be derisively enacted against modern women.

In addition, the phrase was used to evoke nostalgic feelings about 19th-century traditional womanhood. For a long time, the structured regulations placed on women forced them into their own sphere. The upheaval of organized gender exclusivity aroused panic in the minds of the public. As a result, the phrase was used to juxtapose the old versus the new—the old being the pure, righteous concept of True Womanhood, and the new being a grotesque, mannish figure who was an abomination to her sex and to society. Many of the texts that included the phrase “New Woman” are a direct criticism of the modern woman and the various ways in which she was living outside traditional standards. Thus, the New Woman was often demonized as a disgraceful caricature who would lead to the downfall of society. As a writer for *Maine Farmer* wrote in 1896,

The phrase [New Woman] itself suggests the cartoons of the comic papers. One thinks of bloomers and other semi-masculine experiments in dress, of unfeminine voices, of various grotesque assumptions of the place and power that belong to man and the relinquishment of whatever is attractive. Perhaps the attitude of the comic papers is not

entirely unprovoked, but the woman's movement surely means something better than this. ("The 'Real' New Woman")

Oftentimes, the phrase "New Woman" drew to mind a hyperbolic version of vulgar and unfeminine woman—the opposite of the traditionally accepted view of womanhood, and, as this writer says, not necessarily in line with the intentions of the suffragists. Ella W. Winston in 1896 derogated modern women under the label "New Woman" and indicated how modern women typically resisted being associated with the New Woman and how some—regardless of whether they approved of the behaviors of modern women—saw the New Woman as an imaginary being: "[The New Woman] has christened herself the 'new,' but when her opponent speaks of her by that name she replies with characteristic contrariety that the New Woman, like the sea-serpent, is largely an imaginary creature" (99). Thus, praise for the New Woman was less frequent and more nuanced—it specifically addressed the ways in which people were wrong about the New Woman, while also extending beyond the archetypal conversation about the New Woman into more specific subtopics of the feminist movement.

However, there certainly were a plethora of texts that were instrumental in promoting the feminist movement. These texts spoke in favor of the modern woman or the suffragist to normalize the new decisions women were making. For example, Mona Caird (1888; 1889) and Gertrude Atherton (1899) wrote specifically about the "marriage question"—a sister debate to the "woman question." Julia M.A. Hawksley wrote in 1894 about a woman's right to a higher education. Olive Schreiner in 1899 debated that women should be allowed to enter the workforce in the same vocations men were involved. Most prominently, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton worked at great length throughout their lives to enforce new legislation that would grant women the right to vote in the United States. Though these texts dealt directly with the

ways in which womanhood was changing, progressive texts steered away from using the term “New Woman” because of the way the phrase was popularly enacted. As the aforementioned writer from *Maine Farmer* implied, the term “New Woman” typically conjured up a foul and negative representation of the ways in which women are changing. Furthermore, the New Woman was an archetype—an aggregate symbol that stood in for numerous modern women. Even though the phrase “New Woman” was commonly used in portraying a negative image, feminists were not particularly interested in creating a positive representation of the archetype. To them, the “New Woman” was a useless term that did not encapsulate their mission. They did not seek to set a new standard for women in their texts by defining who the New Woman was—but rather, they were interested in promoting the various opportunities for women and calling attention to the ways in which women were oppressed by the current societal structure. This way, a definition of womanhood—old or new—was not quite the goal. Members of the first wave of the feminist movement sought to broaden women’s prospects so that each woman’s individual life could be lived out free from socially sanctioned conventions. Thus, the New Woman concept was used mostly by people who were trying to grapple with the advancement of society. A concrete definition of womanhood was starting to wither away.

Some supporters of the feminist movement rejected the common use of the term “New Woman” for their understanding of modern womanhood and redefined the feminist movement based on their own progressive stance. Blanche Lane in October of 1896 sought to redefine the way in which womanhood was changing: “We agree that the femininity of today possesses its own special allotment of peculiarities. But the term ‘new woman’ is a misnomer, and designates no established existence.” In this, Lane was stating that the way that the New Woman is typically defined was not indicative of the intentions of modern women; that is, the “modern woman is not

