Uncovering Nellie Bly

Martha Groppo

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I am a rising senior history and journalism major and a Gaines fellow. I am also a writer for the Kentucky Kernel and recently finished a year as Features Editor. This paper is an excerpt from a longer historical honors thesis written during the HIS 470/HIS 471 sequence, which was taught by Dr. Joanne Melish and Dr. Ellen Furlough.

I am extremely grateful to them both for their assistance and encouragement. The original paper was awarded the 2011 Philo Bennett Prize for best undergraduate history paper. I have received an Undergraduate Summer Research and Creativity Grant through the Office of Undergraduate Research to continue my studies on Bly, focusing on her record-setting journey around the world. This summer I will be visiting the European countries to which Bly traveled and beginning a second thesis under the supervision of the Gaines Center. I was recently awarded a Presidential Scholarship by the University of Virginia’s Semester at Sea program, and I plan to continue my research on Bly’s journey in the fall by circumnavigating the globe as she did. My research will focus on Bly’s identity abroad and her role as an early female foreign correspondent.

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Ellen Furlough

Martha Groppo’s work on Nellie Bly, a stunt journalist and social reformer of the late 19th century, is a superb analysis of a formidable and important woman whose historical contributions to journalism and the women’s rights have largely been neglected despite her continued name recognition.

Groppo’s work on Nellie Bly helps to fill in the gaps on Bly’s historical significance as one of the first female journalists to break into the largely male-dominated world of late 19th and early 20th century journalism in the United States. Groppo carefully documents Bly’s talents and efforts, and argues that Bly was able to gain skills and recognition as both an advocate for women’s rights (in journalism and more broadly) even as she remained a staunch supporter of the conservative feminine ideals of her time. Indeed, it was Bly’s ability to navigate both conventional and relatively radical standards of femininity that enabled her to embody and promote herself both as a “new woman” and an intelligent and accomplished journalist.
**Introduction:** Nellie Bly, stunt journalist and social reformer of the late 19th century, is almost completely absent from the world of academic study. Bly not only broke into the patriarchal world of journalism during the cutthroat era of Joseph Pulitzer in the 1880s-1900s as one of the first American female journalists to venture off newspaper society pages into male-dominated reportage, but she also helped set the definitive standard for daring in stunt and undercover journalism. Bly’s name nonetheless remains largely absent from scholarly research in the late 19th-20th centuries. Journalist Brooke Kroeger wrote the only scholarly documented biography on Bly in 1994, and it remains one of the few reliable sources on Bly available. Kroeger comments on the dearth of research on Bly, stating that at the time of publication the Library of Congress catalog possessed no documented biographies about Bly (Kroeger, 1994). Stacey Gaines Parham’s 2010 English dissertation is among the few recent research efforts on Bly (Parham, 2010). Some undocumented biographies and a handful of children’s books round out Bly research to date. The consensus of analyses portray her as an adventurer with feminist ideals, but upon closer examination, Bly speaks through her stories as both an advocate for women’s rights and a staunch supporter of the widely accepted feminine ideals of her time.

I argue here that Nellie Bly constructed her own image through her writing, casting herself as the embodiment of the daring “stunt girl” while maintaining her traditional feminine image in order to be a successful journalist. This image corresponded with the emerging ideal New Woman in the late 19th to early 20th centuries and allowed Bly to define the ideal New Woman in her own way. Bly constructed her self-identity during the first wave of the New Women, a wave that redefined the role and image of women in society while retaining aspects of traditional femininity of the preceding generation. Charles Dana Gibson’s iconic Gibson Girl pen and ink drawings became the masthead of this first wave of New Women. These women strove to be more daring, beautiful, free, and educated than previous generations, but without linking themselves to controversial issues on the horizon such as suffrage, birth control and the redefinition of motherhood. Bly, through self-promotion and redefinition, sought to embody the Gibson Girl and become the consummate New Woman. Bly’s redefinition of herself in the context of the New Woman matches historian Martha H. Patterson’s assessment of the emergent New Woman: “the New Woman defined women more broadly than the suffragette or settlement worker while connoting, even in its seemingly more socially conservative deployments, a distinctly modern ideal of self-refashioning” (Patterson, 2005, p. 2). My assessment is that Bly “self-refashioned” through her writing, even as several factors contributed to her need and desire to redefine herself into the New Woman for the public eye. After providing a brief summary of her life and providing journalistic context, I will discuss Bly’s self-construction.

**Her Life: Just the Facts:** Bly changed her name several times before she died, but her name at birth was Elizabeth Jane Cochran. Born May 5, 1864 to Judge Michael Cochran and his second wife Mary Jane Cochran, of Cochran’s Mills, Pennsylvania, Bly was the Judge’s thirteenth child (Kroeger, 1994, pp. 3-5). Her life changed at age six when her father died of paralysis, intestate (Macy, 2009, p. 11). Financial woes set in, and Mary Jane married Civil War veteran John Jackson Ford, an abusive and shiftless alcoholic (Kroeger, 1994, p. 15). Mary Jane was granted a divorce, and Bly went to the State Normal School at Indiana (Kroeger, 1994, p. 21). She did not, however, have the finances to finish the term (Macy, 2009, pp. 16 17).

