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Whitley, Hannah

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Hot Off the Ladies' Press!
The Optimization of the British Mass Media by the Late Victorian Women's Movement,
1870-1899

*Hannah Whitley*¹

In the closing decades of the Victorian era, the vast and rapidly expanding machinery of the British mass media was just beginning to rise in influence, shaping public opinion and framing cultural narratives in unprecedented ways. Amidst the clatter of printing presses and newspaper circulation wars, another equally powerful movement was rising: the women's movement. Between 1870 and 1890, the women's movement harnessed the power of mass media to challenge social norms. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines mass media as "forms of communication designed to reach many people."² Therefore, newspapers, magazines, and books will prove the best forms for analyzing a movement in the Victorian era. Books and local and national newspapers were already established as forms of media, whereas magazines were a somewhat newer form but quickly rose to the same level of popularity. All of these avenues of communication were better suited to long-form articles, provided more space for complex ideas than other forms, such as pamphlets, and were more accessible to the whole country than in-person events like speeches.

While women had of course always had access to these forms of media, it was often limited to topics deemed appropriate for ladies' eyes and minds. The use of the mass media by the women's movement during this period reveals how instrumental it was in propelling the fight for women's rights, and in the new discussions it opened up in middle-class society and beyond. Women fought for their rights using the mass media as a vehicle not only for spreading ideas and information, but also as a haven for women to come together to discuss, share, learn, be creative, debate, and do whatever else with a sense of camaraderie while living in a restrictive patriarchal society.

¹ Hannah Whitley is a graduate student completing her Masters in Library and Information Science at Louisiana State University. She graduated from the University of Maine with a B.A. in History. Her research interests include women's history as well as 18th-20th century American and European history. This is her first published work in an academic journal. She can be reached at hannah.whitley@lsu.edu.

²Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. "mass medium," accessed May 12, 2025, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mass%20medium>.

Media and Politics: A Brief History, Until 1870

With the invention of the Linotype machine and offset lithography, printing became cheaper for publishers and consumers.³ Books and newspapers occasionally merged. Mark Hampton mentions some common 19th-century literary references include the power newspapers had over readers' minds and their appeal to all walks of life.⁴ The jobs of newspaper writers were affected as well with the correspondence system of reporting, and the telegraph allowed for quicker, universal reporting.⁵ In 1860, there were only 33 provincial newspapers in production. By the 1880s, there were 150.⁶ This growth is not only staggering, but extremely rapid, speaking to the claim that newspapers became the dominant medium by the end of the 19th century.⁷

Nevertheless, newspapers merged with magazines and helped them rise in popularity. Because many newspapers were dailies, they could easily and effectively promote magazines, books, or any other less frequent media.⁸ The first magazines that appeared in mid-18th-century America were formatted after existing British magazines, but their relationship was mutual; as journalism evolved in Britain, many observers contributed aspects of it to American influences.⁹ Magazines were found to be especially useful for social justice activists and movements due to the ability to be more in-depth in magazine articles rather than newspaper articles, though entire newspaper publications dedicated to movements were popular in their own right.¹⁰ Stephen Koss even claims that political movements needed to have at least one publication for the movement, or it could not be seen as serious due to their apparent lack of journalistic backing.¹¹

It is important to discuss the linguistics of the word "feminism" and how this paper will proceed, or opt out of using the word. There is some debate on whether or not it is anachronistic to

³ Ulrich Regler, CMJ 100: Introduction to Media Studies (class lecture, University of Maine, Orono, ME, September 13, 2023).

⁴ Mark Hampton, *Visions of the Press in Britain, 1850-1950*, (University of Illinois Press, 2004), pp. 20-24.

⁵ Ulrich Regler, CMJ 100: Introduction to Media Studies essential(class lecture, University of Maine, Orono, ME, September 13, 2023).

⁶ Hampton, *Visions of the Press*, p. 28.

⁷ Hampton, p. 19.

⁸ Hampton, p. 28.

⁹ Hampton, pp. 92-93.

¹⁰ Ulrich Regler, CMJ 100: Introduction to Media Studies (class lecture, University of Maine, Orono, ME, September 15, 2023).

¹¹ Hampton, *Visions of the Press*, p. 26.

use the word when speaking of women's movements before the late 1800s. The most basic reason against using the term is that it was not a commonly accepted word before the 1890s.¹² However, the *Oxford English Dictionary* states that the earliest use of the word is in 1841 in Webster's *American Dictionary of the English Language*.¹³ It seems unlikely that a word with such strong meaning behind it would take 50 years for its use in American English to translate over to British English, but in the end, this cannot be assumed. Mappen quotes Philippa Levine, saying that "it is not anachronistic [because of] women's positive identification with one another in a context of political struggle."¹⁴ As somewhat of a middle ground, this paper will henceforth use the term "women's movement" as a description of Victorian women's fight for equality.