masculine, she is not striving to become a second man, but is testing and proving those faculties for strength and usefulness.” The modern woman was now employing her abilities that she has had all along in a realm outside of the home. In the same way, a writer for *The Independent* in 1898 sought to take the phrase “New Woman” away from its conventional definition and use it to praise the ways in which the New Woman was economically independent: “The ‘new woman’ has come to stay. Not the so-called new woman whom none of us likes. . .but the new woman who appreciates to the full that her work in the good world is made up of the positive as well as the negative, and who brings to that work a spirit and ability as ‘new’ is admirable” (“The New Woman” *The Independent*). Likewise, Alice Hilton in 1895, who spoke favorably for egalitarianism, disregarded the canonical characterization of the New Woman in the press to try to understand the origin and significance of the stereotype amid a world that was redefining gender: “Taking off certain ornamental features from ‘the new woman’ of current discussions, I make out that this delightful creature is essentially a woman who is the equal of man.” More superficially, an article titled “Here is the New Woman” for *New York World* in 1895 stated that the term “New Woman” was a misnomer for the most prominent modern women (viz. feminist activists) because they were advanced in age. The article featured twelve composite sketches of popular feminist activists—including Sarah Grand, Susan B. Anthony, Francis E. Willard, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. The writer of the article stated that his or her intention in creating this collage was to put faces to the feminist movement. The article reads:

A great deal has been said about the new woman, but nobody, until today, has had the opportunity of looking her in the face. The above picture is a composite of the new woman. It is faithfully made up of twelve excellent likenesses of the twelve most prominent women in the world. It will be observed that the term “new” woman is used

here in a sort of Pickwickian sense, as none of these ladies is what might be called new, merely judging from the lapse of years. They are new, however, in the sense of representing the most advanced ideas of the present progressive movement of womankind. (“Here is the New Woman” 47-48)

Perhaps most prominently, Elizabeth Cady Stanton in 1899—though titling her piece “The New Woman,” wrote an article in which the phrase “New Woman” was absent, and used her voice instead to discuss the dichotomous organization of masculinity and femininity: “Difference [in gender] does not argue disability. Nature knew what she was about when she made man and woman to differ; if the masculine and feminine elements, the positive and negative electricity. . . were alike, they would have been no use whatsoever.” Here, Stanton was arguing that the obvious biological differences between men and women were vital for the sustainment of society, however, these differences do not render women inferior. Her omission of the words “New Woman” reinstated her idea that women have always had the capabilities that the current “new women” are now actively living out, it was just that no one has ever realized it. Thus, she indirectly implied that there simply is no “New Woman”—just women who were reaching their full potentials. By enforcing the idea of equality, Stanton was speaking in the fashion of other feminists in this time: promoting egalitarian viewpoints offered a more nuanced interpretation of who women are as humans. Therefore, Stanton and those like her presented a disinterest in contributing to the archetypal conversation about the New Woman.

This being said, both opponents and supporters of the feminist movement often rejected the New Woman by saying there was no such figure. Women were who they always have been—but their historical identities were defined in different terms depending on the writer. A writer for *Maine Farmer* in February of 1896 touched on a common question in this debate: Who

exactly is the New Woman, and does she really exist? “Who is she? She is but a creature of imagination; she does not really exist. Woman is woman and always will be, whatever her vocation” (“The New Woman” *Maine Farmer*). Thus, opponents tried to address the New Woman by simply smiting her existence. By taking the definition of womanhood back to its “true” meaning, dissenters of the New Woman attempted to fan the flame of this debate to reduce the traction that it was progressively gaining. For example, a writer for *Harper’s Bazaar* in February of 1898 rejected the canonical New Woman in favor of the Victorian True Woman. While the New Woman is causing a scene in the public eye, this writer says, the True Woman was to be admired for staying at home and carrying on like always. In the fervor of the controversial modern woman, the True Woman stuck to her tradition and her virtues. In the end, this writer concluded by saying that “the fact is that womanly nature has not materially changed since the beginning of the race. Woman’s special mission has always been to nurse, to educate, to heal, to alleviate, to comfort, to care for, and to sympathize with those who need her” (“Woman, Old and New”). The idea that there might be a New Woman left people confused about how to now singly classify all of womanhood. Traditionally, 19th-century rhetoric about womanhood featured a unanimous, concise conception about how women were to behave. As a result, an attempt to wipe out the existence of the New Woman was an attempt to enact the same rhetorical style of 19th-century discourse about womanhood. For example, in an article for *The American Farmer* in January of 1895 titled “IT IS EVERYWHERE. The Sphere of the Woman—The New Woman is not New,” the writer eradicated an idea of the New Woman: “It is becoming a little tiresome—this incessant talk about ‘woman’s sphere’ and the ‘new woman.’ . . . As for the ‘new woman,’ there is no new woman” (“It Is Everywhere”). The writer goes on to list numerous examples of strong women throughout history—Hypatia, Joan of Arc, and Queen

