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## **Changing Ideals of Womanhood During the Nineteenth-Century Woman Movement**

*Susan M. Cruea*

"Feminism," as we know the term today, was nonexistent in nineteenth-century America. The phrase did not become popular until the 1910s as efforts began to focus around women's suffrage, yet pre-feminist activity began long before 1910 (Cott 13). During the mid-nineteenth century, the "Woman Movement" developed as a result of "women's strivings to improve their status in and usefulness to society." The objectives of the movement were "to initiate measures of charitable benevolence, temperance, and social welfare and to initiate struggles for civic rights, social freedoms, higher education, remunerative occupations, and the ballot" (Cott 3). The setting of these goals resulted from women's rising awareness of the precariousness of their situation in the patriarchal society of the 1800s.

At this time, women were the continual victims of social and economic discrimination. Upper- and middle-class women's choices were limited to marriage and motherhood, or spinsterhood. Both choices resulted in domestic dependency. While they could find jobs as shop girls or factory workers, women were discouraged from being wage earners by the belief that women who earned wages were "unnatural." In addition, "[l]ow wages, the absence of upward mobility, depressing and unhealthy working conditions, all made marriage an attractive survival strategy for working-class women" (Smith-Rosenberg 13). Women were forced, for a variety of reasons, to be dependent upon their husbands for financial support.

Evolving throughout the nineteenth century, the Woman Movement developed in response to women's dependent situation. It promoted a series of new images for women: True Womanhood, Real Womanhood, Public Womanhood, and New Womanhood. While these phases have been individually identified and defined by previous scholarship, I will examine them not in isolation but instead as overlapping parts of a long-term change in cultural attitudes towards gender, a gradual shifting of power away from its patriarchal basis, and a steady movement for women

toward twentieth-century feminism.

During the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s, the nonproductive matron became a symbol of "bourgeois class hegemony" through an ideal now known as the "Cult of True Womanhood." This ideal "prescribed a female role bound by kitchen and nursery, overlaid with piety and purity, and crowned with subservience" (Smith-Rosenberg 13). First described by Barbara Welter in *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1976), a "True Woman" was designated as the symbolic keeper of morality and decency within the home, being regarded as innately superior to men when it came to virtue. "[P]iety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity" were thought to be natural to women (Welter 21). Welter suggests that being a True Woman was an awesome charge:

In a society where values changed frequently, where fortunes rose and fell with frightening rapidity, where social and economic mobility provided instability as well as hope, one thing at least remained the same—a true woman was a true woman, wherever she was found. If anyone, male or female, dared to tamper with the complex of virtues which made up True Womanhood, he was damned immediately as an enemy of God, of civilization and of the Republic. It was a fearful obligation, a solemn responsibility, the nineteenth-century American woman had—to uphold the pillars of the temple with her frail white hand. (21)

In a rapidly changing world where men were charged with the task of creating and expanding an industrialized civilization from a wilderness, a True Woman was expected to serve as the protectress of religion and civilized society.

Because being a True Woman was such an important responsibility, the ideal of True Womanhood was early imprinted upon young girls, who were trained to be obedient and exhibit great self-control (Welter 4). Each was also taught to value her virginity "as the 'pearl of great price' which was her greatest asset" (5). She prepared herself for marriage by keeping herself chaste for her future husband and learning the skills necessary to manage a household and rear children. Motherhood was valued as the most fulfilling and essential of all women's duties, a view extending the eighteenth-century ideal of Republican Motherhood, which charged women with the task of "shaping the values of their sons, who were likely to have a direct impact on the nation's success" (Woloch 90). This view was communicated to young women through their families, churches, and schools, as well as "periodical and popular literature, medical texts, and etiquette manuals" (Welter 3). Although middle-class women had the opportunity to attend female seminaries and colleges, the curriculum at these schools was limited to religious instruction and basic "book learning" which would enable a mother to later educate her children. Intel-

lectual pursuits were strongly discouraged; instead, a True Woman was expected "to fulfill herself in the 'instinctive' arts of child rearing, domestic pursuits, and spiritual comfort" (Cogan 68). Intellectual women like Margaret Fuller were condemned as "unfeminine," since a woman's "heart" was valued over her "mind," the mind being associated with the masculine.

