

## The Fin de Siècle Heroine with a Special Reference to *Jude The Obscure* and *The Woman Who Did*

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### Abstract

The last decade of the nineteenth century, often referred to as the “fin de siècle” witnessed manifestations of a swelling movement for freedom which elicited a change in the manners and morals of women. This spirit of revolt and growing freedom is mirrored in the novels of the period in general, and in those dealing with the woman question in particular. The heroine shakes the dust of the old world from her feet and marshals some advanced arguments against conventional marriage and the laws that govern it. She considers regular marriage as a form of slavery and calls for free love ideals. While in early Victorian novels adultery was under attack, now in *The Woman Who Did*, *Jude the Obscure* and many other “fin de siècle” novels, it is marriage which is under attack. The shattering of the phantom of the angel in the house is complete.

**Keywords:** Fin de siècle; freedom; home; woman question; regular marriage; free love; emancipated woman; ideals.

### Introduction

Queen Victoria’s Jubilee in 1887 was — as many scholars and critics see it — the last occasion on which enough semblance of the old Victorian unity survived to present an imposing facade; the Jubilee may have provided a more significant end to the “Victorian Age” than that of the Queen’s death in 1901. By 1887, the “High Noon of Victorianism” had passed, and although the Queen continued to be very much alive, the “Victorian” epoch was already petering out and “the remaining years, rather than quietly winding up the century, seem to have marked the inauguration of the new one” (Reckitt, 1957-58, p. 269). Dickens died in 1870, Charles Kingsley in 1875, and George Eliot in 1880; Thackeray, Mrs Gaskell and the Brontes were already dead. A number of other famous writers died during this period: Bulwer Lytton and J.S. Mill in 1873, Caroline Norton in 1878, and Disraeli in 1881. At the death of Thomas Carlyle in 1881, Gissing wondered: “Does it not seem now as if all our really great men were leaving us, and, what is worse, without much prospect as yet of any to take their place. Where are the novelists to succeed Thackeray, Dickens, George Eliot? What poets will follow upon Tennyson and

Browning when they, as must shortly be the case, leave their places empty? Nay, what really great men of any kind can honestly be said to have given tokens of their coming?” (Gissing, 1927, p. 92)

### Fin de Siècle

The last decade of the century, often referred to as the “fin de siècle period” and the “Naughty Nineties” (Ensor, 1936, p. 1936), was the era that witnessed the publication of *The Yellow Book*, a quarterly magazine devoted exclusively to art and letters which was notorious in its day for its “lubricity”, and famous largely for having Aubrey Beardsley (a celebrated graphic artist of daring, bizarre and often exotic courage) as its art editor and designer. The first number appeared in April 1894. It gave no literary news and published no reviews, and its pages presented the works of artists and writers side by side without introduction or apology. In 1896, Arthur Symons started *The Savoy*, which ran from January to December on a parallel basis. Both *The Yellow Book* and *The Savoy* were manifestations of a swelling movement for freedom of artistic expression and both represented a reasoned

and intellectual reaction in the direction of French ideals. Though the phrase “fin de siècle” may be associated with particular manifestations of this period in the field of art such as “aestheticism” and “decadence”, it points, in a wider context, to “the preoccupations and phenomena of the last years of the nineteenth century” (Elwin, 1939, p. 31).

From the early years of the decade, “fin de siècle” became a catch-phrase and was applied to “a wide range, of trivial behaviour, provided it was sufficiently perverse or paradoxical or shocking” (Bergonzi, 1970, p. 288), and Holbrook Jackson, in his excellent study of *The Eighteen Nineties* (1913), quotes various entertaining instances of the phrase (p. 32). A school boy who, on passing the gaol where his father is imprisoned for embezzlement, remarks to a chum: “look, that’s the governor’s school” is “a *fin de siècle son*”, a wedding ceremony held in a gas-works and the subsequent honeymoon in a balloon is “a *fin de siècle wedding*”, and a king who abdicates but retains by agreement certain political rights, which he afterwards sells to his country to provide means for the liquidation of debts contracted by play in Paris, is “a *fin de siècle king*” (Jackson, 1913, p. 20).

