Who was the “New Woman?”

Viewpoint: The New Woman of the Progressive era (1890–1915) represented a popular culture idea embraced by women that marked a shift in the role of the family in American society.

Viewpoint: The New Woman of the late nineteenth century was constrained by the culture’s concern with body consciousness.

Nineteenth-century historian Thomas Carlyle said that history was merely the biography of great men, and historians of that era sought out “representative men” to explain their epoch. This particular historical method would need to change in the twentieth century: the history of the Progressive period cannot be written as a biography of great men, because its true leaders were women. Jane Addams, Florence Kelly, and other women exemplify the Progressive impulse and shift our understanding of history.

In addition to pushing for political and social change, the women of the Progressive era sought changes in their own status. Proclaiming the arrival of the “New Woman,” ordinary women sought new roles in society, as reformers, political activists, and social leaders. It was a revolution in social mores, which has made the twentieth century fundamentally different from the nineteenth.

But how “new” was the New Woman? In these two essays, scholars Keren R. McGinity and Clara Bouricius take remarkably different positions. Bouricius, whose scholarly interest is in the writings of women, looks at the history of feminism and traces the roots of the New Woman to the nineteenth century. The New Woman, Bouricius argues, marked a real change in the role and status of women in American society.

McGinity, on the other hand, argues that the New Woman was a change in rhetoric, but not a change in women’s status. Women in the early part of the century, and even today, continued to be captive to social ideology and to images of ideal womanhood. The New Woman rhetoric, promising to free women from impossible social constraints, masked the fact that women continued to be confined to traditional roles. While women were changing their political and social roles, she argues, they were still constrained by social attitudes about what women’s roles should be. McGinity sees women constrained, too, by a culture of consumption, which replaced the earlier culture of work, defining women by what they wore instead of by what they did. In this way Progressive era women were actually more constrained than the women of earlier generations.

Which interpretation is more convincing? What evidence does each scholar use to advance her argument? This issue may not be possible to resolve.
Viewpoint:
The New Woman of the Progressive era (1890–1915) represented a popular culture idea embraced by women that marked a shift in the role of the family in American society.

Sometime in the late 1880s or early 1890s the “New Woman” appeared in print as a named concept, coined possibly by philosopher Henry James, or possibly by British novelist Sarah Grand: historians do not agree. “The Woman Question” (were women the same as men and were they equal) had been quite dominant in popular literature, but now suddenly everyone was talking about the “New Woman.” Was the new woman most adequately represented by reformers such as Jane Addams or socialist Crystal Eastman; by free-love advocate Isabella Beecher Hooker or birth-control advocate Margaret Sanger; by author Charlotte Perkins Gilman, inventor of the “kitchenless household”; by adventurous and feisty journalists and muckrakers such as Ida B. Wells; by the hordes of working girls who avidly embraced the fashions and pleasures of mass-consumer culture; by literary professionals such as Pauline Hopkins, onetime editor of the Colored American Magazine; by Alice Paul, cofounder of the Congressional Union; or even by novelist and playwright Anita Loos? Or should one look rather in literature to Kate Chopin’s sexually awakened Edna Pontellier in The Awakening (1899); Theodore Dreiser’s “sister” Carrie Meeber, who finds her destiny as a working girl on the stage, in Sister Carrie (1900); Edith Wharton’s tennis-playing “innocent” May Welland in The Age of Innocence (1920); F. Scott Fitzgerald’s quintessentially idle Daisy Buchanan in The Great Gatsby (1925); or a woman as eternally searching for a new self, yet trapped by her provincialism, as Henry James’s Isabella Archer in The Portrait of a Lady (1881)?

According to Cecilia Tichi, in an article in Columbia Literary History of the United States (1988), the first New Woman was the “powerful” literary figure of a sexually awakening woman that appeared in the 1880s, which “embodied new values and posed a critical challenge to the existing order” and was thus much spoofed and maligned. Mary Beth Norton and Ruth M. Alexander suggest with the title of their essay “The ‘New Woman’: Suffrage and Social Reform,” in Major Problems in American Women’s History (1996), that New Women were instead themselves politically active in ways women of previous generations were not. They argue that New Women combined “a [traditional] belief in sexual difference [between men and women] with the pursuit of equality,” both in service to expanding opportunities for women. Other scholars, who take a larger cultural view, hold that the New Woman label in fact denotes a lack of agency on the part of women: she was a creature of advertising, of objectification by a relentlessly emerging commercial culture that not only co-opted women’s increasing presence in the marketplace in service to corporate capitalism, but also objectified women’s bodies in the process—thus rendering “New” women even more powerless than the old—trapped every way in their own image.

