

# **‘And she calls herself a woman’**

Criticising the New Woman in the British Periodical Press of the 1890s

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**'And she calls herself a woman'. Making the New Woman in the Periodical Press of the 1890s**

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**Abstract:**

**In this dissertation I look at the ways in which the New Women were described and criticised by their opponents in the British periodical press of the 1890s. To do this, I will use close reading to study five articles that were published in *The Nineteenth Century*, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, *The Quarterly Review* and *The Cornhill Magazine* by four different authors: Eliza Lynn Linton, Hugh E. M. Stutfield, W. F. Barry and an anonymous author. In the articles I have chosen to study the New Women are described as posing a threat to the established rules and codes of society; they are overtly conscious of their sexuality and not afraid to discuss it openly, they have an unusual interest in education and work, they pepper their speech with slang words, they smoke cigarettes, ride bicycles, hunt, play golf and cricket, dress in either rational dress or tailormade clothing, and are described as being varyingly overtly attractive or wholly unattractive; all in all, they are unlike any other, decent female contemporaries of theirs, and participate in activities wholly unsuitable for women of their time. And yet, despite all their masculine transgressions the New Women, in the words of the anonymous author, still had the audacity to call themselves women.**

**Key words:** the New Woman, Feminist history, Women's history, the 1890s, 'the naughty nineties', *fin de siècle*, the periodical press, Great Britain

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## 1 Introduction

A wild woman or an odd one, a daughter of decadence or a revolting daughter, a glorified spinster, Novissima, or a member of the shrieking sisterhood... In her peak, the New Woman was known by many names. Rising out of obscurity during the naughty nineties, the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the New Woman came to dominate the vivid conversation surrounding the so-called “woman question”. The New Woman, as she was most often known as, was alternately described as an overeducated old bore seeking votes and equal rights for women, or as a femme fatale trying to disrupt the fragile moral harmony of Victorian society by inverting sexual and gender roles; she could as easily be described as an attractive, athletic young maiden riding a bicycle at terrifying speeds, or as a haggard and wan bookworm squinting at a book in candlelight. This very ambiguity and multiplicity of the New Woman is exactly what makes her, even today, as it did at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, such a fascinating, illusive figure, as well as an object that is still worthy of further study.

In this dissertation I seek to explore the ways in which the New Woman was described in the British periodical press of the 1890s by her opponents. I have chosen to study the New Woman through the lens of the press because, as remarked by Gail Cunningham, it was precisely the press, not the now well-studied New Woman novels, that created the public image of what a New Woman was.<sup>1</sup> My decision was also influenced by the fact that the New Woman was seen primarily as “a journalistic phenomenon, a product of discourse,”<sup>2</sup> both by her hostile contemporaries as well as by some New Women themselves.<sup>3</sup> As my primary sources I have opted to use articles published in such magazines as *The Quarterly Review* and *The Cornhill Magazine*, which all more or less represented conservative or at least politically neutral values, and which were not on the side of the New Woman or her quest for more independence or better opportunities in life. Nor, indeed, were the authors of the articles which I will be studying, who include for example the likes of Hugh E. M. Stutfield and Eliza Lynn Linton, in favour of more rights for women. This selection of magazines, articles and authors is very much a conscious choice, as I have chosen to study precisely how the New Woman was seen by her opponents, not her supporters. The point of view of her opponents has not been as extensively explored by scholars and historians as has the perspective and opinions of the New Woman’s supporters,

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<sup>1</sup> Cunningham 1978, 11.

<sup>2</sup> Ledger 1997, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 4.

especially those of the New Woman writers as expressed in their fiction, which is precisely why I have chosen it as my standpoint. The choice of the periodicals I have opted for was also influenced by the fact that these were publications that had a much wider readership and print circulation than did the feminist and radical periodicals which supported the views of the New Woman, and which would not have been subscribed to by more conservative circles. Therefore, these periodicals would have, I believe, had a more profound impact on the general population's understanding of the New Woman.

A few words still need to be said here about my choice of studying not what the New Woman was in real life, but how she was seen and depicted in the periodical press by her opponents. I agree with Sally Ledger when she writes that “textual configurations of the New Woman – – are as significant historically as the day-to-day lived experience of the late Victorian women's movement”<sup>4</sup>, and therefore merit and deserve further study. The way New Women were described in the press was extremely influential both in creating a place for discourse about them and for popularizing them<sup>5</sup>, in addition to creating public perceptions and ideas about them. The New Women, given that they were a literary construct (both of the press and of the New Woman writers), should be studied from a literary perspective, and the attempt to study the real New Women (assuming that they existed)<sup>6</sup>, would be incredibly difficult, if not even impossible, without recourse to literary descriptions of them. Therefore, I believe, it is important to study the New Women both from a literary perspective, as well as from the perspective of the mainstream periodical press dominated by their opponents.

I have divided this dissertation into two parts: in the first part I will seek to answer such questions as: according to her critics, how did the New Woman behave? What did she do in her day-to-day life, and why? What specifically characterized her in her opponent's minds, and what caused her to behave the way she did? I will lay special emphasis on how the New Woman, according to her opponents, attempted by her behaviour to shock her society. In the second part I will explore what the New Woman's opponents described she looked like; what kind of clothes she is reported to have worn; whether she was described as being beautiful, attractive and young or ugly, unattractive and old etc.

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<sup>4</sup> Ledger 1997, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. Ann Ardis *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* pages 12-13.

The periodicals which the articles I will be studying were published in are *The Nineteenth Century*, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, *Quarterly Review*, and *The Cornhill Magazine*. *The Nineteenth Century* was a British monthly which was founded and for a long time also edited by Sir James Knowles who designed the magazine to be an impartial publishing platform for intellectuals. The magazine quickly gained a reputation for non-partiality and freedom of editorial interference and control, as well as established itself as one of the leading British periodicals of its time. *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* was a Scottish monthly publication which was founded, and eventually edited as well, by William Blackwood. The magazine came to be known for its conservative values and support for the British Tories, even though in its early phases it also published more radical content, such as poetry by Percy Bysshe Shelley and essays by John Neal. The *Quarterly Review*, founded by John Murray, was a London-based periodical which represented conservative values. Unlike *Blackwood's Magazine*, the *Quarterly* was from its inception against radicals such as Shelley and published many scathing reviews of him and his fellow poets, and continued on this anti-radical course right until the end. *The Cornhill Magazine* was a British monthly which included both articles and serializations of new novels. It published works by such great names as Henry James, George Eliot and Matthew Arnold. The magazine came to be known for upholding traditional, Victorian values.<sup>7</sup>

The authors of the articles I will be exploring are Eliza Lynn Linton, Hugh E. M. Stutfield, William Francis Barry, and the anonymous author of *The Cornhill Magazine's* "Character Note: The New Woman"<sup>8</sup>. Eliza Lynn Linton was an English journalist and novelist and was herself a trailblazer by being the first woman journalist in Britain to receive a salary, but who in her writings was nonetheless known for her anti-feminist and anti-New Woman rhetoric and opinions. Linton wrote her series of articles about the "Wild Woman" just before she (the Wild Woman) had been re-christened as the New Woman by the novelist Ouida<sup>9</sup>, but even with a difference in names there is no doubt that she was referring to the same phenomenon as the other authors who wrote about the New Woman.<sup>10</sup> Hugh E. M. Stutfield was a solicitor and a mountaineer as well as an author, who published his diatribe against the other writers of his day

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<sup>7</sup> To retrieve the basic information about these magazines, I have used the magazines' Wikipedia pages; the links to these pages may be found in the references.