At age 16, Bly and her mother moved to Pittsburg, Pennsylvania. Bly’s legendary news career may never have started if not for Erasmus Wilson’s bigoted column printed in The Pittsburgh Dispatch in 1885 touting home as the proper “sphere” for a woman (Kroeger, 1994, p. 36). Bly, a young girl who had been forced out of her “proper sphere” to support herself and her mother, took objection. She wrote a letter to the editor and signed it “Lonely Orphan Girl.” Managing editor George Madden put an advertisement in The Dispatch for the “Lonely Orphan Girl” to come to his office (Kroeger, 38-39). Elizabeth left her appointment with Madden with an assignment to write an article, published on January 25, 1885, about women’s spheres. After its publication, Bly adopted her famous pen name, “Nellie Bly,” derived from a Stephen Foster song.

During Bly’s time in Pittsburgh, she demonstrated what became a lifelong concern for women and children, writing about working and chorus girls. Despite her early success, Bly was demoted to the society pages, a section deemed appropriate for women reporters but loathed by Bly (Kroeger, 1994, p. 56). Society could not retain Bly’s attention, so she aimed to write something that suited her better than fashion: a travel piece about Mexico. The first words of her book written upon her return, read: “I was too impatient to work along at the usual duties assigned women on newspapers, so I conceived the idea of going away as a correspondent “ (Bly, Six months, 1888, p. 5). After Mexico, Bly’s return to daily work at the Dispatch failed to satisfy her, and she decided to leave for the journalistic Mecca, New York City (Kroeger, 1994, pp. 74-75). According to her lifelong friend Erasmus Wilson, Bly simply disappeared one day. With what became signature flair, she left a note that said, “I am off for New York. Look out for me. –Bly” (Kroeger, 1994, p. 75).

Bly lost a purse containing all of her money after four months in New York spent sustaining herself by sending a few articles back to Pittsburgh and attempting to find a newspaper willing to hire a female (Kroeger, 1994, p. 84). Stories differ on how Bly managed to get an audience with The World, but accounts agree that Bly left the paper’s building with a twenty-five dollar advance to support herself—and to keep her from going to another paper—while the editors discussed her ideas. The origin of the idea for Bly’s first assignment is also uncertain, but Bly’s own story was that, “I was asked by the World if I could have myself committed to one of the asylums for the insane in New York, with a view to writing a plain and unvarnished narrative of the treatment of the patients therein” (Bly, “Ten days,” 1887, p. 2). Bly agreed to the idea, accepting one of history’s most sensational undercover assignments, though the World had no definite plan in place for getting her out of the asylum if she was successfully committed (Bly, “Ten days,” 1887, p. 3). Bly got herself committed after convincingly feigning insanity, and she wrote about another sane patient and documented the hospital’s harsh treatment and corruption in her book on the ordeal, Ten Days in a Mad-House (Bly, “Ten Days in a Mad-House” (Bly, 1887, p. 5).
days,” 1887, p. 21). The World successfully got Bly off Blackwell Island and turned her experiences into print.

Bly’s Blackwell Island stunt made her famous, providing ample readership for her subsequent exposés on employment agencies, infant trafficking services, female laborer employers, and matrimonial services (Kroeger, 1994, pp. 102-102, 106). Bly had a knack for acting, and her life-long talent of getting people to believe her was matched only by her interview skills. She interviewed presidential candidate Belva Lockwood and fighter John L. Sullivan and also wrote lighter stories, attempting ballet, spending the night in a haunted house, going to the races, trying fencing, and dressing as an Amazonian showgirl.

Bly’s most famous story was not an exposé, an interview, or a lighthearted article; it was about a trip. In her subsequent book, Nellie Bly Her Book: Around the World in 72 Days, Bly said the idea of beating Phileas Fogg’s fictional record of circumnavigating the world in 80 days from Jules Verne’s 1873 novel Around the World in Eighty Days, came to her when she was lying in bed. Bly said her original proposition was turned down because of her gender (editors feared she would be slowed down by baggage) and inability to speak any languages but English (Bly, “Nellie Bly’s Book”, 1890, p. 2). However, when Bly heard that the idea had already been suggested and the paper was planning to send a man, she reportedly said, “Start the man, and I’ll start the same day for some other newspaper and beat him” (Bly, “Nellie Bly’s Book, 1890, p. 3). She got her circumnavigation assignment and set sail immediately. Back at home, The World held a contest with 100,000 reader entries to guess Bly’s exact travel time and tried to have stories about Bly most days (Kroeger, 1994, p. 150). After countless near disasters, adventures, and delays, she boarded her last boat with “For Nellie Bly, We’ll win or die” emblazoned in the engine room (Bly, “Nellie Bly’s Book,” 1890, p. 99). She crossed the Pacific by steamship and crossed America by railroad. A cheering, admiring public greeted her in every town, and she arrived back in New York on January 25 at 3:51 p.m., ahead of schedule, finishing in 72 days.