Elizabeth I—to show women’s capabilities within a patriarchal society to imply that women do not need special rights to be great. “All of this was in the days when women had no time to shine, because of the drudgery in her home and everywhere. . .she probably could have done as much long ago, being given equal opportunity” (“It Is Everywhere”). The main point of this writer’s article is to say that there is no New Woman—all the characteristics typically assigned to the New Woman (strong, dominant, and masculine) have always been present in women. All the female historical icons this writer mentions serve to support the point this writer makes—strong, independent women have always existed and can still exist in a male dominated society. Therefore, this writer’s argument, though in favor of women’s equality, was that the New Woman in the way that she typically was described was not a phenomenon.

Articles such as these clearly denoted the discrepancy between the more modern woman—a discernable figure in society—versus the illusive legend of the New Woman who seemed to have grand intentions in reforming gender power dynamics. As a nebulous archetype, it was meant to be representative of the various new ways in which women were living in response to the rigidity of 19th-century womanhood, but ended up being the butt of conversation in the popular press and was refashioned to be a destructive caricature. Sarah Grand’s original idea of the New Woman is not of a certain stereotype, but as activist whose duty is to press against the power structure of the traditional patriarchy. Over time, visionaries of an egalitarian society abandoned the term to focus and directly address the ways in which society was unfair to women. The New Woman, as a stereotype, paralleled the stereotype of the True Woman in its simplicity and description. In the same ways that the public defined the True Woman as pious, submissive, and virtuous, the New Woman was mannish, immoral, and an abomination to her

sex. Therefore, the New Woman was created as a new type that reduced modern women to the certain features that society valued—namely appearance and aptitude for obedience.

The Visual Rhetoric of the New Woman

Women, historically, were valued and defined by their outward appearance. Not only was a woman's success highly contingent on her beauty and her ability in finding an honorable husband (which would secure her wealth and status in society), but style, much like it is today, conveyed a woman's personality and character to the public. The way women looked represented their behaviors and their domain within their respective spheres. Rhetorically, a woman's style was greatly consequential in how the public defined her status and reputation. Hence, women who wore shorter skirts and rouge were snidely deemed as unmoral prostitutes, whereas women who dressed more modestly and simply were given more respect, and people more readily listened to them. As Carol Mattingly writes, the success of women in rhetorical situations was highly contingent upon their style of dress. For example, Mattingly described feminist activist Frances E. Willard, president of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, as having a typically modest style that worked in her favor: "Willard's simple hairstyle and natural complexion, along with her modest dress and her eschewing of flashy or elaborate decoration, increased her credibility" (114). This established her identity as a feminine and domestic woman—which prompted her audience to be more initially receptive to her message. Modesty in fashion was a way of communicating new ideas in the most effective way possible. Though pushing for reform on ideas of traditional womanhood, Willard did so by appearing customarily feminine in a way that provided her a certain ethos. Hence, ideas about womanhood were often carried and interpreted through the appearance of women, what this appearance represented, and the

connotation of said appearances. In the way that the behaviors characteristic of modern women were vilified by society, the same antagonism was devoted to a more modern style of dress. Furthermore, women who sought to diverge themselves as liberated women in the 1920s cut their hair shorter and shortened the length of their skirts. It was these hairstyles and dresses themselves that often came to mind first when describing the flapper—that is, the appearance of these women was primarily symbolic of their freedom. In the same way that women who dressed modestly were respected by the public, women who dressed modernly in the Progressive Era were disrespected as sinful beings—just based on style. For example, Margaret E. Sangster, addressing the character of the New Woman in 1895 in *The Golden Rule*, warned women about appearing mannish in their looks:

What shall the New Woman avoid? First and above all things, let her not be mannish.

There is a sort of mannish affectation in the air; one sees the result of this—and very droll it is—in a sort of swagger in the walk, a slangy manner of talking, and a copying of one's brother's vests and ties and hats and coat-tails in the dress. Do not yield to it, girls. You gain nothing, and you lose much, when you try to dress like men, or to imitate little peculiarities that are identified with our ideas of men. To be pure, womanly, is the best thing a woman can be; and a mannish woman is a pitiable, almost a despicable, sight.

