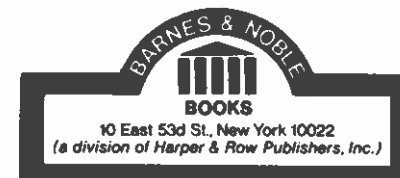


The New Woman and the Victorian Novel

Gail Cunningham



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G.C.

Introduction

She flouts Love's caresses
Reforms ladies' dresses
And scorns the Man-Monster's tirade;
She seems scarcely human
This mannish New Woman
This Queen of the Blushless Brigade.¹

In the last years of the nineteenth century the Victorian middle classes were subjected to what was probably the most profound of the many shocks they had received throughout the reign. The age of *fin-de-siècle* may have failed to culminate in the *fin-du-globe*, languorously desired by Dorian Gray, but it certainly produced a dramatic and thrilling end to the Victorian era and its supposed stability of values. It was a period in which everything could be challenged, a time of enthusiastic extremism and gleeful revolt, of posturing dandyism, absinthe-sipping and bourgeois-shocking, when reputations could be made by an exquisitely expressed preference for green, or yellow, or purple over more conventionally approved colours. But it was also a period of deeply serious inquiry, of impassioned debate over central questions of moral and social behaviour which created acute anxiety in those who felt themselves to be witnessing the breakdown of the rules traditionally thought to hold society together. The froth and ferment which gave rise to the naughty nineties image were symptoms of a deeper malaise, reflected in the most popular pejoratives of the time – 'morbid', 'decadent', 'degenerate', 'neurotic'. It was widely believed that society was sick, probably with an infection spread from Europe through the new translations of Ibsen and Zola. And Woman, always held to be delicate, had succumbed more severely than most. 'Life has taken on a strange unloveliness', wrote Mrs Roy Devereux in 1895, 'and the least beautiful thing therein is the New Woman.'²

Violently abused by many, ridiculed by the less hysterical, and championed by a select few, the New Woman became a focal point for a variety of the controversies which rocked the nineties. In the

comparatively permissive atmosphere of the time, feminist thinkers were provided with a unique opportunity for a radical investigation of the female role, and ideas ranged adventurously over all aspects of women's life. Highly qualified women were emerging as a result of conclusions wrung from the educational establishment and suitable work and social status had to be found for them: the Girton Girl and the Lady Doctor became recognised sub-groups of the New Woman species, and the financial independence and personal fulfilment gained through work began to seem attractive alternatives to marriage. It was pointed out that women were likely to remain the weaker sex as long as they were encased in whalebone and confined their physical activity to the decorous movements of the ballroom, and the new 'doctrine of hygiene' as it was coyly termed advocated sports for women and Rational Dress. Many young women pedalled their way to undreamt-of freedoms on the newly popular bicycle; petticoats and chaperons were equally inappropriate accoutrements, and could be discarded in one go. But these things alone, though important aspects of emancipation, could not account for the elevation of the New Woman into a symbol of all that was most challenging and dangerous in advanced thinking. The crucial factor was, inevitably, sex.

It was suddenly discovered that women, who had for so long been assiduously protected from reading about sex in novels and periodicals, or from hearing about it in polite conversation, had a great deal to say on the subject themselves. Unsavoury topics which had previously lurked in pamphlets, government reports and weighty medical tomes were dragged out by reforming women and paraded triumphantly through the pages of magazines and popular novels. Venereal disease, contraception, divorce and adultery were made the common talking points of the new womanhood. And marriage, traditionally regarded as woman's ultimate goal and highest reward, came in for a tremendous battery of criticism. Mild reformers, like Sarah Grand, deplored the constricting divorce laws and the condition of carefully nurtured ignorance and total inexperience in which young girls were supposed to choose their life partners; but radicals, such as Mona Caird, regarded the whole institution of marriage with such disfavour as to positively recommend its abolition. Some women jeered openly at the ideal of the maternal instinct, and scorned the notion that the care of children was the highest duty to which they should aspire. The family, long regarded as a microcosm of the state, if not of the divine order, was

exposed as a nest of seething frustrations, discontent and deception. It was little wonder that, with such wild notions in her head, the New Woman was regarded with some dismay.

Feminist thinkers in the late eighties and nineties appeared to be redirecting their energies from specific political and legal questions towards the formulation of a new morality, a new code of behaviour and sexual ethics. A complete reassessment of the female character was called for, sweeping aside the old clichés and moral certitudes and replacing them with a questioning frankness which alarmed as much as it excited. And here, of course, the novel could play a significant role. A new frankness, particularly about women, was just what was needed to give the English novel the injection of vitality and reality it so badly required. It was not simply male domination and entrenched attitudes which impeded the development of feminist ideas. The unofficial censorship exercised by the circulating libraries, whose refusal to take a book could spell financial disaster for the author, by magazine editors wary of serialising a novel which might offend their readers, and indeed by public opinion, meant that for most of the nineteenth century a novelist would have little chance of publishing a work which seriously challenged accepted standards of delicacy. But by the last decade of the century novelists who were sensitive to the ideas of the feminist debate or who were anxious to develop artistically a fresh view of women and sexual relationships could command an increasingly wide and eager audience. Major novelists, such as Hardy, Meredith and Gissing, joined the battle for artistic freedom and began to write explicitly about topics associated with the New Woman; and in the 1890s a group of popular writers dubbed 'the New Woman novelists' created a sensation with their highly polemical, and often lurid, feminist fiction. Heroines who refused to conform to the traditional feminine role, challenged accepted ideals of marriage and maternity, chose to work for a living, or who in any way argued the feminist cause, became commonplace in the works of both major and minor writers and were firmly identified by readers and reviewers as New Women. How far this assumption was just – what, in detail, it meant – are questions to be examined later. The important point is that for this brief period at least the emancipation of women and the emancipation of the English novel advanced together.