When Bly’s rousing success failed to earn a raise from Pulitzer, she left The World in 1890, but she returned after just three years (Kroeger, 1994, p. 186, 200). Despite her time away, Nellie Bly still enjoyed great popularity upon her return. According to Kroeger, “No other American newspaperwoman could command such name recognition among readers or such glorification from her editors—and after three years out of newsprint” (1994, p. 205). Few could deny that Nellie Bly and her exploits sold papers. The World’s readership dropped during Bly’s absence, then re-peeked upon her return (Kroeger, 1994, p. 224). For a while she enjoyed intriguing story assignments, like interviewing anarchist Emma Goldman, an assortment of Tammany Hall leaders, accused murderess Lizzie Halliday and union leader Eugene V. Debs.

The World was soon to lose Bly again, however. On April 21, 1895, Bly’s name was, once more, part of a headline. The subheading to the story read “This is not an exposé this time” (qtd. in Kroeger, 1994, p. 260). Indeed, Bly’s marriage was so sudden and unusual after all of the proposals she had received, that it seemed like it must be another stunt. At age thirty, Nellie Bly wed Robert Livingston Seaman, a seventy-year-old multimillionaire whose Iron Clad Manufacturing Company made milk containers for rail transport (Kroeger, 1994, p. 266). Bly soon found herself president of the Iron Clad Company, living among the socially elite, and settling down for several years that were, for her, at least, mild.

Bly and her husband returned from an extended trip to Europe to a company in debt. Shortly after, Seaman died of a heart condition after a wagon hit him while crossing the street (Macy, 2009, p. 52). Bly was left alone to preside over her dead husband’s floundering company and did her best to rise to the challenge. After several legal entanglements, Bly discovered that her manager had cheated her out of $50,000 dollars in a scandal involving forged checks and fraudulent employees. The legal mess dragged on before Bly finally admitted defeat, with the forgers acquitted and the former heiress out of money (Kroeger, 1994, pp. 102-102, 106). Bly had a knack for acting, and her life-long talent of getting people to believe her was matched only by her interview skills. She interviewed presidential candidate Belva Lockwood and fighter John L. Sullivan and also wrote lighter stories, attempting ballet, spending the night in a haunted house, going to the races, trying fencing, and dressing as an Amazonian showgirl.

During her stay in Austria from August 1914 to January 1919, Bly completed one of the few roles she had not yet occupied as a journalist: that of a war correspondent. Bly repeatedly wrote home asking Americans for contributions to war widows and orphans in Austria.

Despite Allied suspicions that she had German or Bolshevik leanings, Bly was permitted to return to America. During her stay in Europe, however, her mother mismanaged the money, leaving Bly nearly penniless (Kroeger, 1994, p. 464). Bly turned to journalism, the one thing that had always brought her success, and returned to The Journal once more to support herself through writing. Bly created a new column that offered advice and provided assistance to people who wrote to her (Kroeger, 1994, p. 463). Despite increasingly poor health, Bly remained the spirited, driven reporter of her youth into her later years. Ever gutsy, Bly witnessed an electrocution at Sing Sing after receiving a challenge from a male reporter friend who had hardly stomached covering an electrocution himself (Kroeger, 1994, p. 479). Her attempts to place unwanted children in adoptive homes continued for the rest of her life, although she received some criticism for her way of personally evaluating prospective adoptive families rather than letting outside providers do so. After several struggles with bronchitis, Bly died in St. Mark’s Hospital in New York on January 27, 1922 at 8:35 a.m. of pneumonia (Macy, 2009, p. 57).

**Her World: Pulitzer, Pride, and Pressure:** Few professional fields have such sordid reputations as the field of journalism. Images of workaholic men swearing in smoky news rooms long after normal working hours persisted far into the 20th century. Because women in the 19th century
Drastic stunt ideas including her famous madhouse stunt. Lutes, writing from the perspective of an English scholar interested in the literary significance of Nellie Bly and other stunt girls, describes stunt reporting as “a hybrid of ‘hard news’ (objective, hard-hitting) and ‘soft news’ (frivulous, emotional)” (Lutes, 2002, p. 219). Stunt stories often involved looking at difficult or unsavory topics through the softening lens of personal experience. By performing stunts, women could have a taste of the male world of hard news without completely abandoning their familiar feminine world of soft news, so stunts provided the ideal way for women to enter the journalistic world. Bly may have been the stunt girl trendsetter, but she soon learned that imitation is not just the sincerest form of flattery; it is also the gravest threat to originality.