<sup>8</sup> Patricia Marks dubs this anonymous author as E. B. Hall, presumably the English writer Evelyn Beatrice Hall; however, given that most other scholars have been unsure of this writer's identity, I will continue to refer to them simply as the anonymous author.

<sup>9</sup> Ardis 1990, 10.

<sup>10</sup> Ledger 1997, 12.

in *Blackwood's Magazine*. William Francis Barry was an English Catholic priest and a writer, who specialized in writing about subjects, such as the New Woman, that were controversial in his time.

When these authors published their articles, Britain was going through what is now known as the naughty nineties: a decade of decadence, debauchery and demoralization, as well as an atmosphere of change and fluctuation. Alongside the socialists, anarchists and aesthetes, the women began to demand their own rights: not only did they want to be able to vote, study and work just as the men, but they also wanted to be able to love and be able to express their love in a world without the double standard of Victorian society, which demanded virginity and chastity of women, but not men.<sup>11</sup> The New Women were not alone in their struggle for the improved rights of woman; in addition to their male sympathizers and compatriots, certain parts<sup>12</sup> of the New Women's cause were also advocated by the suffragettes. Women, in the eyes of the men once so demure and gentle, now vociferously beginning to assert their rights, would indubitably have rocked the world of the men, so safe and secure in their self-imposed superiority as they were. The upheaval the patriarchal society was forced through by these New Women, surprisingly enough from a modern-day perspective, not only shocked and outraged the men of the time, but some of the women also; women including Mrs Eliza Lynn Linton whose articles form a key part of this study.

The New Woman of the 1890s, visible as she was back then, has lost none of her vitality even now; she continues to fascinate enough to be the subject of numerous scholarly studies. Sally Ledger in her *The New Woman. Fiction and feminism at the fin de siècle* examines how the New Woman interacted with her contemporary movements of decadence, imperialism and socialism, to name a few. Ann Ardis, on the other hand, in her book *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* explores the connections between the New Women and modernism. Both Ledger and Ardis, as well as many other scholars besides them, view the New Woman through the lens of the New Woman novels, which were written by men and women with feminist credentials. In this they seem to be following in the footsteps of earlier scholars such as Gail Cunningham, who in her book *The New Woman and the Victorian Novel*

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<sup>11</sup> Steinbach 2012, 135. For more on the standing of women in Victorian society, see the rest of Susie L. Steinbach's *Understanding the Victorians: Politics, Culture and Society in Nineteenth-Century Britain* Chapter 7, or e.g. Martha Vicinus' *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, or Patricia Hollis' *Women in Public 1850-1900*.

<sup>12</sup> The suffragettes are mostly known for advancing the cause of women's right to a vote; most suffragettes disapproved of and frowned upon the New Women's quest for sexual recognition.

investigates the key part that questions of sexuality played in the discourse of the New Woman, especially as portrayed in the New Woman novels. The New Woman is also the linchpin of a collection of works about the subject, titled *The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact*, which was edited by Angelique Richardson and Chris Willis. The New Woman, especially in conjunction with the periodical press, is explored as well by Patricia Marks in her book *Bicycles, Bangs and Bloomers: The New Woman in the Popular Press*. Another popular way to study the New Woman, besides that of studying her through a literary lens, is to study her in conjunction with sexuality. This has been done for example by Elaine Showalter in her book *Sexual Anarchy. Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg in her essay *Discourses of Sexuality and Subjectivity: The New Woman, 1870-1936*. The New Woman has also featured in numerous articles, periodicals and webpages, some of which have also contributed to this study.

As, unlike these scholars in their works, I will not be studying the New Woman through the New Woman novels, the source criticism that I will be using stems from quite a different starting point than theirs. While as they were mostly dealing with writings that were intended to advance the women's cause, I will be studying texts that were meant to undermine it. While interpreting these texts I must keep in mind that they, like any other political publications, were written with a specific agenda in mind, that they were written for a reason: that reason being to weaken the position and standing of the New Woman, as well as to support and maintain the traditional Victorian conception of womanhood; that of the perfect little wife, mother and daughter of a great man who only minds him and his home by following the etiquette of the angel in the house –trope. I must also bear in mind that the authors whose writings I will be studying may have resorted to satire<sup>13</sup> and hyperbole for the sake of emphasis, and I must try to see through these to truly understand what the truth behind the writers' literary flourishes is. By keeping these matters in mind, and, in effect, by peering through them, I hope to attain an understanding of what the New Woman's opponents perceived her to be.

In addition, I must bear in mind that the New Woman's opponents, by the very act of writing, hoped to exercise their power as writers, journalists and 'influencers' of their time, and to use this power to keep the New Woman in check; the power that they had, and the power they wished to wield, in all probability influenced their works and the way they wrote. By their

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<sup>13</sup> This is the case in the *Character Note: The New Woman*, which is in its entirety a satirical description of a New Woman, or 'Novissima', as she is labelled in the piece.



writings about the New Woman, these critics of hers were not merely ridiculing and belittling her, and thus disempowering her, but were also reinforcing and adding their contribution to a wider public debate raging at the time, in which was embedded the idea that women's bodies and minds were not their own, but instead collective property of society and state, and which should remain in the control of said state and society. However, by this act of writing about the New Woman in the hopes of checking her advances and diminishing her, her opponents also inadvertently empowered her; in the footsteps of Sally Ledger, I maintain that the New Woman's opponents, with their literary attacks on her, virtually prised open a discursive space for her, a space, which quickly enough, was filled with feminist writings sympathetic to the cause of the New Women. With her theory about this discursive space, Ledger is adapting the ideas of Michel Foucault, according to whom the dominant, aggressive discourse directed against a marginalized group of people, in this case, the New Women, can lead to the appearance of its opposite: the reverse discourse, as Ledger calls it, which in turn gave power and a voice to the New Women and their supporters.<sup>14</sup> This empowerment allows for the attacks on and criticisms of the New Women to be seen, with the advantage of hindsight, as a surprisingly positive thing: for despite the damage these attacks might have been supposed to have caused, the benefits they unwittingly allowed for made it all worth enduring.

Ann Ardis has taken quite another stance on the subject; according to her, the New Woman's opponents' literary attacks on her, and especially on the New Woman novels and their characters, narrowed the debate about them, and made them less real and tangible. She claims that by naming and defining the New Woman, her opponents in effect quarantined her and made her merely into a literary construct, rather than an actual person to be found in real life. This wish to quarantine the New Woman may have stemmed from her ambiguity and elusiveness, making her harder to grasp and fully understand; hence the need to give her a name and to define her, if only possible, merely as a literary, fictional construct.<sup>15</sup> Defining and quarantining the New Woman may have indeed been the original aim of the writers who opposed the New Woman, but, be that as it may, in accord with Ledger, I believe that they were unsuccessful in this aim of theirs, and despite their best efforts to narrow the discussion on the New Woman to include merely their own views and opinions, they failed horridly, and in effect simply managed to create a discursive space for the New Women which they themselves succeeded in filling, thereby cementing their place in history.