Ironically, while a True Woman was assumed to be a pillar of moral strength and virtue, she was also portrayed as delicate and weak, prone to fainting and illness. She dared not exert herself too much physically or be emotionally startled for fear of her health. Strenuous physical activity was discouraged, as women were considered to have "much more delicate nervous system[s] than . . . men because of the particular function of their reproductive organs . . . [T]heir fragile nervous systems were likely to be overstimulated or irritated, with disastrous results" (Cogan 29). Part of this physical deficiency was real, deriving from the constricting dress of the time. In *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States*, Eleanor Flexner describes "stays so tightly laced that women could hardly breathe, and half a dozen skirts and petticoats (which might weigh as much as twelve pounds), long enough to sweep up refuse from the streets and dust from the floor" (83). The nineteenth-century woman "practice[d] devotions at the shrine of fashion and beauty, the former in whose service she distort[ed] her rib cage and internal organs with corsets" (Cogan 3).

Due to her emotional and physical frailty, a True Woman needed to be protected by a male family member. She also required the luxuries that his income could provide. The popular press perpetuated this notion through newspapers, pamphlets, and magazines, such as *Godey's Lady's Book*. First published in 1830, *Godey's* was, according to Gerda Lerner, the "epitome of sentimental literature"; in its pages, the conception of "lady" was "elevated to the . . . ideal of femininity toward which all women could strive" but which only the wealthy could truly afford (190). An upper-class woman's primary function was to "display . . . her husband's wealth," for "idleness . . . had become a status symbol" (191). Meanwhile, middle-class women's purpose was to "elevate the status of [their] famil[ies]" through "setting 'proper' standards of behavior, dress, and literary tastes" (190). Materialism was at the heart of this ideal as women were expected to dedicate themselves to "the ladylike consumption of luxury goods" (Cogan 3). Lacking the traditional class structure of England and Europe, America substituted wealth for bloodline in order to "transform the formless and uncertain into the structured and familiar," portraying "wealth and social status" as the rewards for "self-reliance" and a "drive for success" (Smith-Rosenberg 167). A True Woman's role within this ideology was to

serve as "Queen" over her household, which was supposed to reflect her husband's wealth and success, and to prepare her children to continue the husband's legacy of success.

How did the beginnings of feminism emerge from a generation of women who accepted such a weak and submissive ideal? The Cult of True Womanhood laid the groundwork for the later development of feminism by crediting women with a moral authority which implicitly empowered them to extend their moral influence outside the home. A True Woman was known as the "Angel in the House" whose primary purpose was to impart moral guidance to her family. However, many women asserted that it was their duty to spread such guidance outside the home as well, in order to protect their families and improve the public good. Moreover, while most women clung to the ideals of True Womanhood, many "maintained such a steel-engraved image only superficially, covertly holding the reins of influence inside the family, the church, and the social world to achieve what slight protections and partial reforms they felt were possible" (Cogan 4). In other words, they exploited their moral empowerment for both covert and overt social action. As the "Angel out of the House," a True Woman's "activity within the church communities was [seen as] an extension of women's role within the home" (Wilson 188). Many middle- and upper-class women were actively involved, for instance, in benevolent and charitable actions on behalf of their churches. Their belief in their moral superiority to men also empowered them to attempt to right the wrongs, especially alcoholism and prostitution, inflicted on society by sinful men. As a "Female Saviour," it was a True Woman's duty to sacrifice her self in order to turn her father, brothers, husband, and sons from their sinful ways (Showalter 134).

The Cult of True Womanhood also laid the groundwork for the later development of feminism through its unobtainable quality for the majority of nineteenth-century American women. The vision of women as "wan, ethereal, spiritualized creatures bore little relation to the real world, especially of the working class, where women operated machines, worked the fields, hand-washed clothing, and toiled over great kitchen stoves" (O'Neill 7-8). Even middle-class girls raised to be idle and submissive found themselves overwhelmed when it came to managing household duties as wives and mothers. Massive economic changes in America also made arranging a desirable marriage difficult. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg notes that commercialization, industrialization, and advancements in transportation led to a mass departure of young men from the New England agricultural area "either to the West or to the new urban frontier" (80-81). As a result, women's marital opportunities became limited, and more were forced to seek employment:

New England's daughters, like New England's sons, set off upon the roads and canals of the new commercial world. A few sought education and employment in the burgeoning common-school systems of the North. Others flocked . . . to the textile towns that . . . began to dot New Hampshire's rivers. Still others turned to larger cities, where they sought to survive as domestic servants in the new bourgeois households or as needleworkers in the garment industry. (81)