Bly defined daring for the stream of stunt girls who followed her lead, but she soon had to compete with her imitators. Part of Pulitzer’s strategy for The World was to pit his employees against each other, hoping that this would encourage better work. George Juergens, a Pulitzer biographer and historian of the press, writes that “Pulitzer subscribed to the principle that two men occupying the same slot compelled both to their competitive best” (Juergens, 1966, 18). Rather than letting Bly become too comfortable, he introduced the pressure of competing stunt girls to keep her stories lively. According to Bly’s popularity, Pulitzer decided to hire more female reporters like her who were willing to take virtually any assignment (Brian, 2001, p. 187). The outcome of such a competitive situation was an inevitable battle of the escalating stunts.

In time, the idea of the stunt girl story became so familiar to readers that The World assigned a single byline, “Meg Merrilies,” to many of its stunt girls, though Bly was allowed to keep her own byline. The stunt girls who shared the name Meg Merrilies left few feats untried. According to Brian: “In the Bly tradition, Meg Merrilies slept among the tortured inmates of Chambers Street Hospital; saw a surgeon remove a cataract from a baby’s eyes; rescued a child from a burning building; steered a ship in a gale; and leaped into the path of a speeding trolley car, to show the need to equip the city’s public vehicles with better brakes” (Brian, 2001, 187).

Some of the stunt girls’ exploits were truly daring, but competition and the resulting escalation made some stunts seem ridiculous. Kroeger writes of Bly during the era of the Meg Merrilies, saying, “As if her own assignments weren’t demeaning enough, The World had other women reporters competing with her in the same sorts of embarrassing tasks. It had gotten to the point that the Sunday female stunt slot had taken on the aspects of an assembly line” (Kroeger, 223). The stunt girls found themselves in an interesting conundrum. They could either choose to perform occasionally demeaning or ridiculous stunts and enjoy the freedom of being a female journalist, or they could avoid potential embarrassment by remaining on the sedate society pages and stay on the outer edges of the journalistic world. Bly, for one, preferred performing stunts over writing for society pages. She and her imitators, however, faced the challenge of maintaining a credible journalistic reputation while performing stunts.

Pulitzer fostered competition but was serious about accuracy as well. He once wrote about a story with an error saying, “Accuracy! Accuracy!! Accuracy!!!!” (qtd. in Brian, 2001, p. 252). Bly, caught in a whirlwind of sensational stunts, had to maintain accuracy to earn standing as a respected journalist. Although Pulitzer expected his reporters to be accurate, he also expected them to write fantastic and sensational pieces—a nearly impossible balance (Kroeger, 1994, p. 187). Bly referenced her paper’s emphasis on the reporter’s responsibility in one of her articles when she wrote, “The proprietor of the The World hires people to find out and publish the truth about everything, regardless of all other considerations, and if the truth is not given it is solely the fault of the writer, not the paper” (Bly, “Are you an anarchist?” 1894). Thus, Bly and her female The World counterparts found themselves in a pressure-filled position resulting from being pitted against other reporters, expected to be daring to outdo the competition, and required to be accurate. These pressures came from inside The World’s famous doors. More awaited in the city beyond.

A magazine titled The Journalist frequently wrote stories about the activities of the journalistic world. Its managing editor, Allan Forman, eschewed impartiality and published his opinions of various male and female journalists freely (Kroeger, 1994, p. 103). Bly was conscious of the industry’s competitive culture and referenced it in her writing. For example, when faced with the possibility of having her beloved assignment of going around the world assigned to a man, Bly quickly threatening that she would start for another paper if she was not given the assignment (Bly, “Nellie Bly’s Book,” p. 3). Bly’s struggle with competition was perhaps never more evident than on her journey around the world, when she learned mid-trip that she was not only seeking to beat the world record for circumnavigation, but also trying to beat Cosmopolitan’s reporter, Elizabeth Bisland, a lady simultaneously sent on the exact same mission (Bly, “Nellie Bly’s Book,” p. 76).

The risk of being outdone or replaced by someone more satisfactory influenced Bly’s published opinions on one of the major issues of her time. Bly’s desire for improved freedoms for women was tempered by a tenacious hold on the past that corresponded with her paper’s policy on women’s issues. The World carefully maintained neutrality in regards to the burgeoning women’s rights movement. Juergen’s, in his assessment of
Fortunately for the stunt girls, their medium was the written word, and they could paint the canvas of their life in whatever way they chose. No one
journalistic world. She forged an image of herself that she knew would sell papers and that attempted to embody her version of the ideal New
Woman. By presenting herself as young, beautiful, desirable, and daring, she maintained her feminine identity while testing the contemporary
boundaries of female respectability. Like The World, Bly remained non-committal in her assessment of women’s liberation. The paper’s stance on
women’s issues matched the stance of many of the first wave New Women who staunchly held on to the past while braving into the undefined
future. By maintaining her traditional feminine identity and simultaneously advocating for many women’s causes, Bly remained safely in the
middle of public opinion and expectations for the ideal, Gibson-like New Woman—and safely in a job.

Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s definition of the early New Women aptly describes the role Bly filled and carefully maintained during her
career as a journalist: “In radical new environments, on the brink of developing a host of new roles for women, the first generation of New Women
wove the traditional ways of their mothers into the heart of their brave new world” (Smith-Rosenberg, 1985, p. 255). These women left the serious
advocacy for issues like suffrage to others, while they contented themselves with the task of proving to men that the New Woman could be as
nurturing, feminine, and loving as the old one. They served as a link between tradition and change that eased the nation into the massive transition
looming on the horizon.

On August 18, 1895, roughly a year after Bly’s interview with Altgeld, The World published an article titled “Here is the New Woman.” In the article, The World highlighted twelve women it categorized as being “New Women.” The article reinforced the newspaper’s safe women’s liberation stance of lauding traditional roles while supporting new freedoms. It described the twelve featured women by saying:

They do not totally disapprove of the “old” woman, the woman who nursed you when you didn’t know where on earth you were or what business you had there, the woman who soothed you when you were consumed with the agony of cutting your first teeth, the woman who has been and will be your refuge all through life. …They believe that after the incidental business of the household has been performed, women should go out into the world, work side by side with the men, fight when they are oppressed, vote, insist upon their rights and make themselves generally agreeable (qtd. in Patterson, 2005, p. 48).

An illustration dubbed “The New Woman,” a fierce-looking composite of the twelve women’s portraits, accompanies the article. The resulting composite made with features from the faces of Belva Lockwood, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, E.B. Grannis, Francis E. Willard, and Sarah
Grand, among others, is unattractive. Bly, striving to embody the ideal New Woman, doubtlessly did not want to be associated with this intelligent but undesirable face. Bly thought better of linking herself with the suffragette, who, at the time, Patterson writes, “might be called unattractive, barren, neglectful, and manly, doomed to the rank of spinster, shrewish wife, neglectful mother or housekeeper” (Patterson, 2005, p. 26). Instead, the image Bly projected fit better with the more youthful image of the Gibson Girl which emerged during Bly’s career. Gibson’s images of suffragettes often depicted them as unattractive nags, pestered their husbands. The youthful, beautiful Gibson Girl stood in stark contrast. She was traditional in some ways, but also indisputably “new” in her vibrant portrayal of womanhood. Bly’s version of the New Woman was as young, brave, and beautiful as the Gibson Girl and as intelligent and progressive as The World’s composite New Woman.

Bly was not alone in her alignment with the youthful Gibson image. Patterson writes that “The tremendous proliferation and appeal of her [the Gibson Girl’s] image, and the bevy of imitations her success sparked, makes her image the most influential version of the New Woman” (Patterson, 2005, p. 31). Charles Dana Gibson printed the first folio work of the Gibson Girl in 1894, the same year Bly was reporting on the Pullman Strike (Patterson, 2005, p. 22). Some images of Gibson’s images were printed years earlier, however, and the ideology formulating Gibson’s image was certainly present from the earliest days of Bly’s writing career. So many women sought to look like the Gibson drawing that one man described Fifth Avenue as being “like a procession of Gibsons” (qtd. in Patterson, 2005, p. 33). Bly’s limbo between a progressive, fresh female image and traditional roles mirrored what she saw in the popular image that was pervading culture. The Gibson Girl was fashionable, feminine, gorgeous, athletic, aloof, intelligent, and capable, but Gibson also published images depicting the undesirable circumstances that would ensue if women became jurors, soldiers and judges. Patterson describes the unique social balance struck by the Gibson Girl: “Tall, distant, elegant, and white, with a pert nose, voluminous upswept hair, corseted waist, and large bust, Charles Dana Gibson’s pen-and-ink drawings of the American girl, the Gibson Girl, offered a popular version of the New Woman that both sanctioned and undermined women’s desires for progressive sociopolitical change and personal freedom at the turn of the century” (Patterson, 2005, p. 29).

Vibrant youth was an important part of the New Woman image of both the Gibson Girl and the image Bly created for herself. The very title “stunt girl” paints a specific mental image of a youthful reporter. Calling Nellie Bly or one of the Meg Merrillies a “stunt woman” or “stunt lady” would have completely changed the genre’s image. The idea of a girl venturing out into the city to cover sordid stories lent an element of suspense to the stunt girl stories. Without evident hesitation, Bly lengthened her shelf-life as a girl reporter by putting age twenty-two on her passport for her journey around the world when she was actually twenty-five. Kroeger suggests that Victorian women frequently lied about their ages, and writes that, “Bly, for her part, looked even younger than twenty-two and had a great deal invested in being ‘that plucky girl reporter’” (Kroeger, 1994, p. 145). The lie about her age demonstrates Bly’s commitment to maintaining her youth, but her writing shows even more clearly that she was a master of public relations. Through dozens of articles written in the first person, Bly had the opportunity to subtly create herself through word choice and the quotes she included. For example, in her 1894 article “Are you an Anarchist?” Bly described Illinois Gov. John Altgeld’s references to her as the “little girl who is questioning me” and as “a little Republican” (Bly, “Are you an anarchist?” 1894). In her book written about her time undercover on Blackwell Island, Bly gave her dimensions as five feet and five inches and 112 pounds when a doctor examined her (Bly, “Ten days,” 1887, 34). Though, assuming these dimensions are correct, Bly was petite, the fact that she was called a “little girl” in the Altgeld story at age thirty is telling.

