

Devoted to Sport:

Health, Fitness and the American New Girl, 1890-1902

Catherine Horne
Honours,
University of Sydney

Girls of strong, active physique, erect carriage, and energetic spirit, delighting in tennis, riding, boating, walking are now the rule; the feeble, indoor do-nothing is now the exception, and the result is a tall, vigorous race, with free step and cheeks aglow with the ruddy color of physical health and energy.¹

In August 1894 the *Chicago Tribune* ran a lengthy article on the physical transformation of the American female which highlighted an overwhelming passion for athletic activity amongst girls as well as the abundant physical benefits this had reaped. As the above quote demonstrates, the image of the physically active young woman had become the norm by the 1890s, displacing the more demure, fragile vision of girlhood which predominated several decades earlier. Girls were depicted in this article as engaging in a wide variety of sports in a highly enthusiastic manner, from tennis and bicycling to yachting and golfing. Moreover, the common engagement of girls in athletic activity was presented as a national trend. In the East and in the West, in the city and in the country, girls were participating in one sport or another.² The *Tribune* article is representative of a proliferation of media coverage of the athletic 'New Girl' in the 1890s. A cultural symbol more than a lived reality, she represented the culmination of decades of concern over the physical health of middle-class girls in America. The most notable example of the New Girl was found in the drawings of Charles Dana Gibson, whose 'Gibson Girl' became a symbol of all that the New Girl stood for, while also representing the latent anxieties over the changing nature of femininity in this period. Beyond Gibson, the New Girl was widely seen in newspapers and magazines, in advertisements and in artworks, and was depicted through words and illustration. Despite this barrage of representation, it is important to note that the New Girl was primarily a cultural construction, and as such the extent to which images of the New Girl can be used as evidence

¹ 'Devoted to Sport: American Women Are Growing More and More Athletic', *The Chicago Tribune*, August 25 1894, 16.

² *Ibid.*

for the lived experience of America's young women is limited. However, such images do provide exceptional insight into the culture which created them, and particularly suggest a society obsessed with the nature of girlhood to the extent that images of young women became representative of the national characteristics so desired by Americans. The New Girl was strong, bold, healthful and beautiful.

An important characteristic of the culture of nineteenth century America was an emphasis placed on health and fitness. These discourses manifested in various tonics and cures, an awareness of the importance of hygiene, and the promotion of physical exercise, which was often strongly connected to an ideal of American masculinity. Roberta J. Park, for example, has argued that Americans connected masculine strength and health with morality, which resulted in a zeal for physical training and sports by the end of the nineteenth century.³ Moreover, as Bruce Haley has argued, the defining feature of a successful boyhood was the cultivation of a strong and healthy manhood.⁴ The benefits of physical fitness were by no means limited to boys and men, however, and throughout the nineteenth century physical exercise became increasingly promoted for women. The role of physical culture in the lives of women has been extensively researched by historians such as Jan Todd, who has analysed the role of purposive exercise as a challenge to the submissive 'Cult of True Womanhood' in the antebellum era; Martha H. Verbrugge, who has analysed how discourses of feminine health and fitness materialised through their promotion by educational and lifestyle institutions; and Ann Chisholm, who has argued that the popularisation of calisthenics redefined women as social subjects through bridging the desire to improve women's health and educational attainment with the need to ensure their fidelity to domestic roles.⁵ These works have provided important contributions to the understanding of how physical exercise influenced a redefinition of femininity during the nineteenth century. However, their applicability to adolescent girls, and subsequently to the figure of the New Girl, is limited by their focus on the separate life stage of womanhood.

Girlhood has developed as a subject of enquiry separate from womanhood, and this has been well demonstrated by work on the development of girlhood as a distinct concept in the late nineteenth century.⁶ Most notably, Jane H. Hunter has provided a detailed analysis of the development of girlhood as a concept, its acceptance as a distinct lifecycle stage and its influence on girls' subjectivities in late nineteenth century America.⁷ However, the lack of attention paid to physical culture presents a significant gap in this analysis, and Hunter's focus on girls' diaries as her major source material somewhat obscures how girlhood was being actively constructed in other ways, particularly through printed media. Crista DeLuzio has analysed how adolescent girls became prominent subjects of developmental thinking by health reformers during the nineteenth century

3 Roberta J. Park, 'Healthy, Moral, Strong', in *Fitness in American Culture: Images of Health, Sport, and the Body, 1830-1940*, ed. Kathryn Grover, (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), 123.

4 Bruce Haley, *The Healthy Body and Victorian Culture*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 144.

5 Jan Todd, *Physical Culture and the Body Beautiful: Purposive Exercise in the Lives of American Women, 1800-1870*, (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998); Martha H. Verbrugge, *Able-Bodied Womanhood: Personal Health and Social Change in Nineteenth-Century Boston*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Ann Chisholm, 'Incarnations and Practices of Feminine Rectitude: Nineteenth-Century Gymnastics for U.S. Women', *Journal of Social History*, vol. 38, no. 3, (Spring 2005), 737-63.