The emergence of the term New Woman and its consistent use for more than thirty years is a complex phenomenon because the image is so multifaceted. Except for their essentially white nature, the idealistic young women in search of social relevance in the 1880s seemed to have little ideology in common with the pleasure-seeking “flapper” of the 1920s. One wanted to change both her role and the world; the other was out for personal freedom and happiness. Nonetheless, both were quintessentially single. “Notable” (ideal) women of the nineteenth century were by definition married. A woman not married was either too young or stood too much on the sidelines of the nuclear family—emerging as the cornerstone of American national ideology during the nineteenth century—to be important in national discourse. However, the home and “domesticity” lost productive power in the latter part of the nineteenth century, to reemerge as the locus of efficient consumption in the 1930s. It is thus in fact quite meaningful that the “New Woman is by definition single. What was “new” about her was that she was not married, yet fully “woman,” not girl or spinster. New Women, real or image, were women who were conscious of change in the definition of womanhood. No more and no less. The New Woman ideas, which changed markedly over the course of its existence, and was used by some women as well in popular culture, was always closely connected to ideas of national progress. The first term “New,” took precedence over the second, “Women,” and New Woman ideology ultimately did little to either free real women from gender stereotyping or constrain them from freeing themselves.

In the 1880s and 1890s a first generation of college-educated middle-class young women wanted to change womanhood, to be useful in a wider circle than the family, and started the “settlement movement.” Jane Addams founded Hull House in Chicago in 1889 to consciously live and work outside of the family structure but, nonetheless, served as a mother of sorts among immigrant populations. The object was to bring about social change much in the same way that a middle-class mother raised her children to be good citizens. That this development eventually
included becoming garbage inspector in Chicago's nineteenth ward and taking on the political power structure "merely" grew out of that womanly task, but it was a new and (to many) disturbingly political translation of mothering. Black women who joined the National Association of Colored Women also took their family task to the larger structure of "the race." Again, it was the same old responsibility in form, but a conscious taking-on of public persona in order to get that task done, and thus an elemental redefinition of the private sphere.

Of course, there were plenty of New Women to whom political agency was exactly the point of being newly defined, who demanded equality and/or the vote. The suffrage movement had been splintered over questions involving essentialism (the essence of womanhood as biologically different from manhood)–whether petition or political action was more appropriate, whether suffrage was an object in its own right or only part of a wholesale revaluation of women in society and law to protect women. Carrie Chapman Catt and the other women who united the warring factions of the suffrage movement into the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) in 1890 became politicized—in some cases even militant—enough so by 1914 to organize the Congressional Union, a party with one clearly defined goal: win the vote through direct political action on the federal level by amending the Constitution in no uncertain terms.

However, not all "New Women" were socially or politically out to change the world. "New" was also represented by the woman who wore bloomers (pant-skirts designed by Elizabeth Smith Miller in the mid 1840s and popularized by Amelia Bloomer in 1850), rode a bicycle, or played tennis; zoomed around the world with pen or camera as did journalist Nellie Bly (pseudonym of Elizabeth Cochrane Seaman) or itinerant photographer Jessie Tarbox Beals. These women gave rise to the image of a healthy and active woman busily adjusting her womanhood in some way—purveyed first in woodcuts, and then in steel engravings, in the many weekly "family" papers such as the New York Ledger and Collier's and magazines such as McClure's, Scribner's, or the Atlantic Monthly. "Imaging" American women, to use Martha Banta's term in Imaging American Women: Idea and Ideals in Cultural History (1987), became respectable, exciting, and commercially attractive as advertising grew astronomically. What was new about Charles Dana Gibson's portraits was not only the implication of the jaunty look in the eye of a beautiful woman wearing her hat with a flourish, but also health, innocence, and potential prosperity. Gibson adjusted the world to the notion that a woman could flaunt herself and still be quite respectable. The result was exciting enough to make it into wallpaper design, endlessly reproducing an array of twelve women—not for risqué or bawdy places but "Suitable for a Bachelor Apartment," as featured in Life.