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<sup>14</sup> Ledger 1997, 9-10.

<sup>15</sup> Ardis 1990, 12; Ledger 1997, 9-11.

## 2 Behaviour and characteristics

The New Woman was as elusive to her contemporaries as she is even today; according to W. F. Barry, “she is not to be found complete and realized in one individual, as she ranges from grave to gay, from lively to severe.”<sup>16</sup> In fact, the contemporaries of the New Woman could only agree on one point; that “she challenged existing gender relations and the distribution of power.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, by simply being what she was and behaving how she willed, she threatened the very foundation of society. Whatever her behaviour, she was calculated to surprise, confound and shock those around her; whether it be by smoking cigarettes or swearing and spouting slang words, by hunting animals or participating in sports that were wholly unsuited to women, or by behaving immodestly and flouting age-old gender roles by speaking openly about sex or seeking employment outside of the sphere of her domestic duties. This behaviour, at least in the minds of her opponents, was conducted with one specific goal in mind; that of shocking society.<sup>18</sup>

### 2.1 Shock and stun

The ideal late nineteenth century woman, as remarked by Patricia Marks, was a meek and modest little angel in the house who lovingly kept the home for the men in her life.<sup>19</sup> This ideal was not only supported and reinforced by state and society but was indeed to be seen everywhere; in the writings of journalists, political activists and scientists, in popular novels of writers such as Charles Dickens who are still held in admiration today, and as well in the hearts and minds of the majority of the people themselves. Therefore, what better way for a woman to shock society and upend the traditional conception of womanhood than by behaving in an immodest and vulgar way; and what better way to be immodest and vulgar than by drawing attention to matters pertaining to sexuality? Indeed, one of the most defining characteristics of a New Woman was her openness about her and other women’s sexuality,<sup>20</sup> something that would have been completely unheard of in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Eliza Lynn Linton, in her diatribe against the lowered standards and morals of the women of her time, described the New

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<sup>16</sup> Barry 1894, 304.

<sup>17</sup> Smith-Rosenberg 1989, 264.

<sup>18</sup> Lynn Linton 1891B, 599.

<sup>19</sup> Marks 1990, 1. For more on the Victorian conception of a woman, see e.g. the introduction to Martha Vicinus’ *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*.

<sup>20</sup> Cunningham 1978, 47.

Women as not being above the little pastime of flirting<sup>21</sup>, which, along with their other, innumerable vices marked them out as being “infinitely less modest” than the women who came before them.<sup>22</sup> A contemporary of Mrs Lynn Linton’s, Mr Hugh E. M. Stutfield shared her outrage regarding the immorality of the New Women: he related how the “emancipated woman in particular love[d] to show her independence by dealing freely with the relations of the sexes. Hence all the prating of passion, animalism, “the natural workings of sex” and so forth.”<sup>23</sup> Sexuality, and a willingness to discuss it openly, was something that was associated with the New Women both by their opponents and a lot of the New Woman writers themselves, in contrast to the ‘old’ Victorian women, who were, according to Sally Ledger, largely held to be lacking in sexuality and passion.<sup>24</sup> For a society intently oblivious of the inner workings of sexual passion the idea of a woman proclaiming her sexuality would have been indisputably shocking and terrifying; it would have seemed like a direct blow at the very foundation of Victorian society: at that of modesty.

Another way for a New Woman to confound and shock those around her was by getting herself an education. In the words of Hugh Stutfield “the New Woman – – [was] a victim of the universal passion for learning and “culture”, which, when ill-digested, [were] apt to cause intellectual dyspepsia.”<sup>25</sup> In fact, education and the will to obtain it was one of the most salient characteristics of a New Woman<sup>26</sup> and New Women were commonly referred to as ‘Girton Girls’, a name derived from the first women’s college in the United Kingdom which was attended by numerous New Women, both fictional as well as factual.<sup>27</sup> The yearning for education the New Women felt (and manifested) was, however, not seen in as much a positive light by the New Women’s contemporaries as it was by the women themselves, as showcased both by the anonymous writer of *Cornhill Magazine’s* “Character Note: The New Woman”, who described the New Woman merely as an “interesting development of cheap education”, who, despite her erudition, would come to prove nothing;<sup>28</sup> as well as by Mr Stutfield’s choice of the word ‘dyspepsia’ (a fancy word for ‘indigestion’); referring most likely to the New Women’s incapability to ‘digest’ and truly understand what they had learned. Stutfield was not

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<sup>21</sup> Lynn Linton 1891B, 598.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 600.

<sup>23</sup> Stutfield 1895, 836.

<sup>24</sup> Ledger 1995, 23-25; see also Elaine Showalter: *Sexual Anarchy* or Nancy F. Cott: *Sexuality and Sexual Behavior*, especially pages 37-54.

<sup>25</sup> Stutfield 1895, 837.

<sup>26</sup> Smith-Rosenberg 1989, 266.

<sup>27</sup> Ledger 1997, 17. For more on the difference between factual and fictional New Women, see note 70.

<sup>28</sup> *Character Note: The New Woman* 1894, 82.

alone in referring to the dire consequences of women's craving for education by medical terms; in fact, the understanding that women were not physically or biologically suited for an education was rather mainstream in the medical discussion of the time, as has been observed both by Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Sally Ledger.<sup>29</sup> Medical men, as well as laymen, warned how overly educating women would lead to hysteria and insanity as well as an incapability to reproduce, which, after all, was seen as one of the most important functions of a woman.<sup>30</sup> All these warnings and outrage most likely stemmed from one source; the fear that by educating themselves, the women might prove that they were just as smart and capable as the men.

Yet another way in which New Women shocked their societies by their behaviour was by their refusal to marry; according to Eliza Lynn Linton, the New Women repudiated marriage "as a one-sided tyranny", and, what's even worse, they regarded maternity, in the mind of Mrs Lynn Linton (and numerous contemporaries of hers) the highest goal of a woman's life<sup>31</sup>, simply as a degradation.<sup>32</sup> A woman who would not, or could not, marry "undermined the comfortable binary system of Victorian sexuality and gender roles"<sup>33</sup>, as put by Elaine Showalter. Marriage was held to be the linchpin that held together all of society; a family headed by a man with his wife at his side and his children under his will was seen as a miniature form of the state itself, and could, in the words of Gail Cunningham, even have symbolized the divine order.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, by refusing to enter the married state, a woman was (at least in the minds of her opponents) deliberately trying to wreck the very foundations of respectable society and the state. Furthermore, by not marrying, a New Woman was associating with a class of women that came to be known as the 'odd' or 'surplus' women, who, because they were not supported financially by a husband, were forced to commit yet another transgression: that of earning their own living by working, which would have put them directly at odds with the men whose jobs they were accused of trying to steal.<sup>35</sup> But, of course, a financial motivation (or an obligation) for a New Woman's offence of seeking employment may not always have been what her opponents had in mind.

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<sup>29</sup> Smith-Rosenberg 1989, 267; Ledger 1997, 17-18.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Lynn Linton 1891A, 80.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>33</sup> Showalter 1991, 19.

<sup>34</sup> Cunningham 1978, 2.