6 For a comprehensive overview of the development of girlhood as a topic of interdisciplinary study see: Mary Celeste Kearney, 'Coalescing: The Development of Girls' Studies', *Feminist Formations*, vol. 21, no. 1, (Spring 2009), 1-28.

7 Jane H. Hunter, *How Young Ladies Became Girls: The Victorian Origins of American Girlhood*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

due to their perceived ill-health, and has argued that such reformers believed that fitness and good health would see girls through any future trials.⁸ However, DeLuzio has focused her analysis on the development of scientific thought and does not explicitly connect it with the construction of a discourse of girlhood through media and other cultural sources. As I will argue, the increasing concern for the health of girls and the subsequent promotion of physical exercise would have a significant influence on rise of the New Girl as a cultural figure in the 1890s.

The most notable work on the New Girl as a distinct figure has been done by Martha Banta and Lynne D. Gordon, who have argued that the Gibson Girl particularly represented a compromise between the college-educated suffragettes or 'New Women' and the more demure manifestations of Victorian womanhood.⁹ While Gibson's drawings do indeed represent a middle-ground of sorts between these two extremes, this explanation does not fully address the reasons for the New Girl's rise to cultural prominence. Specifically, this position ignores the extent to which images of the New Girl were intricately linked with notions of health and fitness. Thus, while Gordon's focus on the role of college education in the construction of the New Girl is important and justified, she has tended to malign other elements which also played a significant role, particularly discourses of health and fitness.¹⁰ Banta, while recognising the central role of sport and health to the New Girl's visual construction, has neglected to draw a connection between the images of sporting girls in the 1890s and the previous half century of promotion of physical fitness for girls in America.¹¹ As such, it is my aim to demonstrate how the discourse of a fit and healthy girlhood, laid down throughout the nineteenth century, came to a head in the figure of the New Girl in the 1890s.

This article will begin with an analysis of the increasing concern over the health of middle-class girls and the rise of physical exercise as a normative activity from the mid-nineteenth century. This played a significant and underappreciated role in the acceptance of the New Girl as a cultural figure and the concurrent changing ideals of American femininity. I will then discuss the visual construction of the New Girl with particular focus on how an already ingrained discourse of healthful girlhood came to influence her creation and acceptance. Following this, I will analyse the particularly national features of the American New Girl and the comparison between these new images and the ideal of fragile Victorian womanhood which predominated a generation earlier. Finally, this article will discuss the role of advice literature which promoted the ideals embodied by the New Girl as model life choices for girls and their mothers. By the turn of the century, the New Girl had become a pervasive cultural figure who represented a national desire for strength and health. This vision of ideal femininity had changed significantly from half a century earlier, and the promotion of physical fitness for adolescent girls during this period played a significant role in this shift.

This article primarily draws on newspaper and magazine articles, popular illustrations, as well published treatises and advice literature. The media articles come from an array of titles, including general interest and women's magazines as well as widely-circulated newspapers. Many

8 Crista DeLuzio, *Female Adolescence in American Scientific Thought, 1830-1930*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).

9 Lynne D. Gordon, 'The Gibson Girl Goes to College: Popular Culture and Women's Higher Education in the Progressive Era, 1890-1920,' *American Quarterly*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (Summer 1987), 211-30; Martha Banta, *Imaging American Women: Idea and Ideals in Cultural History*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

10 Gordon, 'The Gibson Girl Goes to College', 211-30.

11 Banta, *Imaging American Women*, 88.

are serious and often lengthy pieces which provide various perspectives on the role of physical culture in girlhood, while often also providing advice and encouragement to parents, mentors and girls themselves. These themes are also the major focus of the advice literature, which is aimed primarily at young women and their mothers. The illustrations used were largely published in magazines and newspapers, while some were also posters for upcoming magazine issues. Due to its public nature, this body of source material can therefore be characterised as contributing to a public discourse of girlhood. As such, it should be noted that this is not a study of American girls' experiences of physical culture, but rather how it was used in the conceptualisation of girlhood during this period. In other words, by analysing the source material I have identified, my aim is to chart the development of a discourse through focusing on a particular cultural figure. Further research using the personal writings of girls or their mothers, for example, would provide valuable insight into how this discourse of physical fitness influenced their own subjectivities. It is also important to recognise that the sources used in this article are largely representative of a white, Northern, middle class perspective, and I am conscious of grounding my study within this context. Broader research into the intersectional implications of this phenomenon, particularly in the Southern States, would be a valuable contribution to the literature on this topic, particularly as the New Girl was constructed as a national figure in a country divided by civil war only a generation earlier.