New Women could thus become the image of buying power powerful enough to procure health and, as Banta has pointed out, northern European whiteness. But the equation of physical with social and moral health did not come along immediately or smoothly. From 1890 to 1915 there was a huge public debate, pursued on the pages of the magazine press, on the morality of women's sexual autonomy and public presence. Middle-class reformers saw prostitution everywhere in the hierarchical relations of the public world, including the easy cross-gender socializing of young women desperate to buy their way out of the depressing culture of grinding family poverty by working outside the home in factories and department stores. This debate made it into literature immediately. Stephen Crane wrote Maggie: A Girl of the Streets (1899), the story of an Irish immigrant girl who descends into prostitution and death after hav-
The independent working woman rejected nineteenth-century moral strictures and adopted a resolutely asexual mode of fashion that assaulted the current definitions of comeliness and motherhood. Lipstick, bobbed hair, cigarette smoking, and patronage of speakeasies emerged from the culture of avant-garde art and politics of the 1900s and 1910s. In these circles reform was based on rejection of capitalism and its attendant social values. And whereas the generation of Jane Addams built its philosophy on middle-class noblesse oblige, the young women of Greenwich Village could reject class as a measuring stick for morality and goodness with the adoption of socialism, anarchism, or bohemian art ideals. Though many of them were from well-to-do backgrounds and lived on surplus funds, a meaningful minority, particularly comprised of Jewish women, was not. For these New Women the object was to erase where they came from, and they did so through the adoption of a different womanhood—more sexual but less sexualized.

This seeming androgyny dominated criticism of public and "modern" New Womanhood after World War I. During the 1870s there was the tentative emergence of a new discourse on American womanhood in the context of industrial urbanization, as well as the emergence of Social Darwinism and other forms of scientific social determinism. Ideologically, it turned on the question as to whether women were biologically destined to stay home and tend the family or if it was perfectly acceptable, even a social good, for women to be educated and move in the larger world. Largely simultaneously, however, the dominant imagery of young women in the print media shifted from private and sentimental to publicly and physically active, and this image persisted. The New Woman's characteristics thus seem to have shifted between 1880 and 1920, and in different cultural contexts of social reform and advocacy, education, an increase in women who worked outside the home, and the booming popular-magazine culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Along with the proliferating commercial use of the young and healthy female body and the New Woman's own move away from the rhetoric of social motherhood to individual fulfillment as the highest good, the tone of criticism of New Womanhood shifted. Scientists and moralists denounced the "lesbianism" of androgynous denizens of Greenwich Village's bohemia, of suffragists out marching for the vote, of ambulance drivers in World War I, of professional women of the 1920s, and of flat-chested and short-skirted female modernity alike.

The New Woman image of the flapper is thus a culmination of the type. In addition with the coming of the flapper, with her acceptance of companionate marriage and her participation in a commercial world, the resolute singleness of active women disappeared from the public image of the New Woman. What was new was the public adoption of young, unmarried women to represent the hope for a happy and healthy future. By the 1910s their function had become so much more iconic than ideological that historians have scratched their collective heads to place them under the umbrella of one ideal, either proactive as Progressive reformer or simply working girl, or passive as the emblem of spoiled American consumerism looking to the future. The flapper was unencumbered by strictures of gender and class, free to live it up—consume—and eventually establish a "companionate marriage." The flapper was single but would not remain so all her life.

The new-woman-as-flapper crashed with the stock market in 1929. But the stage was set for the washing-machine ads of the late 1930s, filled with women who were cheerfully dedicated to nothing but the happiness of their husbands and children. The discourse of the New Woman had marked the separation of the ties between the nuclear family and the good of the larger whole; the heavy-duty social responsibilities that came with the domestic ideology of the nineteenth century had been replaced by the simple obligation to consume, as a unit. Save for a dip in the marriage rates for women of Addams's generation—which a full 10 percent remained unmarried, the highest percentage in American history—New Womanhood was a blip on the screen of the history of women. In the history of American national discourse, however, the concept heralded the appearance of the white nuclear family as representative unit with the individual child at its center.