<sup>35</sup> Showalter 1991, 19.

According to Eliza Lynn Linton, the New Women of her day were starting in increasing numbers to adopt professions, not out of pecuniary necessity, but instead simply out of boredom, an excess of education and most crucially, out of a need to shock.<sup>36</sup> The New Women, as per Mrs Lynn Linton, were “restless, dissatisfied, insurgent, and like[d] nothing so much as to shock established prejudices and make the folk stare”<sup>37</sup>, and therefore, adopted professions which were seen as unsuited to women of upper- or middle-class backgrounds<sup>38</sup>. And, worst of all, not only did these women succeed in shocking society, but they were also driving other, less advantaged persons out of their jobs; persons, who out of a simple need of making a living needed their jobs far more than the bored and disgruntled New Women did. Even if this, however, would be seen merely as the personal, biased opinion of Lynn Linton (who, by the by, supported herself financially by her writings) and not as totally reflective of the truth, it is indisputable that women entering the working world posed a threat to the economic *status quo* of the time, in which bourgeois men reigned supreme.<sup>39</sup> Be that as it may, it is most probably the case that many of the New Women, who had by their behaviour shocked those close to them, could have been disinherited, thrown out of their homes or simply even originally been in a position where added income was needed, and therefore would have needed their jobs just as badly as those they were said to have replaced. But whatever their motivations may have been, there is no denying that the New Women pushing themselves into the working world were successful in at least one of their said goals: in that of shocking society.

## 2.2 Forbidden habits

One of the ways in which a woman could identify as a New Woman was by smoking. Smoking tobacco was traditionally held as a masculine habit; it was a little bit of luxury in which only men indulged in. Commonly in upper- and middle-class families after dinner the men and women of the party would retire into separate spaces; the men would smoke their cigarettes and cigars, either in the dining room or in an adjacent space designed specifically for the men to smoke in, while the women would gossip and chatter in a nearby drawing room, waiting for the

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<sup>36</sup> Lynn Linton 1891B, 599.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> The New Women were strongly associated with only the upper- and middle-classes, not the working-class; the working-class women, as they were already in many cases occupied in the working world, would not have gained much by advocating the beliefs of the New Women. For more, see e.g. Sally Ledger: *The New Woman and the Crisis of Victorianism*, specifically pages 27, 38 & 41.

<sup>39</sup> Ledger 1997, 19.

men to reappear. The New Woman, however, would flaunt these time-worn customs, and instead, quite radically, choose to smoke with the men. According to Eliza Lynn Linton, smoking with the men after dinner wasn't however her only vice; instead, she would also smoke in railway carriages and public rooms.<sup>40</sup> This, in the mind of Lynn Linton, conjured up images of "ancient dames 'whiskin' beards about the mou's', withered and unsightly"<sup>41</sup>, smoking their pipes alongside the men. Importantly and critically enough, this habit of smoking made these 'dames' into unattractive, masculine versions of the feminine women they once were. By smoking, women were directly encroaching on male territory and by doing so, were perhaps trying to associate with two attributes that were heavily connected with the smoking, bourgeois men: self-control and rationality.<sup>42</sup> If this indeed was the aim of the smoking women, they were, sadly, unsuccessful in it; for according to Jarret Rudy, the habit of smoking could at this time be seen merely as a sign of the woman's moral weakness, and could even put her social standing into question.<sup>43</sup>

In addition to the masculine connotations smoking held, Mrs Lynn Linton draws comparisons between the smoking upper-class New Women and the working-class women of the coal mines, who according to her, also indulged in smoking.<sup>44</sup> One can only wonder why a woman such as Eliza Lynn Linton, who was known for her traditional values, would feel it permissible to compare the women of her own class with the women trudging away in dark coal mines; perhaps the idea of an upper- or middle-class woman lowering herself and her standing by an act so horrible as smoking a cigarette frightened her so deeply that she deemed the comparison justified. Or, perhaps, Lynn Linton was merely trying to scare her readers away from smoking by hitting them where it hurt most: their vanity. In a world where the most important thing a woman had to do was to secure herself a husband, one can understand why the idea of becoming as unattractive as an old hag or as low-class as a coalmine worker would terrify the young women reading Lynn Linton's writings.<sup>45</sup>

Besides from smoking, the New Women had yet another nasty little habit they indulged in; one which worked well with their undying passion for learning: reading. They didn't read just

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<sup>40</sup> Lynn Linton 1891B, 597.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Rudy 2005, 89.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>44</sup> Lynn Linton 1891B, 597.

<sup>45</sup> For more on the interconnections between social class and smoking, see Jarret Rudy: *Freedom to Smoke: Tobacco Consumption and Identity*, especially the work's Introduction and Chapter 1.

anything, however, but instead the books they read were, at least in the minds of their contemporaries, quite questionable and obnoxious: Mr Barry listed the New Woman's reading material as consisting of, for example, the famous women's rights campaigner and activist John Stuart Mill, as well as others such as Rousseau, Diderot, Comte, and the infamous Ibsen.<sup>46</sup> Henrik Ibsen was a Norwegian playwright who rose to fame and notoriety with his play *A Doll's House*, which featured a radical prototype New Woman as its lead character; a character which served as a terrifying example for the women to follow, or so undoubtedly the New Woman's opponents feared.<sup>47</sup> Mr Stutfield also singled out Ibsen for his disapprobation, as well as hinted at yet another dangerous influencer of his time, whose ideas and thoughts he seemed to fear the New Women might follow: Friedrich Nietzsche.<sup>48</sup> The anonymous author of the *Character Note* was just as dissatisfied with the reading habits of the New Women as were Barry and Stutfield; even though this writer did not care to elaborate specifically what it was the New Woman read, one gets the impression it might have just been better that the general public did not even know<sup>49</sup>. When describing the New Woman novels of his time, Mr Stutfield, after his lengthy admonition of the subject, went on to state how he would prefer the young people of his time not to read this 'unhealthy' modern fiction quite so much<sup>50</sup>; given this warning, and how popular the New Woman fiction was at this time<sup>51</sup>, one may presume that the New Women were keen on reading the modern and radical New Woman fiction itself as well<sup>52</sup>; something which was referred to additionally by the *Character Note* by the descriptive and apt epithet of "deleterious fiction."<sup>53</sup>

In the late nineteenth century (and indeed as well before and after that time) one of the most masculine sports men partook of was hunting. For the New Woman, however, anything that was traditionally held as masculine, and therefore out of limits for women, only seemed the more tempting. According to both W. F. Barry, who described the New Woman as "a Spartan girl, with a rifle at her shoulder"<sup>54</sup>, and Eliza Lynn Linton, the New Women encroached yet

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<sup>46</sup> Barry 1894, 317.

<sup>47</sup> Ibsen, his play and the main character of his play, exemplify well both how the New Women and their ideas crossed national boundaries and became international phenomena, as well as the longer than assumed timespan of the New Women's ideological creed, given that the play *A Doll's House* appeared a good fifteen years before the 'christening' of the New Woman had even happened.

<sup>48</sup> Stutfield 1895, 838.

<sup>49</sup> *Character Note: The New Woman* 1894, 81.

<sup>50</sup> Stutfield 1895, 836.

<sup>51</sup> Ardis 1990, 4.