Thus, as modern women attempted to live in ways outside of the norm, the response dealt similarly both with her appearance and her actions. Mattingly writes, “gender inscribed on and around women's bodies, was constructed largely in the visual impact created by their clothing and appearance” (1). Hence, it comes as no surprise that with the popularity of female images gracing the covers of magazines in the 1890s, artists sought to typify the modern woman in a socially acceptable and appealing way. Journalism scholar Carolyn Kitch writes that the

magazine's cover girl's "various permutations were the first mass media stereotypes" (5). These artists aimed to create female characters who were, in part, representative of the changing world, but also possessed conventional attributes of class and femininity in a way that would still make these characters endearing to men. Out of these attempts to traditionally feminize the modern women came the visual stereotypes of the New Woman.

As the New Woman became a popular subject of conversation during the Progressive Era, the topic of the ideal American girl's portrayal consumed much of the conversation about womanhood. Martha Banta writes that during this era, "*the woman as image* was one of the era's dominant cultural ties" (xxviii). In other words, depictions of the ideal American girl that graced the covers of magazines were the visual response to shifting cultural perceptions in society. Because of the popularity of "the woman as image," some denoted this period as "The Day of the Girl" (Kitch 44). Not only did the New Woman pervade through journalistic conversations about women's behaviors, but in the art world, artists combined the trend of stylistically female images with the contentious trend of woman's modernity. For example, Kitch writes that "the New Woman offers a study in iconology. As a cultural construct, she conveyed opportunities for upward social and economic mobility while she also embodied fears about *downward* mobility . . . of white American men" (8). The discussion about the New Woman in the press certainly mirrors this perceived unbalance that the New Woman appeared to promote—that as different possibilities were opened to women, the comfortable binary between the dominance of white men and the subordination of women was crudely being unearthed. However, visual depictions did not so easily capture this back-and-forth nature of this divisive debate. As previously mentioned, the term "New Woman" in the press was typically used in the context of derogating the modern woman. However, because the style of magazines from 1890-1920 featured an

idealized depiction of femininity, the ways in which the New Woman was portrayed visually represented a modest, moderate, and socially acceptable caricature that exemplified progressive era beauty.

During this time, creating images that typified the American girl came to be the trend in the art world. Artists like Harrison Fisher and Howard Chandler Christy were both known for depicting modern women through the lens of relative beauty standards; however, by the late 1890s, the work by Charles Dana Gibson came to broadly iconize the Progressive Era woman the most. Born in Boston in 1867, Gibson grew to eventually become a part of the socially elite culture depicted in most of his drawings (Kitch 39). Historian Lois W. Banner writes that his drawings, which first appeared in 1890 in *Life* magazine, quickly became a sensation. His portrayal of the ideal woman influentially set the standards of beauty of the day (154). The Gibson Girl “was tall and commanding, with thick dark hair swept upward in the prevailing pompadour style. Her figure was thinner than that of the voluptuous woman, but she remained of large bosom and hips. Her mouth was small and her nose snub” (Banner 154). The nature of his drawings often depicted a beautiful, confident, and bold girl as the focal point, wearing modern, casual clothes and appearing to be in control of her life choices when it comes to hobbies and, mostly, choice of husband. However, it is unclear whether Gibson set out to produce his own interpretation of the New Woman, or if he was contributing to the growing trend of “showing the public what the American girl looked like” (Kitch 36). Because Gibson did not show favor upon the feminist movement, and his drawings did not often exhibit an explicit political message, it is easier to believe that Gibson was more devoted to his career as an artist rather than offering his input on political conversations through his art. As Banner writes, “Ultimately, Gibson came to hate the Gibson girl, to sense that repetition of variations on a single theme hampered the

development of his talent. He wanted to be a Howard Pyle or an Arthur Rackham, not a practitioner of 'pretty girl art,' as Norman Rockwell would tempestuously describe him" (156). However, "contemporary feminists often saw her as the prototype of the 'new woman'" (Banner 156). This correlation between the New Woman and the Gibson girl may not be as accurate as previously believed. For the most part, Gibson's "New Woman" drawings offered a benign and harmless representation of a modern woman who was bold, beautiful, and confident, but did not really pose a threat to society's established order on gender. Because "she was rarely portrayed as a working or college woman," Gibson's stereotype of the New Woman may not only represent the conglomerate of new choices women were making, but inaccurately represents the more radical ways in which women were now living (Banner 156). Martha H. Patterson writes that "while the New Woman as a college student too often deferred or outright rejected her maternal obligation, the Gibson Girl offered assurances of eventual marriage and children" (*Beyond the Gibson Girl* 37). For example, an illustration titled "His Beginning" depicts a young woman leaning away from an interested man, seeming to hold the power over the situation. The caption reads, "I had no idea that you were in love with me," she says. He replies, "Neither had I, until I proposed and you rejected me." Therefore, the kind of New Woman Gibson seems to create in cartoons like these is a coquette whose modernity is displayed in her confident character within social situations.