As previously mentioned, writings and publications like Wollstonecraft's were essential in the development of the Victorian women's movement. One of the earliest examples is considered the first text in Britain or America to call for prioritizing civil and political rights for women. Marion Reid published *A Plea for Women* in 1843 after visiting the World Anti-Slavery Convention in 1840. She relates the exclusion of black men from government positions to that of women.¹⁵ *The Subjection of Women* by John Stuart Mill, perhaps one of the most famous political theorists, was published in 1869 and echoed Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*, as well as advocating women's right to vote and their right to be a separate legal entity from their husbands.¹⁶ Mill's wife, Harriet Taylor, actually wrote *The Enfranchisement of Women* almost a decade before *Subjection* in 1851, calling for the same legal, social, and economic equality.¹⁷

A book review from the March 28, 1853, edition of *The Observer* provides valuable insight into the movement's state by the latter half of the 19th century. The book is titled "Social Condition of Women in the United States: An Englishwoman's Experience in America" by Marianne Finch, and it describes Finch's trip to America and her experience of a new culture with things like train cars, public education, and of course, "what is called in America 'the Women's Movement,'" which is described as

¹² Mappen, p. 155.

¹³ "Feminism," Oxford English Dictionary, last modified July 2023, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/feminism_n?tl=true&tab=factsheet.

¹⁴ Mappen, p. 155.

¹⁵ Esther Breitenbach et al., *Scottish Women: A Documentary History, 1780-1914* (Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 255.

¹⁶ "The Subjection of Women by J S Mill," British Library, accessed October 21, 2023, <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-subjection-of-women-by-j-s-mill>.

¹⁷ Ignatius Nsaidzedze, "An Overview of Feminism in the Victorian Period [1832-1901]," *American Research Journal of English and Literature*, 3:1 (2017): p. 4.

“one of the most curious and remarkable chapters in the book.”¹⁸ The reviewer summarizes, saying that “[Mrs. Finch] turns to her own country and inquires, why here also women should be deprived of their political existence, when we recognize a female sovereign. The rights of property are of more account in England than the rights of women, for if a woman be proprietress of land... she may possess as much Legislative power as half the borough of Manchester.”¹⁹ Regarding this chapter and its contents as “curious” is illuminating. It suggests that while ideas for some sort of movement were in place, no formal movement had yet been established, or even considered in the public eye.

The 1801 census was the first taken in Britain, and it found that women outnumbered men. This led to fear among middle-class women of living the rest of their lives as spinsters or old maids, i.e., unmarried old women.²⁰ Marriage was seen as an essential institution, for men, of course; women had few legal protections in their marriages, and as previously mentioned, were not seen as separate legal entities from their husbands. Laws were mainly passed for the benefit of husbands, and the women’s movement fought against such an institution. The Infants and Child Custody Bill of 1839 gave women nothing but the right to *ask* for custody of children under seven years old if the woman had not been previously convicted of adultery, yet judges continuously favored men. It was not until 1925 that mothers had equal rights to custody as fathers.²¹ The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 restored divorced or separated women’s rights as single women, such as the right to own property and enter into contracts. It also forced women who wanted to divorce their husbands to prove adultery, as well as another offense occurring for at least two years.²² It was not until 1882 that women were granted legal separation from their husbands and the right to own property with the Married Women’s Property Act.²³ An 1883 article from *Cassell’s Family Magazine* calls this act “a social revolution, by reversing the ancient principle of Common Law, through which, upon marriage, the husband and wife became one person (who, in practice, always turned out to be the husband)...”²⁴ The reasoning behind the previous law is due to the upper class’ creation of the law, and women of this class were far less likely to

¹⁸ “Social Condition of Women in the United States,” *The Observer*, March 28, 1853, p. 6.

¹⁹ “Social Condition of Women in the United States.”

²⁰ Nsaidzedze, “An Overview,” p. 4.

²¹ Michael Wutz, “Victorian Women’s Legal Status,” Weber State University, accessed October 22, 2023, <https://www.weber.edu/michaelwutz/womens-legal-status.html>.

²² Wutz, “Victorian Women’s Legal Status.”

²³ Wutz, “Victorian Women’s Legal Status.”

²⁴ A Lawyer, “A Social Revolution: The Married Women’s Property Act, 1882,” *Cassell’s Family Magazine*, 1883, p. 281.

be negatively impacted by the earlier law regarding marriage.²⁵ The author does admit that the act had its shortcomings, but says it was still a “conspicuous landmark in the progress of reform,” a powerful statement considering the considerably lacking reform in previous decades.²⁶ The details of the act are described in the article, which, in basic terms, allowed married women to keep for their own use money and property in their own name.²⁷

As for education, women had few options. It was not uncommon for young ladies from middle-class families to receive some elementary education and be sent to boarding school, as it was for women to pursue higher education. In fact, girls who recently arrived home from boarding school could likely feel unfulfilled in life, as they were not children anymore but not quite ready to marry either, according to Victorian author Lily Watson.²⁸ There were, however, several colleges opened for women throughout the century. Queen’s College in London was opened in 1848 for women, with a focus on teaching, and Bedford College was founded in the following year. Girton College in Cambridge was founded in 1869. The 1870 Elementary Education Act even allowed women to serve on school boards and required girls and boys to get an elementary education.²⁹

Other laws that spurred the creation of a real movement include the Contagious Diseases Acts, passed between the years of 1864 and 1869, which allowed women living in some military-related regions to be declared prostitutes by law enforcement and have them forcibly examined for sexually transmitted diseases.³⁰ If they did not submit to the exam, they could be imprisoned.³¹ A famous member of the movement, Josephine Butler, formed the Ladies National Association for the Repeal of Contagious Diseases Act in 1869. Margaret Hamilton declares that “Without the dedicated effort of a group of courageous women, it is doubtful that the [Acts] would have been repealed– at least, not in the nineteenth century.”³² This repeal was one of the earliest decisive victories for the movement, with the acts being fully repealed in 1886.