<sup>52</sup> For more about the reading habits of young people/girls of the 1890s, see e.g. Ardis 1990, 32, 39, 49, 52

<sup>53</sup> *Character Note: The New Woman* 1894, 81.

<sup>54</sup> Barry 1894, 313.

again upon male ground by showing a characteristically unfeminine interest in hunting and shooting animals for sport: “beginning by ‘walking with the guns’, they end[ed] by shooting with them; and some [had] made the moor a good training-ground for the jungle”.<sup>55</sup> In the mind of Mrs Lynn Linton, the sight of a well-bred woman butchering an animal, be it a lamb for slaughter or a leopardess in a jungle, was unsightly, coarse and sickening. The traditional view held that the prerogative of women was to nurture and breed children, and therefore women were seen as naturally predisposed to be more caring and gentle-hearted than men. A woman who chose to slay an animal for recreation was therefore in direct contradiction with her very nature, not to even mention the mores and norms of society. In the words of Lynn Linton, the act of hunting resulted in “the possession of – – an absolutely unwomanly indifference to death and suffering; which certain of the Wild Women of the present day cultivate[d] as one of their protests against the limitations of the sex”<sup>56</sup>. In other words, the act of hunting, unnatural as it was, may have been a conscious decision on the part of the New Woman: she may indeed have been choosing to hunt precisely because it was deemed unnatural for a woman, and as such could be seen as a protest against the rules imposed on women by society.

The New Women were not sporting women merely in the world of hunting, but instead, as per Mr Barry<sup>57</sup> and Mrs Lynn Linton, they were active as well in the world of sports itself. Rather than being content with just tennis and croquet, which by this time were already seen as suitable pastimes for women as well as men, the New Women pushed into the realm of the men by inserting themselves in the fields of golf and cricket; sports which at this time were still seen as highly masculine, and therefore, quite obviously, completely unsuitable for women. When it comes to Lynn Linton’s warnings for women who outrageously enough attempted their hands at golf or cricket, they followed much the same line as her warnings for female smokers: ‘persist on this course, and not only shall you be an object of fun and ridicule, but you will be wholly unattractive to boot as well’: “hot and damp, mopping her flushed and streaming face with her handkerchief, she has lost that sense of repose, that delicate self-restraint, which belongs to the ideal woman.”<sup>58</sup> What was even worse, not only would the New Woman meddle with golf and

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<sup>55</sup> Lynn Linton 1891B, 597.

<sup>56</sup> Lynn Linton 1891B, 598.

<sup>57</sup> Barry 1894, 313 & 317.

<sup>58</sup> Lynn Linton 1891B, 599. The fact that Mrs Lynn Linton is so perturbed by the idea of women doing sports can be quite surprising, given that at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the ideal of an exemplary, fit woman following in the footsteps of her ancient Spartan sisters was beginning to raise its head in certain circles. This ideal went hand in hand with the contemporary ideas of imperialism and eugenics, which had fostered the objective of a healthy British empire which needed healthy (in other words, athletic) British women to create and maintain it.



cricket, but as prophesied by Mrs Lynn Linton, given time she would also move into the world of other sports as well; in the process making herself ever more unattractive and unfeminine, and therefore unsuited to fulfil the ‘real’ objectives of a woman’s life: those of marriage and motherhood.

The athletically minded New Women did not stop at merely playing golf and cricket, however; but instead, they adopted yet another sport: that of bicycling. In fact, the bicycle came to be so heavily connected with New Women that the figure of a New Woman straddling a bicycle popped up regularly in, say, *Punch* cartoons and other caricatures of the time<sup>59</sup>, as well as in political writings, such as Barry’s *The Strike of a Sex*<sup>60</sup> and Stutfield’s *Tommyrotics*.<sup>61</sup> This connection became so strong that in his article on the New Women, Chris Willis described bicycling quite simply as a “characteristic of the New Woman”.<sup>62</sup> There are many reasons why a New Woman would have been keen to adopt bicycling; one being that it would have provided her with an independence she would have been unable to have without one, and another that a bicycle, as it had no connotations to either gender, (unlike a horse, a cart or a car, which were all held to be predominantly masculine) would have been a mode of transport that was easier for a woman to adopt without being labelled a sexual radical or a feminist (even though, with time, the bicycle came to be associated specifically with new, radical, feminist women<sup>63</sup>). Riding a bicycle, unlike riding a horse or managing a motor-vehicle, was not so erotically loaded, and therefore would have been more acceptable for a woman; additionally, women riding bicycles, unlike those riding horses, did not need chaperones and were therefore free to roam the country completely on their own.<sup>64</sup> Patricia Marks has also remarked how bicycles were more affordable than horses, automobiles or the gear for golf would have been, and therefore would have been more readily available to less advantaged women as well.<sup>65</sup>

Women adopting the use of bicycles was, however, not completely deemed suitable by Victorian society, for a woman on a bicycle embodied the idea of the growing power and independence of women, which was seen to threaten that of the men.<sup>66</sup> Women who encroached

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<sup>59</sup> See e.g. *The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact* pages 18-21 or *Bicycles, Bangs and Bloomers: The New Woman in the Popular Press* pages 192, 194, 196 & 198.

<sup>60</sup> Barry 1894, 294.

<sup>61</sup> Stutfield 1895, 837.

<sup>62</sup> Willis 2001, 54.

<sup>63</sup> See e.g. *Bicycles, Bangs and Bloomers: The New Woman in the Popular Press* pages 174-203.

<sup>64</sup> Wintle 2001, 66–71.

<sup>65</sup> Marks 1990, 184.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

upon male territory by becoming sportive, and in addition to playing cricket and golf, also exercised by bicycling, were seen to threaten the established dichotomy of society into male and female spheres of influence, which engendered yet more fears and concerns: could it be that if women were becoming more masculine<sup>67</sup>, men would become feminine in return?<sup>68</sup> And what if, with her new-found independence and freedom, the bicycling New Woman would come to realize that she did not in fact need men in her life after all?

### 2.3 The lost art of polite conversation

One of the ways in which a New Woman could make herself stand out from her ‘old’ sisters was by adopting masculine or working-class slang. According to Mrs Lynn Linton, if a New Woman was in possession of money, “she [was] sure to call it ‘oof’, so as to be in line with the verbal as well as the practical blackguardism of the day”<sup>69</sup>, and if, heaven forbid, she was a ‘horsy’ New Woman, she would be full of stable slang that she had no doubt picked up from the working-class men she was surrounded by in the stables.<sup>70</sup> Using slang words such as ‘oof’ (as well as even money being spoken of by women, or in the presence of women, in the first place) would have been completely unacceptable for women of the upper echelons of society in the late nineteenth century. By speaking in masculine terms and slang words, a woman would most certainly have been shocking her society, as well as flouting the gender and class norms of the time and disregarding the kind of behaviour expected of her. As Alycia Gilbert has remarked, the use of slang was strongly associated with the New Women, so by using slang words, a woman would have been directly identifying herself as one. Gilbert also writes that a New Woman’s use of slang would have “recast her as a mannish social ill”, drawing attention to how this kind of masculine behaviour could have been seen, in addition to being a bothersome nuisance, as a threat to the society at large.<sup>71</sup>

The speech of a New Woman was not merely marked by what words she used, but also how she spoke and what she spoke of. Indeed, one of the ways in which a New Woman could manifest her ‘newness’ was through direct and straightforward speech, especially with

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<sup>67</sup> The masculinity of New Women can be observed e.g. in the *Character Note: The New Woman* 1894, 80-81; see also Ledger 1997, 17.