This apparent revolution could not grow out of nothing: the New Woman, while attracting all the notoriety of sensationalism, was in

many ways a natural development of the more modest 'advanced' or 'modern' women who, in company with sympathetic men, had been pressing for reforms throughout the century. The 'woman question' had formed an essential part of Victorian thought during most of the reign, and there had already been much agonising over both the formal status of women and general conceptions of the female role. To some extent the two are linked – there is no point in agitating for a woman's right to become a doctor while an accepted definition of femininity is a shrinking from the physical facts of life – but for the convenience of brief summaries they can be considered separately.

Although the official concessions made to women in the nineteenth century look paltry by modern standards they did mark essential steps in the struggle for emancipation. By the 1880s the prospects for the woman who was not going to confine herself to the smooth career of wife and mother were significantly less bleak than at the beginning of the century. The educational establishment, though fighting a strenuous rearguard action, was giving ground on several fronts. The foundation of Queen's and Bedford Colleges in London in 1848 and 1849 paved the way to higher education and produced the first generation of well-qualified women teachers. The North London Collegiate in 1850 and Cheltenham Ladies' College in 1854 set a high standard of secondary education; and the great triumph of 1869, the foundation of Girton, gave women their first foot in the door for the assault on Oxford and Cambridge. Largely owing to the individual efforts of such women as Elizabeth Blackwell, Elizabeth Garrett and Sophia Jex-Blake, the medical profession began with extreme reluctance to relent towards women. Areas of female employment expanded as nurses and teachers began to receive professional training. And the commercial world provided an entirely new field of work: the census returns of 1861 and 1871 show no female clerks at all; by 1881 there were nearly 6000 and by 1891 the number had almost trebled to 17,859 – the Typewriter Girl had arrived.

The legal picture was perhaps not quite so encouraging. Though the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 meant that divorce was no longer a total impossibility for the majority, it embodied in law a tacitly accepted moral inequality which proved very hard to dislodge. In effect it gave legal recognition to the common assumption that women should be sexually purer than men. Whereas a husband could sue for divorce simply on the grounds of

his wife's adultery, a wife could petition only if her husband had been guilty of 'incestuous adultery, or of rape, or of sodomy or bestiality, or of adultery coupled with such cruelty as without adultery would have entitled her to a divorce *a mensa et thoro*, or of adultery coupled with desertion without reasonable excuse, for two years and upwards'.³ Thanks to the efforts of Caroline Norton, the Infants' Custody Act was passed in 1839, granting non-adulterous wives the privilege of retaining the children of a broken marriage, provided they were under seven years old. The Married Woman's Property Act of 1882 gave women a legal right to their own property after marriage, a right which suggested to some that a powerful incentive for discontented wives to remain married had been irresponsibly removed. But the vote was apparently no nearer. In 1870 the Suffrage Bill was definitely blocked, and the death of John Stuart Mill in 1873 dealt a crippling blow to the hopes of campaigners. Not until 1895, when the new parliament was returned with more than half the members theoretically committed to the principle of women's suffrage, were hopes revived, though in the event these again proved vain.

However, it was not really until the militant suffragette movement of the early twentieth century that the vote began to be regarded as the cure for all female oppression. Towards the end of the nineteenth century the emphasis fell on questions of social organisation, and particularly of sexual morality, and here again the New Woman was building on earlier foundations. One of the most interesting of mid-century writers on sexual matters was George Drysdale, whose book *The Elements of Social Science or Physical, Sexual and Natural Religion* was first published in 1854 and quickly ran through several editions. Drysdale deplores 'the morbid delicacy, which forbids all open discussion of sexual matters', and sets about remedying the situation in several hundred pages of close print which combine tedium, quirkiness and good sense in more or less equal proportions. His comments on marriage could have come from the mouth of any New Woman of the nineties: 'Marriage is one of the chief instruments in the degradation of women. It perpetuates the old inveterate error, that it is the province of the female sex to depend upon man for support, and to attend merely to household cares and the rearing of children.'⁴ But his objections to marriage are not based solely on an altruistic concern for female emancipation; there are medical questions involved too. It was Drysdale's belief that certain diseases could be cured only by sexual