Bly’s ability to play the part of a youthful girl reporter convincingly was linked to her tireless projection of a spunky, energetic and daring personality. Bly’s personality was naturally dynamic, but she certainly used every opportunity to highlight her daring. In her 1894 story about Gov. Altgeld, for example, Bly describes his usual hostility toward reporters and then writes, “I rather enjoy an encounter with fierce people” (Bly, “Are you an anarchist?” 1894). Bly opened one of her more silly articles, written about a night spent looking for a ghost, by writing, “Afraid of ghosts? Oh, no! Not I! Why, I was wildly eager to see one, and as for living in a haunted house, I just hankered for the chance” (Bly, “Nellie Bly and the Ghost,” 1894). In her book about her journey around the world, references to Bly’s spunk abound (Bly, “Nellie Bly’s Book,” p. 3). One of her least-subtle references to her own spirit occurs when she discusses her first few hours on the boat that carried her across the Atlantic, during which she suffered sea sickness: “Silently I marveled at my boldness to attempt such a feat wholly unused, as I was, to sea-voyages” (Bly, “Nellie Bly’s Book,” p. 8). Throughout her account of the voyage, Bly records her eagerness to experience the sights she encounters. She peppers her account with lines like, “The weather was very bad, and the sea was rough, but I enjoyed it” (Bly, “Nellie Bly’s Book, p. 10) and “I was very anxious to see the execution ground” (Bly, “Nellie Bly’s Book,” p. 83). Gibson’s ideal woman frequently participated in adventurous activities in his drawings, leaving even her male companions looking lackluster.

Another integral part of Bly’s projected identity was her femininity and desirability. As a female in a male-dominated career, Bly wanted to work amongst men, but maintain her feminine image. Including mentions of flirtations and male attentions in her articles was a simple way to convey a feminine image and to establish her role as an ideal woman with exceptional abilities and beauty. In most cases, Bly was too subtle to advertise her beauty explicitly. Instead, she focused on her appearance’s influence on her subjects—particularly her male subjects. Throughout Ten Days in a Mad-house, Bly seems hyper-aware of her appearance, possibly because the story was her first for The World, and she felt the need to establish her femininity. In her description of her appearance before a judge to decide whether she should be committed, she writes that the judge said “I am positive she is somebody’s darling” (Bly, “Ten days,” 1887, p. 16). Of course, it suited Bly’s agenda perfectly to be thought lovely enough to be deemed “somebody’s darling” on sight. Later in her story, Bly says that one doctor watched her for a while and then said that her “face was the brightest he had ever seen for a lunatic” (Bly, “Ten days,” 1887, p. 45). This was an odd compliment, perhaps, but not too odd for Bly.
Mentions of more admiring males abound in Bly’s article “Wanted—A few good husbands.” The article describes her experiences with a matrimonial agency that arranged meetings between singles for a fee. Bly writes that when she discussed with an agent her feigned desire to marry and “give some lonely man his chance to find his ideal,” the agent responded, “I should think that you would have plenty of proposals and would need not our assistance” (Bly, “Wanted,” 1887). Bly described paying a five dollar fee to use the agency’s services, then meeting a series of potential husbands who asked to see her again. One would-be groom showered her with compliments saying, “You are so good-natured and happy” and “You have such a way about you” and “It would not take me long to ask you to marry me.” Bly ends the article on a flirtatious note, flaunting her desirability by saying, “I am still in search of a husband and Mr. Wellman has my S$” (Bly, “Wanted,” 1887). To Bly, exercising the power of being desirable was part of being a New Woman. Dana’s Gibson Girl images frequently featured women as highly desirable beings exercising their power to choose a mate. Bly reveled in her role as both an attracter and rejecter of men—a role she saw the Gibson Girl playing in the press. The Gibson Girl New Woman ideal can also be seen in Bly’s eventual selection of husband. A number of Gibson’s images focused around the vibrant Gibson Girl marrying an elderly millionaire. The notable age gap between Seaman and Bly, together with his large fortune, meant Bly’s marriage to him made her even more like what the Gibson Girl embodied.