Before the New Girl: The Cultivation of a Healthful Girlhood

The nineteenth century saw the development of a concept of girlhood in which physical, mental and cultural development each played a significant role. Assuredly white and thoroughly middle class, this understanding of girlhood became a site where anxieties over the development of bourgeois American society could be aired and remedied.¹² Within the context of the emerging scientific study of childhood and youth, the figure of the middle-class girl became a focus of significant cultural concern due to her perceived ill-health.¹³ This concern was succinctly articulated by the Reverend G.S. Weaver who, in 1856, told the students of a girls' seminary that they had become 'sickly house-plants' and in so doing were robbing American society of the influence of good women.¹⁴ Following the recognition of the perceived physical depletion of middle-class girls, a concerted effort to remedy the situation began to gain prominence with advice books, magazine and newspaper articles, lectures and various other cultural tracts promoting programs of physical culture produced from the 1850s until the century's end.

Physical culture referred to various systems of health and strength training, such as gymnastics and calisthenics, which aimed to improve the perceived ill-health of middle-class girls. One of the leading exponents of physical culture for girls was Dio Lewis, who produced a plethora of books and articles outlining gymnastic exercises and general health principles, as well as opening his own school for girls in 1864.¹⁵ While his ideas on the physical and social development of young women were quite radical in the 1860s, they would go on to have a significant influence on the social understandings of girlhood by the century's end. Notably, Lewis connected the physical depletion of girls with the values of the American middle class, which dictated that a strong,

12 Hunter, *How Young Ladies Became Girls*, 5.

13 DeLuzio, *Female Adolescence in American Scientific Thought, 1830-1930*, 2, 41; Hunter, *How Young Ladies Became Girls*, 5.

14 G.S. Weaver, *Aims and Aids for Girls and Young Women, on the Various Duties of Life*, (New York: Fowler & Wells, 1856), 95.

15 Todd, *Physical Culture and the Body Beautiful*, 239, 264.

muscular physique was indicative of servitude or hard work, whereas feminine fragility was cherished as a sign of ladylike gentility.¹⁶ This attitude, according to Lewis, would need to be revised for middle-class girls to develop their physical potential. As he forcefully argued in his 1871 advice book, *Our Girls*, 'to treat the strong body of one as the source of coarseness and ignorance within, and, in the other case, to treat the weak, delicate body as the source of fine culture, is to reason like an idiot.'¹⁷ This argument tapped into existent anxieties over the social impact of modern life, particularly the potential detrimental impacts of urban life on social morality and health, and gave those anxieties a focus in the physical state of middle-class girls.¹⁸ The subsequent near-obsession with improving their health would, unsurprisingly, have a profound impact on how girlhood was understood and managed in this period. For girls, attaining a decent level of physical health, and acquiring the skills to maintain it, became a central focus of both their formal and informal education and, by the 1890s, would result in the figure of the New Girl coming to significant cultural prominence.

The rise of girls' colleges in the 1860s and 1870s would do much to further this cause, as physical culture became a central part of the curriculum of institutions such as Wellesley and Vassar.¹⁹ Indeed, such colleges felt it necessary to place an important focus on developing their students' physical potential. The perceived detrimental effects of education on the female constitution, particularly that excessive study would result in poor health, remained a pervasive argument against the colleges. The widespread acceptance of physical culture for girls subsequently provided one way through which the colleges could prove their legitimacy.²⁰ By the 1890s, when a second generation of college girls were completing their educations, the precepts of physical fitness had been established as core elements of the curriculums of these institutions and had significantly shaped understandings of girlhood more broadly.²¹

In the 1880s and 1890s the focus on gymnastics within the colleges developed into a debate over girls' participation in athletics. The dominant opinion held that competitive sports were too unfeminine and did not fit with the overall goals of colleges, however if a friendly atmosphere could be fostered then certain sports, such as tennis, could be promoted. The historian Martha H. Verbrugge, for example, has argued that at Wellesley College students' increased enthusiasm for competitive sports was met with concern by administrators, who perceived sporting rivalry as both unhealthy and unfeminine.²² The reluctance of colleges such as Wellesley to embrace competitive sport demonstrated the limits of their vision of girlhood. While physical fitness was embraced as a defining characteristic, there remained an expectation of grace and poise which was difficult to reconcile with competitive sport.²³ Attitudes did, however, begin to soften by the 1890s, with sports such as tennis and hockey gaining acceptance, and indeed becoming a part of the image of the

16 Dio Lewis, *Our Girls*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1871), 70.

17 *Ibid.*, 71.

18 Hunter, *How Young Ladies Became Girls*, 5.

19 Verbrugge, *Able-Bodied Womanhood*, 140.

20 Paul Atkinson, 'The Feminist Physique: Physical Education and the Medicalization of Women's Education,' in *From "Fair Sex" to Feminism: Sport and the Socialization of Women in the Industrial and Post-Industrial Eras*, ed. J.A.Mangan and Roberta Park, (London: F. Cass, 1987), 39-40; Verbrugge, *Able-Bodied Womanhood*, 141.