Finally, necessity forced many women to forsake True Womanhood in order to fill positions left vacant by men who had gone off to fight during the Civil War. Women took on the roles of teachers, office workers, government workers, and store clerks. As pointed out by Nancy Woloch, southern women took on the management of vast plantations with hundreds of slaves (223). In addition, thousands of women participated in the war efforts as nurses and volunteers, "[m]inistering to 'the boys' in the wards, serving as teachers of former slaves, rolling bandages, or visiting camps." Over 3000 women from the North and South served as nurses during the war (223). However, the greatest wartime factor affecting women was the number of casualties caused by the war: the deaths of an estimated 359,528 Union and 198,524 Confederate soldiers (Nofi). Ultimately, "over a million men were killed or wounded, more than [in] any other American war before or since" (Woloch 225). This human loss "created a generation of widows, spinsters, and wives with disabled husbands, and enlarged the pool of women in dire need of income," especially in the South where women outnumbered men by tens of thousands (225).

Frances B. Cogan asserts that in response to these factors, "another, more open, completely autonomous and indigenous American ideal [came to exist] for [women] to emulate" (4). Especially for the middle-class, the ideal of "Real Womanhood" emerged as an alternative to True Womanhood (4). Cogan explains that Real Womanhood differed from True Womanhood in its attitude toward health, education, marriage, and, most importantly, employment. While, like True Womanhood, it claimed "a unique sphere of action and duty for women," this sphere was "vastly extended . . . past the dimensions of anything meant by that term to devotees of the competing True Womanhood" (4). Real Womanhood encouraged healthy exercise and activity, permitted women a minor degree of independence, and stressed economic self-sufficiency as a means of survival.

Instead of viewing women as "nervous, hysterical, and biologically weak specimens . . . easily subdued and dominated by male force, strong emotion, and male rationality," Real Womanhood offered women "a vision of themselves as biologically equal [to men] (rationally as well as emotionally) and in many cases markedly superior" (Cogan 4-5). Real

Womanhood encouraged strenuous exercise and activities. Instead of remaining docile, as the conventions of True Womanhood dictated, girls and young women who adopted the tenets of Real Womanhood were encouraged to participate in sports activities such as archery, gymnastics, rowing, skating, and horseback riding. Meanwhile, wives were encouraged to perform their own housekeeping tasks, such as pumping water, washing laundry, and sweeping floors since these provided brisk activity. Walking and gardening in the fresh air were encouraged for women as they stimulated "ruddy cheeks and vigorous health" (7). Real Womanhood also brought about changes to fashion: corsets, heavy skirts, and thin shoes and stockings were replaced by more sensible dress that was looser fitting and practical. Higher skirts (touching the tops of boots) and the absence of "tightly laced stays" made "walking along country lanes and through meadows easier and enterprises such as . . . the ramble less hazardous in falls and sprained ankles" (58).

An education also made a woman better equipped "to manage a household and raise children satisfactorily," and "to help transmit culture, gentleness, and morality to future generations, the immediate family" (Cogan 74-75). While True Womanhood advocated learning for women only as it enhanced the ability to perform domestic duties, Real Womanhood saw education as enabling a woman "to attract the right kind of man and . . . fulfill the duties of wife and companion" (74). A woman with an education was more likely to be a suitable partner for an educated husband, better able to participate in conversations on a more equal level of understanding. Moreover, "if the need arose, . . . [the educated woman could] support [herself or her] immediate or extended family . . . to help financially in a marriage" (75). A woman with an education was not dependent on others for support, for she had the skills to gain an income. On an individual level, Real Womanhood saw education as beneficial for a woman as a means "to combat neurosis, depression, and mental illness" and "to widen [her] horizons and enrich [herself] as a person" (75).

Education was also thought to be essential to the Real Woman because of marriage, which was viewed not as the happy product of the "inescapable passions, conjunctions of stars, and melting oneness" envisioned by True Womanhood but as a potentially "risky" prospect since a woman had little chance of divorce (Cogan 103). Cogan points out that if a woman were not careful, she could easily find herself in a disastrous match with a drunkard, gambler, or rake. Therefore, instead of teaching a young woman "flirting techniques . . . guaranteed to bring her romance," Real Womanhood offered careful strategies for gaining insight into the moral character of a prospective mate (103-04). Real Womanhood encouraged a woman to marry "a man who was hardworking, compassionate, and

moral rather than one who was merely wealthy or physically attractive" (75). Regardless of how hard a wife tried to reform her husband, "one rarely managed to reform an alcoholic, a compulsive gambler, a chronic philanderer, or a wastrel; the behaviors usually continued, despite tears and promises to the contrary" (103). Therefore, though marriage was still considered a desirable possibility for women, Real Womanhood regarded the position of an educated spinster, able to support herself, as more desirable than that of an unhappy or abused wife. A woman's primary interest was in securing a "bearable future," as opposed to "bliss" (103).