Side by side with the prevailing use of “fin de siècle”, and running its popularity close, came the adjective “new”. It was applied in much the same way to indicate extreme modernity, and gradually spread until it embraced the ideas of the whole period. Novelty became an object to be sought for its own sake. For the young, any happening sufficiently new was good, and expressions such as “up to date” and “new” came to have special significance. To say a thing was “new” or “fin de siècle” was the highest praise to bestow (Jackson, 1913, p. 21).

Seeking “new” tendencies was not confined to art and letters only. The artistic search was part of a massive internal transformation in the country as a result of the “transition” of the previous decade. In religion, social relations, politics and business, as R.C.K. Ensor writes, “men grown contemptuous of the old ideals were stridently asserting new ones (1936, p. 304). According to G.M. Trevelyan, “In the nineties — the fin de siècle, as the time was called — a change in the direction of levity, if not of laxity, was observed” (1936, p. 581).

## New Ideals

Women were becoming more athletic and with the introduction of the bicycle, cycling became not only a practical means of transport, but also a symbol of emancipation.

Women-cyclists were able now to tour the countryside and the long skirts — inappropriate accompaniment for the cyclist — became shorter and was sometimes abandoned for neat suits (Rubinstein, 1977-78, pp. 47-71). In educational and professional institutions, young women pedalled their way to a wider range of opportunities, and highly qualified women such as the “Girton Girl” and the “Lady Doctor” started to emerge, and suitable work and social status had to be found for them. The most discussed phenomenon of this period was the “new woman”.

By the 1890s, the “new woman” began to emerge with a distinct identity. The new sentiments and tendencies of the period elicited a change in the manners and morals of many girls and young women. They were no longer brought up to consider their lives circumscribed by the home. The change from samplers and classrooms to bicycle tracks, skating rinks and lawn-tennis tournaments brought into being fashionable girls with a new spirit who, in their varied search for emancipation, refused to conform to the traditional role of wife and mother.

Conventional marriage for the “new woman” was found wanting, and, as Gail Cunningham (1918) writes, “little better than slavery (p. 10). They chose to work and direct their energies into professional rather than matrimonial achievements, and the financial independence and personal fulfilment gained through work began to seem attractive alternatives to marriage. Radicals, such as Mona Caird (1890), attacked marriage as an institution “of the old order” which converts women from autonomous human beings into objects for the use of others, and sanctions their domestic and sexual exploitation. She also argued that women should have the freedom to love where they would, and, in particular, the right to decide whether and when to have children (pp. 310-330). In 1894, Grant Allen joined the battle denouncing conventional marriage as “a system of harlotry”. He called on women to develop themselves freely and to stop thwarting and sacrificing themselves by “the selling of self into loveless union for a night or for a lifetime (p. 391). Caird and Allen were not the only two writers who tried to shatter the phantom of the “Angel in the House”, who sacrifices herself and her life for others. Even the *Saturday Review* ran, in 1895, a series of articles by “A Woman of The Day” which argued the same case:

The only woman at the present time who is willing to be regarded as a mere breeding machine is she who lacks the wit to adopt any other role, and now she is the exception instead of the rule. (p. 753)

From the early days of her emergence, the “new woman” — sometimes referred to as the “emancipated woman” — was subjected to attack from those who felt themselves to be witnessing the breakdown of the rules traditionally thought to hold society together, including members of her own sex. Prominent among female opponents were Lynn Linton and Mrs Humphry Ward. Linton had been attacking changes in girls’ behaviour, since the 1860s. Now elderly, Mrs Linton remained a formidable antagonist. She described the feminists as “breaking up all the social values—weakening all the foundations of the social edifice”, and drew up “An Appeal Against Female Suffrage” which included about a hundred signatures of prominent women of the period (Stone, 1912, p. 66). Even Queen Victoria herself issued a statement in regard to this “new creature” and to the whole question of women’s rights:

The Queen ... is most anxious to enlist every one who can speak or write to join in checking this mad wicked folly of Women’s Rights, with all its attendant horrors, on which her poor, feeble sex is bent, forgetting every sense of womanly feeling and propriety. (Altick, 1974, p. 58)

But the poor, feeble sex was not without its supporters and champions whose dedication gave impetus to an “emancipation” movement which neither the Royal condemnation nor the taunts and exhortation of Lynn Linton, Mrs Ward and other upholders of the old order could check. It gained momentum, and by the end of the century became more vociferous in its demand for equality and social freedom.

