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## Forward! But not too fast!

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## Forward! But not too fast!

### Abstract

In 1920 Arnold Bennett wrote *Our Women*, sub-titled *Chapters on the Sex-Discord*. The nine chapters on the 'sex-discord' surveyed various aspects of relations between the sexes in the immediate post-war years, drawing on contemporary understandings about the changing position of women as it did so. The general conclusion reached by Bennett was that many changes had occurred in the era following the close of the Victorian period that he viewed as fruitful and desirable. Not least of these was a breakdown of the old wasteful gender idealisation that characterised women as helpless and dependent and men as useful and active; an idealisation that had very real consequences for many in that it dictated the extent and nature of the opportunities that were available to men and women, particularly women. Post-war British society, then, benefited from more knowledgeable, more mobile, and less inhibited middle-class women; they benefited from the creation of the modern girl.

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## Introduction

In 1920, Arnold Bennett wrote *Our Women (OW)*, sub-titled *Chapters on the Sex-Discord*. The nine chapters on the ‘sex-discord’ surveyed various aspects of relations between the sexes in the immediate post-war years, drawing on contemporary understandings about the changing position of women as it did so. The general conclusion reached by Bennett at the end of the survey was that many changes had occurred in the era following the close of the Victorian period that he viewed as fruitful and desirable. Not least of these was a breakdown of the old wasteful gender idealisation that characterised women as helpless and dependent and men as useful and active; an idealisation that had very real consequences for many in that it dictated the extent and nature of the opportunities that were available to men and women, particularly women. Post-war British society, then, benefited from more knowledgeable, more mobile, and less inhibited middle-class women; they benefited from the creation of the ‘modern girl’.

However, this revolution in social mores and to a certain extent in social practices did not affect a total transformation of relations between the sexes. To Bennett’s mind, there were differences between the sexes that did – and should – remain. Men and women, he declared, were attracted to each other not least because of inherent sexual difference. Discord between them was as necessary as it was desirable. The nature or make-up of the sex-discord varied from era to era – mirroring changing social, economic, political and moral conditions – but the discord itself prevailed. And this was as it should be. Who wanted men and women to be indistinguishable from one another? Not Bennett and, as this notion coloured much of his writing – fictional and non-fictional – not his substantial, ongoing readership either.

Since publishing *Our Women*, Bennett has gained something of a reputation as an anti-feminist; his declaration in that publication that women were intellectually and creatively inferior to men – a pronouncement that provoked the ire of renowned feminist writer, Virginia Woolf and sparked a much discussed exchange between her and Bennett – seemed

to confirm that status. Yet, a reading of a selection of his pre- and post-war fiction and non-fiction reveals a much more complex, nuanced approach to women and feminism. This chapter explores Bennett's nuanced approach to women, particularly middle-class women, in a selection of his fiction and non-fiction. The first section of the chapter traces how Bennett's pre-war popular fictional writing portrayed aspects of the everyday lives and emotions of women in an era experiencing change but still very much influenced by the mores and the restrictions of the Victorian world. The second part of the chapter looks at a selection of his post-war fictional and non-fictional writing to trace Bennett's reaction to the many immense, often enormously visible changes that his society had experienced, especially those affecting gender idealisation. The chapter concludes that the motto, 'Forward! But not too fast!' – the motto of *Woman*, the magazine that Bennett edited in the late Victorian period before he became a renowned middle-brow writer – remained an apt maxim directing his views on women both in his pre- and post-war writing.<sup>i</sup>

### **Bennett and women's lives in the pre-war period<sup>ii</sup>**

True to the climate of the time – when remaining celibate 'connoted failure' for a woman, if not for a man – the majority of Bennett's pre-war heroines desire, above all else, to marry.<sup>iii</sup> Bennett, therefore, spends considerable time plotting his female characters' reactions to romantic love and sexual desire. Importantly, however, he does so with a respect for Victorian reticence and a disregard for romantic sentimentality (unlike many of the more sensational novels of the day, those of renowned bestselling author Marie Corelli included). True to his loyalty to realist conventions, Bennett portrays a society where the rules governing courtship, marriage and divorce are so restrictive that there is little escape for those who choose an unsuitable partner. Decisions in matters of love and marriage are far too crucial to be shrouded by unhelpful, blinding sentimentality.<sup>iv</sup>

