# The Quest for Meaningful Work: Enacting New True Woman Values via Epideictic Rhetoric

**Kristy Crawley**

**Abstract:** To persuade readers to enact New True Woman's values in their quest for an occupation, Martha Rayne employs epideictic rhetoric to educate her readers in *What Can a Woman Do or Her Position in the Business and Literary World.* In this paper, I argue that Rayne blends True Woman and New Woman values to promote the working New True Woman. Through my analysis of Rayne's work, I demonstrate that she utilizes the New True Woman's values of resourcefulness, critical thinking, and self-fulfillment as a basis for educating or guiding readers' conduct through praising and blaming. To showcase the enactment as well as the challenges to New True Woman's values, this article highlights the labor of Mary Ellen Pleasant and Julia Wolfe, two nineteenth-century boardinghouse keepers.

**Dr. Kristy Crawley** is a professor of English at Forsyth Technical Community College. Her research on pedagogy and rhetorical studies appears in PARS in Practice: More Resources and Strategies for Online Writing Instructors; Writing Program Administration; Prose Studies; Peitho; Teaching English in the Two-Year College; Routledge Companion to Literature and Class; and Teachers, Teaching, and Media: Original Essays about Educators and Popular Culture.

**Keywords**: Martha Louise Rayne, *What Can a Woman Do or Her Position in the Business and Literary World*, nineteenth century, American, epideictic rhetoric, New True Woman, Nancy Myers, domesticated workspaces, separate spheres, labor, Julia Wolfe, Mary Ellen Pleasant

> ". . . her development of strength need not detract from her womanliness or make her one degree less lovable. She will be less dependent but more companionable. Her work itself is becoming more and more adapted to her own tastes and her ability to perform it, and it is a duty imposed on all who have the power to advance her interests to unite by word and deed in clearing away all false ideas of the true woman's position in the world" (Rayne 16).

With the number of occupations for women increasing in the late nineteenth century, Martha Louise Rayne recognized a strong link between self-fulfillment and meaningful labor. In *What Can a Woman Do or Her Position in the Business and Literary World*, Rayne, a nineteenth-century American journalist, invited readers to learn about rewarding occupations that offer more than a paycheck and mindless domestic toil. Rayne's emphasis on independence and personal satisfaction evokes images of the New Woman, a nineteenth-century feminist ideal that contrasted with the True Woman.

Barbara Welter clearly defines True Womanhood via traditional nineteenth-century ideals: "The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her

husband, her neighbors, and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. . . Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement or wealth, all was ashes. With them she was promised happiness and power" (Welter 152). Whereas the New Woman starkly contrasts with the True Woman: "Tethered to the professional woman, the educated woman, the club woman, and the political woman, the figure of the New Woman represented virtues at odds with the cult of domesticity: secularism vs. piety, sexual freedom vs. purity, independence vs. domesticity" (Patterson 2). Based on New Woman's ties to independence and public space, Martha Patterson identifies numerous types of New Women: "suffragist, prohibitionist, clubwoman, college girl, American girl, socialist, capitalist, anarchist, pickpocket, bicyclist, barren spinster, mannish woman, outdoor girl, birth-control advocate, modern girl, eugenicist, flapper, blues woman, lesbian, and vamp" (2). The New Woman examples imply a power to choose, speak, travel, and challenge authority.

Considering the differences between the two ideals, Rayne avoided alienating her audience, specifically those aligned with True Womanhood's values. She promised women readers the occupations within her work foster "strength" and "independence" while affording women the ability to maintain their "womanliness" and lovableness (16). Wedged between two contrasting ideologies when promoting rewarding occupations for women, Rayne appeals to a broad audience by reconceptualizing the working True Woman. She challenges the either/or dichotomy of the New Woman and True Woman by rhetorically melding the two ideologies forming what Nancy Myers refers to as the New True Woman. The New True Woman "blends and modifies social expectations about women's respectability with the individual woman's need and desire to engage in meaningful work" (Myers 43). The New True Woman labors for more than her family. She serves the public as well as strives to perform meaningful work. Laboring within a domesticated workspace, she solidifies her connection to domesticity while engaging in meaningful work to attain "financial independence" and "self-fulfillment" through her "resourcefulness" and "critical thinking" (Myers 43).