Bly’s assessment of the suffragette movement gives further insight into her views on beauty and femininity. Her articles written about suffrage demonstrate that she viewed physical attractiveness as a weapon that gave her influence over men. In her article about attending the National Woman Suffrage Convention in 1896, Bly lambastes the physical appearance of the suffragettes, which she thought was sloppy. She wrote, “I never saw any reason for a woman to neglect her appearance merely because she is intellectually inclined. It certainly does not show any strength of mind. I take it rather as a weakness. And in working for a cause I think it is wise to show the men that its influence does not make women any the less attractive.” Perhaps Bly had in mind The World’s intelligent, but unattractive “composite woman” while penning these lines. Criticizing some of the perpetuators of the sterner New Woman image gave Bly the opportunity to distance herself from their unfeminine qualities. Bly went so far as to say that, “If I belonged to the Suffrage Association I would propose that every club have a dressmaker who would visit New York at least once a year.” Evidently distressed by the issue of clothing more than any other at the convention, Bly also wrote that “Dress is a great weapon in the hands of a woman if rightly applied. It is a weapon men lack, so women should make the most of it. As their motto seems to be ‘the means to gain the end,’ why not use the powerful means of pretty clothes” (Bly, “Nellie Bly with the Female Suffragists,” 1896). Clearly, Bly viewed her femininity as a competitive advantage. She found a way to transform the liability that kept her from being classified in the same way as her male journalist contemporaries into an asset. Rather than hiding her femininity to fit in with the men, she embraced it so she could be competitive.

Kroeger notes that Bly may have had the appearances of these suffragettes in mind when she expressed approval of clothing worn by the women at the Republican National Convention years later in 1920. Bly was happy to see that the women at the convention had adopted her view of femininity: “For while they have fought and won the battle for equal rights with men, they did not forget that man is a creature of his eyes. Nor do these same women intend to let the world believe that suffrage will make her anything else than she has been heretofore, a womanly woman, a mother, a wife and a sister and the uplifter and sustainer of all that is good” (qtd. in Kroeger, 1994, p. 483). This passage succinctly demonstrates Bly’s opinion of what the New Woman should be. She desired reform and the advance of woman’s rights, but she saw these changes as a way to improve the conventional roles of women, not replace them. This stance allowed Bly to support liberation for women but also maintain traditional femininity and retain her position of influence and prominence as a journalist.

Because she received criticism about her feminine identity in her nontraditional role as a journalist, Bly needed to promote her own appearance in her writing in order to maintain an attractive and safe feminine image. Female journalists during Bly’s lifetime were held to a level of scrutiny far beyond a modern audience’s comprehension. Bly referenced this criticism and her own sensitivity to it in her account of her journey around the world. In the story, Bly was tempted to laugh at someone’s appearance. Instead of laughing, her response to the episode provides a glimpse of the pressure Bly felt to be beautiful. Bly explained that “thoughts of how sensitive” she was to remarks about her appearance kept her silent, and added “I have always said to critics, who mercilessly write about the shape of my chin, or the cut of my nose, or the size of my mouth, and such personal attributes that can no more be changed than death can be escaped: ‘Criticise [sic] the style of my hat or my gown, I can change them, but spare my nose, it was born on me’” (Bly, “Nellie Bly’s Book,” p. 82).

Though it may never be known exactly who criticized the size of Bly’s chin or the shape of her nose, it is possible to identify one source of physical critique. The Journalist’s assessments of female reporters often contained physical descriptors. It is easy to imagine what a competitive environment this combination of professional critique and physical description could have made for young female journalists. The Journalist described Bly’s competitor for the journey around the globe stunt, Elizabeth Bisland, as “undoubtedly the most beautiful woman in metropolitan journalism,” and called her a writer with “daintiness and distinction” (qtd. in Kroeger, 1994, p. 121and 176). Other publications at the time described Bly as pretty, but The Journalist did not fawn over her appearance as it did the appearance of other reporters. In the words of Kroeger, “The Journalist gave her very pointed short shrifl” (Kroeger, 1994, p. 102). The same publication was, however, quick to criticize Bly’s attempts to bolster her image through her writing, which she doubtlessly used to remain competitive with her fellow journalists who were receiving glowing beauty reviews. The Journalist said of Bly after her return to The World that it would be even better news that Bly had returned if she “would not
take herself quite so seriously and would let up on these periodic descriptions of her glorious eyes and her career. Of course, we all know that she is the smartest woman who ever lived, and has accomplished more than all the men journalists of this century put together...” (qtd. in Kroeger, 1994, p. 227). The Journalist’s criticism demonstrates a stressful dilemma in which Bly found herself. By self-promoting her physical appearance, she risked accusations of narcissism, but leaving such references out of her stories meant ignoring a powerful part of her appeal as a journalist.