Fig. 1. "His Beginnings." Charles Dana Gibson, *The Gibson Girl: Drawings*, Diablo Press, 1968.

The Gibson girl was seldom swept off her feet by the advances of man, but rather, with her beauty and assertiveness, she holds control over her romantic affairs and was given a say in whom she will marry. Hence, Gibson's depiction of female freedom was less associated with considerable gender reform, and more associated with gently and stylistically representing the push of the status quo (Kitch 44). The meek, quiet woman of the 19th-century was now subverted by a more self-assured figure. The Gibson girl simply expressed modern style and generalized

sentiments about women's new vocations, yet gave her a pretty face. For example, an illustration in *Life* published on March 15, 1900 titled "Fore!" depicts an athletic girl's breezy day playing golf (see fig. 2).



Fig. 2. "Fore!" Charles Dana Gibson, *The Gibson Girl: Drawings*, Diablo Press, 1968.

Her hair and her dress are billowing in wind, as she yells out to the distance. Though meant to portray a casual scene, this and many other works by Gibson appear to be highly picturesque—almost staged—to capture a perfect ambiance. The woman is alone and stands as the focus on the illustration, calling attention to her independence and agency she has over her actions. She does not appear to be meek or virtuous, but rather she seems to have made her own choice to play golf, and, because there is no one else in the picture, she does not need anyone to direct her.

Though capturing the independent ambiance of the New Woman, Gibson also draws this golfer as very pretty—her shoulders are broad, her waist is slim, and she is tall. Thus, one might say that this is a “socially acceptable” depiction of modern women during the Progressive Era. She does not appear mannish and possesses the typical feminine appearance that was expected of men, but her independence over her actions is conveyed through arbitrary activities that are not integral to the function of society. Therefore, Gibson’s version of the modern woman was a socially appropriate image that adheres to the reservations many people still held about women placing themselves in traditionally masculine roles. In fact, Gibson was not “sympathetic to organized feminism, for he had misgivings that involvement in politics would make women coarser and more masculine” (Banner 157). Thus, not only was there a disconnect between the press’s claims about modern women and the stereotype of the New Woman, but in visual representation, the assumed visual stereotype of the New Woman in illustration appeared to be moderate in her choices, yet still typically pretty by the beauty standards of the time.

The more casual comics and cartoons that presented the caricature of the New Woman followed the fashion of the conversation about her in the press. Comics that depicted the New Woman mainly as a suffragist were also meant to be a form of derogation—a means of discouraging women from taking upon these new opportunities by poking fun at the New Woman. These comics often featured a boastful, prideful woman, whose mere existence and identity was insulting to men. The proud modern woman is often glancing pompously down on a weak and cowering man. In addition, the man is frequently performing the wifely tasks (like cooking, cleaning, and watching the children) while the women are out protesting for women’s rights. In this way, the New Woman appears to be a vicious villain who is unjustly assuming authority that she cannot rightfully possess, while also abdicating her typical duties as wife and

mother—which inconvenienced the men in her life. For example, a cartoon “The Home of the Suffragette” from *Life* magazine in 1910 depicts a violent scene with a powerful message (see fig. 3). The man, cowering in fear, looks frightened at his wife who holds a clenched fist. The caption ironically reads “A little difference of opinion.”



THE HOME OF THE SUFFRAGETTE
A LITTLE DIFFERENCE OF OPINION

Fig. 3. "THE HOME OF THE SUFFRAGETTE." *Life* (1883-1936), vol. 56, no. 1470, Dec 29, 1910, pp. 1201, American Periodicals, <http://proxy.lib.ohio-state.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.ohio-state.edu/docview/90679893?accountid=9783>.