To persuade readers to enact New True Woman's values in their quest for an occupation, Rayne utilizes epideictic rhetoric to educate her readers in *What Can a Woman Do or Her Position in the Business and Literary World.* In this paper, I argue that Rayne blends True Woman and New Woman values to promote the working New True Woman. Through my analysis of Rayne's work, I demonstrate that she utilizes the New True Woman's values of resourcefulness, critical thinking, and self-fulfillment as a basis for educating or guiding readers' conduct through praising and blaming.

My analysis of Rayne's work builds on the definition of epideictic rhetoric's education function. Although many definitions of epideictic hinge on Aristotle's notion of praising or blaming a person or thing, I focus on contemporary epideictic rhetoric centered on the "conduct and values

within communities addressed or invoked" (Sheard 771). Grounded in its etymological definition of "showing forth, of display, of demonstration, of making known, of shining," epideictic rhetoric shows forth "shared values of a community. These are the values the epideictic upholds, the foundation from which a rhetor can praise or blame" (Moe 436). In the context of education, Peter Wayne Moe observes that rhetors engage in "seeing what shared values in the community are troubling and then resisting them, rewriting them even, through praise and blame" (Moe 452). Utilizing Moe's description of epideictic rhetoric's education function as a framework for my analysis, I attend to the resistance of True Womanhood values in the first half and focus on Rayne's use of epideictic rhetoric as a way to rewrite True Woman's values in light of New True Woman's values. In the second half, I demonstrate the enactment as well as challenges to New True Woman's values exhibited by the labor of nineteenth-century boardinghouse owners, Mary Ellen Pleasant's and Julia Wolfe in domesticated workspaces.

## Resisting True Womanhood's Troubling Values

For Rayne, True Womanhood's values imposed troubling restrictions on women as its emphasis on domesticity intertwined with the separate spheres ideology that refers to "the idea that men and women operated within separate spheres as a result of inherent physical and mental differences" (Amnéus 10). Regarding physical differences, women's ability to give birth automatically linked them to the domestic spaces, meaning private homelike spaces for them to nurture others and perform domestic labor while men's primary role as providers established their position within public spaces, places of commerce and competition. However, in connection to mental differences, Aileen Kraditor notes that the Industrial Revolution "broadened the distinctions between men's and women's occupations and certainly provoked new thinking about the significance and permanence of their respective 'spheres'" (9). With many women lacking the education or skills needed to apply for new technologically advanced jobs and being tied to the domestic spaces due to childcare, men automatically became ideal candidates for jobs within public spaces as many moved from working alongside their wives on the family farm to working in factories. Thus, the divide between men's and women's labor widened, leaving women in the home as men pursued work in public spaces.

While the Industrial Revolution's role in separate spheres ideology makes it appear that all women remained nestled in domestic spaces, numerous lower and lower-middle class women worked in public spaces as unskilled factory workers, maids, cooks, and seamstresses. Lower-class women's presence in public spaces prevented them from completely fulfilling the expectations and ideals associated with the domestic sphere tied to True Womanhood: "piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" (Welter 152).

Discouraging many women from entering occupations outside of homemaker and limiting them to household drudgery's monotonous work, True Woman's long-standing values prove

difficult to resist due to women's social status and reputation tethered to domesticity. Gerda Lerner interpreted True Womanhood "as a *vehicle* by which middle-class women elevated their own status. 'It is no accident,' Lerner wrote in 1969, 'that the slogan 'woman's place is in the home' took on a certain aggressiveness and shrillness precisely at the time when increasing numbers of poorer women *left* their homes to become factory workers'" (qtd. in Kerber 12). True Womanhood's values, entrenched in the separate spheres ideology, function as an ideal for white middle and upper-class women.