Romantic sentimentality may find little welcome in Bennett's novels, but gender idealism does find a prominent place. Men and women in Bennett's narratives tend to be drawn to each other because of an explicit admiration of each other's individual personality traits, but this is only one aspect of their attraction. The other, Bennett asserts, is a more general feeling; it is the impression of gender difference. Masculinity confirms femininity and vice

versa. The troubled relationship between Edwin Clayhanger and Hilda Lessways as explored in the 1910 and 1911 novels, *Clayhanger* and *Hilda Lessways (HL)* and later *These Twain (TT)*, provides a good example of this. Although initially repulsed by Hilda's dark, brooding looks because they are 'less feminine than masculine',<sup>v</sup> Edwin soon comes to use Hilda's awakening feelings for him as confirmation of his manhood in the face of the disappointments of his career and home life: '...that night he was a man. She, Hilda, with her independence and her mystery, had inspired him with a full pride of manhood'.<sup>vi</sup> In an age that firmly regulated the meeting and mingling of the sexes – Victorian gender conventions regarding young middle-class men and women being chaperoned still prevailing – initial impressions of gender difference, of masculinity and femininity, were crucially important impressions on which to build romantic relationships.

And this pattern, although it continues beyond initial scenes of courtship, does not do so in an uncomplicated manner. Awareness of and desire for gender difference prevails, but gender traits sometimes become confused with men exhibiting traditionally feminine characteristics and women traditionally accepted male traits. Tellingly, not only is this expected, but it is even desired. Anna Tellwright (*AOTFT*) finds herself equally attracted to Mynors' experienced manliness and to Willie Price's boyish weakness and vulnerability.<sup>vii</sup> Constance Baines (*TOWT*) admires her husband Samuel's bedroom nervousness as well as his manly endeavour to hide this timidity.<sup>viii</sup> This transference of gender traits may permeate Bennett's texts, but his narratives also reflect the fact that he was writing in an age that still paid homage to the ideal of male supremacy. Whatever the 'reality' of individual personalities, levels of intelligence and capabilities, Bennett's women were still expected to either unconsciously conform to, or make the conscious decision to conform to, notions of feminine submissiveness and subservience. As Bennett is to later declare in his controversial *Our Women*: 'Women in the main love to be dominated'.<sup>ix</sup> Indeed, so prevalent is this ideal of masculine superiority, that even Bennett's most 'advanced' young heroine, Hilda Lessways succumbs to this ideal, dreaming 'in her extreme excitement, of belonging absolutely to some man. And despite all her pride and independence, she dwelt with pleasure and longing on the vision of being his, of being at his disposal, of being under his might, of being helpless before him'.<sup>x</sup> Too late does she realise that the man she marries, George Cannon, has weaknesses that betray this notion of masculine superiority: the 'dominating impression was not now the impression of his masculinity; there was no clearly dominating impression. He had lost, for

her, the romantic allurement of the strange and the unknown'.<sup>xi</sup> Locked into a sham marriage, the pregnant Hilda has no satisfying escape.

However, not all examples of this idealisation of masculine superiority are so bleak. In a more optimistic example, the notion of masculine superiority causes less damage, but it is shown as no less contrived. Bennett's portrayal of the courtship and marriage of Rachel – a determined young woman of good sense and reason – and Louis – a charming but vain, irresponsible and lazy young man – in his 1914 novel, *The Price of Love (TPOL)*, is an apt vehicle for his views on the continued place of gender idealisation like male superiority in romantic relationships. In the beginning stages of courtship, Rachel and Louis are content to play the game of helpless maiden and strong and 'omniscient male'.<sup>xii</sup> Trivial episodes like the closing of a high window provide opportunity for this performance.<sup>xiii</sup> But when it comes to more serious concerns, like financial matters, these constructions break down. Stripped bare of the robes of superiority and omniscience, Louis appears pitiful to Rachel. However, when the alternative is presented to her – that is, abandonment, financial hardship and a life lived in disgrace – Rachel soon acquiesces, ignores Louis' weaknesses and restores him to 'master of the house'. Whether viewed as pragmatic or defeatist, only Rachel's resolve to accept that these roles of husband as master and wife as subservient must be played, allows peaceful domesticity to once again reign.<sup>xiv</sup>