21 Gordon, 'The Gibson Girl Goes to College', 214-1.

22 Verbrugge, *Able-Bodied Womanhood*, 158.

23 *Ibid.*

Wellesley Girl. This can be seen in an advertisement for *Scribner's Magazine*, which depicts a scene at Wellesley College in which hockey is clearly represented.²⁴

Similar debates played out in the nation's high schools, which were often influenced by developments in the colleges. In 1894 Englishwoman Sara A. Burstall investigated the state of girls' education in America, and observed that physical culture had become a central tenet of educational philosophy.²⁵ However, she lamented that this enthusiasm had so far largely manifested in gymnastics, not athletics, and further noted that several American teachers had expressed similar disappointments to her.²⁶ Burstall compared this trend unfavourably with England, where physical education was supposedly more advanced, and attributed this to the lasting influence of Puritan colonists who, she argued, 'looked upon athletic exercises as a waste of time.'²⁷ There was hope, however, as Burstall also argued that women's colleges were 'leading the way' in developing a culture of athletics in girls' education.²⁸ Indeed, by the century's end many believed that exposure to some sports, in an environment which discouraged overt competition, would be a beneficial addition to the curriculum.²⁹ The acceptance of sporting culture within high schools can be seen in an 1899 *San Francisco Call* article which promoted volleyball as 'the game par excellence for girls and young women,' after it had been adopted by the city's Girls' High School.³⁰ The school's physical training instructor, having seen the game played at Wellesley and Smith colleges, believed it to be of 'benefit to the girls of San Francisco,' and importantly to have met 'all the requirements for exercise and physical culture.'³¹ The late nineteenth century therefore saw an increasing acceptance of girls' participation in athletic activities within educational institutions, and this would prove an important influence on the cultural acceptance of the New Girl.

This connection between femininity and athleticism was promoted through the media, particularly through articles in wide-circulation newspapers and magazines. One example can be found in E. Pauline Johnson's 1894 article in the *American Magazine* which presented a girls' ice hockey team as nothing other than utterly feminine. They were depicted as being tough, fit and healthy, as well as graceful in their movements and joyful in their demeanour.³² As Johnson poetically summed up: 'Ah! Those are the girls it gladdens one's heart to see, and because of their outdoor sport, had they lost one iota of maidenliness, delicacy or propriety? Not they- a thousand times, not they!'³³ Such articles, when coupled with the difficulties of the colleges to embrace sport, demonstrated the complexities of the shift from calisthenics to athletics. The debates over girls' participation in sports did not question the importance of exercise, but rather which forms were appropriate or, in other words, how athletic activity could be integrated with an existing vision of girlhood. Visions of physically healthy yet graceful young women remained prominent, and as such girls' participation in athletic and recreational activities were often depicted as being in keeping with

24 C. Allan Gilbert, 'Wellesley College Illustrated in the May *Scribner's*,' 1898, image available from https://www.flickr.com/photos/boston_public_library/10559703426/.

25 Sara A. Burstall, *The Education of Girls in the United States*, (London: S. Sonnenschein, 1894), 159.

26 *Ibid.*, 159-60.

27 *Ibid.*, 146.

28 *Ibid.*, 148.

29 Hunter, *How Young Ladies Became Girls*, 235.

30 'Volleyball: The New Game for Girls', *San Francisco Call*, 23 April 1899, 24.

31 *Ibid.*

32 E. Pauline Johnson, 'Girls and Hockey', *The American Magazine* vol. 5, no. 7, (1894), 224.

33 *Ibid.*

poised femininity. Although there remained impediments to girls partaking in physical activity at the same level as boys, an increasing acceptance of the place of athletic pursuits in an ideal of girlhood can certainly be identified. This acceptance would play a crucial role in constructing the figure of the New Girl.

Imaging the New Girl: Visual Types and Gibson Girls

It has been strenuously, and correctly, argued that the New Girl of the 1890s was not representative of the state of America's young women per se, but rather a constructed image bound up with national and social discourses.³⁴ As such, we can only speak of 'visions' or 'images' of this figure, and should be careful to avoid conflating her with the lived experience of girls in this period. Historian Martha Banta, in her seminal book *Imaging American Women*, has analysed the visual construction of American women in the late nineteenth century. She has argued that technological advances in printing processes, a surge in popular newspapers and magazines, along with the rise of advertising led to an increasing appetite for images which were easily readable.³⁵ Into this context stepped the 'American girl' who, in various guises, provided an image onto which the common values and fears of Americans could be inscribed.³⁶ By the turn of the century questions of identity had become a social obsession, leading to a common utilisation of physical 'types' to represent the different values and virtues with which Americans were supposed to identify. These types, however, were largely variants on one stock image: the American female.³⁷ Banta has identified several 'subtypes' of these representations of the American girl, the most notable for my purposes being the athletic 'Outdoors Girl.' The visions of this subtype presented girls who were sporty and free, yet also charming and, unlike their suffragette cousins, not threatening to the social milieu.³⁸ Thus, for Banta, images of girls on bicycles showing off their tall and muscular figures provided a way through which the challengingly independent 'New Woman' could be made socially acceptable.³⁹ While I agree with Banta's conclusion here, it remains that she has given scant attention to a major reason why the image of the Outdoors Girl gained so much currency in late nineteenth century America: the influence of a half century of heavy promotion of physical culture for young women. It was because a fit and healthy vision of girlhood was already ingrained in the American consciousness by the 1890s that images of the New Girl could be utilised with significant effect