### Fin de Siècle Novels

In fiction, the emergence of the “new woman” as a social phenomenon was matched by an increasing interest among novelists in the woman question as a source of artistic inspiration. Writers who “were sensitive to the ideas of the feminist debate, or who were anxious to develop artistically a fresh view of women and sexual relationships could command an increasingly wide and eager audience (Cunningham, 1918, p. 3). Major writers such as Hardy, George Moore, and Grant Allen joined the battle and began to deal with marriage and married life with more frankness and freedom than before. There were open calls for a change in social habits and in the dominant sexual ideology, and central questions of moral and social behaviour were seriously looked into and passionately debated. This spirit of revolt and growing freedom is mirrored in the novels of the period in general, and in those dealing with the fallen woman in particular.

In *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891), Hardy presents his fallen heroine as a “pure woman”, and attacks society’s conventional notions of purity and its unjust moral standards; and argues that society should judge women as Tess not by achievement, but by intention. In George Moore’s *Esther Waters* (1894), the heroine rises, devotes herself to rearing her illegitimate child, wins the sympathy and love of her employer, and the respect and admiration of her seducer who comes back to claim her as his “wife”. At the end of the book, she comes out not only as an example of the girl who is able to retain self-respect, but also of the mother who saves.

In an entirely different spirit, the heroine in most of these novels shakes the dust of the old world from her feet and assumes new features. She is no longer a naive and ignorant girl seduced by one above her in rank, nor a poor girl pushed by necessity to earn her living on the street, but an intelligent and educated girl who gives herself freely to her lover and refuses to marry him. Sue Bridehead in Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* refuses the “marriage contract” and calls for a free-love ideal, and Herminia Barton in Grant Allen’s *The Woman Who Did*, becomes a martyr, not because she redeems herself from “sin” and repents, but because she opposes society’s views and old attitudes towards her.

Torrents of abuse were poured on the writers of these novels who were described as “petticoat anarchists who put a blazing torch to the shrine of self-respect and feminine shame (Cunningham, 1918, p. 18). In March 1895, a writer in *The Westminster Gazette* (9 March) calling himself “The Philistine”, launched an onslaught on the Sex Mania of the new fiction, and a month later, James Ashcroft Noble, in his articles in *The Contemporary Review*, attacked writers who present men and women as “conduits of sexual emotion”, and praised those who ignore “the details of sexual psychology which are attractive only to unwholesome undergraduates, or to neurotic young women of the idle classes” (pp. 494 & 498).

Though this sudden burst of puritanism may have been the product of an increasing fear among conservative readers about the country’s moral health, the trial of Oscar Wilde, which took place about the time when these articles were published, seems to have been the real catalyst. To many prudish critics and opponents, Wilde was a leading figure and a high priest of “a school which ... sets up false gods of decadent culture and intellectual debauchery” (Fletcher, 1979, p. 15). His trial and imprisonment were seen by them as a defeat of the new spirit and a triumph for moral rectitude. Even H.G. Wells, in his comment in the *Saturday Review* (1896) on the

appearance of *Jude the Obscure* in the aftermath of Wilde's affair, was wrongly led to suggest that:

The pendulum bob of the public conscience swung back swiftly and forcibly. From reading books wholly and solely dependent upon sexuality for their interest, the respectable public has got now to rejecting books wholly and solely for their recognition of sexuality. (p. 153)

Well's generalization about a sudden change in the public taste was too hasty, and the successful sales that *Jude the Obscure* enjoyed a few months later proved him wrong. Hostility to the new spirit of the period was far from universal, and the following year saw two interesting reversals of this short-lived triumph of prudery. While in 1887 Vizetelly had been imprisoned for publishing Flaubert and Bourget, in 1897, Oxford University invited Bourget to lecture on Flaubert, and while in 1891, Ibsen's play *Ghosts* had been hysterically vilified, in 1897, Queen Victoria herself went to see it during the Jubilee celebrations. Reflecting on the change that had come over the public taste, Rhoda Broughton, who had been considered somewhat improper in the 1860s, later wrote: "I began my career as Zola, I finish it as Miss Yonge; it's not I that have changed, it's my fellow countrymen (Lubbock, 1928, p. 25).