In resistance to True Womanhood's troubling values, Rayne recognizes the connection between True Womanhood's values and women's lack of financial independence, especially lower-class women, widows, and unmarried women. Rayne criticizes True Womanhood values' punishing ties to social class as she declares, "The day has gone by when a woman who enters any pursuit of industry loses caste" (12). She precedes to define her audience as well as pinpoint specific groups of women suffering as they cling to domesticity to uphold their social standing:

> There are true womanly women, who may not have another opportunity of making themselves a home, for whom providence has furnished no mate—women who are denied marriage, or who prefer a life of single independence to taking up with one lame offer; or, it may be, they are already married, but have no taste or strength for domestic work, and prefer to bear the mutual burden in their own way. There are other women who have time from the duties and obligations of housework to earn a little pin money, and turn an honest penny, for their own profit. (Rayne 14)

Rayne identifies True Womanhood's ties to domesticity and social class as a barrier that prevents married women from earning supplemental income, discourages impoverished single women from working, and forces those with a distaste for domestic labor to continue their household drudgery. In each scenario, women fear that they will lose their social standing and, as a result, they sacrifice their financial stability and contentment derived from engaging in meaningful labor.

Laying blame on True Womanhood's values, Rayne's epideictic rhetoric "invokes shared values as a basis for promoting a vision of what could be" (Sheard 766). From impoverished single women to wealthy married women desiring extra spending money, each group values financial stability and self-fulfillment. Amidst Rayne's disapproval of True Womanhood's domesticity tied to caste, readers imagine what their lives could be like if they discarded the false belief that their social standing rested on whether they labored in a public or domesticated workspace.

Prompting readers to dispel their false beliefs and imagine enriching their lives through

meaningful labor, Rayne conveys epideictic rhetoric's efficacy. Sheard infers, "Its [epideictic's] efficacy depends today as it did in antiquity on *kairos* or 'exigency' in the broadest sense (not just 'occasion' of discourse, but what makes the occasion what it is—the critical convergence of time, place, and circumstance, including audience's needs, desires, expectations, attitudes, resources, and so on)" (771). The dilemma of choosing between maintaining their social status and working plagued middle and lower-class women as separate spheres ideology and True Womanhood's values flourished during the Industrial Revolution. However, for some, particularly single women, the only choice was to "work or starve" (Rayne 14). Considering the urgency to help women, *What Can a Woman Do or Her Position in the Business and Literary World* informs women of meaningful occupations and serves as a guide for their conduct in the workplace. Rayne's work fulfills their needs and educates them on the values that lead to fulfilling work while avoiding missteps.

However, Rayne's epideictic rhetoric utilizes working women's missteps to guide readers' conduct. Rayne observes,

> The number of incompetent women who attempt to conduct a business they know absolutely nothing about, is almost incredible, and they work harder, to make ignominious failures, than the educated woman does to succeed. But in one sense they are themselves educators; they are many of them pioneers in the work they have chosen, and their mistakes serve as warnings to other women who, armed with their energy, added to a practical knowledge of business in its many details, will accomplish all that they failed to do. (15)

Pioneers' successes and failures help advance Rayne's New True Woman's values through praise and blame. Although Rayne never references specific pioneers, their performances in workspaces help reify New True Woman's values. The next section dedicated to resourcefulness and critical thinking showcase pioneers' behavior. Rayne references the working women's behavior to rewrite community values through praise and blame as she promotes New True Woman's values of resourcefulness, critical thinking, and self-fulfillment that potentially lead to financial independence and contentment.

## Rewriting True Womanhood's Values to Promote New True Woman's Values

In the sections dedicated to New True Woman's resourcefulness, critical thinking, and self-fulfillment, I demonstrate Rayne's use of epideictic rhetoric to educate readers through praise and blame as well as persuade them to enact New True Woman's values.

**Self-Fulfillment in Domesticated Workspaces**

With numerous chapters dedicated to discussing domesticated workspaces, Rayne praises domesticity in advising women to pursue occupations such as boardinghouse keeper, beekeeper, engraver, and cook where their business is an extension of their home and labor benefits the public as they pursue their interests. Similarly, the book's illustrations reinforce domesticity amidst advocating for diverse occupations to promote women's financial independence. For instance, a squirrel, tree branches heavy with leaves, and a farmhouse surround the table of contents. Its domestic imagery praises domesticity while the chapter titles showcase numerous occupations that persuade readers to create their own domesticated workspaces.

However, within the chapters, Rayne resists the notion of conflating women's labor for her family with laboring for the public in a professional capacity. In a chapter dedicated to keeping boarders, Rayne praises separating work from family life: "In the best boarding house the landlady is never seen, except when business requires her. She has her own room, which is also her office, and boarders go there to see her, engage board, pay bills, or make complaints" (270). The boardinghouse keeper ideally functions in a professional capacity and interacts with boarders in the professional space of the office instead of the domestic spaces in the home.