The most famous images of the New Girl were those of illustrator Charles Dana Gibson. His Gibson Girls were tall, muscular, and utterly graceful; they appeared in ballrooms, at dinner tables, and also on the putting green. His illustrations appeared in high profile magazines such as *Life*, *Scribner's* and *Harper's*, and collections of his drawings were also released.⁴⁰ The Gibson Girl became a pervasive and recognisable figure by the century's end, and represented the New Girl in a particularly American context.⁴¹ One of the most important ways in which Gibson's

34 See Banta, *Imaging American Women*, 89; Hunter, *How Young Ladies Became Girls*, 387-8; Ellen Wiley Todd, *The "New Woman" Revised: Painting and Gender Politics on Fourteenth Street*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 5.

35 Banta, *Imaging American Women*, 2.

36 *Ibid.*, 5.

37 *Ibid.*, 21.

38 *Ibid.*, 88.

39 *Ibid.*

40 Hunter, *How Young Ladies Became Girls*, 389-90.

41 *Ibid.*

images demonstrated the influence of physical culture on conceptions of the New Girl lies in the physicality of his girls. Their posture was always impeccable, their shoulders broad, and their height equal to their male counterparts. This can be easily observed in a 1900 illustration which depicted a girl on a golf course, standing tall next to a male companion with her clothing reasonably free.⁴² Anxiety over gender relations was another major motif of Gibson's work as this image showed; girls, it appears, were penetrating the previously closed world of sport and proved to be a significant distraction to their male companions (who did not seem to affect the girls in the same way). This anxiety was further highlighted in an illustration of a team of Gibson Girls playing football with just one slightly bewildered male against them.⁴³ The girls in this image are represented as athletic but still feminine, comically shown by a girl at the back of the field fixing her hair. The image of the team further suggested an influx of females into a previously male domain, and even implied that they were better equipped for the challenges that met them there, both through strength of numbers as well as strength of body. Although Gibson presented this as an anxiety on the part of men, the self-confident beauty of the girls also indicated an acceptance of this figure. The Gibson Girl therefore did not come off as threatening, but as powerfully attractive. Indeed, in an article for San Francisco magazine *The Wave*, writer Frank Norris espoused his loyalty to the Gibson Girl, calling her a 'man's woman' and one that he would like to see himself with.⁴⁴ Norris also embraced the physical prowess of the girls, and noted that 'she is very tall and a little slim, and her dignity and imposing carriage are her great characteristics.'⁴⁵ Although there remained significant social unease over the changing nature of girlhood in this period, it is also apparent that a vision of femininity which encompassed a strong and healthful physicality, along with the activities required for its attainment, had become so embedded in the cultural psyche that images such as Gibson's could become significantly representative.

The Gibson Girl, of course, was not the only representation of the athletic New Girl type, although she remained pervasive. Healthful sporting girls could be seen in a variety of areas, from magazines and newspapers, to advertisements, and even in literature. Magazines and newspapers held particular cultural sway, and subsequently some of the most iconic depictions of the New Girl were found in these publications. These took a variety of forms, from pictorial representations (both photographs and illustrations such as Gibson's), as well as written descriptions in articles, stories or advice columns. Moreover, different perspectives on the athletic New Girl and her importance were proffered, the most notable being the correlation between healthful girlhood and American national identity, and the comparison between the New Girl and older forms of femininity. The New Girl was seen to represent particularly national shifts in the health of American girls and their concurrent reification as a new feminine ideal.

Comparing the New Girl: English Cousins and Steel-Engraving Ladies

Given the importance placed upon the cultivation of a healthful girlhood for American society throughout the nineteenth century, it is not surprising that this continued to be expressed in depictions of the New Girl in the 1890s. Strong, fit and healthy, she represented the characteristics

42 Charles Dana Gibson, 'One Difficulty of the Game,' 1900, in *The Gibson Girl and Her America: The Best Drawings of Charles Dana Gibson*, ed. Edmund Vincent Gillon, Jr., (Toronto: Dover Publications, 1969).