²⁵ A Lawyer, p. 282.

²⁶ A Lawyer, p. 282.

²⁷ A Lawyer, pp. 282-83.

²⁸ Lily Watson, “Mademoiselle L’incomprise,” *The Girl’s Own Paper*, vol. 14, (1893): p. 148, <https://www.victorianvoices.net/ARTICLES/GOP/1893/1893-Mlle.pdf>.

²⁹ Nsaidzedze, “An Overview,” pp. 3-4.

³⁰ Margaret Hamilton, “Opposition to the Contagious Diseases Acts, 1864-1886,” *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, 10:1 (Spring 1978): p. 14, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4048453>.

³¹ Hamilton, p. 14.

³² Hamilton, p. 15.

The women's movement was centered around middle-class women during the 19th century, which some might rightly criticize, but the movement certainly cared about working-class women and fought for them nonetheless. There is evidence of the Bristol and Clifton Society for Women's Suffrage, formed in 1868, supporting the Barton Hill cotton workers' strike in 1875 and their right to unionize.³³ In 1876, Emma Watson of the Women's Protective and Provident League (WPPL), which encouraged women working in the trades to join unions, published the *Women's Union Journal*. The *Journal* published not only important WPPL and industry news, but also poetry, short stories, and other articles highlighting women and their talents and achievements.³⁴ After a few years, the *Journal* began highlighting what Melissa Walker calls "a co-operative model of self-help," bringing working- and middle-class women together rather than enforcing prominent class division through "[not] being conventionally domestic or individualistic, [instead] its new 'model woman' fosters relationships of respect and mutual support with people from all walks of life."³⁵ Women from the middle class fought alongside them for the benefit of their movement and those allied with them, and for every woman. The WPPL changed its name to the Women's Trade Union League and the *Journal* was renamed the *Women's Trade Union Review*, both in 1890.³⁶ With this came a shift in its content, reporting more on formal information on the League, as the *Journal* had "satisfied its mission" of spreading women's trade unionism."³⁷ The work of these women transcended not only class but also the women's movement and the politics of an entire political ideology, in this case, socialism.

Ladies in Literature: The Late Victorian "New Woman"

The biggest impact books had on the Victorian women's movement was the development of a new path women could choose for themselves, dubbed "the New Woman." The New Woman was strong, intelligent, and independent. She could be middle or working class, though one could argue that working class women did not have much choice on whether they were to work or not, and indeed most had to help support their families. This term is usually credited to Sarah Grand's 1894 article in *The*

³³ Lovell, "The British Suffragette Movement," p. 2.

³⁴ "Timeline," TUC History Online, London Metropolitan University, accessed December 3, 2023, http://www.unionhistory.info/timeline/TI_Display.php?irn=3000021&QueryPage=..%2FAdvSearch.php.

³⁵ Melissa Walker, "On the Move: Biography, Self-Help, and Feminism in the *Women's Union Journal*," *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 50:3 (Fall 2017): p. 595, <https://doi.org/10.1353/vpr.2017.0042>.

³⁶ "Timeline," TUC History Online.

³⁷ Walker, "On the Move," p. 603.

North American Review titled “The New Aspect of the Woman Question,” in which she calls out the hypocrisy of the Victorian institution of marriage.³⁸ She says “[The] new woman is a little above [man], and he never even thought of looking up to where she has been sitting apart in silent contemplation all these years, thinking and thinking, until at last she solved the problem and proclaimed for herself what was wrong with Home-is-the-Woman’s-Sphere, and prescribed the remedy.”³⁹ One of the main problems Grand addresses in this article is the assumption that women are not smart or clever enough to pave their own way in the world, and their manipulation of women to mold them into what they want ladies to be. “Man deprived us of all proper education, and then jeered at us because we had no knowledge. He narrowed our outlook on life so that our view of it should be all distorted, and then declared that our mistaken impression of it proved us to be senseless creatures. He cramped our minds so that there was no room for reason in them, and then made merry at our want of logic.”⁴⁰ Feeling threatened by women’s desires outside of the homemaking sphere, men threaten that “[women] shall be afflicted with short hair, coarse skins, unsymmetrical figures, loud voices, tastelessness in dress, and an unattractive appearance and character generally, and then he will not love us anymore or marry us.”⁴¹ In other words, women are scared into conformity with the fear that the desire to be like the New Woman will make them unfeminine, unladylike, and unworthy of love. It almost evokes a feeling of being seen as subhuman.