Similarly, Rayne praises dressmakers who separate their business from the domesticated parts of the home: "And, above all, let her keep her domestic troubles and the wrangles of her workroom out of sight, and as separate from her business life, as she would the bread and butter of the nursery from her customers' silks and satins" (218). Such advice emphasizes the importance of the physical separation between the home and business through the illustration of keeping a nursery's physical objects away from work-related materials. Separation yields a sense of fulfillment in labor performed in a professional capacity for those outside of the family.

**Critical Thinking and Resourcefulness**

In the chapter "Dressmakers and Dressmaking," Rayne blames dressmakers for their failure to utilize critical thinking to advise customers.

> I presume there are three dressmakers out of every twenty-five who present the appearance and manners of ladies to their customers. The dressmaker we most frequently meet with, even in the highest grades of the profession, is a dilapidated looking woman, dressed haphazardly in a cheap, ill-fitting costume, who has nothing in her own appearance to suggest a single idea of what her work is. Instead of being interested in her customers' wants, she begins a doleful story of how one girl is sick and another has left her in the middle of the season, without giving warning, or relate her own domestic troubles, or the remissness of some of her customers. When she finally gives her attention she brings in an armful of French fashion papers, and asks the customer to select something,

> instead of selecting and suggesting the styles herself, and the lady, who wants her new dress stylishly and fashionably made, goes away with no idea of what it is to be, and with no confidence that the dressmaker knows any more about it than she does. (217-218)

Although the poorly attired dressmaker complains about the struggles in her personal and professional life, when she turns her attention to customers, she takes on the role of a servant as she presents the customers with the French fashion papers and waits for their selection. The dressmaker fails to place herself in the position of a fashion expert. Instead, she views the customer, who is more than likely a middle or upper-class woman, as an expert in matters of fashion. They possess the ability to pay for her services, so they have the power to choose a dress according to their personal taste without any interference from a working-class dressmaker. Instead of being a fashion expert, the sewing professional transforms into a present yet invisible servant as she takes measurements, makes alterations or garments to satisfy her clients, and toils endless hours.

Rayne's critiques highlight epideictic's rhetorical potential to initiate change. Sheard extrapolates, "Often enough, negative images of what is or could be provide powerful incentives for change" (770). Such negative images illuminate dressmakers' lack of critical thinking in terms of analyzing their own clothing's messages or failure to think critically by sharing their expertise with customers. The negative images censure the dressmakers' conduct in showing readers what not to do.

To reinforce critical thinking's value and provide an incentive to change, Rayne praises dressmakers' artistic qualities aligned with critical thinking:

> She must have the artist's eye to judge the effects of color, the sculptor's faculty for form, that she may soften the outlines, turn the figure to the best advantage, and arrange the drapery in harmonious folds. She must know history in order to take from different epochs particular details suitable to various styles of beauty, and to be sure of making no mistake in the matter of accessories; and she must be a poet, to give grace and expression and character to the costumes. (217)

Drawing on the skills of artists, sculptors, historians, and poets, the dressmaker uses critical thinking, imagination, and skill to create dresses designed to fit the unique curves of each woman while offering her customers dresses that are in tune with current fashion trends. Dressmakers break out of their servant roles as they engage in self-making as well as making others through their fashion advice and garments. Bodies wearing their garments serve as a reflection of the creator, a woman with the power to shape reputations and combat or promote oppressive fashion trends.

Other works, similar to Rayne's *What Can a Woman Do or Her Position in the Business and Literary World* echo the New True Woman's emphasis on critical thinking. Frances Willard, Helen Winslow, and Sallie White's *Occupations for Women: A Book of Practical Suggestion for the Material Advancement, the Mental and Physical Development, and the Moral and Spiritual Uplift of Women* touted critical thinking's important role in women's sewing professions when describing an unnamed milliner's creative process: "When a customer orders a bonnet or a hat I make a mental picture of it; photograph it, as it were, on my brain, dwelling intently upon it until its image is so indelibly stamped on my memory that I cannot forget it, and can exactly reproduce it" (392). The milliner relies on her mind's eye to hold the image as she works to recreate the hat or bonnet. However, her work goes beyond imitation or reproduction. Her original designs stem from a creative process as well. When asked where she obtains her designs, the milliner provided this response: "Literally everywhere. I go to the theatre as much to see the women's headgear as to watch the play. In architecture, in groupings of statuary or single chiseled figures, in pictures, on placards, and posters, in the way fences are built, in everything my eyes fall upon . . ." (393). The mental work required for design and creation overlaps with subjects commonly taught in universities, for she obtains her designs from art, theatre, and architecture. Lines, shapes, colors, and textures of everyday objects serve as fuel for her imagination and creation. Her everyday outings become research for potential projects.