intercourse. Obviously this was a difficult prescription to issue if marriage was a necessary preliminary to the implementation of the cure, so freer sexual relations were not only socially, but medically, desirable. It was doubtful, though, that the mothers of ailing young ladies would flock to Dr Drysdale for advice. More practically, he devoted a large section of the book to advocating contraception and describing the most reliable methods then available. Poverty, he argues, is the greatest of social evils, and its 'only cause' is overpopulation. Fortunately there exists a corresponding 'only cure', but before describing it Drysdale goes heavily on the defensive, earnestly exhorting the reader 'not to prejudge this greatest of questions, not to allow commonly received opinions to divert him from its steadfast consideration'. With infinite caution, he leads up to the shocking truth: 'there is a way' which 'contains within itself little real evil, or at least the smallest possible amount of evil'; and at last, no doubt to the relief of what must by now be a very jittery reader, he springs it—'PREVENTIVE SEXUAL INTER-COURSE'. The ensuing description of such methods as the safe period, the sheath, the sponge (highly recommended) and withdrawal is, however, fairly straightforward, and could no doubt prove of immense benefit to any overburdened wives who had had the courage to follow him to his conclusion.

Drysdale was also indirectly involved in the Bradlaugh-Besant case, which in 1877 gave the contraception question the greatest publicity it had yet received. Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant decided to republish *The Fruits of Philosophy* more as a challenge to the Obscene Publications Act than as an advertisement for birth control, but inevitably it was contraception, rather than the freedom of the press, which commanded attention. *The Fruits of Philosophy* by Charles Knowlton, first published in Britain in 1834, described various methods of contraception and had sold steadily but in modest numbers ever since its appearance. When its latest publisher, Charles Watts, also a sub-editor on Bradlaugh's *National Reformer*, was prosecuted under the Obscene Publications Act and pleaded guilty, Bradlaugh and Besant hastened to re-establish the cause of freethinking by provoking another trial. They reissued *The Fruits of Philosophy* with notes by George Drysdale and sold vast numbers of it before the law finally rose to the bait and arrested them. The outcome of the trial and subsequent appeal was acquittal on a technicality, but the almost inadvertent significance of the case was the enormous amount of publicity given to contraception in

the national press. It became increasingly difficult for even the most determinedly modest to pretend ignorance of the question, and *The Fruits of Philosophy*, together with Annie Besant's updated account of contraception *The Law of Population*, enjoyed enormous sales. By the end of the century the practice of birth control had become fairly widespread among the middle classes, and was firmly attached to the feminist cause.

General discussions of sexual questions and the increase of knowledge about contraception were obviously important steps in the build up towards the radical feminist thinking of the eighties and nineties. But by far the best and most powerful plea for female emancipation before the emergence of the New Woman came in John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869). Though many of his points had been made earlier by Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), she had been so far ahead of her time as to be practically lost sight of, and it was Mill's work which became the bible of the feminists in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Mill's case for 'a principle of perfect equality' is argued with incisive logic and meticulously covers the ground from equality before the law, in government, the professions and education down to equality of influence in domestic matters and power-sharing in marriage. Probably his major achievement, though, was to spell out with greater clarity than any previous writer the psychological pressures which kept women in their traditional place: in modern terminology, he spotted the indoctrination of sex-roles. 'All women', he writes,

are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men; not self-will, and government by self-control, but submission, and yielding to the control of others. All the moralities tell them that it is the duty of women, and all the current sentimentalities that it is their nature, to live for others; to make complete abnegation of themselves, and to have no life but in their affections.⁵

This leads on to an attack on the notion of 'natural' femininity, always one of the prime weapons of the anti-feminist. Mill effectively demolishes the idea that what is instinctively apprehended as 'natural' must be so, and more particularly that anybody can pronounce with certainty on what is naturally feminine. Women, he says,

have always hitherto been kept, as far as regards spontaneous development, in so unnatural a state, that their nature cannot but have been greatly distorted and disguised; and no one can safely pronounce that if women's nature was left to choose its direction as freely as men's, and if no artificial bent were attempted to be given to it except that required by the conditions of human society, and given to both sexes alike, there would be any material difference, or perhaps any difference at all, in the character and capacities which would unfold themselves.⁶

This was an exciting idea: if women could only set aside the assumptions about their own nature ground into them from earliest infancy and forge ahead towards any goal they may choose, there was no limit to their possible achievements. Deviation from the accepted pattern of feminine behaviour need no longer be regarded as 'unnatural'—it could just as well be called 'spontaneous development'.