In studying the New Woman scholars have focused far too much on "Woman" and left aside the essentiality of the "New" label. To the historian, what unites the ideological young woman of the 1880s and the carefree flapper of the 1920s is that they were self-consciously present as a symbol of a new age with a fundamental
change in mores. Real-life new women were not simply victims or heroines. They wanted to be part of the emergence of a new world in which family happiness and fulfillment became a central symbol of the very economic miracle that would allow for such emergence. Individual cases left aside, they were not more or less “liberated” than their forebears—nor more or less objectified than the sentimental wallflowers of the 1840s. As Carroll Smith-Rosenberg argues, in Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America (1985), the public debate about the “social and sexual legitimacy of the New Woman” was a metaphor for the question of “the legitimacy of the bourgeois social order,” which came to be represented by patterns of consumption. It is no coincidence that the next important cultural icon to appear was the teenager. Documented by Robert S. and Helen Lynd in Middletown: A Study in American Culture (1929), the teenager was reared as a child according to the principles of Dr. Benjamin Spock in the 1940s and came of age in the 1950s, ready to ditch the nuclear family and reshape the world around the fulfillment of the individual. New Women were excited about themselves—both as person and as icon—and that excitement was the most significant thing about them. Like their mothers, the “True” women, they were a vessel for national purpose—no more and no less so.

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**Viewpoint:**
The New Woman of the late nineteenth century was constrained by the culture’s concern with body consciousness.

Between 1890 and 1920 the concept of the “perfect” woman evolved quite markedly. Although the ideals changed and the New Woman of the Progressive era did obtain more participation in the public “sphere,” she did not achieve liberation from cultural pressures to conform to what was considered desirable, despite the carefree fun-loving flapper image. Socially constructed ideas shaped the concept of the physically “perfect” woman. Over the course of American history women have significantly altered the appearance of their own bodies in attempts to achieve the perceived ideal womanhood. In Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century (1989), Warren I. Susman asserts that there was a change in American values at the beginning of the twentieth century from a person’s character to their personality. Up through the Victorian Era, words used to describe the notion of American character included citizenship, duty, work, honor, morals, and integrity. These terms were replaced sometime during the first decade of the twentieth century with words such as attractive, glowing, stunning, and magnetic, that connoted something different. With this shift from a culture of character to a culture of personality came an elevated level of importance placed on improving the self so as to achieve as many of the positive attributes of this so-called personality as possible. Since value was placed on a person’s external attractiveness and charm, rather than on internal attributes or good deeds, women necessarily focused their attention on how to enhance their physical “personalities.”

Body consciousness was also an integral part of the transition from a producer to a consumer culture in American society, and it remains a living testament to the extent to which consumerism affects lives in the most personal of ways. In order to understand the radical shifts in body consciousness at the turn of the century, it is helpful first to consider the influence of capitalism, leading up to and including the 1880s. Body consciousness evolved alongside the change in women’s roles from primarily in-house producers to constant consumers as a result of industrialization. Between 1870 and 1880 many items that had previously been manufactured by women in their homes were produced elsewhere. As American society moved from a producer to a consumer culture, women’s relationship with capitalism changed. Previously, they spent significantly more time indoors than in urban society. By the 1880s, women were propelled out of doors and onto city streets to purchase items necessary to sustain a household, as well as for leisure purposes. As they ventured outside, women were increasingly visible, and as a result their bodies received more attention. Women’s participation in mass-consumer culture created the opportunity for a redefinition of what constituted femininity and challenged the models they had inherited from their predecessors. As William Leach describes in a 1984 *Journal of American History* article, “this tension, clearly established in that transformative moment in history, would take many forms but would remain a fixed and fundamental part of female experience for decades to come.”
COMMON CRIMINALS OR POLITICAL PRISONERS?

By 1917 suffragettes picketed the White House on a regular basis and were occasionally arrested as public nuisances. President Woodrow Wilson, who opposed women voting, sidestepped the matter by declaring that the individual states should resolve the issue. Although several Western states had adopted woman suffrage laws, many Eastern states had refused to do so. The following letter of protest was written by jailed suffragettes denouncing their treatment as ordinary lawbreakers. (The police responded by placing the signers in solitary confinement.)

To the Commissioners of the District of Columbia:

As political prisoners, we, the undersigned, refuse to work while in prison. We have taken this stand as a matter of principle after careful consideration, and from it we shall not recede.

This action is a necessary protest against an unjust sentence. In reminding President Wilson of his pre-election promises toward woman suffrage, we were exercising the right of peaceful petition, guaranteed by the Constitution of the United States, which declares peaceful picketing is legal in the District of Columbia.

Conscious, therefore, of having acted in accordance with the highest standards of citizenship, we ask the commissioners of the District to grant us the rights due political prisoners. We ask that we no longer be segregated and confined under locks and bars in small groups, but permitted to see each other.

We ask exemption from prison work, that our legal right to consult counsel be recognized, to have food sent to us from outside, to supply ourselves with writing material for as much correspondence as we may need, to receive books, letters, newspapers, our relatives and friends.