Also, sewing professionals, particularly those who owned and operated their own businesses, employed their mental faculties to make important business decisions. With more women entering sewing businesses and cities growing, business owners "had to remain cognizant of the changing shopping patterns and economic geography. They had to consider the best and most lucrative location for a business given what one could afford to pay in rent" (Yohn 412). Based on past and current experiences, women proprietors predicted areas of future growth and decline. They used their mathematical skills to determine their weekly and yearly budgets in order to see whether it is worthwhile to move to a new location. Also, to ensure their success, they developed communication skills to reach out to those who could help them accomplish their goals: "They also had to maintain personal and social collaborations and relationships with family, friends, and neighbors that resulted in labor and or financial support. And they had to forge the business alliances that ensured them access to products that would continue to attract loyal clientele" (Yohn 412). Proprietors' access to labor and material goods depended on their continued contact with community members. As they came in contact with suppliers, they engaged in negotiations for the best prices. Their livelihood rested on critical thinking that helped them problem solve in an unstable marketplace filled with competition.

Rayne's praise for the New True Woman's critical thinking, backed by readers' exposure to similar texts, persuades readers to challenge the devaluation of the cerebral in women's physical labor. Occupations such as dressmaking permit women to physically labor, a type of labor considered as inferior to jobs requiring mental labor. In *The Mind at Work: Valuing the Intelligence*

*of the American Worker*, Mike Rose acknowledges the misconceptions attached to physical labor: “It is as though in our cultural iconography we are given the muscled arm, sleeve rolled tight against biceps, but no thought bright behind the eye, no image that links hand and brain” (xv). Although nineteenth-century women workers do not come to mind in Rose’s picture of muscled arms, women’s confinement to a domesticated space coupled with their confinement to physical tasks illustrates their devalued positions and intelligence. As Rose points out, sadly few connect physical labor to the idea of “competence,” for competence involves a mastery of “special terminology,” “movements of the body,” and “knowledge of tools and devices” (xviii). Women’s confinement to domesticated workspaces and physical labor reinforced social understandings of women’s work as nonessential and inconsequential. Thus, Rayne praises critical thinking in an attempt to reconceptualize labor in domesticated workspaces.

## Enacting New True Woman’s Values

To showcase working women enacting New True Woman’s values, I highlight two examples below: Mary Ellen Pleasant (1814-1904) and Julia Wolfe (1860-1945). Although I cannot attest that Rayne’s book published in 1893 influenced Pleasant and Wolfe, their work exhibits New True Woman values as well as highlights financial independence derived from those values.

I selected Pleasant and Wolfe to demonstrate that New True Woman’s values are shared amongst diverse groups. Pleasant and Wolfe’s differing characteristics such as African American/Caucasian and urban/rural highlight New True Woman’s widespread appeal and attest to epideictic rhetoric’s power to rewrite or revise True Womanhood’s values.

### Mary Ellen Pleasant

Mary Ellen Pleasant, an African-American boardinghouse owner, uses the home as a site for education and intellectual activity. Pleasant, also known as “Mammy Pleasant,” works as a domestic servant for Milton S. Latham, a senator, prior to owning her first boardinghouse. Acquiring a boardinghouse after leaving her domestic servant position, Pleasant embraces her ties to domesticity as she continues her physical household labor.

However, she transforms her domestic servant identity tied to True Womanhood by developing a professional ethos through a “cerebral representation of herself” (Berthold 112). Pleasant utilizes the boardinghouse as a launching pad for acquiring property and wealth. Being well acquainted with Senator Latham and other government officials through her work in Latham’s household, she soon attracts the wealthy and powerful to her boardinghouse’s central location in San Francisco in 1869: “Her property was strategically placed—near City Hall, the opera, and the largest gambling house—to attract the city’s political and financial elite . . . Pleasant’s forays to the markets, banks, shops, and courts could be easily observed from the city center, as could the

galas and meetings that took place at 920 Washington" (Hudson 56).