### ***Jude the Obscure***

Sue Bridenhead, the heroine of Hardy's last novel *Jude the Obscure* (1894) revolts against the traditional moral and religious views and marshals some advanced arguments against conventional marriage and the laws that govern it. She criticizes the marriage ceremony as a "humiliating" discrimination against women which allows the man to choose his wife "of his own will and pleasure "while the woman does not choose, but has to be given to him by somebody else like a "she-ass or she-goat, or' any other domestic animal" (Hardy, [1894], 1978, p. 136). To her, the church service has no divine or religious significance, and is no more than a civil undertaking based on "material convenience in householding, rating, and taxing, and the inheritance of land and money by children, making it necessary that the male parent should be known" (p. 167).

Once married, she immediately feels the artificiality of her new social status. As with her earlier objection to the socially and religiously-sanctioned derogation of women as chattel, she now raises another feminist objection to the loss of control over her own body and the tyranny of the traditional sex roles. She feels herself trapped by the "marriage contract" into a nightly degradation in which she has to be "responsive [to her husband] whenever he

wishes" and to "feel in a particular way in a matter whose essence", she tells Jude "is its voluntariness"(p. 169). She sees her marriage to Phillotson as an "adulterous union" in which she has no choice but to submit to the sexual advances of the chamber-officer "appointed by the bishop's license"(p. 163); and feeling a burning desire to retain her sexual independence, she asks to be released from her contract commitment. She tells Phillotson:

I didn't reflect it would be—that it would be so much more than that ... For a man and woman to live on intimate terms when one feels as I do is adultery, in any circumstances, however legal. There—I've said it .... Why can't we agree to free each other? We made the compact, and surely we can cancel it. (p. 177)

Sue is not only a fallen woman, but that particular object of Victorian abhorrence, the fallen wife. She leaves to join her lover while she is still legally the wife of another man. Even after she and Jude are divorced from Phillotson and Arabella, she refuses to marry him and, like Lyndall in *The Story of an African Farm*, she prefers to have an uncontracted and free union with him. She tells Jude:

I think I should begin to be afraid of you, Jude, the moment you had contracted to cherish me under a Government stamp, and I was licensed to be loved on the premises by you—Ugh, how horrible and sordid! Al though, as you are, free, I trust you more than any other man in the world (p. 205).

She equates love with the fluctuations of desire which sanction the sexual embrace and without which, she believes, a woman prostitutes herself and sacrifices her essential independence. She attacks society for recognizing only "contractual relationships" and calls for the free-love ideal. She says:

In a proper state of society, the father of woman's child will be as much a private matter of hers as the cut of her under-linen, on whom nobody will have any right to question her" (p. 191).

Putting her ideas into practice, Sue finds out that she does not have the courage of her views. She coaxes Jude and encourages his sexual advances, but whenever she is faced with the need to give herself to him or to respond to his emotional demands, she artfully backs down keeping him at a pitch of sexual desire. Admitting her lack of courage and her failure to live up to the ideals she preaches, she tells Jude:

Put it down to my timidity ... to a Woman's natural timidity .... Assume that I haven't the courage of my opinions. I know I am a poor miserable creature. (p. 191)

It is only when she is pushed by jealousy of her rival Arabella, who reappears unexpectedly on the scene and by her own fear that she will lose Jude, that she finally acquiesces and offers herself to him.

Sue Bridehead is a curious hybrid, a combination of the contemporary spirit of independence and traditional feminine coquetry. She is a model of new womanhood in theory, but in practice a typical female heroine. Though she is critical of the moral and religious orthodoxy, she feels emotionally bound by it, and finds it difficult to break free. As her secret worship of the statuettes of Venus and Apollo shows — symbols of her emancipation from conventional religion — herself professed paganism and rebelliousness against conventions conceal an affinity for social and religious conformity. This co-existence of intellectual emancipation and emotional dependence makes her a divided and contradictory character.