A year before she published this article, Grand wrote the book *The Heavenly Twins* in protest of the Contagious Disease Acts and the hypocrisy of sex portrayed within them.⁴² Literature published before the term ‘New Woman’ was coined portrayed these ideas of women breaking free of their designated sphere, especially in the 1880s. One of the earlier examples of New Woman literature is *The Story of an African Farm* by Olive Schreiner. Published in 1883, this book and its author are named as inspirations of fellow New Woman authors. Schreiner discusses multiple topics of concern, but largely focuses on marriage and education. Lyndall, one of the main characters and New Woman

³⁸ Greg Buzwell, “Daughters of decadence: the New Woman in the Victorian fin de siècle,” British Library, May 15, 2014, <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/daughters-of-decadence-the-new-woman-in-the-victorian-fin-de-siecle>.

³⁹ Sarah Grand, “The New Aspect of the Woman Question,” *The North American Review*, 158:448 (March 1894): p. 271, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25103291>.

⁴⁰ Grand, p. 272.

⁴¹ Grand, p. 274.

⁴² Buzwell, “Daughters of decadence.”

representative, returns home from school after six months to find her cousin Em engaged. Lyndall is not immediately excited about Em's future husband, to which Em responds by guessing about Lyndall's relationship status after noticing a ring on her hand. Lyndall thwarts the idea immediately, saying that "I am not in so great a hurry to put my neck beneath any man's foot; and I do not so greatly admire the crying of babies," she said, as she closed her eyes half wearily and leaned back in the chair. "There are other women glad of such work."⁴³ She is not only showing distaste for such entrapment as marriage, but also of children. It is interesting how she describes marriage and child rearing as "such work," since work was not for ladies. Lyndall later states that "Marriage for love is the beautifulest external symbol of the union of souls; marriage without it is the uncleanliest traffic that defiles the world... And they tell us we have men's chivalrous attention!" she cried. "When we ask to be doctors, lawyers, law-makers, anything but ill-paid drudges, they say—No; but you have men's chivalrous attention; now think of that and be satisfied! What would you do without it?"⁴⁴ Her statement here encompasses both issues of work and marriage and their intersection.

Closing the chapter, Lyndall says, "I never find anyone I can talk to. Women bore me, and men, I talk so to—'Going to the ball this evening? Nice little dog that of yours. Pretty little ears. So fond of pointer pups!' And they think me fascinating, charming! Men are like the earth, and we are the moon; we turn always one side to them, and they think there is no other, because they don't see it—but there is."⁴⁵ Lyndall is directly contrasting herself, a New Woman character, to that of traditional ladies, who must be dull in the eyes of the intellectual New Woman. However, she doubles back on her statement by saying that women are not one-dimensional beings. Perhaps she is commenting on the ideas of Wollstonecraft and Mills, that women do not have a fair chance to express their fullest potential, as they know they have.

The Women's Magazine Phenomenon

Magazines marketed towards women did not gain much traction until the latter half of the 19th century. Margaret Beetham pinpoints the change in 1861 with the publication of the new, improved,

⁴³ Olive Schreiner, *The Story of an African Farm* (1883): ch 2.IV. Lyndall, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1441/1441-h/1441-h.htm>.

⁴⁴ Schreiner, ch 2.IV.

⁴⁵ Schreiner, ch 2.IV.

and more expensive *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* from publisher and editor Samuel Beeton.⁴⁶ Beeton first published the magazine in 1852 with a new and improved format. Prior magazines, one of the earliest being from the 1830s, focused on domesticity and were not outright marketed towards women, just the idea of domesticity in general, along with stories and general information.⁴⁷ Beeton's magazine, along with others that came after, focused on needlework, fashion, columns, advice, recipes, dress patterns, and fiction deemed "safe" for women's "fragile" minds.⁴⁸

By the end of the century, publishers took Beeton's model and ramped up production for a new era of women's magazines, being especially driven by the passing of the Elementary Education Act requiring girls to receive an elementary education equal to boys, including reading and writing.⁴⁹ Advancements in printing technology made substantial amounts of content available for cheap.⁵⁰ More subgenres appeared, such as religious, vocational, political, social justice, and fashion-focused publications.⁵¹

One of the most popular British magazines of this kind was *The Girl's Own Paper*, also affectionately called the GOP, running from 1880 to 1941. While it was originally geared more toward young ladies during the Victorian era, it later did cater to both young and old. Charles Peters was the magazine's editor from 1880 to 1907, and his vision for the paper aimed "to foster and develop that which was highest and noblest in the girlhood and womanhood of England."⁵² With the educational, practical, creative, and empowering content the GOP featured, some might even call it progressive.

One interesting article in the *Girl's Own Paper*, volume 14, is "Mademoiselle L'incomprise" by Lily Watson. Watson believes that middle-class young women— not old enough to be mothers or wives but old enough to have left boarding school— cannot find fulfillment for the body and mind solely in the home. They are not reliant on their parents anymore, and their parents are not old enough to need any help. They feel misunderstood by their families when they want to get out of the house and do something— be it work, physical activity (which Watson describes as "[developing] your physical

⁴⁶ Margaret Beetham, "The Rise and Rise of the Domestic Magazine: Femininity at Home in Popular Periodicals," in *Women, Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1830s-1900s: The Victorian Period*, ed. Alexis Easley, Clare Gill, and Beth Rodgers (Edinburgh University Press, 2019), p. 18.