This difference of opinion (in terms of women's suffrage) is not a civil argument, but rather it is one in which the woman, who holds the progressive opinion about women's emancipation, appears to be the violent adversary. Thus, the cartoon displayed the message that women who believe in suffrage are ferocious. Another cartoon from *Life* in August of 1910 titled "The Always 'New' Woman" features a husband feeding a small child (with a focused yet downcast look on his face) while the woman walks out the door (see fig. 4). "Good-by, dear," she says, "I'm going to see my publishers and shall most likely be late home again."



THE ALWAYS "NEW" WOMAN

"GOOD-BY, DEAR, I'M GOING TO SEE MY PUBLISHERS AND SHALL MOST LIKELY BE LATE HOME AGAIN. . . . DON'T FORGET TO GIVE PODORE HIS PAP TWICE AGAIN."
 —From "Dunmier and Garvami." *International Studio Special Extra Number*. John Lane Company.

Fig. 4. "THE ALWAYS "NEW" WOMAN." *Life* (1883-1936), vol. 56, no. 1449, Aug 04, 1910, pp. 198, American Periodicals, <http://proxy.lib.ohio-state.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.ohio-state.edu/docview/90694461?accountid=9783>.

The wife has a stingy and unkind downward gaze upon the two as she leaves. As a result, the woman is intended to appear heartless and cruel for making her husband stay behind and do the tasks she ought to do as a wife. Therefore, cartoons such as these seemed to harshly ridicule

ideas about modern womanhood by offering a perception of the New Woman who seems violent, angry, and prideful. By putting forth images such as these, illustrators and editors in the popular press made grand generalizations about all modern women and about how they actually are in relation to men. To the reader of these comics, then, the New Woman was not merely representative of new options for women, but she would eventually lead the downfall of society and the destruction of men.

Visual representations of the New Woman provide unique insight into the attitudes about the change in women's choices because images in the press not only reflected the ideas in the articles, but these images also help to reinforce the stereotypes given to such figures like the New Woman—that is, visual images put a face to a name. Gibson's drawings corresponded with the growing trend in art to typify the American girl in a way that was endearing to the men who bought the magazines. As a result, Gibson's version of the New Woman did not pose a threat to the established gender order and did not contribute to the efforts of the feminist movement. Rather, the Gibson girl was part of a larger trend in art of capturing who the American girl was in a way that was appealing to readers of the magazines in which his illustrations were published. Thus, the association between the Gibson girl and the New Woman in scholarship is not an accurate comparison considering the popular negative connotation the term "New Woman" had in the articles in the popular press. Contrarily, the comics and cartoons, more casual than the illustrations did in fact reflect the attitudes of the New Woman as they were conveyed in writing. These comics more typically depicted the New Woman as a mannish, negligent wife and mother who would abandon her family to go out on the streets and fight for women's rights. This difference between the New Woman's representation in comics/cartoons and the more sophisticated illustrations by Gibson perhaps points to the ways in which the art world had to

take those cultural attitudes about the New Woman and combine them with the trend of portraying the American girl. In doing so, artists created an image of the Progressive Era woman that was not as provocative and controversial as the cartoons and comics in the press displayed her. In addition, the Gibson girl's benign nature along with the Progressive Era's trend of typifying the American girl reflected men's resistance to feminism and the gravitas 19th-century precepts about gender still held. This trend echoed the ongoing authority men held to define how women should look, talk, and act—in a way that is still appealing to men. Thus, though the Gibson girl did not overtly represent the antagonism towards modern women's behaviors like the comics and cartoons did, her lack of controversy signifies the control men still assumed in determining women's appearance and behaviors.

The Nebulous New Woman: Who is She?

“After all, it may be that the New Woman is a recurring decimal, as the arithmeticians would say, appearing at certain intervals with a constantly shifting value to civilization.”

-Maurice Thompson, Oct. 1, 1895

Though New Woman prose and literature has been a topic of research studied by Jean V. Matthews, Carolyn Christensen Nelson, and Martha H. Patterson, the rhetoric surrounding the debate of the New Woman has gone overlooked by rhetorical scholars. These scholars have typically attributed the New Woman to the rallying suffragists and the ambitious college women, which—though not entirely inaccurate—is an approach that ignores the argumentative intentions of the writers who constructed the New Woman. An understanding of the New Woman that defines the term as a proactive depiction of modern women overlooks the typical rhetorical