The tragic death of Sue's children comes as a blow which breaks the precarious structure of her divided personality. The moment the children are dead, Sue's very soul despairs and the intellectual framework of emancipation in her breaks down. She blames herself for what has happened, and finds in the atrocity of Little Father time ample evidence of divine retribution for her "immoral" life. She says to Jude:

We went about loving each other too much indulging ourselves to utter selfishness with each other! We said — do you remember? — that we would make a virtue of joy. I said it was Nature's intention, Nature's law and *raison d'être* that we should be joyful in what instincts she afforded us — instincts which civilization had taken upon itself to thwart. What dreadful things I said! And now Fate has given us this stab in the back for being such fools as to take Nature at her word! (p. 268)

Ridden by sexual guilt, she renounces her independence and becomes an embodiment of penitence seeking to atone for her sin. She returns to Phillotson, accepts sex dutifully as a form of self-flagellation, and joins the ranks of fallen sisterhood in what will apparently be a life-long penance for that transgression.

The other fallen woman in the story stands as a complete contrast to Sue Bridehead. While Sue is referred to throughout the novel as a sexless ethereal creature, a "spirit", and a "phantom—hardly flesh" (195), Arabella Donn is presented as an utter carnality. She is a "complete and substantial female animal—no more, no less" with a "round and prominent bosom, full lips, perfect teeth, and the rich complexion of a Cochin hen's egg"(pp. 33-34).

In her first appearance, Arabella attracts Jude's attention by throwing a pig's genitals at him, and all her subsequent actions in the story are consistent with this initial gesture. She seduces Jude, dupes him into marriage by a lie about a non-existent pregnancy, ventures on a bigamous marriage to a second husband in Australia, and later comes back to Jude and persuades him to re-marry her when, as Patricia Stubbs writes, "according to convention, she should, by this point in the novel, have been an abandoned whore dying in the streets (Stubbs, 1981, p. 66). In the final scene of the story, she leaves her dying husband unattended to enjoy an afternoon with another man lined up for her as a prospective husband.

Unintellectual and unconcerned with philosophical questions, Arabella stands as part of the "hot mass" of humanity outside Sue's world. She refuses to adopt Sue's "tragic note" or to indulge in her diatribe against marriage. She accepts man's lower instincts and, as D.H. Lawrence sees her, she stands for the will to live (Lawrence, 1936, pp. 490-496). Like Becky Sharp, she is vital, perennially youthful, self-renovating and indifferent to any law but that of her own self-seeking instincts. She does not rebel against the conventions of her society because she never worries about being bound by them. Moral questions have little bearing on her conduct, and to Jude, who tells her that her bigamous marriage in Australia was a crime, she answers: "¡ Pooh. They don't think much of such as that over there!" (p. 148). Unplagued by Sue's feelings of guilt or her moral scruples, she escapes remorse and self-torture, and while Sue is defeated, Arabella triumphs. We close the book on her well set to become the wife of Vilbert, the physician.

Like *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, *Jude the Obscure* had had a rough passage before it reached book form. It appeared as a monthly serial in *Harper's Magazine*, and Hardy had to cut and change some of its most vital parts (Watt, 2016, p. 432). Though the change was damaging, Hardy's agreement seems to have been influenced by two reasons: firstly, he wanted to sell the serial rights; secondly, he knew that his true novel, the later generations would read and judge him by, was soon to appear in hard covers. Some months later, when the book came out it stirred up a storm of righteousness and provoked abusive reactions from much of the press. The protest was focused sharply on the sexual theme of the novel, and on its apparent cynical attack on the sacrament and the institution of marriage. *The Pall Mall Gazette* (1895) reviewed it under the heading "*Jude the Obscene*"; *The Athenaeum* judged some of the characters as "nothing less than loathsome and repulsive in the highest degree"; the Bishop of Wakefield publicly announced that he "was so disgusted" with



the book's "insolence and indecency" that he "threw it into the fire (Watt, 2016, p. 433) ; and Mrs Oliphant in her famous article " The Anti-Marriage League" declared that "there may be books more disgusting, more impious as regards human nature, more foul in detail; in those dark corners where the amateurs of filth find garbage to their taste; but not ... from any Masters hand" (p. 138), and accuse Hardy and two other contemporary novelists of forming a sinister league bent on destroying marriage altogether.