⁴⁷ Beetham, pp. 20-24.

⁴⁸ Beetham, pp. 20-24.

⁴⁹ Beetham, p. 25.

⁵⁰ Beetham, p. 27.

⁵¹ Beetham, p. 25.

⁵² "About the Girl's Own Paper," The Girl's Own Paper Index, Lutterworth Press, accessed October 25, 2023, <https://www.lutterworth.com/gop/about-gop.php>.

powers,” quite empowering indeed), religious service, creative endeavors, or whatever else they would like– to fulfill themselves. In fact, she believes that these ladies will actually injure themselves beyond repair if they do not nourish their bodies and souls sufficiently.

Watson’s opening to her argument is powerful. She says, “The last [twenty five] years have seen a wonderful development of public opinion with regard to woman’s work, woman’s culture, and woman’s life in general... all this stir and unrest cannot but powerfully affect the mental condition of the growing womanhood of our time.”⁵³ Her point here is interesting because she assumes that these young ladies, whom she is explicitly speaking to rather than their parents, will get married, yet she does not seem to fully subscribe to society’s expectations of women. Watson also assumes here that the growing womanhood, powerfully affected and inspired by these discussions, will do something about it, something traditionalists definitely would not want to see. Watson is empowering young women to take back autonomy and do something for themselves in a time when empowerment like this was a threat to such a patriarchal society. She presents women as human equals to men, with desires and motivations to do whatever they want to fulfill themselves; they are humans with brains and ambitions, not just bodies made to have kids, cook, and clean. Watson says that “[Her mother] tries to make things right by planning amusements for her daughter, failing to perceive that what the latter wants is not pleasure, but work. This is just an instance in which the conventional idea– that a girl’s duty is bounded by ‘helping her mother’– is beside the mark altogether.”⁵⁴ Perhaps this failure to perceive what the daughters of this decade come from stems from the mothers’ old-fashioned way of raising them, hence the daughters being misunderstood.

She also brings religion into the conversation in a more progressive way than what was usual in this conversation, which was typically that God created women to serve men. She quotes an unnamed source, saying “‘The old order changeth, yielding place to new, And God fulfills Himself in many ways.’”⁵⁵ Watson believes that young ladies should “not sulk, but *act*” in all they do, including through philanthropy and other religious works.⁵⁶ Philanthropy has always been heavily connected to religion, and Watson suggests that it is one of the most important ways women can fulfill themselves if they are very religious, short of becoming a missionary. One suggestion she has is to “Ally yourself with the nearest association for helping your own sex.”⁵⁷ The language used here and throughout the article is

⁵³ Watson, “Mademoiselle L’incomprise,” p. 148.

⁵⁴ Watson, “Mademoiselle L’incomprise,” p. 148.

⁵⁵ Watson, “Mademoiselle L’incomprise,” p. 148.

⁵⁶ Watson, “Mademoiselle L’incomprise,” p. 149.

⁵⁷ Watson, “Mademoiselle L’incomprise,” p. 149.

interesting because she speaks directly to the reader, acts like a mentor to girls, and suggests they help each other in the spirit of sisterhood.

A. B. Romney shares a similar sentiment in their article titled “‘Common-Place’ Girls,” published in the same volume of the GOP.⁵⁸ Romney describes young ladies’ desire at this point to mark themselves as different from other women, either through their beauty or talent, but women without either are insecure and call themselves “common-place.” Anxiety rules over their lives about becoming an old maid, and that there is no way for them to change being common-place. Romney’s advice to them is that it is possible to change ourselves for the better, and it is simple yet intimidating. They say, “It is simply this: Don’t be a common-place girl; in other words, don’t make marriage the sole aim of your life; instead, fill your time with other interests.”⁵⁹ However, Romney warns strongly against doing anything out of the desire to be seen a certain way by society. This, they say, is what makes a girl common-place. Instead, the moral is to be true to oneself, but also that “To be true we must be brave, we must not fear the laugh or sneer of the world. Remember... the few are the leaders, the many the followers.”⁶⁰ Advice like this is clearly a blatant rebellion to social institutions– in this case, one of the most contested by the women’s movement– and expectations of this time. This is also an example of the New Woman phenomenon, translating into real life as a model for real women to follow.

Norma Lorimer adds to this example in volume 19 of the GOP, published in 1898, with her article “Strides of Women.” Right away, she states that “The women of Queen Victoria’s reign will stand out in the history of our country as the pioneers of women’s rights.”⁶¹ Her primary focus is on the issue of women’s work and education, of which she says, “The old-fashioned idea that it was necessary to give the male portion of the family only (the bread-winners) a thorough and practical education is, we are thankful to say, dying out.”⁶² Most of the article, however, is focused on highlighting women who have broken into the public sphere and workplace, hence the title. These

⁵⁸ There is no mention of the author’s information including their full name in the GOP Index or in the article except for the author’s use of “we” while addressing the audience, so it is likely a woman, but in order to not assume anything incorrectly “they” will be used to refer to this author.