43 Charles Dana Gibson, 'Threatened by the New Woman - The Coming Game, Yale versus Vassar,' *The San Francisco Call*, 24 November 1895, 1, image available from <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85066387/1895-11-24/ed-1/seq-1/>.

44 Frank Norris, 'A Question of Ideals: The American Girl of 1896 as seen by Wenzel and Gibson,' in *The Apprenticeship Writings of Frank Norris*, ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., and Douglas K. Burges, (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1996), 216.

45 *Ibid.*

so desired of American national identity. As Banta has argued, in the late nineteenth century Americans were constituted as collective social beings through their interpretations of signs, a major one being the American girl.⁴⁶ The athletic New Girl, in particular, was a visual type which embodied a strength of both spirit and physicality that appealed to American sensibility. Further, her creation represented the success of a concerted effort at the improvement of an entire social cohort - middle-class girls - and therefore the proven capabilities for mass social development. She was an aspirational figure not just for the girls she claimed to represent, but for middle-class society's aims of self-improvement.

Media representations of the New Girl were aware of this, and indeed made the connection clear. For example, the author of an 1894 *Chicago Tribune* article argued that the American girl of previous decades was 'a popular synonym for "nerves," ill health, and all the ailments engendered by want of exercise, foolish diet, and irregular habits of life.'⁴⁷ The New Girl of the 1890s, however, took delight in outdoor life, in action, and in 'the spirit of sport' to the extent that these had become normative traits. Through the cultivation of their physical potential, therefore, young women represented values of self-improvement, strength and vigour. Moreover, these traits were represented in terms of the nation as a whole. The *Chicago Tribune* article began by noting that the American girl of the mid-nineteenth century 'suffered in comparison' to her English counterpart whose 'outdoor life', we are told, made her 'the picture of abounding health and rosy-cheeked energy'.⁴⁸ However, the decades of promotion of physical culture for girls had brought about a resounding change, as the author argued that a 'generation has sufficed to effect a complete change, and our English cousins no longer hold a monopoly on outdoor sports'.⁴⁹ The comparison with English girls couched the issue in undoubtedly national terms, and the rise of sports as a normative element of girlhood highlighted the place of girls in the development of an ideal of 'Americanness'. The increasing promotion of physical fitness for girls was a trans-Atlantic phenomenon, however the perceived challenge of strong and healthy English girls gave the American version of the figure a distinctively national, and even nationally competitive, flavour. The American New Girl was also nationally readable due to her close association with American girls' colleges, such as Vassar, Wellesley, Smith and many others. Moreover, the dominant image of the New Girl was found in the drawings of Charles Dana Gibson, an American illustrator whose works reflected American culture. The American New Girl, therefore, exhibited distinctively national traits and embodied national concerns. It is important to note, however, that this vision of the nation was significantly white and middle-class in emphasis; while such visions may have been couched in 'national' terms their ability to represent American society in its entirety was necessarily limited. As such, the healthful young woman here presented as the pinnacle of national femininity suggests that health and fitness, as developed through an adherence to the principles of physical culture, was perceived as the contribution of the American girl to the fight against the decline of white, middle-class society - a fight which she appears to have won.

A comparison between the more passive representations of American femininity and the more active visions of the American New Girl demonstrates a marked shift in how youthful femininity was conceptualised in the 1890s. While the wasp-waisted Victorian lady remained in view, her position as the pinnacle of femininity became increasingly usurped by the more athletic and

46 Banta, *Imaging American Women*, 21.

47 'Devoted to Sport', 16.

48 *Ibid.*

49 *Ibid.*

outgoing figure.⁵⁰ This shift was particularly promoted by the media. One way in which the differences represented by the New Girl could be emphasised was through a simple comparison with the 'young ladies' of generations past. For example, in 1901 essayist Caroline Ticknor wrote a short piece for the *Atlantic Monthly* comparing the 'Steel-Engraving Lady' - a typical representation of demure Victorian womanhood - and the athletic Gibson Girl, who comes to visit the supposedly extinct Victorian lady.⁵¹ The Gibson Girl, noting her opposite's pallor and sickly frame, encouraged her to take 'fresh air and exercise', however the Steel-Engraving Lady did not feel that this would be ladylike.⁵² Further, the Gibson Girl is described as actively taking part in golf, and having a keenly educated mind. However, Ticknor presents her as emotionally bereft, unable to find true love because the young men she cavorts with do not see her as a romantic figure, but rather as one of them. The Steel-Engraving Lady, on the basis of her Victorian femininity, has found love and happiness.⁵³ Ticknor was therefore critical of the supposed gains enjoyed by the New Girl. Although she was healthier, more educated and visible in the public sphere, she was supposedly missing out on the emotional benefits provided by family and romance.