There were powerful indications even before the publication of Mill's essay that many women were choosing to develop spontaneously, and were attracting a good deal of adverse comment as a result. A general feeling that young ladies were not what they used to be was already creating nervous flutters in the conventionally-minded, and this feeling was skilfully exploited by one of the most ardent anti-feminists of the period, Mrs Lynn Linton. In 1868 the *Saturday Review* published what was to become one of its most famous articles, 'The Girl of the Period',⁷ which created intense controversy and whose title passed into the language. Mrs Lynn Linton's portrayal of modern womanhood was certainly not calculated to allay fears, but at least appeared to identify an enemy. Nostalgically she summons up a picture of the 'fair young English girl' of the past, a paragon 'who, when she married, would be her husband's friend and companion, but never his rival . . . a tender mother, an industrious housekeeper, a judicious mistress'. The contrast with the present is acutely painful, for the modern young woman apparently has more in common with the prostitute than with the angel in the house: 'The girl of the period is a creature who dyes her hair and paints her face'; her inordinate regard for fashion leads her to 'strong, bold talk and freshness; to the love of pleasure and indifference to duty; to the desire of money before either love or happiness; to uselessness at home, dissatisfaction with the monotony of ordinary life, and horror of all useful work'. She apes the manner

of the *demi-mondaine* with the result that 'men are afraid of her; and with reason'. Mrs Lynn Linton concludes, sweepingly but with tremendous popular appeal:

All men whose opinion is worth having prefer the simple and genuine girl of the past, with her tender little ways and pretty, bashful modesties, to this loud and rampant modernisation, with her false red hair and painted skin, talking slang as glibly as a man, and by preference leading the conversation to doubtful subjects.

It might appear that this fast and unalluring creature could have little to do with the deep sincerity of the reforming modern woman. The predatory manhunter with her painted face and dyed hair seems very far indeed from the New Woman's ideals of integrity and independence. But the traditionalist public was in no mood to discriminate, and the Girl of the Period image was superimposed on any picture of modern womanhood. In any case, some of Mrs Lynn Linton's pronouncements, though much inflated and distorted for rhetorical effect, could be identified with feminist ideas. 'Strong, bold talk and freshness', for example, could be interpreted as a laudable reluctance to draw on the reserves of false modesty supposed to be at the command of every girl. 'Dissatisfaction with the monotony of ordinary life' was surely not so heinous a crime that it should imply exclusion from the ranks of decent society, and Mrs Lynn Linton's ideal of English womanhood—'tender, loving, retiring or domestic'—could not be expected to appeal to the new spirit of adventure. Indeed it was this very image, held up by so many for imitation by the ideal Englishwoman, that was being so vigorously challenged. Sarah Ellis's best-selling books of the 1840s, which codified at length proper feminine behaviour, retained their popular following, and there were still battalions of Lynn Lintons who would endorse her rhetoric:

Can it be a subject of regret to any kind and feeling woman, that her sphere of action is one adapted to the exercise of the affections, where she may love, and trust, and hope, and serve, to the utmost of her wishes? Can it be a subject of regret that she is not called upon, so much as man, to calculate, to compete, to struggle, but rather occupy a sphere in which the elements of discord cannot

with propriety be admitted—in which beauty and order are expected to denote her presence, and where the exercise of benevolence is the duty she is most frequently called upon to perform?⁸

The New Woman's answer to these questions would be an emphatic and defiant Yes.

By the 1890s, then, when the New Woman began to emerge with a distinct identity, a good deal of progress had been achieved in the two areas most affecting modern woman. Reforms in the law and in educational and professional institutions had opened up a wider range of opportunities than had ever previously been available; and frank discussions of sexual questions, together with rational investigations of woman's place in contemporary society, had done much to dispel the stifling clouds of mystique which had gathered protectively round the fair sex.

The New Woman built on both foundations. She could now elect to put her energies into professional rather than matrimonial achievement, and could justify her decision by pointing out that marriage, as conventionally defined, was a state little better than slavery. She could make her own choice about having children, either with or without the authority of a marriage licence, and she could demand complete freedom from either parental or legal control in selecting her sexual partner. In fact, the New Woman represented everything that was daring and revolutionary, everything that was challenging to the norms of female behaviour dictated by the Lynn Lintons and Sarah Ellises. But two essential points have to be borne in mind if an accurate picture of the New Woman is to emerge. Firstly, a woman was only genuinely New if her conflict with social convention was on a *matter of principle*. Mere eccentricity, or flamboyance along the Girl of the Period lines were not sufficient. The New Woman had high ideals; she examined the world from an intelligent and informed base, and if what she saw led her to the conclusion that accepted standards were unjust or inadequate then she would try to go her own way according to her own principles. Secondly, the New Woman's radical stance was taken on matters of personal choice. It was not based on any recognisable movement or organisation, and was necessarily limited to the areas where personal choice could operate. A woman at the end of the nineteenth century could not choose to vote in a general election, but she could opt for bachelor motherhood, or a career, or

even, on a trivial level, short hair, comfortable clothes and a cigarette. Any one of these, provided it was accompanied by stern pronouncements on its liberating effect, would be enough to label its perpetrator a New Woman. And in many ways this attack on domestic and social arrangements, even though unaccompanied by violent demonstrations, incendiarism and suicide, was a good deal more dramatic, and more significant in terms of total female emancipation, than the suffrage struggle which eventually superseded it.