Because of the risks of marriage, Real Womanhood also permitted women to work for an income. While a career was not encouraged because it would distract from domestic responsibilities, work played a central role in Real Womanhood, which demanded that women be "employed" in charitable, domestic, or salaried work since it "taught the woman self-reliance." Conversely, "idleness" was strongly discouraged as it promoted dependency and could lead to moral temptation (Cogan 200). By being able to earn an income in order to support herself, a woman could also avoid finding herself in the position of having to marry an unsuitable man just to "acquire a home" (107). She could support herself until a desirable match could be found, or she could choose not to marry at all. Finally, too, a woman able to work could support herself and her family when illness, death, or financial disaster struck. Yet, while Real Womanhood required women to work, this work was usually of a domestic nature and involved traditional housekeeping, gardening, canning and baking, and taking care of children. Any charitable work primarily involved "organizing food and clothing drives for the impoverished" and delivering "Christian tracts to the neglected" (203). Salaried work consisted of working as a seamstress or laundress, or performing some other type of domestic function that could be completed within the home.

However, additional occupations soon began to take middle-class woman outside of the home. Glenna Matthews defines this next step towards feminism as the advent of the Public Woman. In *The Rise of the Public Woman: Woman's Power and Woman's Place in the United States, 1630-1970*, Matthews examines American women's exclusion from public space and the history of their struggle to gain public access. She points out that women began to gain greater public access and claim public roles for themselves as a result of women's increasing involvement in the moral and cultural welfare of their communities. This phase involved a move out of the private realm and into the public in the "legal, political, spatial, and cultural sense" (6). During this phase, women strove to gain legal visibility in order to protect their interests materially. They also sought to lift restrictions imposed by the sexual segregation of the public space.



They moved into the cultural realm through publishing, performance, and participation in public rituals. Finally, they worked toward acquiring the vote and the right to hold public office.

These developments did not go unchallenged. Controversy surrounded them, since public visibility for a woman was equated with loose sexuality. In fact, the term "Public Woman" originally referred to a prostitute. While a "public man" was "one who act[ed] in and for the universal good," a "public woman" "was seen as the dregs of society, vile, unclean . . . .[T]o be a public woman—in any of several senses of the term—was to risk the accusation of sexual impropriety" (Matthews 4). A woman outside the home without a respectable male escort risked ruining her reputation irreparably, for she would immediately be suspected of participating in something immoral or socially marginal.

In addition, women who worked outside the home faced "[e]conomic hardships and insecurity" as well as "social marginality." Domestic servants were frequently employed by "new bourgeois" families who felt little or no responsibility for their servants or their servants' well being. These "masters" treated their servants as disposable employees, "to be released for the smallest infraction of rules or for minor incompatibilities of personality" (Smith-Rosenberg 82). Meanwhile, women working in "sweat shops" as seamstresses were harshly exploited by capitalists, who paid them "a few pennies" for garments that often took them hours to make. These women who had often moved away from their families to the cities in order to find work "could not afford rooms in respectable boarding houses or hotels [and] clung together in sordid tenement dwellings" (82). Ironically, in order to survive, they often did turn to prostitution to supplement their meager incomes.

Despite these challenges, women soon began to develop occupations for themselves outside the home which allowed them both to work respectably and to be treated fairly. Matthews notes that they did so by "cloak[ing] woman's public activity with the aura of woman's sphere" (95). School teaching quickly became a public occupation dominated by women since it was closely related to childcare, a role assigned to women. Estimates suggest that during the mid-nineteenth century, "one-quarter of all New England women spent at least a small portion of their lives" teaching school children (96). Pioneers like Catharine Beecher, Emma Willard, and Elizabeth Peabody "tirelessly promot[ed] female education" while helping to transform teaching into a "true profession" (96). During the Civil War, nursing also became a profession open to women for the first time since caring for the ill was traditionally women's responsibility. With the large number of men involved in fighting the war and the excessive casualties created, the government was soon desperate for help

in tending and ministering to the wounded. Dorothy Dix, a well-known social reformer, was appointed as the Superintendent of Female Nurses, in April of 1861. As noted previously, over 3000 women participated as nurses in the Civil War (Woloch 223).