The trend identified by Ticknor is present in another media debate, this time over the changing nature of the 'Summer Girl.' Previously, the focus of middle-class girls on their summer vacations had been solely on courting, however with the rise of the athletic New Girl in the 1890s this altered to an emphasis on pleasure, particularly associated with sport.⁵⁴ An April 1898 *Chicago Tribune* article presented the 'new' Summer Girl as lacking any of 'the old fashioned feminine about her,' as sports had 'won in the transformation of the American damsel.'⁵⁵ An August 1896 article from the same newspaper provided a more thorough analysis of the athletic summer girl type, the author highlighting her athletic prowess and the charm that this held for the opposite sex:

There can be no doubt that the athletic girl has come to stay. She is too contented, too loveable, and altogether charming to be ever set aside even by the present change loving generation. When she turns her attention to matrimony, laurel wreaths again await her, and her husband finds her too delightful a comrade ever to be neglected.⁵⁶

This is certainly a different appraisal to that of Ticknor. While both recognised the supposed 'equality' of the relationship between the New Girl and her beaux (the use of 'comrade' above highlighting this particularly effectively), they perceive the result of this quite differently. Ticknor, born in 1866 and thus writing from the perspective of an older generation of women, perceived the changes in femininity apparent in the New Girl as not necessarily positive when compared to the dominant image of girlhood a generation earlier. The writers of the *Tribune* articles, however, disagreed with this perspective, instead emphasising the attractiveness of a girl whose health and physical fitness were of the highest order. The differences in opinion on this matter again demonstrated anxieties over the changing nature of femininity, as also seen in Gibson's

50 Mary Lou Remley, 'The Steel-Engraving Lady and the Gibson Girl: The American Sportswoman in Transition,' *LA84 Foundation Seward Staley Lecture 1984*, (Los Angeles: LA 84 Foundation, 1984), http://www.la84foundation.org/SportsLibrary/NASSH_Proceedings/NP1984/NP1984b.pdf, accessed 19 June 2011.

51 Caroline Ticknor, 'The Steel-Engraving Lady and the Gibson Girl,' *The Atlantic Monthly*, July 1901, 105-8.

52 *Ibid.*, 106.

53 *Ibid.*, 108.

54 'There are Seven Different Types of the Summer Girl-Which is the Belle?', *The Chicago Tribune*, 1 August 1896, 16.

55 'Summer Girl of '98: Will Show but a Little Old Fashioned Femininity', *The Chicago Tribune*, 16 April 1898, 16.

56 'There are Seven Different Types of the Summer Girl', 16.

illustrations. However, the very fact that a major paper such as the *Tribune* would sing the praises of the New Girl demonstrates the power that the figure held.

Indeed, this was by no means the only publication to present the New Girl in such a light, and it was a common representation by the century's end. The athletic 'Summer Girl' was a particularly fascinating manifestation of the New Girl for American newspapers. There appears, for example, to have been a trend among newspapers and magazines for a pictorial montage of the 'Summer Girl.' Athletic activities are strongly represented in these images as girls posed with golf clubs, tennis racquets and bicycles. For example, a *St. Louis Republic* montage advised on appropriate fashions for golfing, fishing and walking; a similar collage in the *Washington Times* in July 1902 featured golf and polo; while the *San Francisco Call* placed a golfing girl in mid-swing at the centre of their June 1900 collage.⁵⁷ As these images showed, the figure of the sporting girl was now central to the nationwide ritual of summer courting - a trend which demonstrated the cultural importance of the New Girl. Indeed, as an 1894 *Chicago Tribune* article argued, the American girl was not so obsessed with sports as to 'smack of the stable and the field', but rather saw athletic activity as serving the ends of 'physical health and well-developed womanhood.'⁵⁸ The New Girl was therefore a figure which held considerable cultural currency for American middle class society. She was healthy and athletic, but was still perceived as decidedly feminine. This is where The New Girl diverges from the New Woman: while the New Girl was educated and athletic, she was not politically active and, moreover, still maintained an allure for the opposite sex. Her well-developed yet unthreatening appearance made her an ideal figure for girls to emulate, and indeed her lifestyle was promoted through advice literature aimed at a new generation of young women.

Emulating the New Girl: Advice Literature

Although the New Girl may not have been the lived reality of girlhood experience, it remains that she presented an image to which girls could aspire, regardless of how successful this endeavour would ultimately be. As I have argued throughout this article, by the 1890s American girlhood had been constructed with physical culture as a central pillar, with the result that the cultural type of the New Girl was significantly influenced by a desire to represent a strong and healthful girlhood. One major way by which this discourse was constructed was through the proliferation of advice literature aimed at girls and their mothers, and indeed such literature continued to be produced in the 1890s and early 1900s, albeit with the comfort of knowing that the campaign for physical improvement of middle-class girls had succeeded in the public eye. Two advice books for girls, Harriet E. Paine's *Chats with Girls on Self-Culture* (1900), and Eva Lovett's *The Making of a Girl* (1902), provide pertinent demonstrations as to how girlhood had progressed since the mid-nineteenth century. Both works were written by feminist authors, with Paine being a leading figure of the suffragette movement, and Lovett an experimental educator, eventually opening the Lovett School in Atlanta. At the time these works were written, self-determination had become the conventional opinion regarding girls' development, and this was certainly present in depictions of the educated, sporting New Girl.⁵⁹ While the works of Paine and Lovett did not overtly implore girls to imitate