<sup>68</sup> Marks 1990, 176.

<sup>69</sup> Lynn Linton 1891B, 601.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 602.

<sup>71</sup> Gilbert 2023, 47.

members of the opposite sex. In describing a conversation between a young man and the New Woman of the ‘Character Note’ written for *The Cornhill Magazine*, the anonymous author stated how “Novissima [the New Woman] [was] intensely earnest and in her desire to show him [the young man] the depth of her knowledge, [was] not always discreet.”<sup>72</sup> This, naturally enough for the unaccustomed poor boy, caused him to stare “about him with speculative grey eyes”; the New Woman’s directness and forwardness would have undoubtedly caused similar difficulties in real life, if ever implemented. The anonymous commentator went on to elaborate how “in conversation she criticize[d] men and books freely”<sup>73</sup>, while Mr Stutfield amplified the picture further by stating how the New Woman had an unfortunate habit of indulging in “straight talks to young men”.<sup>74</sup> According to Gail Cunningham these straight talks included an openness and frankness about sex<sup>75</sup>, which undoubtedly would have profoundly shocked the New Woman’s listeners.

The way a New Woman spoke to people, especially to men, was seen as being against all the longstanding rules of decorum; instead of speaking politely to men about subjects that were considered suitable for young ladies, the New Woman had no aversions to speaking her mind. Not only did she talk straight, but her choice of conversation subjects was also objectionable; or as Stutfield put it, the table-talk of his time was “garnished with the choice flowers of New Woman’s speech”.<sup>76</sup> One can only imagine what these ‘choice flowers’ were; perhaps the New Woman was sharing her views on the poor position and standing of women? Or maybe she was sharing tips for reading material that would have been considered inappropriate for women? Whatever her choice of conversation topic was, it seems to have been too radical or too modern for Mr Stutfield’s tastes. Instead of being aggravated by her table-talk, the anonymous author of the ‘Character Note’, however, was more incensed by how the New Woman, apparently, could not, or would not, partake of polite conversation with young men whom she deemed too ‘mild’; instead of politely maintaining eye contact with them, she directed her gaze above their heads, and “in return for their mild platitudes”, she merely threw “scraps of talk to them — — crumbs from a well-stored intellectual table.”<sup>77</sup> Besides her use of slang words and straight talk, and her inability to engage in polite conversation, the New Woman was guilty of yet another

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<sup>72</sup> *Character Note: The New Woman* 1894, 82.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>74</sup> Stutfield 1895, 836.

<sup>75</sup> Cunningham 1978, 47.

<sup>76</sup> Stutfield 1895, 844.

<sup>77</sup> *Character Note: The New Woman* 1894, 80.

*faux pas*; instead of referring to people she didn't personally know in a polite and correct way, she would talk of them merely by their surnames, which would have infused her speech with a masculine air, and for contemporary hearers would have indicated a familiarity with these people that she did not enjoy.<sup>78</sup>

The New Woman was someone who could have easily been spotted from across the room; not only was it possible to tell her apart by listening to her orations about the rights of woman, of course punctuated by slang words and references to illicit reading materials, but also by listening to what was being reported about her behaviour by others, for they would undoubtedly have been describing her as someone who was, for evidently no understandable reason whatsoever, being refusing a perfectly reasonable, conventional marriage with the prospect of a lovely home filled with children; as someone who was instead choosing to acquire for herself an education and a profession; as someone who was sauntering through lanes and fields not by the conventional mode of walking, but instead by riding a bicycle; and as well as someone who partook of such manly, and hence forbidden, activities as smoking, hunting and golf-playing. By choosing to describe the New Woman in this manner, her critics were hoping not only to create a strong image of her in the minds of their readers but instead were also attempting to influence these very minds of theirs; just as they themselves had been shocked by the New Women's behaviour, so too would they with their descriptions of her shock their readers, possibly even into action.

By putting their perceptions of the New Woman on paper, her opponents were exercising their power as writers and journalists; their goal being to make their contemporaries dread and fear the New Women so much that they would not themselves become ones, as well as to make the New Women ridiculous and laughable, and hence, easily dismissible and powerless. They were also in effect othering the New Women, and trying to segregate and isolate them from respectable society, as well as to regain control over them; all these efforts, in the minds of their opponent's, were doubtlessly justified by the New Women's recalcitrant, rebellious and repulsive behaviour. These critics, however, did not stop at merely remarking on this behaviour of the New Women, but instead made them instantly recognizable simply based on their appearances as well.

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<sup>78</sup> *Character Note: The New Woman* 1894, 80.

### 3 Physical appearance

A New Woman — with a cigarette in hand, engaging in vivid conversations about radical and forbidden books or the general emancipation of women, or just on her way to the cricket fields on her bicycle — would undoubtedly (if she, as such, existed anywhere outside of writer’s imaginations<sup>79</sup>) been an instantly recognizable figure; but, besides her behaviour, were there other ways to spot her out of a crowd? Did she, according to her opponents, have some specific, physical features that marked her out as ‘new’? Was she for example more beautiful or ugly, more feminine or masculine, more fashionable or careless in her appearance than the other women of her time? All in all, what did the New Woman look like?

#### 3.1 The ugly can be beautiful... or can they?

The ambiguous and elusive New Woman was intermittently described either as a dangerous femme fatale flirtily luring men into their dooms, or as an unattractive and haggard old maid. On most occasions, at least in the writings of her opponents, she featured as an unappealing, ugly warning for those women who did not, at the very least yet, identify as New Women. This essence of creating a cautionary example of the New Woman is crucial when trying to understand her enemies’ descriptions of her appearance; after all, they were trying to influence others by their writings, and what better way to scare of young women, given that they were for the most part concerned with finding suitable partners for themselves, than by telling them that by becoming ‘new’ they would not be able to do so?

The anonymous writer of *The Cornhill Magazine*’s ‘Character Note: The New Woman’ stated the matter in a blunt, matter-of-fact way: she was “not pretty herself. She [wa]s white. Pink girls call[ed] her sallow. She ha[d] a long face, with a discontented mouth, and a nose indicative of intelligence<sup>80</sup>, and too large for feminine beauty as understood by men.”<sup>81</sup> Not only were her attractions incomprehensible to men, but she had also lost her youthful bloom; despite her young age, the anonymous author continued to describe how she appeared to have more years

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<sup>79</sup> The jury is still out on whether the New Woman was merely a literary construct or whether she existed in reality as well; the matter was disputed already during the golden age of the New Woman’s existence, both by the New Woman’s opponents as well as by the New Women themselves. For more see e.g. Sally Ledger *The New Woman. Fiction and Feminism at the fin de siècle*.

<sup>80</sup> The description of “a nose indicative of intelligence” may have been influenced by the racist, antisemitic conceptions and ideas of the era, and therefore may have linked the New Woman in the minds of the contemporary readers of the piece with the Jews and the negative connotations they held at the time.