strategies used in conversations that employ female stereotypes. Therefore, this understanding of the New Woman eschews the term's function as a stereotype and muddles the true definition and usage of the term. Though the stereotype is conventionally spoken of as the symbol of modern women, this comprehension is perhaps too simplistic and ignores the nuanced, contentious arguments of those in the popular press who debated the New Woman. Moreover, this understanding disregards the role of the term "New Woman" as an operative composition of antagonistic beliefs about modern women. Reading New Woman texts from a 21st century perspective prompts one to study feminist activism from 1890 to 1920 in terms of their rise to progress—we already know that the feminists were successful eventually in procuring women's rights. However, studying the debate about the New Woman from the rhetorical perspective of those who contributed to conversations about womanhood offers a new understanding of what the New Woman represented—namely the ways that people constructed arguments to resist new concepts of gender and the New Woman's identity as the antithesis of the esteemed True Woman.

The archetype of the New Woman, though generally characterized as the representative for the modern woman, allowed people to have a term that they could use to discuss women's changing behaviors—and with that phrase developed an assigned set of (typically negative) connotations. Meant to be indicative of women who were adapting to the technological and industrial advances during the Progressive Era, this simple term served as a bridge between old social constructs and emerging new social constructs about gender. This term allowed people to compare the favored True Woman and the supposed response to the True Woman: The New Woman. As Martha H. Patterson writes, the "capaciousness [of the term 'New Woman'] allowed a diverse range of writers to deploy it strategically, playing on its ability to evoke a host of

cultural anxieties and modern desires” (*Beyond the Gibson Girl 2*). Over time, opponents of women’s new behaviors appropriated Sarah Grand’s definition to castigate these behaviors in favor of the more comfortable view of womanhood devised in the 19th-century. Because ideas about womanhood were a common point of interest in the 19th-century, and this conversation created a stereotype that was generally viewed favorably, women capitalizing on the new opportunities of the Progressive Era countered the attempts of 19th-century writers to keep all woman in the role of a pious, quiet, and submissive wife and mother. Thus, the New Woman was born from people’s shared distaste, confusion, and disillusionment towards women who abandoned their corsets, their etiquette classes, and their conduct books.

The New Woman’s identity as the antithesis of the True Woman signifies the hesitancy and resistance people have towards societal reform and the ways in which people are most likely to respond to new understandings of gender. The New Woman represents the way feminists were misunderstood in their intentions to create a more egalitarian society. From the genesis of the New Woman in Sarah Grand’s “The New Aspect of the Woman Question” in 1894, the term was distorted to be evocative of a militant, hostile woman who seeks to forego traditional morality and greatly wants to become a man. Sarah Grand created a simple, concise, and recognizable term that opponents feasibly espoused to build an archetype out of a set of traits they found so repulsive. As Teresa Perkins states, the fortitude of a stereotype lies in its simplicity, its relevance, and its recognizable reference to interrogative cultural subjects that beg for an answer through discussion (qtd. in Kitch 5). The befuddlement about modern women’s relinquishment from traditional roles resulted in the conception of a caricature of the modern woman who was meant to portray modern women as thoroughly immoral. Even though the rhetorical strategy of generalizing all women under a shared set of beliefs about their behavior was common in “The

Cult of True Womanhood,” and consequentially in the debate about the New Woman, the New Woman debate possesses more complex characteristics because it was the direct response to “The Cult of True Womanhood.” For example, because the New Woman was posited as the antithesis of the True Woman, the New Woman debate visibly indicates how prominent and relevant the ideas about the True Woman still were. Thus, cultural precepts about gender retain a firm grip amid societal reform and serve as the basis that prompts the responsive rhetorical nature of the arguments within the debate.

Comprehending the contentious debates about the regulation of womanhood serves as the basis for women’s rhetorical studies as it provides context for interpreting the impressionability and reception of women’s words, and it helps in comprehending how archetypes are fashioned to exemplify the arguments that conveyed popular opinion on the conduct of women. Thus, the methodology used in this project can be applied to other constructed stereotypes of women that hindered their progress in gender reform—for example, the True Woman of the 19th-century or the “feminazi” of third-wave feminism. The edifice of these archetypes prompts those who doubt the intentions of feminists to not take their arguments seriously, furthermore, stereotypes are especially effective in minimizing the reasoning for women’s call to action. In the same way that women’s arguments are dissected and analyzed by feminist rhetorical scholars, we must further dissect and analyze the underlying cultural tenets on gender that influences the efficacy of women’s messages by further researching the rhetoric of those resistant to gender reform.

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