When hosting elite clientele, Pleasant's boardinghouse becomes a site for audience analysis and all physical objects within the boardinghouse become texts open for interpretation. Subversively, Pleasant acquires information about her clientele as well as valuable investment information: "These men frequented her boardinghouses and revealed information—financial and social—that Pleasant used to increase her own wealth and status. Pleasant's use of seemingly private space to further her enterprise may have played on the assumptions that white men had about African Americans and 'help' in general: that domestics would not understand financial affairs" (Hudson 59). However, while attending to her domestic duties in the boardinghouse, Pleasant attentively listens and applies the financial tips to her life, for "she invested in gold, silver, and quicksilver (mercury) mines" (Hudson 59). The profits from investments that Pleasant acquired allow her to purchase other boardinghouses and further transform her San Francisco boardinghouse into an elaborate establishment.

By embracing the role of a domestic and motherlike figure in her interactions with patrons in her boardinghouse, Pleasant soon learns "the needs of the most successful investors of the day: the Bonanza Kings and their compatriots, who demanded elegant establishments in which to conduct their business" (Hudson 59). Through listening to their conversations, she understands the need for "extravagant fare, including not only food, but also linens, laundry service, and china" (Hudson 57-58). Extravagant furnishings and food ensure that her boardinghouse matches the furnishings of an upper-class home, surroundings quite familiar to her wealthy clients.

Through her commitment to domesticity within the boardinghouse and her resourcefulness, she acquires wealth to improve her own social standing as a financially independent woman as well as engage in the self-fulfilling work of improving the social standing of other African Americans. During the Reconstruction Period, racism prevented many Black Americans from obtaining employment, so Pleasant hired an "extensive staff of black workers" (Hudson 58). Likewise, Pleasant invests her money and efforts when she "challenged the streetcar companies" in court who discriminated against African Americans (Hudson 55). Pleasant's work as a domestic servant, boardinghouse proprietor, and social justice advocate foregrounds her intellectual labor and underscores her identity as a financially independent New True Woman engaging in meaningful work.

**Julia Wolfe**

Like Pleasant, employing the home as a site for intellectual labor, Julia Wolfe, owner of the Old Kentucky Home boardinghouse in Asheville, North Carolina and Thomas Wolfe's mother, used her boardinghouse as a means of financial independence and self-fulfillment. Engaging her body and mind, Wolfe utilizes her role as boardinghouse keeper to make time for intellectual pursuits.

Through critical thinking and resourcefulness, Wolfe constructs an "ethical autonomy" through her ties to boardinghouse's domestic space while employing her boardinghouse as a means of unofficially separating from her husband and reducing her childcare responsibilities to develop as professional (Myers 43). Kraft describes the family's separate living arrangements: "When Julia moved into the house she named 'Old Kentucky Home' the family split, since W.O. was unwilling to leave Woodfin Street. Julia took Tom while her second daughter, Mabel, stayed with her father. The other children 'were left floating in limbo,' picking up one meal at the boarding house and another at Woodfin Street, sleeping wherever they happened to be at bedtime" (65). The boardinghouse enables Wolfe to free herself as much as possible from her husband W.O. who was known for "his occasional drunken violence" (Kraft 67). While Wolfe does not shun motherhood, motherhood does not consume her identity. Her identity as a businesswoman emerges as the children roam back and forth between the Old Kentucky Home and their father's house on Woodfin Street, somewhat freeing Wolfe to focus on her business.