The Journalist hardly fostered a mutually supportive environment for the young women trailblazing the journalistic world. As previously discussed, journalism at this moment in history was fiercely competitive, but the level of competition was intensified for females. Bly wrote the following about a woman who swindled girls through job scams: “Talk of man’s inhumanity to man! Woman’s meanness to woman would, by comparison, rise like a cathedral beside a tombstone and ring its own chimes.” Did Bly speak from personal experience? The assessment of a fellow female journalist, Mary Twombly, suggests that she did. Twombly wrote in 1889 of women in her profession and “their willingness to undermine and supersede each other, and the uncharitableness towards beginners of those who are securely placed” (qtd. in Kroeger, 1994, p. 195). Twombly cited the small genre in which all female journalists worked as the source of their nastiness toward one another. With women confined to the specific areas of stunt reporting and society pages, there was little room to spread the competition. In her discussion of female competition, Kroeger also writes that Bly “weighed in as both a victimizer and victimized” in the catfights, saying that Bly had “friction” with Bisland, Nelson and several other journalists. The lack of sisterly feelings must also have been fostered by additional tension their appearances caused. As soon as physical appearance entered the assessment criteria of female journalists, their competitive environment became more personal than that of the men. The female journalists’ competition was not just work-based, but also image-based.

Bly’s desire to project a beautiful image is further explained by the question of identity being a journalist raised for a 19th century female. A woman entering the male-dominated field raised questions in the mind of her readers about her femininity. An obscure article published in 1904 by Louis Megargee when Bly was 40, widowed, and past her journalistic prime, gives a rare glimpse into what life behind America’s sweetheart’s smokescreen was like. The article describes Bly as someone “variously pictured as a gushing school girl, embittered old maid, a grass widow, a real widow, a wife and mother, an effeminate man disguised [sic]as a woman, and as a myth altogether.” Apparently, there was a debate as to who “Nellie Bly” really was, and many thought she was really a man with an alias (Megargee, 1904, pp. 4547-4548). Bly, in her early days, not only had to prove that she was feminine, but that she was a woman at all.

Megargee describes Bly’s physical appearance by saying she was “a very ordinary everyday young woman, rather slight in form, leaning to eccentricity in dress, masculine in her tastes and ideas, and a man hater from ‘way back” (Megargee, 1904, p. 4548). Megargee’s assessment demonstrates that Bly was remembered by at least some of her contemporaries as being masculine and a man-hater, though he offers no explanation for this assessment. Though his own description of Bly as “masculine in tastes and ideas” could be interpreted as critical, Megargee also offers a vivid representation of the criticism Bly received that she avoided mentioning in her stories:

In her pursuance of this ambition she has endured what would drive almost any other woman wild with shame, mortification or chagrin. The basest motives were at times attributed to her by thoughtless and brutal carpers and cynics. She was declared unwomanly, unmaidenly, bold, presumptuous, by men, and brazen and forward by her sister women. While it is true that the vast majority of who felt an interest in her novel and original line of work entertained only the kindest sympathy for her, the very nature of her occupation subjected her constantly to the cruelest kind of unthinking animadversion. (Megargee, 1904, p. 4549)

Megargee’s assessment partly explains Bly’s constant marketing of her own femininity and beauty, and her reason for not fully committing to the suffrage cause. By simply placing herself in the journalistic realm, Bly challenged the traditional female role enough that she received criticism and cast doubt on her femininity. She needed to maintain and promote her feminine attributes to keep herself popular, safely acceptable, and non-threatening to her reading audience.

Conclusion: Modern descriptions of Bly as “a feminist” and “stunt girl” are troubling, not so much because they are incongruent with her life, but because they do not adequately summarize her complex identity. While Bly’s status as a pioneer in a male-dominated field and her continued advocacy for the betterment of women’s lives suggest radical ideals, Bly for most of her life did not self-identify with the most liberated women of her time, the suffragettes. The little research conducted on Bly to date fails to address the complex issue of the image Bly projected through her writing. It is not enough to know the stunts Bly conducted or the causes she championed; such facts create an image of what she did, but not who she was.

When she constructed the image of a young, fearless, beautiful, and utterly feminine reporter, Bly successfully cemented not only the way she would be perceived by her contemporaries, but also the way she would be remembered for decades to come. The discovery that Bly’s image was, in fact, her own fabrication, does not suggest that she lacked the qualities she claimed. Somewhere in the midst of the years she spent creating “Nellie Bly,” Elizabeth Cochrane disappeared entirely and became the star reporter about which she wrote. Bly became perpetually youthful, courageous, desirable, and feminine. Bly not only introduced the idea of stunt girls, but also became the ideal stunt girl. In the process, she demonstrated that the New Woman could be both young and beautiful, and strong and intelligent. Through her role as a stunt girl and attempts to personify the fictitious Gibson Girl, Bly became the embodiment of her own vibrant version of the New Woman.
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Figure 1: Nellie Bly around the time of her journey around the world

Figure 2: One of Charles Dana Gibson’s Gibson Girls, 1901