⁵⁹ A.B. Romney, “‘Common-Place’ Girls,” *The Girl’s Own Paper*, vol. 14, (1893): p. 5, <https://www.victorianvoices.net/ARTICLES/GOP/1898/1898-StridesofWomen.pdf>.

⁶⁰ Romney, “‘Common-Place’ Girls,” p. 5.

⁶¹ Norma Lorimer, “Strides of Women,” *The Girl’s Own Paper* vol. 19, (1898): p. 570, <https://www.victorianvoices.net/ARTICLES/GOP/1898/1898-StridesofWomen.pdf>.

⁶² Lorimer, “Strides of Women.”

women include Sarah Grand, artist Elizabeth Butler, Dr. Elisabeth Garrett Anderson, and naturalist Eleanor Ormerod, just to name a few, but *Lorimer* features women from a variety of professions. Putting a spotlight on women in this way is not only an empowering action in itself, but it also gives young ladies a preview of what life could have in store for them and a push into exploring these avenues, along with any other interests they may have considered; or simply that their lives do not have to be spent at home if that is not what they wish for themselves.

There were countless women's magazines published during this time; there could be an entire archive dedicated to articles from all of them! *The Girl's Own Paper* is an interesting publication to focus on for this section because, while it was marketed to young women and girls, it could be enjoyed by older women as well. For example, Watson's article is mainly targeted towards young ladies. Still, there is no doubt that parents reading it would appreciate not only how Watson urges girls to respect and be grateful to their parents, but also the insight it offers into their daughters' feelings and lived experiences. After all, much had changed since their time regarding social conditions. It could be argued that this publication was nothing more than a money grab, and that Charles Peters' statement about improving the next generation of British women was part of that. It is no secret that many publications are created to make money, but the content they produce determines their profitability. The fact that the *GOP* ran for so long and was so popular exhibits that this sort of empowering, educational, and creative content is what its readers wanted, even expected, from this magazine. As the saying goes, consumers vote with their dollars. Peters simply would not have been so successful if not for the social change his readers were noticing, whether they supported it or not, and the quality articles that discussed it, along with the fun articles, too, of course.

Newspapers and Public Opinion

Viewed next to the ideal Victorian lady, one who was submissive, quiet, ultra feminine, and no threat to a patriarchal society, it is no surprise that the *New Woman* was ridiculed in other media by the public, men, and other women. Newspapers proved to be an excellent source for relieving their frustrations, but it certainly wasn't all negative opinions. In any case, newspapers are a valuable source for studying public opinion on social issues because anyone can contribute to a publication, whether a professional writer or not. Additionally, they prove that the *New Woman* idea did translate into real life and real women.

One Blackburn paper, *The Weekly Standard and Express*, held weekly essay competitions with topics readers could write about and submit to win a cash prize. The March 30, 1895, edition of the paper published the winners of the previous week's prompt, the best short essay on the "New

Woman.” This particular prompt had two winners, Miss Sarah Ann Stowe and Miss M. Littlehales, both against the idea of the New Woman. Stowe’s answer provides insight into the interesting duality of the argument against the New Woman:

The New Woman is self-assertive, not in the perfectly legitimate way of taking work for which she may be specially qualified by nature or circumstance. This may be done with the most perfect modesty, even though the work is usually performed by men. But the New Woman is self-assertive in a way which abrogates the legitimate rights of women, and aims at the more pronounced and distinctly masculine rights of man. She is loud of speech, aggressive in manner; and vulgar, because unwomanly, in dress.⁶³

Littlehale provides a similar argument. She says that “Because women are intellectually as acute as men, have quite as rich or a richer moral nature, can in many instances hold their own in the study, can undertake efficiently duties that had long been allotted exclusively to man... The dissatisfied woman seems to be sore against men because she is not one of them, and simultaneously reviles and copies them.”⁶⁴ Interestingly, both of them seem to have no aversion to ideas such as women working, studying, or taking on roles like men’s traditional places in society. Their main complaint seems to be that New Women want to *be* men, or at least act like them. These two observations together suggest that there is a group of people who agree with the ideas of the women’s movement but oppose the concept of the New Woman.

The idea of the New Woman wanting to be a man seems to be unique to ordinary readers rather than writers for publications, with or against the women’s movement. Perhaps it is because these people are taking these ideas at face value and not dissecting them in detail as a writer would; it is not necessarily their fault because one can only say so much in a newspaper column, and it simply is not their job. It would be interesting to know what exactly these answers are judged on, as the rules state simply that “Specimens of the best answers will be published each week as space permit.”⁶⁵ Is it based on the quality of the writing, or on the editors’ biases towards the ideas? It is hard to tell, but two other answers published, both by men, share a slightly different sentiment than the winners.

One of the men, David H. Hughes, calls the idea of the New Woman “a household word. It is widely descriptive, and at the same time, a very indefinite term. The New Woman is mainly, though

⁶³ “Weekly Prize Competitions,” *The Weekly Standard and Express*, March 30, 1895, p. 8, Newspapers.com.