<sup>81</sup> *Character Note: The New Woman* 1894, 80-81.

than she in reality did.<sup>82</sup> Mrs Lynn Linton joined the chorus by adding coarsely that the New Woman “exemplifie[d] how beauty can change into ugliness;”<sup>83</sup> however, she also described how a New Woman could just as well be “a beautiful young creature, painted, dyed and powdered according to the mode”<sup>84</sup>, given that she didn’t resort to the all-too popular habit of smoking. Even the anonymous author of the *Character Note* on occasion lapsed into describing the New Woman as possessing some attractive qualities, such as a trim figure,<sup>85</sup> no doubt brought about by such New Womanish activities as cycling or cricket playing. Mrs Lynn Linton, however, was not as impressed about the New Woman’s participating in sports; she berated how by partaking of sports even “the prettiest woman in the world los[t] her beauty. – – Hot and damp, mopping her flushed and streaming face with her handkerchief, she has lost that sense of repose, that delicate self-restraint, which belongs to the ideal woman. She is no longer dainty. She has thrown off her grace and abandoned all that makes her lovely – –.”<sup>86</sup> The New Woman’s masculine activities had in effect rendered her too manly to be considered lovable or lovely; something that W. F. Barry could agree upon: “the ape of the masculine remains what she was, her beauty gone, her least desirable qualities heightened, by the detestable male habits which she has been ridiculous enough to assume.”<sup>87</sup> In effect, by behaving as she did, the New Woman was “destroying her distinctive charm of womanhood.”<sup>88</sup>

Not only was the New Woman rendered unattractive by her behaviour and activities, on occasion she was not even beautiful to begin with; something which may have even led to her becoming a New Woman: if she was unable to attract attention by her looks, why not do so by her behaviour? And if indeed a woman was, because of a natural lack of charm, grace and good looks, unable to gain suitors, did it not make more sense for her to get an education and hence an occupation? Mrs Lynn Linton moaned how New Women of an adventurous spirit “[had] done nothing but lose their beauty, if they had any”<sup>89</sup> to begin with, and the anonymous commentator of the *Character Note* elaborated that the New Woman was dark; whether by complexion or hair is not specified, perhaps by both; and how “if she were fair she would [have been] quite a different person.”<sup>90</sup> The choice of describing the New Woman as ‘dark’, whether

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<sup>82</sup> *Character Note: The New Woman* 1894, 80.

<sup>83</sup> Lynn Linton 1891B, 596.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 597.

<sup>85</sup> *Character Note: The New Woman* 1894, 82.

<sup>86</sup> Lynn Linton 1891B, 599.

<sup>87</sup> Barry 1894, 314.

<sup>88</sup> Lynn Linton 1891B, 602.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 603.

<sup>90</sup> *Character Note: The New Woman* 1894, 80.

as a brunette or as possessing a dark complexion in this satirical image of her had deeper connotations than would at first seem, for outer darkness could well have been associated with an inner darkness as well, just as outer fairness was with inner fairness, “for fairness usually [went] with – – gentle weaknesses of which Novissima [was] conspicuously innocent,<sup>91</sup> and which ‘gentle weaknesses’, such as frailty, delicateness and a tendency to swoon, a traditionally fair maiden would have possessed in abundance. The *Character Note*’s Novissima’s darkness may have also been due to her having acquired a tan whilst occupying herself with her many outdoor recreations and pastimes, such as those of golfing or bicycling. A tan, which held connotations of physical activity and manual labour performed out-of-doors, would have been something a traditional Victorian maiden would have abhorred and tried to prevent or hide by the use of, say, parasols or arsenic-based powders.<sup>92</sup> Describing the undesirable New Woman as dark may have likewise stemmed from the racist atmosphere of the time, which dictated the supremacy of the white race and the inferiority of anything perceived as darker. Whatever the circumstance of her darkness, however, a New Woman seemed not to be merely unattractive and undesirable because of her behaviour, but she may not even have had a choice in the matter to begin with; for she had simply been rendered unattractive by nature.

### 3.2 Forsaking the ‘undivided cylinder’

A New Woman, according to W. F. Barry, wore as her garment of choice a rational dress “in favour of the ‘undivided cylinder’, or grandmother’s petticoat, which she once wore contentedly.”<sup>93</sup> Instead of draping herself in layer upon layer of petticoats and fabrics, the New Woman opted for a simplified, business-like apparel: a rational dress, often consisting of an upper part that closely resembled the upper parts of men’s clothing, and a lower part that was even more shocking: the New Woman, to the utter outrage of society, on occasion opted for a type of voluminous and puffy pants known as bloomers. Bloomers had been in fashion already in the 1850s, and now some pioneering New Women had reawakened this by-gone style, albeit in a slightly altered form. The rational dress they adopted, bloomers and all, was ideally suited to one of the New Women’s favourite pastimes: bicycling. Some of these women, however,

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<sup>91</sup> *Character Note: The New Woman* 1894, 80.

<sup>92</sup> For more on the Victorian women’s obsession with pale skin and use of poisonous powders and make-up, see e.g. Natalie Zarrelli’s article *The Poisonous Beauty Advice Columns of Victorian England*.

<sup>93</sup> Barry 1894, 304. I have here taken Barry’s unusual choice of words, the ‘undivided cylinder’, to mean a traditional dress with petticoats: in comparison to the bloomers, which could have been described as a ‘divided cylinder’, a dress or a skirt could be seen as an undivided one.

were not contented to just wearing these outfits when on their bikes, but instead, as put by Barry, forsook the ‘undivided cylinder’ of their grandmothers completely. The wear of bloomers indeed seemed so common to the horrified Mr Barry that he described the hordes of New Women advancing in “wide-spreading tumultuous battalions, many of them wearing the divided skirt [bloomers]”.<sup>94</sup> The shock of Mr Barry, and indeed many of his contemporaries concerning bloomers becomes more understandable when taking into consideration the fact that for centuries, or even millennia, women had not worn any kinds of pants, but had covered their legs completely; thus even the glimpse of an ankle could be seen as alluring by men<sup>95</sup> and the sight of an entire leg would have been considered something completely astonishing, and not always in a good way.

Wearing a rational dress was, however, not limited to just replacing flowy skirts with bloomers, but also included other changes as well: for example, those regarding underwear. For hundreds of years, women had worn corsets under their dresses; with the rational dress movement, some women chose to discard tight-laced corsets in favour of a piece of clothing known as a ‘liberty bodice’, which, according to the supporters of the rational dress movement, was healthier than a corset but still as stylish, or on occasion even more so.<sup>96</sup> Not wearing a tight-laced corset, which would have seriously impeded breathing, made the favoured activities (e.g. cycling and sports) of New Women easier to perform. However, by rejecting tight-lacing, women were putting themselves in direct contradiction with the fashion trends of the time, which idealized an hourglass body shape with a tiny waist. As part of the rational dress movement, some women also chose to replace their heavy layers of petticoats with drawers, which, unfortunately, were seen as highly masculine.<sup>97</sup> However, choosing to discard tight-lacing and wearing bloomers, or at the very least drawers, would not have been deemed acceptable by the standards of the time; according to Patricia Marks, this “was almost immediately seen as a threat not only to the female image but to male status”, as it was perceived as a mark of the woman’s intention of disregarding her traditionally feminine domestic role.<sup>98</sup> In fact, this liberation from the heavy weight of petticoats and the restrictiveness of tight-laced corsets, could even have been seen as a liberation on a grander scale, as the idea of women throwing away their weighty, restrictive

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<sup>94</sup> Barry 1894, 290.