Yet not all of the new professions sprang from the domestic sphere. As America became increasingly industrialized, large corporations "developed elaborate bureaucracies to oversee their massive holdings" (Matthews 148). Office work, which had traditionally been dominated by males, began to attract women as the need increased for stenographers and typists. With the invention of the typewriter in 1867, corporate employers quickly began hiring young women whose "nimble fingers" were "well suited" for typing and whom they could pay substantially less than men. The business office, which had previously been male-dominated, was suddenly invaded by thousands of "typewriter girls" whose "numbers soared to over 200,000 by 1900" (Matthews 148). The United States Department of Commerce estimates that at least 877,000 workers were employed in clerical positions by 1900 (141). Thus, women constituted almost a quarter of the office work force. Tensions arose as men, who had previously been free to smoke, curse, and drink alcohol in the work place, were forced to edit their actions "so as not to offend their female coworkers" (149). However, these new secretaries and clerical assistants were there to stay as they proved themselves indispensable to their cost-conscious employers.

In addition to finding employment outside of the home, another way that nineteenth-century women sought public access was through religious activity. The Second Great Awakening "released a democratizing burst of religious enthusiasm that also brought more reform in its wake . . . [increasing] the number of women involved in unprecedented public activity [more] than anything that had gone on before" (Matthews 94). Thousands of women flocked to public religious meetings as "fiery waves of revivals" swept across America. "Female converts outnumbered male converts three to two . . . and women formed the bulk of congregations" (Woloch 121). The Awakening presented enormous potential for women to move into the public space as the phenomenon provided "a community of peers outside of the home" and an outlet for social activism. Women experienced a sense of "sisterhood" for the first time in working toward a common cause. Through the evangelical experience, they "gained one another's company, new routes to participation in the world, and clerical approval" (Woloch 122). Women and ministers shared an "unstated bargain" of clerical endorsement of "female moral superiority in exchange for women's support and activism" (Woloch 121).

To be sure, women were still prohibited from participating as "reviv-

alists" or taking leadership roles, steps that would have usurped the minister's position of power. However, a few women formed new denominations and conducted revivals of their own. Phoebe Palmer, the daughter of a New York doctor, created the "Tuesday Meeting for the Promotion of Holiness" and traveled across the country preaching (Hankins 118-19). Nancy Towle, a schoolteacher from New Hampshire, "traveled 15,000 miles in the space of a decade as she spread the word" (Matthews 104). Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Mary Livermore even "constructed [their] own feminist Bible, which rejected both traditional Christianity and gender assumptions" (Smith-Rosenberg 134-35). In addition, The American Female Moral Reform Society and The Women's Christian Temperance Union sprang from the notion of women's moral superiority. Endorsed by the church, these groups used women's moral superiority as a justification for public activity which transcended women's traditional domestic role and combated social immoralities that threatened the sanctity of the home and family. Others formed voluntary associations for "charitable, educational, and missionary purposes" (Matthews 104-05).

Women benefited from religious empowerment primarily through the power they gained in their own homes due to their clerically endorsed moral superiority. Matthews notes: "As women began to make new claims to power and influence in the name of their domestic role, both within the family and in the larger society, they also began to assert their power to dictate acceptable male conduct" within the home. The parlor, for instance, became a place of dread for both young boys and grown men who "knew that . . . they had to be on their very best behavior as defined by a wife or mother" (107). Also, women gained use of a new space which was "neither wholly public or wholly private—the front porch," where women could carry on household tasks yet at the same time "[maintain] a public presence and [monitor] the activities of others in the community" (107).