⁶⁴ “Weekly Prize Competitions.”

⁶⁵ “Weekly Prize Competitions.”

not altogether, a caricature.”⁶⁶ The other, Charles Fischer, welcomes the New Woman as long as she is still feminine and not “an Amazonian creature.”⁶⁷ Both, however, believe the “ordinary woman” (the traditional feminine) reigns supreme.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, this column and all its answers highlight an interesting divide, which may not be any one group’s fault specifically, but rather the fault of the very nature of social debates like this, which can still be seen today.

For all of the negativity seen in articles like this– and there are countless more examples of articles like this, including political cartoons– the positivity and strength exhibited by other writers had to have been beneficial for women trying to accept themselves as they are in this era of conformity pushed by traditional stereotypes of femininity. If they were not, why would people like A. B. Romney write articles dedicated solely to encourage young ladies, or any lady trying to find herself for that matter, to be brave and “not fear the laugh or sneer of the world?”⁶⁹ There must be some shared experience or feeling between the women facing this kind of hostility for it to make a person want to encourage others positively. As seen in publications like the *GOP*, there was.

Though reading the newspaper as an emancipated woman with non-traditional beliefs may seem a depressing experience, there was some fun too, especially in shopping! While advertisements are often criticized as a modern societal flaw, a single page of a Victorian newspaper shows that advertising is by no means a new concept. One section in the *Los Angeles Herald* was actually a special correspondence dated December 5, 1897, from London featuring Sarah Grand’s “Newest New Woman’s Fur Bicycle Suit.” The subtitle says “Designed by Mme. Sarah Grand for herself” but the text certainly reads like an advertisement, with language targeting consumers such as “...an attractive summer rig for the athletic girl,” “...smartness of the wearer’s appearance,” “[includes a cloak] that can be discarded at the option of the bicyclist,” “...an improvement on the male bicycling costume,” and “...in devising it she has given additional cause for rejoicing among women this coming holiday season.”⁷⁰ Highlighting the customization of the style available and pointing out improvements to other bicycle suits, paired with an elegant illustration of the suit, gives the appearance of this part of the paper as marketing material.

⁶⁶ “Weekly Prize Competitions.”

⁶⁷ “Weekly Prize Competitions.”

⁶⁸ “Weekly Prize Competitions.”

⁶⁹ Romney, “‘Common-Place’ Girls.”

⁷⁰ “The Newest New Woman’s Bicycle Suit: Designed by Mme. Sarah Grand for herself,” *Los Angeles Herald*, December 26, 1897, Newspapers.com.

Along with the product, the idea of the New Woman is advertised; it could even be argued that this idea is promoted through the product. According to the article, Grand found inspiration in the character Rosalind from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, who wears a male disguise. They say that "...Grand proceeded to think about her Rosalind style bicycle costume, discarding one by one the nineteenth century articles of dress that fettered the sex when awheeling," which included corsets, skirts, the waist, and bloomers.⁷¹ By focusing on removing parts of clothing like this rather than adding to existing women's clothing, it is rebelling against the norm. Grand even goes as far as to say that she believes "Nothing is unfeminine for a woman unless she chooses to make it so. I think we are beginning to show nowadays that we can do many things which used to be thought 'unfeminine,' and be womanly nevertheless. Bicycling is one of them, and the wearing of a rational bicycle costume goes with it."⁷² In saying that something is only unfeminine if a woman makes it, not only does she give women back (or give for the first time, perhaps) autonomy in living for themselves rather than for society's construct of gender. She also makes a distinction between being feminine and being womanly. Rationality in dress for whatever activity a woman wants to do is categorized by Grand as being womanly here. By contrast, "feminine" must mean the opposite, which in this case would be wearing a skirt on a bike to appease society, even though it can be dangerous.

Existing Scholarship on Women's Rights and the Mass Media

The history of mass media is a well-studied topic across multiple disciplines, including history and media studies; the two subjects often overlap. However, the Victorian women's magazine is not widely studied, though it has been studied to some extent since at least the 1970s. The consensus from this time seems to be that, while popular women's magazines offered women an opportunity to expand their horizons, the pieces were written by upper-middle-class women with no other employment obligations beyond being wives and mothers. In more recent years, attitude seems to have shifted to a more positive view as empowering to read and write in a space dedicated to women.⁷³

British social historian Geoffrey Crossick thinks it to be "somewhat perverse to end a study of the development of feminist movements in 1900, before the organised suffragettes had begun their campaign... [Phillipa Levine] cites the words of Helena Swanswick on the eve of the Great War, bemoaning the fact that 'one hears people talk sometimes as if the suffrage movement *were* the

⁷¹ "The Newest New Woman's Bicycle Suit."

⁷² "The Newest New Woman's Bicycle Suit."

⁷³ David E. Latané, "British Victorian Women's Periodicals: Beauty, Civilization, and Poetry," *The Wordsworth Circle* 42: 4 (Autumn 2011): pp. 262-63.

women's movement.”⁷⁴ It is interesting to note that even just a few decades after the Victorian era ended, women were noticing this trend of diluting the women's movement to just gaining the vote. Crossick notes that the field was growing by the late 1980s, but databases are not exactly overflowing with publications on the matter as of late.