Our united demand for political treatment has been delayed, because, on entering the workhouse, we found conditions so very bad that, before we could ask that the suffragists be treated as political prisoners, it was necessary to make a stand for the ordinary rights of human beings for all the inmates. Although this has not been accomplished, we now wish to bring the important question of the status of political prisoners to the attention of the commissioners, who, we are informed, have full authority to make what regulations they please for the District prison and workhouse.


With the culture of consumption’s modified ideal of the “perfect” woman from voluptuous to one with more natural and somewhat less accentuated lines, there emerged a new female character in the 1890s. Novelist Sarah Grand first called this natural woman “the new woman” in the March 1894 issue of the North American Review, and another novelist, Mary Louise de la Ramée, responded in the May issue by capitalizing the N and W. What was most important about this New Woman was that she unsettled the theretofore accepted definitions of what it meant to be feminine and received an onslaught of criticism in the process. In a February 1896 Ladies’ Home Journal article, Ruth Ashmore wrote that a woman was not meant to imitate a man either bodily or mentally. Although conservative women had been empowered for some time, she argued, there was now a fear of conservative woman being “terrified out of existence by the loud screaming of those sisters of hers, who in their desire to repudiate their womanhood, become sexless.” The ideas associated with the New Woman mixed dress reform with sports, suffrage with social work, and questioned the long-held belief in the pursuit of a husband as woman’s ultimate goal in life.

Lois Banner, historian and author of American Beauty (1983), points out that this New Woman, embodied in the illustrations by Charles Dana Gibson, was not pictured as a working or college woman. The independence
or self-reliance of the Gibsonesque standard seems that it did not go further than playing sports, wearing comfortable clothing, and looking self-reliant. The typical demeanor connoted some independence but not necessarily empowerment. The popularity of the Gibson girl was more the result of mass reproduction (lithographs being easier to distribute than paintings or sculptures) and the satiric quality of the situations in which Gibson sketched her than to any actual feminist intentions on the part of her creator. Interestingly, feminists themselves claimed this new prototype as exhibiting more of the qualities that would eventually lead to women’s emancipation. Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote that the Gibson girl was “braver, stronger, more healthful and skillful and able and free, more human in all ways.”

Unlike the apparent ease with which the idea for the ideal woman changed, women’s bodies obviously could not actually change as swiftly or easily. Therefore, as the ideal had become one without curves, so too did fashionable women strive to eliminate them from their figures by compressing the busts and hips, in order to achieve the more-streamlined look. They fashioned themselves after the flat-chested ballerinas in the Ballet Russes that toured the United States advertising a stretchy brassiere in their program that was designed to decrease the appearance of the breasts. Interestingly, although the “perfect” woman was now visualized as significantly altered from the classic Greek models, with neither abdominal paunch nor breasts to speak of, the Venus model was still referred to despite the contradiction. A 1914 Ladies’ Home Journal advertisement for front-lacing corsets claimed that: “Venus herself might have posed for the first Gossard fitting so well does she express the new freedom in women’s dress.”

During the decade of 1910–1920, several key events occurred that altered women’s place in American society and therefore affected the idea of the “perfect” woman. In 1915 the Woman’s Peace Party, the first major all-female U.S. peace organization, was founded by a group of women including Gilman, Jane Addams, and Alice Hamilton who advocated for women’s suffrage and equal participation in government. In 1916, Margaret Sanger and her sister made headlines when they opened a birth-control clinic in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, New York, and were arrested ten days later for violating the Comstock Law, which forbade distribution of literature about birth control. In March of 1919 the League of Women Voters was founded, which sought to guarantee that all women would be enfranchised and to eliminate legal discrimination. The U.S. Senate passed the Nineteenth Amendment in June of 1919 that, after ratification by the states, granted women the legal right to vote. This decade represented a monumental leap for womankind that invariably pervaded commonly held beliefs about what the “perfect” woman should look like.

In addition, women’s participation in World War I accelerated the changes in public opinion about their bodies. Women’s new figures were viewed with contempt by some but also with salutation by others who understood the importance of their contribution. Ladies’ Home Journal described the women who succeeded at what had been unconventional jobs or otherwise considered for men only. In 1917 article by Harriet Sisson Gillespie about women doing “men’s work” in the railroad yards and shipyards, female workers were described in the following ways: “In masculine attire they were rapidly feeding big boxes of paper goods to a belt conveyer”; and “A great big purpose animated each of the boyishly clad figures. . . For these girls were ‘doing their bit’ for Uncle Sam as impressively and with the same strength of purpose as the men in the trenches.” Women’s involvement in the war effort further solidified the fashions of the times during which a machine-influenced image proliferated. Tubular-shaped clothing and short, slicked-back hair were manifestations of this association between women’s wartime involvement and increasing empowerment.