The Public Woman ideal also allowed women to become engaged in the cultural realm. Writing professionally, for instance, not only enabled women respectably to earn an income, but also enabled women to do important cultural work (Tompkins xi). The popularity of the novel enabled a great number of women to contribute their voices to a traditionally male-dominated culture: "[T]he appearance of the novel as a genre and its burgeoning popularity . . . created a new set of publishing possibilities for [the] literary woman, hence new possibilities for [the] public woman" (Matthews 72). The novel also benefited women readers who gained access to a wider world of thought and action:

[T]he rise of the public woman in the United States is incomprehensible

without a full understanding of the role played by the novel, because this genre provided an essential link between purely private expression and the public world. Moreover, it gave women, authors and readers both, a voice for the self-representation, which had been made possible by the valorizing of female subjectivity. Further, if republicanism in its American manifestation relied in part on female virtue for its success, the novel spread the word of that development. Finally, the novel gave women authors a means for taking powerful public action in a polity where they lacked a franchise. (Matthews 73)

Thus, the novel allowed women a public forum through which they could share experiences in an effort to reveal common concerns which allowed women to explore solutions to the social problems that plagued nineteenth-century women.

Most popular fiction produced by women in the mid-nineteenth century was directed towards advocating social change. The first significant woman writer of the time was Catharine Maria Sedgwick, whose third novel, *Hope Leslie* (1842), is "especially indicative of the proto-feminist potential inherent in the genre" (Matthews 79). In this work, Sedgwick followed "the life of one young woman who, self-mastered, achieved independence from circumstances and control over her own life" (Baym 54). Much women's fiction was similarly directed toward renouncing the Cult of True Womanhood and promoting either Real Womanhood or Public Womanhood. Fanny Fern, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Susan Warner, Louisa May Alcott, E.D.E.N. Southworth, and Elizabeth Stoddard were all actively engaged in producing fiction which sought to initiate social change. Stowe and Warner, in particular, produced two of the most socially influential novels of the time with *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and *The Wide, Wide World* (1851), respectively.

While Matthews illustrates the important role of women writers in promoting social change, one woman writer who is remarkably absent from Matthews's discussion of the Public Woman is Margaret Fuller. Primarily a non-fiction writer, Fuller was a leading member of Emerson's transcendentalist circle. Thomas R. Mitchell describes her as America's "greatest contemporary scholar and champion of Goethe," the first editor of the *Dial*, and an influential literary and art critic (2). She hosted an "intellectual discussion group" for women known as the "Conversations" at which she made it her mission "to help other women find their voices" (2). In addition, "as one of America's first professional women journalists . . . [Fuller became] the voice of oppressed groups, chastising a materialistic America for its failure to live up to its revolutionary ideals in its treatment of American Indians, slaves, Irish immigrants, the urban poor, and female convicts and prostitutes" (3). "The Great Lawsuit" (1843), which

was later revised and expanded into *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), launched Fuller as one of America's leading women's activists, and called for increased legal rights and greater self-sufficiency for women as well as equality within marriage for a happier union. Fuller's work "is now considered the foundational text of the women's rights movement in America" (Reynolds ix).

Fuller was traveling in Europe in July of 1848 and was thus unable to attend the highlight of the Public Woman phase—the Seneca Falls Convention. Unanticipated by any other gathering, the Seneca Falls Convention was held by women "to discuss the social, civil, and religious rights of women" (Flexner 74). Organized by Lucretia Mott, an ordained Quaker minister, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "the young wife of an abolitionist leader," the convention drew people from a fifty-mile radius to the church where the convention was held. There, women and men gathered publicly for the first time in an attempt to organize efforts to achieve social change. During the proceedings, several speeches were made and debates were conducted on the nature of woman and her rights. The most important of the debates revolved around the issue of the vote, and at the end of the convention, a "Declaration of Principles" was signed which included the pronouncement that "it is the sacred duty of the women of this country to secure to themselves their sacred right to the elective franchise" (Flexner 77).

Though the Public Woman image led to increased freedom for women, for the generation of women who sprang from their "public" mothers, it was not enough. During the 1880s and 1890s, the New Woman emerged, as the daughters who had watched their mothers struggle for public access came into adulthood. While their mothers had been satisfied with gaining a minimal amount of public stature and some independence and control over their lives, their daughters were not willing to settle for these:

They were the daughters of the new bourgeois matrons, and their dreams were heralded by the clubs and organizations their mothers had created and the role expansion those mothers had secured. Yet, ironically, their mothers' achievements only spurred the daughters' determination to create radically different roles for themselves. (Smith-Rosenberg 247)

Primarily middle- and upper-class, these young women demanded rights which their mothers would barely have imagined. The New Woman phase of the Woman Movement focused primarily on entirely "emancipating" women from the social expectations and conventions forced upon them by tradition. Based on the Enlightenment Rationalists' belief in "the natural rights and liberties of all humans [and acknowledging] women's demands for the removal of social barriers 'arbitrarily' designated by sex," it

"provoked . . . analyses of gender differences, and justified claims to liberties and opportunities equal to men" for women (Cott 16-17). Participants in this phase of the Woman Movement were interested in gaining greater access to education, employment, and economic and civic rights, and in changing expectations concerning personal behavior. They believed that gender, no more than race, should determine human rights or a person's sphere of living.