Intelligent, individualistic and principled, the New Woman was also essentially middle-class. Working-class women, while no longer hauling coal in mines eleven hours a day, still led lives so totally remote from the cosy domesticity and shining feminine ideal against which the New Woman was reacting that this kind of revolt could do nothing for them. It was pointless to warn a working-class woman against the evils of an arranged marriage to a dissolute aristocrat, or to urge her to undertake activities more fulfilling than embroidery and visiting. The problems of working-class women were entirely different from those of the middle classes, and received very little attention from writers on the New Woman.

We have, then, some sort of composite picture of the New Woman. More precise definitions are bound to be elusive, since the lack of any formal organisation meant that the principles on which she acted would be largely dictated by individual circumstance or interest. But as many people regarded the New Woman as no more than a malicious invention of journalists, it is worth looking at the treatment she got from the press. This after all is largely what created the public image, and set the context in which the novels dealing with the new type of heroine were judged. There can be no doubt that the New Woman provided the popular press with an endless source of amusement. Cartoonists, naturally enough, seized on externals, and portrayed her in academic dress, or with short hair and mannish clothes, and even, in one *Punch* cartoon, with a gun under her arm (the caption implies that, though bloodthirsty, the New Woman is a poor shot). It is also clear that even if comfortably non-existent, she could still be severely damaging to the more restrained feminists. Elizabeth Chapman was one writer who scented the danger from the 'impatient and ill-balanced minds' of New Women to the more respectable feminist aims:

I believe that these have been obscured to a rather serious extent

of late by the interminable flood of gaseous chatter to which the invention of a journalistic myth known as the 'New Woman' has given rise, and that it has become necessary sharply to emphasise the distinction between this phantom and the real reformer and friend of her sex and of humanity whom I would call the 'Best Woman'.⁹

Another typical response was amused tolerance. Richard le Gallienne, in an article on 'The New Womanhood',¹⁰ relates what he obviously feels to be the charming tale of his encounter with one of its representatives. She is 'a dear, brown-eyed child of nineteen', who is regrettably forced to go out into the world to earn a living. He lures her into an apparently sensible discussion of qualifications, salary and promotion prospects, but all the while his thoughts are elsewhere: 'It amused me that the possibility of these calculations being rendered superfluous by a happy marriage never seemed to occur to her'. His eyes begin to wander too: 'her maidenhood was of that warm-eyed full-bosomed type that as plainly prophesies motherhood as the blossom half transformed into fruit prophesies autumn'. When he puts these points to her, her understandable disgust merely gives him opportunity for more twinkling-eyed condescension: 'You should have seen her draw herself up and protest her scorn of any such base compromise'. Exactly the response, in fact, to make the New Woman with the gun take speedy steps to improve her aim.

A more serious analysis of the New Woman's principles was given in a series of six articles run by the *Saturday Review* in 1895.¹¹ Snappily titled 'Dies Dominae, by a Woman of the Day' these essays were designed to promote sympathy with the New Woman and to give a reasoned defence of her ideas. Lest this should be too readily achieved, however, a right of rejoinder was granted to 'Lady Jeune' who stepped in smartly at the conclusion of the three most controversial articles to deliver a blow on behalf of the Old woman. We therefore have an interesting confrontation between the new and the old in a context of reasonably temperate debate, and the attitudes taken by each side are clearly and neatly contrasted.

The article on 'The Maternal Instinct' is particularly revealing, since it is accepted by both sides that families are decreasing in size – presumably as a result of more widespread contraception – and that there is a marked reluctance among married women to devote the best years of their lives exclusively to the rearing of children. Where

they differ, of course, is on the reasons for this and its desirability. The Woman of the Day puts her case with vigour, contemptuously dismissing the maternal ideal: 'The only woman at the present time who is willing to be regarded as a mere breeding machine is she who lacks the wit to adopt any other rôle'. She argues that the New Woman, by examining the question of motherhood rationally and without prejudice, has exposed the immorality of indiscriminate breeding – women physically wrecked by the age of thirty, children born into families unable to give them proper care – and has demonstrated the practical superiority of intelligence over instinctive or 'natural' femininity. The New Woman 'has seen enough to make her recoil with horror from the heedless motherhood which was accounted the glory of the instinctive woman. Such maternity may be natural, but it is scarcely civilised, and to call it divine is sheer cant'. The only good mother, she suggests, is one prepared to limit her breeding capacity, one who has more to offer her child than an endless succession of siblings and a vapid ideal of maternal devotion. 'After centuries of motherhood, woman at large is beginning to be simply – woman.'

On the contrary, retorts Lady Jeune, 'woman, as the mother, represents the most sacred idea in life'. 'No woman', she declares uncompromisingly, 'knows what real joy is till her babe is laid in her arms.' This is good conventional stuff, of course, and no doubt comforting to those readers who had just seen themselves stigmatised as mere witless breeding machines. Lady Jeune concedes, though, that especially among the middle classes 'the size of the family is diminishing rapidly'. But she attributes this not to the sense of responsibility and desire for self-fulfilment seen as the mark of the New Woman, but to a frivolous craving for social pleasures closer to Mrs Lynn Linton's conception of the Girl of the Period: 'The real fact is, that women do not have children because it is irksome and interferes with their amusements'. On the question of children the new and old are irreconcilably divided.