The boardinghouse business provides fuel for her to engage in intellectual labor in terms of land prospecting, a skill she learned from her father. Through her profits as a successful boardinghouse owner, Wolfe continues to invest in land. Wolfe states, "I had foresight about what Miami Beach was going to be, and I bought property after property" (Norwood 188). On another occasion, she discloses her success in increasing her profits: "I picked up a property and paid $10,000 for it. I sold that in forty-five days for $16,000. It was gambling, and I turned it in too soon. Everything I touched, someone else wanted it in less than no time" (Norwood 189). When investing in properties, she does not rely on W.O. or her sons for advice nor does she rely on them for property development. Remaining in a domestic setting, Wolfe uses the boardinghouse as a site to educate herself about building as well as negotiating with contractors. With the boardinghouse serving as a site for money management education, she skillfully exhibits her thriftiness in her negotiations with carpenters:

> Well, I built a house on that lot. I planned it and ordered every piece of lumber that went into it. The carpenters said, "She is the stingiest girl—she has measured everything to the square inch and doesn't allow any waste." I said, "I don't mean to have any waste." I was twenty-one or two then. I hired the carpenters by the day. You know how a house used to be built. I wanted a steep roof, and I built it with the idea that I would take the roof off and raise the house another story later on. I made a broad hall down the front. When I ordered the sheathing that's put on the rafters they said, "Even to the sheathing she's calculated to the square foot," and I said, "I don't expect you to waste any." They said, "Suppose a piece splits?" "Send it back and get a good one," I said. When the logs were cut there would be a point, and they squared the lumber and there was a little scrap at the end. That wasn't counted in your bill. It was measured from where it measured square. They said, "Maybe we'll have a wheelbarrow full of scraps." I said, "I'll throw it over the fence for Mother to burn in the stove." Nothing was wasted . . . (Nor-

wood 9-10).

She hires workers, oversees the carpenters, calculates the lumber needed, repurposes excess or scrap lumber, and speculates that a steep roof would allow her to add to the house in the future. Wolfe's knowledge, thrift, and negotiating power set her apart from women of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries due to her ability to utilize the domestic space of her boardinghouse as a moneymaking operation to fund other projects. Learning from her previous projects and negotiations, she continues to educate herself about property investment and development.

## Challenges to Enacting New True Woman's Values

Although Pleasant and Wolfe enacted New True Woman's values and reaped the benefits of financial independence and self-fulfillment, it is worthwhile to note the challenges Pleasant and Wolfe encountered when presenting New True Woman's values. Despite Pleasant's and Wolfe's resourcefulness and critical thinking that led to their financial independence, they faced what Joanna Russ terms "denial of agency" (20). Russ explains denial of agency by providing an example from her personal experience. She recalls an exchange with a male colleague who comments on her position as a writer and musician: ". . . I was told at a writer's party by a male colleague that I was a wonderful writer who 'did not write like a woman' and that—pianistically speaking—I had a man's 'reach'" (23). Her colleague denies Russ agency as a woman writer. His comments signify only a man could write or play well. According to her colleague, the skill and intellect needed for such endeavors correspond with men's abilities.

Applying Russ's denial of agency to an undercutting of New True Woman's values, I now turn to Pleasant to further illustrate the denial of agency. Some scholars maintain their doubts about categorizing Pleasant as an entrepreneur as they question how Pleasant acquired a boardinghouse soon after leaving her domestic servant position. Assuming her previous employer is behind her success as opposed to her resourcefulness, some scholars pose the following questions: "'Could it be that some Latham money financed her or was he just unusually generous with wages?' asks author Lloyd Conrich. Or, he wondered, did Pleasant blackmail Latham?' Perhaps Pleasant did blackmail Latham with secrets she learned in his home. It is just as likely, however, that Pleasant saved her earnings and chose to move into her own home" (Hudson 56). Scholars' questions imply Latham is behind Pleasant's success. Additionally, the fact that scholars question how Pleasant obtains the funds to become a boardinghouse owner suggests the underlying expectation that she would continue her ties to domesticity. To ensure her connection to domesticity, her contemporaries call her "Mammy Pleasant."

Similarly, few, including Wolfe's family, approve of her financial independence. Kraft astutely observes, "Feeling a long pent-up need to make money, partly because of her lean childhood in the Reconstruction South, partly because her husband was an alcoholic and, as a provider, more