In a letter to his friend Edmund Gosse, Hardy expressed his amazement that the book was regarded by some critics as a manifesto on "the marriage question", and protested that the central theme of the novel was overlooked in favour of a secondary theme. He wrote:

It is curious that some of the papers should look upon the novel as a manifesto on 'the marriage question' (although, of course, it involves it), seeing that it is concerned first with the labours of a poor student to get a University degree, and secondly with the tragic issues of two bad marriages, owing in the main to a doom or curse of hereditary temperament peculiar to the family of the parties. The only remarks which can be said to bear on the general marriage question occur in dialogue, and comprise no more than half a dozen pages in a book of five hundred .... I suppose the attitude of these critics is to be accounted for by the accident that, during the serial publication of my story, a sheaf of "purpose" novels on the matter appeared. (F. Hardy, 1962, p. 5)

Hardy's claim is disingenuous and no more than an attempt to deflect criticism. Clearly, the novel is concerned with the marriage question in more than a casual way. Marriage is attacked throughout the book as the cause of suffering not only for the central characters but other marginal figures as well. Marital happiness is absent, and evidence against the institution of marriage is piled up relentlessly. Even those who express support for it do so in terms as damaging as those who speak against. Arabella advises Sue to marry Jude because:

Life with a man is more business-like after it, and money matters work better. And then, you see, if you have rows, and he turns you out of doors, you can get the law to protect you, which you can't otherwise, unless he half runs you through with a knife, or cracks your noddle with a poker. And if he bolts away from you-I say it friendly, as woman to woman ... you'll have the sticks o' furniture, and won't be looked upon as a thief. (p. 213)

Even Hardy himself, once the critical storm aroused by the publication of the book subsided, went back to

reaffirm his views on the subject. In his postscript to the 1912 edition he wrote:

My opinion at that time ... was what it is now, that a marriage should be dissolved as soon as it becomes a cruelty to either of the parties —being then essentially and morally no marriage—and it seemed a good foundation for the fable of a tragedy.

### ***The Woman Who Did***

The heroine of Grant Allen's *The Woman Who Did* (1895). Like her rebel sisters who figured prominently in the works of many major and minor writers in the second half of this decade, Herminia Barton not only rejects marriage as "slavery", but condemns the whole idea of setting up a domestic union with a man. Although she gives herself freely to her lover, she refuses to join him, keeps a separate lodging, and earns her own living. Possessed by a sense of mission to regenerate society, she refuses to yield to pressure, or to compromise with her principles, and devotes herself to fulfilling her beliefs and raising her illegitimate child.

At one of her garden parties, Mrs Dewsbury introduces Alan Merrick, a rising young barrister, to Herminia Barton, the daughter of the Dean of Dulwich and a former Girton student, with the words:

He's one of your own kind, as dreadful as you are; very free and advanced; a perfect firebrand. In fact, my dear child, I don't know which of you makes my hair stand on end most. (Allen, 1895, p. 5)

In her first speech Herminia expounds her views on female emancipation and explains that her interest lies in social and moral emancipation far more than in the merely political. She tells him also that she left college without a degree because:

The whole object of the training was to see just how far you could manage to push a woman's education without the faintest danger of her emancipation. (p. 6)

Impressed by the girl's convictions, her frank and fearless glance, and by her beauty, Merrick "who respected human freedom above all other qualities in man or woman, was taken on the spot by its perfect air of untrammelled liberty" (p. 4).

Disregarding conventional practices, Herminia invites Merrick to visit her freely at the cottage where she lives alone. And, heedless of gossip, they proceed to spend day

after day in each other's company. One afternoon, Merrick, after some amorous advances, declares his love for her. Herminia responds immediately by declaring hers too, but when he whispers in her ear "dearest how soon may we be married", she cries "never", and with a flush of horror and shame she explains to him that after all she has tried to make him feel and understand, he ought to have known that to her, regular marriage is a form of slavery, an assertion of man's supremacy over woman which she, in her role of emancipator, cannot subscribe to. It would be easy, she adds:

to do as other women do; to accept the honourable marriage you offer me, as other women would call it; to be false to my sex, a traitor to my convictions; to sell my kind for a mess of pottage—a name and a home; or even for thirty pieces of silver— to be some rich man's wife—as other women have sold it. But, Alan, I can't. My conscience won't let me. I know what marriage is—from what vile slavery it has sprung; on what unseen horrors for my sister women it is reared and buttressed; by what unholy sacrifices it is sustained and made possible. (p. 39)

She proposes that they share together a free unsanctioned union in which she can yield herself to him out of love rather than of obligation: "take me and do as you choose with me. That much I can yield .... But more than that—no. It would be treason to my sex. Not my life, not my future, not my individuality, not my freedom" (pp. 39-40).

