

“THE NEW WOMAN”

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The phenomenon of the “New Woman,” which sprung to great prominence toward the end of the nineteenth century, spilling over into the first part of the twentieth, was as much symbol as fact: she symbolized an “emancipated” ideal of womanhood that fundamentally challenged traditional representations of women. As such, she was a lightning rod for late-nineteenth-century debates over “the Woman Question,” which included several transformative issues such as sexual double standards, women’s occupations, and the vote. The term “New Woman” was coined in 1894, during a debate between pro-feminist writer Sarah Grand (1854–1943) and the anti-feminist Ouida (Maria Louise Ramé) (1839–1908) over this emergent “modern” type of woman. In the end the “New Woman” was most often represented as independent, sexually autonomous, educated or at least well read, and characterized by smoking, drinking, short hair, “rational” dress (e.g., no corset), a nervous temperament, the advocacy of birth control, and the exhibition of other forms of “advanced” behavior. Although conservative critics variously identified the New Woman with feminism, mannishness, promiscuity, and decadence, her literary construction was marked more uniformly by self-assertion—and particularly her assumption that she was entitled to sexual autonomy—than by her hostility to men, espousal of free love, or opposition to motherhood. This self-assertion, coupled with any number of outward manifestations of “fast” behavior (smoking, drinking, swearing, birth control), was what mattered most in the notorious novel *The Woman Who Did* [shun conventional marriage] (1895) by Grant Allen (1848–99), a supposedly feminist but actually rather nastily anti-feminist novel. It was also what characterized the New Woman in the ripostes to Allen’s novel by women, the best known being *The Woman Who Didn’t* (1895) by Victoria Cross [Vivian Cory] (1868–1952) and *The Woman Who Wouldn’t* (1895) by Lucas Cleeve [Adeline Georgina Isabella Kingscote] (1868–1908).

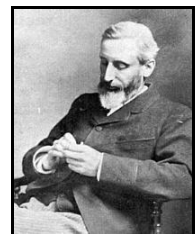
The early-90s London productions of Henrik Ibsen’s plays *The Doll’s House* (1889) and *Hedda Gabler* (1891) contributed to the debate, as did works by Thomas Hardy (1840–1928), George Meredith (1828–1909), and George Gissing (1857–1903), among others. Male writers, even when they sympathetically applauded the New Woman’s struggle for liberation, usually presented her as neurotic (e.g. Gissing’s Rhoda Nunn in *The Odd Women* [1893], or Hardy’s Sue Bridehead in *Jude the Obscure* [1895]). But however she was portrayed, neurotic or otherwise, the New Woman evoked passionate responses, both pro and con—not least, among women. Feminist writers like Sarah Grand, Olive Schreiner (1855–1920), George Egerton [Mary Chavelita Dunne] (1859–1945), Mona Caird (1854–1932), and Iota



Sarah Grand



Ouida



Grant Allen



[Kathleen Mannington Caffyn] (c. 1855–1926) championed her values. They saw the New Woman inspiring women to greater self-development, to search for fuller, more personally satisfying lives. More than a desire for legal reforms, the ideal signified a recognition that women had emotional and physical needs unfulfilled by the traditional roles assigned to them. But in equally strong opposition were writers like Eliza Lynn Linton (1822–98), Margaret Oliphant (1828–97), and Mabel Birchenough (1860–1936), who were alarmed by the New Woman’s pursuit of self-fulfillment instead of time-honored self-renunciation. To Linton, who did herself live an “emancipated life, the New Woman’s demands were foolish attempts to reject proven social and moral standards.



Eliza Lynn Linton

Certainly, the intense controversy surrounding the New Woman owed much to the fact that she repeatedly called attention to a seminal issue that most of her contemporaries, even many of her female contemporaries, preferred to ignore: the inequities underlying the institution of marriage in the nineteenth century and the traditional gender roles on which it was based. The strong feminist momentum for change, spurred by Caird and others, was counter-balanced by an equally fierce defense of traditional gender roles and relationships—often by women. Margaret Oliphant, in her famous article on the “Anti-Marriage League” in *Blackwood’s Magazine* (January 1896), declared that men were not tyrants but the victims of marriage-law reforms: because of those reforms, they were likely to lose their belongings, their children, and their wives to a “triumphant rival.” Ella W. Winston, in an 1896 article “Foibles of the New Woman” published in *Forum*, argued that New Women were wrong to label themselves slaves, because men had, in fact, given them “all the things” they were “fitted for.” The rising number of divorces, remarriages, and common-law arrangements confirmed to influential women like Mrs. Humphry Ward (1851–1920), Mrs. Leslie Stephen (1846–95), and Mrs. Matthew Arnold that the New Woman ideal was antithetical to society’s well-being. As a consequence, perhaps, by the end of the nineties, the blame for venereal disease had been placed once again primarily on women. The New Woman had, in effect, become the scapegoat for her contemporaries’ failure to resolve the double standard.

Even when opponents were willing to acknowledge the legitimacy of women’s “discontent”—that too often women endured monotonous, narrow lives, controlled by selfish men—they used the biology-is-destiny argument to trump all opposition. An 1897 article in *Blackwood’s*, “The Psychology of Feminism,” argued against equality for women on the grounds that medical science had proven women would always be at the mercy of “transient impulses” and “hysterical emotions.” A later article in *Arena*, “The Eternal Feminine I: The New Woman,” praised the New Woman’s self-reliance and initiative, but then declared that equality for a woman, as the weaker sex, could only legitimately mean taking “complete possession of the home life.” The issue for these commentators, as for Oliphant and Winston, was not equality, but biological difference and natural law. Women *belonged* at home, because only there could they fulfill their *natural duty* as wives and mothers.

For that matter, even feminists were not unequivocally supportive of the New Woman and her values. While novelists such as Mona Caird, Emma Frances Brooke, George Egerton, and Menie Muriel Dowie sought a more profound reassessment of a woman's role and potential, others viewed the New Woman's idealism as well-meaning, but misguided and extremist. The fact was that feminists themselves were not in agreement about the proper scope for women's equality, or even whether equality was an appropriate goal. Many, like Sarah Grand, did not share the sexual-liberation tendencies of writers like Egerton or the anti-marriage sentiments of writers like Caird. Others felt that equality should extend only to the vote, or to educational and legal reform, not to more radical questions. They were not interested in recreating marriage as an institution or reversing traditional sex and gender roles.

Ordinary British middle-class women generally viewed the New Woman in less stridently political terms than either their feminist or anti-feminist contemporaries. In general, they eagerly read journal articles and novels on the topic, in no small part because such discussions fed their desire for more self-knowledge. Besides guaranteeing notoriety and large sales for novelists, the New Woman phenomenon, in effect, documented profound changes in outlook and expectations that were taking place among nineteenth-century British women. The furor over the New Woman was strongest in the 1890s, but interest in the type influenced the literary representation of women, by both male and female writers, until well into the twentieth century. Associated issues remained important until after World War I and markedly changed the development of the novel.