lavish than reliable, she set her sights on the boardinghouse at 48 Spruce Street" (65). Financial constraints of the time period and her husband's failure to provide for the family force Wolfe to rely on the real estate skills her land prospecting father taught her. Deviating from women of the time period, Wolfe invests herself into a role that will support the family, even though the role as a businesswoman does not satisfy her family's and society's expectations aligned with True Womanhood. In fact, some people paint Wolfe as a masculine figure. As Norwood visits the Old Kentucky Home to learn more about Thomas Wolfe, he describes his conversation with Wolfe: "She drew a step closer and thrust her index finger in the masculine gesture familiar to all who have met Eliza Gant in Thomas Wolfe's first two novels" (3). A simple description of a masculine gesture hints at Norwood's as well as Thomas Wolfe's perception of a woman lacking motherly qualities. Her pointing suggests a certain strength and authority that men see as uncomfortable and foreign. Sadly, this troubling masculine view follows Wolfe to the present as she is known only to the world as Thomas Wolfe's mother. Her masculinity, penny pinching ways, and lack of a full investment in motherhood leave a troubling legacy.

Wolfe's family as well as Norwood deny Wolfe agency in ignoring her entrepreneurial acts of managing and investing. Instead, the family aligns Wolfe's success, like Russ's mentioned above, with her masculinity. Her entrepreneurial endeavors distance her from her motherly roles tied to home and family. By Wolfe reframing the boardinghouse's domestic space as a site of intellectual activity involving investments and money management, her family denies Wolfe, a woman entrepreneur, agency and instead claims her agency originated from her masculinity.

## Call for Action

Despite challenges in enacting True New Woman's values, these values' relevance extends from the nineteenth century to the present as women continue to seek fulfilling work. I challenge *Peitho* readers to study past and current women rhetors' epideictic rhetorical practices to uncover changing values with each new generation and to identify troubling values worthy of resistance and rewriting.

# Works Cited


Amnéus, Cynthia. *A Separate Sphere: Dressmakers in Cincinnati's Golden Age 1877- 1922*, Texas Tech UP, 2003.

Berthold, Michael. "Not 'Altogether' the 'History of Myself': Autobiographical

Impersonality in Elizabeth Keckley's *Behind the Scenes*, or *Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*." *American Transcendental Quarterly*, vol. 13, no. 2, Jun. 1999, pp. 105-119.

Hudson, Lynn M. *The Making of "Mammy Pleasant": A Black Entrepreneur in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco.* U of Illinois P, 2003.

Kerber, Linda K. "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History." *The Journal of American History*, vol. 75, no. 1, 1988, pp. 9-39.

Kraditor, Aileen. "Introduction." *Up from the Pedestal: Selected Writings in the History of American Feminism*, Quadrangle Books, 1968.

Kraft, Stephanie. *No Castles on Main Street: American Authors and Their Homes*. Rand McNally & Company, 1979.

Moe, Peter Wayne. "Reading Coles Reading Themes: Epideictic Rhetoric and the Teaching of Writing." *College Composition and Communication,* vol. 69, no. 3, 2018, pp. 433-457.

Myers, Nancy. "Louisa May Alcott's *Work:* A New True Working Woman." *Women at Work: Rhetorics of Gender and Labor*, edited by David Gold and Jessica Enoch. U of Pittsburgh P, 2019, pp. 42-55.

Norwood, Hayden. *The Marble Man's Wife: Thomas Wolfe's Mother*. Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947.

Patterson, Martha H. "Introduction." *The American Woman Revisited: A Reader, 1894-1930*, edited by Martha H. Patterson. Rutgers UP, 2008, pp. 1-25.

Rayne, Martha Louise. *What Can a Woman Do or Her Position in the Business and Literary-World,* Eagle Publishing Co., 1893.

Rose, Mike. *The Mind at Work*: *Valuing the Intelligence of the American Worker*. Penguin, 2004.

Russ, Joanna. *How to Suppress Women's Writing*. U of Texas P, 1983.

Sheard, Cynthia Miecznikowski. "The Public Value of Epideictic Rhetoric." *College English*, vol. 58, no. 7, 1996, pp. 765-794.

Welter, Barbara. "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860." *American Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1966, pp. 151-174.

Willard, Frances E, Helen M. Winslow, and Sallie J. White. *Occupations for Women: A Book of Practical Suggestions for the Material Advancement, the Mental and Physical Development, and the Moral and Spiritual Uplift of Women*, Success Co, 1897.

Yohn, Susan M. "The Primacy of Place, Collaborations, and Alliances: Mapping Women's Businesses in Nineteenth-Century Brooklyn." *Journal of Urban History*, vol. 36, no. 4, 2010, pp. 411-428.