As might be expected, this is also the case with the discussion on 'The Value of Love'. 'Love' here is obviously a euphemism for sex, and even the champion of the New Woman is forced into an apologetic strain. A certain amount of sympathetic understanding is required, she implies, if the New Woman's overconcentration on 'the physical' is to be excused:

With the awakening of the intellect there has been a coincident

awakening of the senses. All through the centuries the physical faculties of woman have either lain dormant or have been exercised instinctively without comprehension. Now, for the first time in her progress towards perfect knowledge, their significance has been revealed to her, and as yet she can think of nothing else.

During the first thrill of emancipation, in other words, excitement over the awakening of 'physical faculties' might overwhelm all other interests; but things will simmer down, gradually returning to a state of calm when 'the desire of the flesh and its satisfaction becomes an inconsiderable incident in life, instead of the aim and end of it'.

Despite the circumlocutions, it is clear that the New Woman is regarded as a highly sexual being, all the more dangerous since she cannot be dismissed as a prostitute or a fallen woman. Lady Jeune produces the obligatory shudder of revulsion and defends the cause of purity with a flat denial: 'I look among the women of England for the shameless and insatiate creature, who, I am told, represents the New Woman of the time, and I cannot find her'. Researches lead her to the reassuring conclusion that 'the average English woman is a cold, almost passionless, creature, to whom the allurements of passion offer small temptation', but she still feels it necessary to issue a prophetic warning: 'The voyage of discovery on which the New Woman is embarking will end on the rocks of a life's shipwreck'.

Even her champion expressed some qualms about the New Woman, particularly deploring her demand for work rather than leisured ease. But these, and even Lady Jeune's stern rejoinders, pale into insignificance when compared with the wrath of Mrs Lynn Linton. She strode into the attack with all her customary zest, and again presented an alarming figure who combined many of the ideals of the New Woman—stated of course in extreme and derogatory terms—with some more eccentric attributes. The Girl of the Period has now matured into a Wild Woman, whose

ideal of life for herself is absolute personal independence coupled with supreme power over men. She repudiates the doctrine of individual conformity for the sake of general good; holding the self-restraint involved as an act of slavishness of which no woman worth her salt would be guilty. She makes between the sexes no distinctions, moral or aesthetic, nor even personal; but holds that what is lawful to the one is permissible to the other.¹²

Except for the tone, there is little in this to which the New Woman would take exception apart from the 'supreme power over men'. Nor would she object, as Mrs Lynn Linton does, to women who indulge in such unladylike activities as tennis or golf or earning a living. But when Mrs Lynn Linton really gets into her stride she produces an extraordinary picture of a powder-encrusted harridan lounging around with the men after dinner, smoking, drinking, gambling and in her spare time—for some obscure reason—breeding horses.

After reading Mrs Lynn Linton one might be excused for approaching the question of the New Woman's actual existence with some trepidation. But while it is difficult to produce instances of female horse-breeders gazing blearily through their make-up at a roulette wheel, there is independent corroboration from women of the time that a more responsibly revolutionary life-style was becoming increasingly possible. Many of the writers who won fame with New Woman novels were prepared to put their theories into practice. M^{énie} Muriel Dowie explored the Carpathian mountains entirely alone, dressed in tight trousers and thigh boots; 'George Egerton' (Mary Chavelita Dunne) earned her own living in three continents, married twice and took lovers; Olive Schreiner travelled widely in England, Europe and South Africa, wrote highly respected political works and was an intimate friend of Havelock Ellis. But there had always been individual women who refused to conform. We gain a more convincing picture of strong minority protest from the pages of an extraordinary magazine, the *Adult*, whose stormy career lasted from June 1897 to March 1899. The *Adult* was essentially a sex magazine which offered a social conscience in place of pornography. The first editorial declared that 'its pages will be open for the discussion of important phases of sex questions which are almost universally ignored elsewhere' and promised sympathy with the New Woman's ideal of personal freedom in determining moral codes:

The name of our paper, the *Adult*, signifies that we recognise the paramount right of the individual to self-realisation in all non-invasive directions. The *Adult* advocates the absolute freedom of two individuals of full age, to enter into and conclude at will, any mutual relationships whatever, where no third person's material interests are concerned.¹³

The *Adult* presents us with a remarkable picture of sexual lib-

eration in the late nineteenth century. Its discussions of homosexuality and lesbianism are frank and tolerant without being remotely prurient; the ringing calls for Free Love which echo through almost every number are often accompanied by case histories of couples who can speak for its efficacy as a cure for all social ills; and its radical feminist stance often produces ideas for sexual equality far in advance of more mainstream—and perhaps more practical—women's movements. Though passionately advocating contraception as the greatest of all boons to the emancipated woman, it conceded that the total extinction of the human race was not a desirable end of the feminist campaign, and devoted a good deal of space to attempts to reconcile the ideal of freedom for women with the necessity for a certain amount of breeding. A government-sponsored child benefit scheme was one proposal, and another, which has only just crept back into modern feminist manifestos, was a fair wage for housewives. The *Adult's* tone is crusading and hopeful, and based throughout on the assumption that many people are already leading lives of exemplary liberation. 'There are women', declared Lillian Harman, 'brave, true *womanly* women, too—who live their lives in freedom, calmly ignoring conventional commands.' And in a later number the same writer gave a glowing account of the New Woman:

Nature does not force the 'new woman' to assume a position inferior to her lover, in any relation of life. She will sustain only the relations which she herself desires, will be happy in the love of her lover, and tenacious of her own self-respect; and her children will imbibe the spirit of their free mother, and will be happy, healthy, and independent—in marked contrast to the offspring of the 'submitting' slave mother.¹⁴

Undoubtedly there were women whose mode of life could identify them as New, and the wide and often hysterical press coverage had created an impression of large-scale revolt. But for the vast majority, ideas greatly outstripped practice. The *New Woman* was held up as a symbolic figurehead for a type of social rebellion which many women might concede to be generally desirable but personally unattainable; yet since the *New Woman* rebelled essentially against personal circumstances, the most effective way of portraying her was not in journalistic summaries of her principles, but in novels. It was the novel which could investigate in detail the

clash between radical principles and the actualities of contemporary life, which could portray most convincingly the stifling social conventions from which the *New Woman* was trying to break free, and which could present arguments for new standards of morality, new codes of behaviour, in the context of an easily recognisable social world. The conventional concerns of the popular novel—love, marriage, the family—were the conventional concerns of women, and a fictional heroine who took a fresh look at these would provide a more obvious point of identification for a sheltered middle-class reader than the alarming and sometimes monstrous *New Woman* figures created by the press. And novelists stood to gain too. For the *New Woman* the destruction of sexual taboos appeared essential to female emancipation; and if there was one thing Victorian fiction needed above all else it was the removal of what Hardy called the 'insuperable bar' which prevented the inclusion in a novel of any overt treatment of sex. The portrayal of a new type of heroine would almost inevitably entail a franker approach to sexuality, and would open vast new areas of female psychology and behaviour which had previously been excluded from the novelist's range.

Few novelists specifically identified their heroines as *New Women*—the term was too loaded with associations of eccentricity and fanaticism—but a great many novels which appeared in the nineties seemed to contemporary readers to be directly propagating the *New Woman's* ideas. Marriage, which had usually provided the conventional happy ending, began to be used more frequently as a beginning, and a bad one at that. By minutely dissecting unfortunate marriages, novelists showed ordinary women arriving through bitter experience at the *New Woman's* principle of personal freedom in selecting sexual partners. Meredith's *Lord Ormont and his Aminta*, Gissing's *The Odd Women* and Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* were all widely interpreted as problem novels on the *New Woman* theme. Alternatives to marriage, including divorce and free love, were enthusiastically canvassed in fiction, and Grant Allen's enormously popular *The Woman Who Did* became the archetypal anti-marriage novel. Female sexuality was made fashionable by George Egerton, who received hundreds of effusive letters from women grateful for seeing their unmentionable feelings given the seal of respectability in print. Motherhood was ruthlessly stripped of its sentimental trappings, and some novelists imitated Ibsen and showed their heroines slamming the door on husband and

children. The ideal of female purity was investigated: should it, as the traditionalists maintained, consist in carefully nurtured ignorance of the harsher facts of life, or should it rather be based on knowledge and understanding – even experience? When Hardy sub-titled *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* 'A Pure Woman' he was – as he must have known perfectly well – issuing a deliberately provocative challenge to conventional notions of purity. Altogether the period is rich in novels which show women being led through the normal incidents of domestic life to a point where circumstances compel them to discard their old assumptions and strike out into a more radical course of thought or action.

Obviously this break through the conventional bounds of fiction carried far-reaching implications for the freedom of the novel in general and the portrayal of women in particular. When a respected novelist like Hardy was savagely berated in the press for the alleged obscenity of *Jude the Obscure*, more enlightened critics were impelled to dispute the desirability of artistic restraint and initiate important debates on the freedom of fiction. Woman writers who used the novel as a propaganda machine for feminist ideas, and who presented heroines indulging in minutely detailed self-analysis, encouraged others to reassess the fictional portrayal of the female character. 'It is only lately that woman has really begun to turn herself inside out, as it were, and to put herself into her books', wrote Hugh Stutfield in an article on 'The Psychology of Feminism'. 'Man has no idea what it feels like to be a woman, but it will not be her fault if he does not soon begin in some degree to understand.'¹⁵ But the social implications were also grave. It was generally feared that what women read about, they might do, and thus the new type of novel appeared to threaten the whole domestic structure. Torrents of abuse were poured on the writers of New Woman novels. They were 'petticoat anarchists who put a blazing torch to the shrine of self-respect and feminine shame',¹⁶ 'women who appear to have cultivated the intellect at the expense of all womanly feeling and instinctive delicacy, and to have cast aside all reticence in the mad desire to make others eat as freely as themselves of the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge'.¹⁷ The general conclusion was that 'if the New Woman elects to be judged by the fiction she writes, reads, and applauds, nay – may we not justly add – inspires, then she must . . . accept the position of the bitterest foe to the cherished modesty of our sex that the century has known'.¹⁸