57 'Appropriate Costumes for the Athletic Mountain Maid, Favourite of the Hour', *The St. Louis Republic*, 27 July 1902, 42, image available from <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84020274/1902-07-27/ed-1/seq-42/>; 'How the Summer Girl of 1902 is Enjoying Herself', *The Washington Times*, 20 July 1902, 27, image available from <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn87062245/1902-07-20/ed-1/seq-27/>; 'The New Century Summer Girl', *The San Francisco Call*, 10 June 1900, 10, image available from <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85066387/1900-06-10/ed-1/seq-10/>.

58 'Devoted to Sport', 16.

59 Hunter, *How Young Ladies Became Girls*, 404.

what they saw in Gibson's drawings, it remains that their descriptions of girlhood fit in with such images. Thus, for Lovett, the sickly status of American girls was left firmly in the past, and a new era of opportunity supposedly dawned. As she argued, girls 'cannot be too thankful that they are living in this age of better ideas about women's training. To have plenty of breathing space and to be in full possession of one's body and limbs, is an abiding joy. It means greater health and happiness, and enlarged abilities.'⁶⁰ Exercise, performed both inside gymnasiums and outdoors, was credited with the 'taller stature, better developed muscles, and more graceful movements' of the girls of 1902.⁶¹ Although Lovett recognised the importance and impact of outdoor sports, she lamented the lack of opportunity still afforded to girls in this regard, and noted that physical education must remain central in girls' education as a result.⁶² It appeared, too, that concerns over the impact of education on girls' health had still not subsided, as Paine warned that girls who knowingly injured their health through study were a burden on their families and communities, and as such must be conscious to attain an equilibrium.⁶³ However, Paine also argued that a program of purposeful exercise undertaken during girlhood could provide a strong basis for undertaking study and could even expand the brain - an argument which was strongly linked to the promotion of physical exercise as a key part of college and high school curriculums.⁶⁴

These works demonstrated that the crusade for physical culture had certainly paid dividends, as middle-class girls were perceived as stronger, healthier, and fitter in 1900 than in 1850. Furthermore, their participation in athletics had even begun to take effect and, as Lovett argued, had even become an expectation. However, while they talked of greater freedom, it remains that young girls were still not afforded the same opportunities for physical expression as their brothers, and indeed the notion of education as debilitating to health was still a consideration. These texts demonstrated the complexities of the New Girl ideal; while there was an idealisation of the strong and healthful young woman there were also gendered assumptions which precluded girls from engaging in athletic activity in the same manner as boys. Thus, however 'mannish' she may have appeared to the Steel Engraving Lady, it remains that the New Girl was still largely perceived as a feminine type. This is not to say that physical culture had failed in its transformative goals, rather that such goals remained unabashedly gendered. As such, the New Girl embodied a femininity which was strongly informed by a half-century of connecting physical fitness with an ideal experience of girlhood.

Evaluating the New Girl

The New Girl came to prominence as a cultural figure at a time when physical health and fitness had become strongly ingrained in the conception of girlhood held by middle-class society. The identification of the 'girlhood problem' - the physical weakness of middle-class young women - earlier in the nineteenth century, and the subsequent promotion of physical culture to remedy it, led to the development of a discourse of girlhood with physical health and fitness as crucial and desirable traits. By the 1890s, this had moved beyond the physical culture movement to encompass a push for female participation in athletics and sports; a development heavily linked with other, more political shifts in the social understanding of femininity. The rise of female colleges in the

60 Eva Lovett, *The Making of a Girl*, (New York: J.F. Taylor, 1902), 46.

61 *Ibid.*, 47.

62 *Ibid.*, 49.

63 Harriet E. Paine, *Chats with Girls on Self-Culture*, (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1900), 18.

64 *Ibid.*, 20.

1860s and 1870s, coupled with the increasing agitation for suffrage and greater social freedoms by the feminist movement, resulted in an understanding of girlhood in which physical, intellectual and social development could claim space. It was a combination of these elements - the push to improve the American girl and the push to elevate her social position - which fostered an environment in which the New Girl could flourish as a cultural type. Moreover, the image of the New Girl became intricately connected with the development of an American national identity. Although such an identity was, in actuality, only representative of middle-class values, the fact that the athletic New Girl became so closely aligned with such values is a testament to the overall power of the image. The New Girl, therefore, was not solely an attempt to make feminism 'acceptable' to middle-class society, but also represents a logical outcome of decades of concern over the physical development of young women.