<sup>95</sup> Marks 1990, 188.

<sup>96</sup> Bayles Kortsch 2009, 56. For more see e.g. Deborah Jean Waugh: *Fashion, Emancipation, Reform and the Rational Undergarment* or David Kunzle: *Fashion and Fetishism: Corsets, tight lacing, and other forms of body sculpture*.

<sup>97</sup> Marks 1990, 148.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.



accoutrements could be reminiscent of women breaking free from the yoke of male supremacy itself.

Besides rational dress, the New Women were involved in yet another dress reform of their time: that of tailormade clothes. Straightforwardly put by the anonymous writer of *The Cornhill Magazine's* 'Character Note', the New Woman "dresse[d] simply in close-fitting garments, technically known as tailormade."<sup>99</sup> Tailormade clothing, as compared to the clothing the Victorian women were used to wearing, was simplified in design, lightweight and easy to wear, and highly reminiscent of the men's clothing of the time; even as a word, tailormade had connotations not to the usual makers of women's clothing; the dressmakers, modistes or seamstresses, but to those of men's clothing; the tailors. The tailormade consisted of, to give some concessions, a skirt instead of trousers, a jacket often matching the skirt, a shirtwaist, a tie or a bow (which even today still hold masculine connotations), and a hat, such as a boater, which was fashioned after the hats worn by men. The impression an outfit such as this would have made, at least to the contemporaries of a woman wearing such a costume, was one of an independent, masculine, practical and rational woman who earned her own living. Tailormade clothing was indeed connected specifically with the working world (with men as well as with women) which to many contemporaries, when in conjunction with women, must have been a repulsive idea, given that women working outside of the domestic sphere could have signified an overthrow of traditional male-female roles and relationships, and could be seen as a mark of refusal to marry and have children, or in other words, to perform the traditional duties of a woman.<sup>100</sup> The shock and scandal that wearing tailormade clothing might have caused was however no reason for a New Woman to persist from wearing one; a fact which can be proved simply by looking at the clothing many women have worn to work ever since then.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century women usually wore a more modest, plain, simplified outfit during the day, and a more decorative, flashy and showy dress during the evening. However, the author of the *Character Note* noted of the New Woman how "in the evening simplicity again mark[ed] her dress. Always close-fitting – always manly and wholly simple. Very little jewellery, and close-fitting hair."<sup>101</sup> Not only did the New Woman dress in rational dress or tailormade during the day, but she would even flaunt the customs of society by not putting the effort into her appearance even in the evening, and what's even worse, she could even be described as 'manly'.

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<sup>99</sup> *Character Note: The New Woman* 1894, 80.

<sup>100</sup> Holland, 2008.

<sup>101</sup> *Character Note: The New Woman* 1894, 80.

To make the definition and understanding of the New Woman more complex and difficult, however, quite another picture was painted of her during the evening time by Eliza Lynn Linton: for her a New Woman could just as well be “a superbly dressed young woman, bust, arms, and shoulders bare, and gleaming white and warm beneath the subdued light of a luxurious dinner-table — —.”<sup>102</sup>

When it came to the alleged beauty or ugliness of the New Woman — her having been variously described as a beautiful little vixen, alluringly glowing in candlelight, or as a manly, ashen and faded old maid worn down by her erudite aspirations or athletic pastimes — no consensus was reached in the minds of her contemporary commentators. In describing her attire, however, her critics were not quite as ambivalent, for they at the very least agreed on the fact that the New Woman would not consent to wearing the conventional clothing expected of her, but would instead choose to dress in masculine, businesslike tailormade clothing, or according to the rules of the recalcitrant rational dress movement. Some variations were observable, however, when it came to describing her evening dress, for she was alternately observed as wearing a plain, manly and simplistic dress with little or no accoutrements, or as wearing superbly fashionable apparel according to the latest mode.

Yet no matter what the New Woman was described as looking like or wearing, one thing was clear to her contemporaries: that being that she would come to “revolutionize fashion and its manner of distinguishing the sexes,”<sup>103</sup> something which, undoubtedly, greatly terrified them. This fear of change to come, as well as the power to influence the thoughts and opinions of others the New Women’s opponents as writers possessed, contributed to their negative descriptions of the New Women’s appearances and attires. With their writings, these critics aspired to scare of potential, future New Women from ever becoming ones — they presumably hoped that by creating a nasty picture of the New Women’s looks, women would realize that by being similar, they would become unattractive to men and hence unsuited to completing the traditional roles of women, which in their minds, in all probability, was reason enough to persist from becoming ‘new’ — history, however, has proven that these critics of the New Women, at least when it comes to women’s clothing, were unsuccessful in their attempts to scare and bully women into submission, as can be observed merely by looking at how common tailormade clothing and the lack of a corset and petticoats is among women today.

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<sup>102</sup> Lynn Linton 1891B, 597.

<sup>103</sup> Barry 1894, 293.

## 4 Conclusion

The New Woman, as she was seen by her hostile contemporaries, was a woman of many parts; she was someone who, by how she behaved, and simply by who she was, presented herself both as a threat and as a cautionary example of what the future might hold. In her essence she was seen as a radical who sought to undermine, and even overthrow, the long established, time-worn customs and conventions of Victorian society. A New Woman was seen to be someone who was not content with her lot in life; she would, instead of conforming to the traditional role of wife and mother, obtain for herself an education and an occupation: something which terribly frightened especially the men of the time; for if woman was to become ever so independent, would she even need man anymore?

A New Woman, in addition to outrageously civilizing herself and making herself useful to society by working, would also manifest her newness in various other forms: she would, instead of hiding behind a veil of modesty and courtesy, speak openly about sexuality, she would smoke cigarettes and lavish her conversation with masculine slang words, she would take part in such manly activities as hunting animals or playing cricket or golf, and she would dress in such ludicrous clothing as the rational dress or the tailormade, and what's even worse, when it came time for her to doll up for the evening, she would not even consent to that; something which went hand in hand with her tendency to be naturally uglier, manlier and less attractive than her more conventional sisters.

Throughout the tirades, criticisms and fulminations of the New Woman's opponents, there ran a current of fear, shock and outrage; something that some of the writers, like the one who wished to remain anonymous, tried their best to conceal through such methods as satire. The thoughts and opinions the New Woman aroused in these critics of hers (whether they were or were not representative of her wider audience; the society) did in the very least have an effect on both the public's perception of her, as well as on the future of the New Woman herself: for soon after these writings were published, the New Woman for the most part disappeared from the public's eye, to be overshadowed by her more vocal comrades, the suffragettes. One could say, therefore, that the New Women's critics were successful in their attempts to obliterate and disempower them; this, however, remains a matter for some contention, as the legacy of the New Woman's struggle lives on even still, as can be observed by the independence of, and the sheer abundance of opportunities available for, her descendants: the women of today.

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The quote in the title is from *Character Note: The New Woman* 1894, 80.

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