The New Woman is closely associated with the new women's colleges that emerged in the late nineteenth century. Education was one of the New Woman's "first self-conscious demands," and she turned these institutions into "a potentially revolutionary social force" (Smith-Rosenberg 247). The New Woman demanded the right to attend college, and not just at women's colleges. For the first time, young women began to venture into male universities:

Laden with hatboxes, ball gowns, and lace antimacassars, they searched [at these centers of learning] for . . . intellectual excitement[.]. . . for roles that were not ladylike and were fulfilling. . . . [T]he coeds' demands were . . . radical. They sought not an equal education but an identical education. The same ceremonies would mark their acquisition of the same degree. On a daily basis they would meet with young men to assert their intellectual equality, perhaps to demonstrate their scholarly superiority. And they would do so without any of the protective rituals that surrounded "visiting" between young women and men within the Victorian home. (Smith-Rosenberg 249-50)

The New Woman met a great deal of resistance within male universities. Not only did she suffer from homesickness, but she was snubbed by her male peers, who greatly resented her "invasion," and subjected her to ridicule and harassment. However, she persisted in her desire to attain educational equality.

In an effort to gain emotional support as she pursued education, the New Woman turned to other female students. A "sisterhood" was established in which junior and senior women adopted freshman and sophomore women as "sisters." Within this sisterhood, female students who were successfully navigating the male-dominated academia served as mentors for other women determined to do the same. Small gifts, such as "fruit and flowers," combined with social events and other planned activities, brought young women together: "In a strange and, at times, frightening environment, rituals that drew on traditional female expressions of affection eased the way for the New Woman pioneers" (Smith-Rosenberg 250). These women relied on support from each other in order to withstand the trials of paving new paths for all women.

Yet the most important trait of the New Woman was her assertion

of her right, not just to an education or a job outside the home, but to a career, which met her personal needs and fulfilled her interests.<sup>1</sup> Rejecting marriage and motherhood, she turned to a career for emotional and intellectual fulfillment: "From the 1870s through the 1920s, between 40 and 60 percent of women college graduates did not marry, at a time when only 10 percent of all American women did not" (Smith-Rosenberg 253). The New Woman "had invested college education with [her] dreams of autonomy and power," which would lead to "a new identity," "equality with men," and "the hope of doing something splendid" (253).

The New Woman, however, by completely abandoning the role of wife and mother, had gone too far for much of the public. While Real Womanhood and Public Womanhood permitted women to work outside the home in cases of necessity or to benefit the public good, a woman's primary concern was still expected to be the well being of her family, physically and spiritually. Also, as previously mentioned, work was acceptable outside the home only when it fell within women's traditional sphere; occupations such as housekeeping or nursing fell within the domestic realm. Provided a woman was not married with her own family to care for, school teaching was accepted, despite its intellectual leanings, as it involved childrearing. The New Woman, however, expressed a "distressing disinterest in the female domestic sphere—especially an overt disgust with housework . . . and a shocking desire for 'fellowship' with men" (Cogan 258). She wanted to "exercise . . . her talents . . . even if that work existed in man's sphere" (259). To take a young woman out of the "domestic setting" and "train her to think and feel 'as a man'" was to "encourage her to succeed at a career, indeed to place it before marriage, [which] violated virtually every late-Victorian norm" (Smith-Rosenberg 252). The public feared the "loss of moral decency and grace" if women were no longer imparting their guidance within the home (Cogan 259).