Thus the emergence of the New Woman as a social phenomenon

was matched by an increasing interest among novelists in the woman question as a source of artistic inspiration. Minor writers in particular, content for the most part to parade their arguments unencumbered with the literary trappings of imaginative power or psychological plausibility, gave stark and forceful expression to the new feminist ideas. And the themes they tackled were integrated with greater skill into the works of more talented novelists. Where these works differed from the mainstream of earlier Victorian fiction was in the extent to which they were prepared to provoke a clash with accepted social convention which would reverberate outside the world of the novel. In portraying marital breakdown, adultery, free love or bachelor motherhood unaccompanied by the approved moral retribution – or indeed heavily supported by an impassioned moral defence – these novels were ruthlessly hacking away the foundations of idealised femininity on which much of the Victorian moral structure was built. More or less overtly they were broadcasting the ideas of the New Woman, and an avid public hung on their every word, eager to be either loftily inspired or deliciously shocked.

An investigation of the works of minor New Woman novelists – minor only in the sense that they produced nothing of lasting literary merit, since their novels sold in enormous quantities – will give us the clearest picture of the themes treated and the new character types which emerged. It will then become apparent how far major novelists were responding to the radical feminist thinking of the time and to what extent they were influenced by the works of their less talented colleagues. But before turning to the New Woman of popular fiction, it is worth looking at the ways in which the ideas she developed were treated in the earlier Victorian novel. This will give some idea of the degree to which deference to publicly approved morality limited the nineteenth-century novel; it will reveal some of the conventions surrounding the fictional portrayal of women, and provide a useful comparison by which to judge the revolutionary nature of the New Woman novel.

3. A. B. Hopkins, *Elizabeth Gaskell: Her Life and Work* (London, 1952), p. 124.
4. Pollard, op. cit., pp. 86-7.

Notes

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1. *Woman*, 26 September 1894, p. 3. These lines were picked to win a readers' competition for the best definition of the New Woman.
2. R. Devereux ('A Woman of the Day'), 'The Feminine Potential', *Saturday Review*, 22 June 1895, pp. 824-5.
3. Matrimonial Causes Act, 1857, Section 27.
4. G. Drysdale, *The Elements of Science, or Physical, Sexual and Natural Religion*, 4th edn. (London, 1861) p. 355.
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6. *Ibid.*, p. 273.
7. E. Lynn Linton, 'The Girl of the Period', *Saturday Review*, 14 March 1868, pp. 339-40.
8. S. Ellis, *The Daughters of England* (London, 1845) pp. 22-3.
9. E. R. Chapman, *Marriage Questions in Modern Fiction* (London, 1897), foreword.
10. R. le Gallienne, 'The New Womanhood', *Woman*, Literary Supplement, 2 May 1894, p. i.
11. These articles ran weekly in the *Saturday Review* from 18 May to 22 June 1895. They are reprinted, without the Rejoinders by 'Lady Jeune', in R. Devereux, *The Ascent of Woman* (London, 1896).
12. E. Lynn Linton, 'The Wild Women as Social Insurgents', *Nineteenth Century*, October 1891, pp. 596-605.
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17. 'A Century of Feminine Fiction', *All the Year Round*, 8 December 1894, pp. 537-40.
18. *Ibid.*

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2. A. Pollard, *Mrs Gaskell: Novelist and Biographer* (Manchester, 1965), p. 88.

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1. G. and W. Grossmith, *The Diary of a Nobody*, (London, Penguin edn, 1965), p. 89.
2. H. Ellis, *Women and Marriage* (London, 1888), p. 14.
3. T. Hardy, 'Candour in English Fiction', *New Review*, January 1890, pp. 15-21.
4. M. Oliphant, 'The Anti-Marriage League', *Blackwood's Magazine*, January 1896, pp. 135-49.
5. 'Past and Present Heroines in Fiction', *Saturday Review*, 28 July 1883, pp. 107-8.
6. See Introduction, note 15.
7. *Lloyd's Penny Weekly Miscellany*, iii (1844) p. 530. Quoted in M. Dalziel, *Popular Fiction 100 Years Ago* (London, 1957).
8. S. Grundy, *The New Woman* (London, 1894), p. 27.
9. 'A Chat with Mme Sarah Grand', *Woman*, Literary Supplement, 2 May 1894, pp. i-ii.
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11. *Spectator*, 25 March 1893, p. 395.
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13. *Bookman*, November 1894, pp. 55-6.
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15. F. Harrison, *Funeral Address for Grant Allen* (privately printed, 1899).
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21. J. L. May, *John Lane and the Nineties*, (London, 1936).
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1. R. Y. Tyrrell, *Fortnightly Review*, June 1896, pp. 857-64.

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