Unconvinced by her arguments and worried about what society will say about such a union, Merrick advocates a series of compromises, but Herminia rejects them summarily with the ultimatum that he must choose either to accept her terms or they part forever. Merrick gives in. A week later, in an unceremonial fashion, they celebrate their union. Herminia dressed from head to foot in a simple white gown, opens the door of her cottage to receive the man of her free choice. As she advances to greet him, Merrick holds her in his arms and kisses "her forehead tenderly", and the self-made ceremony is soon concluded with the author's comment "thus consummated" (p. 78). They continue to live separately, and Herminia keeps her job as a teacher. Neighbours on her street find Merrick's visits most unusual, but, as Allen writes, Herminia was "too free from any taint of sin or shame" to "suspect that others could misinterpret her actions .... To the pure all things are pure" (pp. 79-80).

Merrick, however, is not unaware of the talk they are creating. When Herminia's pregnancy begins to be noticed, he decides that she should resign her job and that they

should go abroad. After some unsuccessful attempts at dissuading him, she yields, as we are told, to his "masculine judgement".

In Italy, Merrick dies of typhoid. Heart-broken Herminia stays to have her baby which turns out to be a girl. Merrick's death has left her rudderless and, admitting the failure of her mission, she returns to England and passes herself off as Mrs Barton. She devotes herself to her daughter who, she hopes, will espouse the cause of woman's emancipation, and will succeed where she has failed. To this end, she scornfully rejects all offers of financial aid from Merrick's stern father who shows no respect for her ideals. "The child who was born to free half the human race from aeons of slavery", she believes, "must be kept from all contagion of man's gold and man's bribery" (p. 164).

To her mother's disappointment, Dolly grows up accepting the conventional beliefs of others and shows admiration for birth, wealth and position. She shows no sympathy with her mother's ideals, and her one aim in life as she grows older is to get married as quickly as possible. She falls in love with Walter Brydges, a handsome fellow with all the glamour of a landed estate and an Oxford education, and gets engaged to him, but their engagement breaks when gossip about her illegitimacy reaches her ears. Stunned by what she hears, she returns home to demand the truth of her mother, who tells her all. Dolly rejects her mother "you are not fit to receive a pure girl's kisses" (p. 227), and goes to seek a home with her paternal grandfather.

Herminia, learning that she is an impediment to her daughter's happiness, resolves to kill herself. To Dolly, she writes a letter explaining that her goal has been to be a martyr for her principles:

I set out in life with the earnest determination to be a martyr to the cause of truth and righteousness ... I have fought a good fight; I have finished my course; I have kept the faith I started in life with. Nothing now remains for me but the crown of my martyrdom. (pp. 238-239)

She puts on the dress she wore on her self-made bridal night, lays flowers on her bosom, and puts an end to it all by drinking a phial of prussic acid. The book closes with Allen's comment "Herminia Barton's stainless soul had ceased to exist for ever" (p. 241).

As the above outline of the plot shows, Allen's attack does not focus on society's treatment of those who break its moral code by seeking love outside marriage as much

as on the existing morality which upholds marriage as a sacred institution. Like her rebel sisters of the day, his heroine and mouthpiece Herminia Barton believes that marriage should be sanctioned by love rather than social forms, and that personal relations have a better chance of success when the element of compulsion is absent. She rejects the "marriage contract" as an "absurdity" which makes a legal obligation of "what no human heart can be sure of performing" (p. 41), and vows never to marry because she finds the marriage institution in itself repugnant:

I know on what vile foundations your temple of wedlock is based and built, what pitiable victims languish and die in its sickening vaults. (p. 46)

She defies the moral conventions which brand her as "fallen", and she sees herself as a genuine pioneer of female sexual freedom:

Here, of my own free will, I take my stand for the right, and refuse your sanctions! No woman that I know of has ever yet done that. *Other women have fallen, as men choose to put it in their odious dialect: no other has voluntarily risen as I propose to.* (p. 46)