This new ideal clearly symbolized a change in terms of women’s advancement. The New Woman of the 1920s claimed a novel place for herself, indeed for all women in American society, through body language. As described in 1920 by Rhoda Broughton, a contributor to Ladies’ Home Journal:

Her existence is made up of vigorous pleasures that harden her muscles and supple her limbs, and of that hard study which braces the mind.... Yes, the new woman is a happier and, under many aspects, a finer creature than her forerunner; and if she lacks the fragrant grace, the modesty and reverence for household ties and sanctities of her predecessor she is not in the least aware of it and so is not a penny the worse off!

A study of fashion mannequins from 1910 to 1915 and from 1915 to 1920 illustrates a marked shift in body types. Up until 1915 the natural woman held forth to some degree, and the feminine ideal maintained some accentuation in the bust and hips—though certainly milder than in previous years. However, after 1915 and through the 1920s the female body was progressively defeminized until it achieved a straight “boyish” shape, lacking curves entirely.

The successes of the suffragists and the New Woman meant that the spell of the Victorian “cult of true womanhood” had been broken and that women moved into areas of society that were previously restricted to men. The development of a boyish, or perhaps androgynous, feminine ideal happened more quickly than it might have otherwise because of women’s wartime activities. This
new vision of femininity did not emphasize the differences between women and men at all, nor did it feature women's reproductive abilities, as had previous modes. Instead it sought to minimize the differences by sketching the woman as totally different than she had been before. Indeed, by "eliminating" her hips, waist, and bust, and by cutting her hair, the "new" New Woman defied easy categorization. Perhaps that was part of the goal. Reformist women had worn masculine clothes before in an effort to free themselves from the socially constructed ideals of femininity that kept women in subordinate and legally inferior roles. Using the power of self-transformation, women in the 1920s created new identities for themselves based on appearance modification. They manipulated their outer selves with the illusion of, and sometimes the reflection of, their social selves.

The women who claimed their rights to higher education, the professions, and eventually the vote challenged past ideologies about what constituted manhood by trying to redefine womanhood. The success of the middle-class women's movement, according to historian Gail Bederman in Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917 (1995), was its undermining the assumption that education, professional status, and political power required a male body. One can see in the 1920s feminist ideal that women claimed for the first time what men had theretofore reserved for themselves: identities that included short hair and lack of body definition. Perhaps part of the rationale was a desire to throw off past prescriptions for how women were supposed to look and to go in an opposite direction. In some ways this outlook was ironic because it still represented a socially constructed "perfect" woman. It had a subversive quality, however, and therefore may have seemed less compliant and more revolutionary. Nevertheless, women's new physical "freedom" meant binding their breasts. In throwing off the shackles of prescribed femininity, women simply created yet another ideal. This time it was perhaps more self-instigated, corresponding with the significant change in women's role in American culture and their increasing control over their destinies as well as their bodies.

Deeply enmeshed in the changing ideals between 1890 and 1920 are notions about what constituted womanhood in American society. Had woman's place in society not changed as radically as it did during World War I and with the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment, the idea of the "perfect" woman may well have remained focused on the Greek statues. The culture of consumption's persuasive mores, however, is also a compelling explanation for the innovations. Athletics certainly played a major role, one significant enough to get the voluptuous woman into better physical shape by strengthening her muscles and giving her lungs a chance to breathe more freely. But athletics were not sufficient to get the Gibson girl out of her coquettish posture and into a feminist uniform. The suffragists, the truly innovative New Women, led the way to a modern feminine ideal totally unlike any that had existed before because it was infused with legal rights. Through the manifestations of body consciousness, from the 1880s to approximately World War I, women sought to define their feminine identities as different from men's, and from 1915 through the 1920s women aimed to define their identities as equal to men's. However, for some of the 1920s flappers the therapeutic imperatives toward self-fulfillment actually subverted the intentions of the feminists. As T. J. Jackson Lears and Richard Wightman Fox point out in The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880–1980 (1983), the consumption of products associated with this "New Woman" promised fake liberation through consumption, and many women accepted this new version of male hegemony in their pursuit of self-realization.

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