Alice G. Vines adds that this area of women's history has often been overlooked due to historians focusing on the Pankhursts, a famous family of suffragettes.⁷⁵ Historian and political scientist Ellen F. Mappen says that there is just “a body” of work on this subject, which does not convey a large-scale study by historians.⁷⁶ She wrote this in 1991, two years after Crossick's claim that the subject is growing. Margaret Smith agrees that the suffragette movement overshadows the previous female protest, going as far as to say “[I] suspect that Victorian feminism will remain an ill-considered subject for most students until examining boards take more seriously the claims of women's history[.]”⁷⁷ Smith writes this in the same year as Crossick. Even if it is being studied to some extent, what use is that if it is not being taught or even considered by students of history?

Criticism of the suffrage movement overshadowing other political and social work by women in existing scholarship is not meant to undermine the suffragettes' importance during this period. It was clearly important to women at the time, but so were the other causes they fought for; they should be studied in tandem. Some other prevalent causes included women's rights related to marriage, sex, education, labor, political involvement, and economic concerns.

If the 1840s witnessed the first appearance of the word feminism, who was the first representative of the movement? Mary Wollstonecraft is often called the first advocate for women's rights, as evidenced by her 1792 text, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Wollstonecraft lamented the lack of educational and professional opportunities for women outside the home. Barbara Caine, author of *Victorian Feminists*, says that “...Wollstonecraft stamped the word ‘Duty’ on the women's rights movement from the outset, thus impressing it with a character it has never lost.”⁷⁸ It is important to consider her work, and not just because she was the “first feminist.” The period in which

⁷⁴ Geoffery Crossick, “Review: *Victorian Feminism 1850-1900*. By Philippa Levine,” *History*, 74:242 (October 1989): p. 553, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24414454>.

⁷⁵ Alice G. Vines, *The American Historical Review* 96:3 (June 1991): p. 874, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2162504>.

⁷⁶ Ellen F. Mappen, *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 23:1 (Spring 1991): p. 155, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4050578>.

⁷⁷ Margaret Smith, *Teaching History*, no. 56 (July 1989): p. 42, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43259561>.

⁷⁸ Barbara Caine, *Victorian Feminists* (Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 26.

Wollstonecraft was writing was the beginning of industrialization in Britain, and women were noticing that while the emergence of a middle class was taking place, so was the separation between home and work.⁷⁹

Conclusions

In the decades following the Victorian era, “types” of women like the New Woman continued to place women in boxes based on their conformity, or lack thereof, of society’s expectations of femininity. The most well-known is the flapper of the 1920s, who prioritized fun over anything else, going out to drink, smoke, dance, and flirt. Flappers are typically thought of as an American phenomenon, but they also existed in Britain. There was also the “Gibson Girl” of the 1900s and early 1910s, designed by illustrator Charles Dana Gibson, who cemented her as the standard of beauty. She was more of a marketing tactic than anything, but that certainly did not stop ladies from wanting to be her.⁸⁰ Though the Gibson Girl was an American concept, she was shaped by European beauty standards and represented ideas of a progressive woman held by the British. She was educated, sharp, full of personality, and enjoyed teasing men. In one image from 1903, a group of women is gathered around a bug-sized man who looks like he is pleading for them to leave him alone, examining him with a magnifying glass and a hat pin above the caption “The Weaker Sex.”⁸¹ This image shows the social evolution of how women interact with men, their newfound realization that they do not have to be in the lower ranks of society; basically, they do not have to be the bug in this humorous situation. The caption certainly ties this all together, using the phrase against the historical instigator of women’s rights.

By pointing out these other “types” of women, of which there are too many more to name, it can be understood that the Victorian era was not the first or last time women have been placed into these categories by society, often in bad faith. Confident women who believed in New Woman ideas, or those who had fun doing what flappers or Gibson Girls did, never tried hiding it, but did not typically go out of their way to place a label upon themselves– they were labeled by the media. With this came

⁷⁹ Lin Lovell, “The British Suffragette Movement: The history of feminist thought,” *CESR Review* (July 2012): p. 2.

⁸⁰ Emily Scarborough, ““Fine Dignity, Picturesque Beauty, and Serious Purpose”: The Reorientation of Suffrage Media in the Twentieth Century,” last updated February 27, 2015, <https://scalar.usc.edu/works/suffrage-on-display/gibson-girl>.

⁸¹ Charles Dana Gibson, “The Weaker Sex. II.,” pen and ink over graphite, 1903, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/ppmsc.05887/>.

scrutiny from the media, as evidenced by newspaper articles by reporters and the public on the subject. By this point, it was more crucial than ever for women to have somewhere to connect; for women's rights activists because of the backlash they received, and for those women against the movement who men in society also cast aside as being suitable only for homemaking and child rearing. This was achieved through the plethora of Victorian women's magazines, New Woman literature, and newspaper coverage highlighting the women's rights movement and its activists.