The New Woman also set about establishing her own economic and civic identity. She demanded the same rights as men to economic independence and political power. Her family, shocked at her refusal to marry or adhere to the rules of acceptable behavior for women, often rejected the New Woman. Therefore, upon graduating from college and beginning her career, the New Woman "experimented with alternative life styles and institutions . . . to sustain a life lived permanently outside the bourgeois home" (Smith-Rosenberg 253). Often the New Woman remained at women's colleges as a faculty member where she could earn an income while maintaining the same support system that had "initially fostered [her] ambitions" in order to "nurture the younger women who followed in [her] footsteps" (254). She also moved to settlement houses where she could share housekeeping and expenses with other women like her. These

single-sex houses allowed the New Woman a support network which fostered her independence and nurtured her intellectual growth. "The settlement house represented [her] home, [her] fellow women residents, [her] family. A sororial intensity marked the inner dynamics of the settlement house, just as it did at the women's college" (254). The New Woman often lived her entire life in these close-knit, female-only environments.

By way of these settlement houses, the New Woman also began to organize herself into "a network of women reformers and social innovators, . . . a singularly effective political machine" (Smith-Rosenberg 255). One such example is Hull House; established in Chicago by Jane Addams, daughter of John Addams, a state senator and friend of Abraham Lincoln, the Hull House's residents included Florence Kelly, Alice Hamilton, Julia Lathrop, Grace Abbott, and Sophonisha Breckinridge:

These women lobbied for the legalization of trade unions and strikes and worked to organize women workers. They fought for worker's compensation, minimum-wage and maximum-hour legislation, national health insurance, medical care for pregnant women and children, aid for dependent children. They became expert lobbyists and effective manipulators of public opinion. (Smith-Rosenberg 256)

Such advancements led the New Woman to gain "greater political power and visibility than any other group of women in American experience" (Smith-Rosenberg 256).

Finally, the New Woman asserted her right to sexuality and separated it from her public reputation. The majority of women involved in the New Woman movement believed that sexual identity and behavior should not be linked with public respectability. Sexual activity should not destroy a woman's reputation. The New Woman rejected her mother's church-validated repression of women's sexual desire and belief in women's innate purity and virginal innocence. Women were endowed with the same sexual desires and entitled to the same sexual activities as men. By rejecting marriage, the New Woman caused "a growing uneasiness." Accusations of lesbianism were directed at the New Woman. The "Mannish Lesbian" began to symbolize the New Woman's "demand to exercise male rights and powers. . . . [S]he underscored the irrationality and 'unnaturalness' of a world ordered around male definitions of gender and sexuality" (Smith-Rosenberg 40-41). Her sisterly attachments to other women were considered "sexually perverted" (Smith-Rosenberg 275).

While the New Woman tried to ignore such stereotypes as she moved toward greater equality, public opinion was stacked against her. Cogan explains that the New Woman had strayed too far from True Womanhood for people to accept her. The public was unwilling to abandon its notion



of separate spheres for men and women or accept the possibility of female emotional fulfillment outside of heterosexual marriage. The public feared the desecration of the private sphere:

The home, the last middle-class refuge to which a man could retreat from the soul-destroying horrors of the marketplace . . . would be destroyed when women were made "unfit" for that refuge by education and career. With women joined in the crass and ignoble jungle battle for economic advantage, the home without its guiding spirit and votary would cease to be anything but a structure [void of] such necessary virtues as grace, gentleness, beauty, courtesy, and piety. (259-60)

Without women serving as wives and mothers, America's civilization would rapidly disintegrate. As the nineteenth century ended, the public "attached a growing value to an ideology that was clearly feminine" in an effort to protect the American home (259). The New Woman was encouraged to assimilate back into mainstream culture through marriage or else be considered a lonely, old spinster. If she chose to resist, the New Woman faced a difficult struggle to persevere within a culture that was not ready for her radical vision of "one united human sphere" as she waited to be swept up "into the growing tide of turn-of-the-century feminism" (257-58).

Regardless of the problems presented by the New Woman, the nineteenth century proved fruitful for women. The four overlapping phases of the Woman Movement advanced women from domestic prisoners to significant members of their communities within less than a century. The rejection of True Womanhood in favor of new ideals like Real Womanhood and Public Womanhood liberated women significantly, creating long-term changes in cultural attitudes regarding gender, and shifted them further away from the patriarchal control that inhibited them. These advancements allowed women the opportunity for self-sufficiency, public involvement and discourse, and meaningful employment. Though nineteenth-century culture was not ready for the New Woman, for many women, she represented the promise of a future where, someday, independent, intellectual women would be accepted. Without these alternative ideals, the feminist movement might never have occurred.

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## Note

<sup>1</sup>The New Woman's ability to have a career was most certainly attributable to the huge success of the mid-nineteenth-century novelists, not only from the financial success they gained but also the ideas that they poured forth.

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