Though in her opinions Herminia stands as an animated compendium of every feminist idea in circulation, she is in everything else, as A.O.J. Cockshut writes "very near to the Victorian ideal womanly type" (p. 127). Her attack on contemporary social and moral conventions, and her talk of independence and freedom hide beneath an almost entirely traditional ideal of femininity. Her rejection of the marriage tie does not imply a "rejection of the ideal of a monogamous relationship" nor does it in anyway "challenge woman's traditional role in relation to man". She is, as Allen writes:

woman enough by nature to like being led. Only, it must be the right man who led her, and he must lead her along the path that her conscience approved of. (p. 56)

She regards celibacy as a cruel and wicked misfortune (p. 181), welcomes motherhood as woman's true vocation, and, like Esther Waters, lives exclusively for her child.

Allens saw himself as an "enthusiast on the Woman Quest", (A.R. Cunningham, 1973-1974, p. 181) a leading advocate of woman's emancipation, but his views in all directions were startlingly advanced for his time. No publisher showed interest in his completed novel, as it was so contentious, and Allen, according to Edward Clodd, "threatened to destroy the manuscript" (p. 154), but it was rescued by John Lane who agreed to publish

it. In an announcement about the book, Allen wrote that the novel was written "wholly and solely to satisfy his own taste and his own conscience, and with no eye to the approval of Mrs Grundy" (Fawcett, 1895, p. 625), and wrote to his friends begging their help in publicising it:

If it fails to boom, I go under forever. I hope, therefore, you will talk about it to your friends, no matter how unacquiescently. It is a serious crisis for me and only a boom will ever pull me through. (Clodd, 1900, pp. 156-166)

The book proved an immediate success and ran through at least twenty editions in its first year of publication, earning its author a great deal of money and the envy of some of his contemporaries. In his diary, Gissing wrote on June 6, 1885, "Grant Allen told me he is drawing £25 a week from *The Woman Who Did*", and will soon have had £1000. (Coustillas, 1978, p. 375). Critics on both sides were perplexed and disgusted. Mrs Oliphant, aghast at the success of the book, pleaded with the public to restrain itself. "The twenty editions of Mr Grant Allen", she wrote, "are not a joke to be laughed at in society, but a shame to society" which encourages "the most trumpery of productions (1896, p. 145) While M.G. Fawcett was afraid that the book's attack on the institution of marriage and its argument for free union as a viable alternative for emancipated women would give the suffrage campaign a bad name, and she described the story as "feeble and silly to the last degree", dismissed its author's claim to be writing in support of the Woman's Movement, and condemned him as "not a friend but an enemy" of the Movement (1895, p. 630).

What distinguishes the book from the works of other contemporary writers of the period is Allen's exaltation of his fallen heroine and raising her to a saintly status. He praises her for defying the conventional moral codes of society, and transmutes her from victim into a martyr. He continually reminds his reader that this is to be her fate, and puts innumerable speeches to that effect in her own mouth "It never occurred to me to think ... my life could ever end in anything else but martyrdom" (p. 42). Even her lover, Merrick, refers to her as an "angel whose white wings, he felt himself unworthy to touch with the hem of his garment"(p. 52). Though the visual implications of Allen's metaphor may bring into mind Mrs Gaskell's presentation of *Ruth*, the change in the moral climate between the periods that these two novels represent is complete. While in *Ruth* (1853) adultery was under attack, now in *The Woman Who Did* and many other "fin de siecle" novels, it is marriage which is under attack.



## Conclusion

The devaluation of virginity in many novels of the period to the level of a technical rather than an absolute measure of purity brought about an integration in the late Victorian novel — especially the novels of the last few years of the century — between the character of the traditional “meek obedient woman” and that of the “new woman”. Many heroines who fit into the conventional Victorian category of “depraved”, “outcast” or “impure” are identified as “new emancipated” women. They are no longer the degraded and broken heroines who deserve pity and sympathy, nor can they be dismissed as “depraved” or “impure” but “emancipated” heroines with liberal ideals who are meant to win the reader’s admiration and approval. Through this association, the image of “the angel of the house” who must be protected and shielded is now outdated and utterly quashed. The new century brought a new world and new approaches to the woman question of the relation of the sexes.

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