This respect for pragmatism also colours Bennett's treatment of female sexual desire. Counter to twentieth century myths of Victorian female sexlessness, Bennett's heroines desire to be sexually attractive, to feel sexual desire and to act on those feelings, within the confines of Victorian respectability.<sup>xv</sup> However, given social conventions that restricted free socialising of the sexes and certainly sexual exploration before engagement, an ill-matched sexual relationship could not be detected until after marriage, which by then of course was too late to escape. Arguably, sexual desire was a significant element informing both Sophia Baines' and Hilda Lessways' ill-fated decisions to marry unsuitable men. Sophia (*TOWT*) is a certainly a very active participant in her 'seduction' and elopement with Gerard Scales. So much so that when they finally elope and find themselves alone together in London, Scales is surprised by her very willing display of sexuality: 'the powerful clinging of her lips somewhat startled his senses, and also delighted him by its silent promise'.<sup>xvi</sup> And Sophia's

desire to be sexually attractive and her temptation to realise her sexual feelings – whether in ‘respectable’ circumstances or not – does not diminish with age. Later in the novel she resists sexual temptation, but not before basking in its warm, voluptuous sweetness.<sup>xvii</sup> And further still in the tale, a much older Sophia admits to herself that her sole desire in life is to be ‘young and seductive’ – to excite a man’s lust once more.<sup>xviii</sup>

Hilda Lessways’ experiences are not altogether dissimilar. Indeed, her sexual longings equal, if not surpass, Sophia’s in their intensity. Her desire for George Cannon has her reeling, as if whirling on a river, but in reality in a hot room, feeling his hands on her, smelling his masculine odour, disconcerted by ‘the violence of his kiss’, but simultaneously excited by it.<sup>xix</sup> Of course, true to the diversity of lived experience, not all of Bennett’s heroines experience, indulge in or even articulate the intensity of their own sexual desires. Anna Tellwright (*AOTFT*), for example, finds that her future husband’s physical presence does little to awaken any sexual feelings in her. She, therefore, marries for reasons other than sex, and is promised a contented, if not a blissfully happy, life. Sex, Bennett’s novels suggest, is an important aspect of many women’s lives, but not of all. But where it is a significant feature, it is the female naivety often resulting from restrictive conventions that forbade social and sexual awareness that was the focus of many of his fictional narratives; a concern that was far from the issue of the sexless women.

The desire for romance and marriage direct the aspirations of most of Bennett’s middle-class heroines but this is, of course, not their only concern. Domesticity and, increasingly, paid employment direct their everyday activities, producing an array of emotions from relief and satisfaction to anger and frustration. Mirroring reality, most of Bennett’s female characters spend their lives immersed in what Hilda Lessways calls ‘the business of domesticity’.<sup>xx</sup> Some perform their primary role of housekeeper badly inciting feelings of disgust, even anger and resentment among the men in their lives. Certainly nearing the end of *Clayhanger*, Edwin finds himself ‘appalled’ with Hilda’s housekeeping; and, *The Old Wives’ Tale*’s Samuel Povey also finds the house of his brother and his alcoholic wife to be ‘in a shameful condition of neglect’<sup>xxi</sup>; a combined state of disrepute that elicits the most severe of reactions, one that calls into dispute her very womanhood. Instead, to Samuel, she is a thing ‘vile’, ‘a fouler obscenity than the unexperienced Samuel had ever conceived’.<sup>xxii</sup> Others fulfil the role

of housekeeper with skill and contentment and are judged positively in light of that. For instance, we are told that Anna Tellwright's kitchen was one 'where, in the housewife's phrase, you might eat off the floor, and to any Bursley matron it would have constituted the highest possible certificate of Anna's character, not only as housewife but as elder sister'.<sup>xxiii</sup> And *The Price of Love*'s Louis is certainly impressed by the organised and intimate femininity of Rachel's kitchen, thinking that it is 'the most beautiful and agreeable and romantic interiors ever seen'.<sup>xxiv</sup> And, reflecting the gradual opening up and professionalising of some occupations to middle-class women – occupations such as clerical, nursing, and teaching – Bennett writes that still other women perform their domestic duties with a sense of relief that they do not have to partake of these new employment opportunities. Helen Rathbone (*HWTHH*) gladly assumes the position of housekeeper for her elderly uncle to get away from her teaching position that she despises<sup>xxv</sup>; and, Ethel Stanway (*Leonora*) retreats back into the familiarity and even much loathed drudgery of the domestic realm in preference to paid employment after a brief but disastrous experience working as a clerical assistant in her father's business.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Others, most notably Hilda Lessways, despise a life of the inescapable, tiresome, squalor of domesticity. All over the town and behind closed doors, she laments, a 'hidden shame' – a vast, sloppy, steaming, greasy, social horror – was being enacted.<sup>xxvii</sup> Yet, she realises with resignation that it is she who views this earthly idolatry as barbaric; it is she is different in her revolt as half the adult population (the female half) seem to worship housekeeping 'as an exercise sacred and paramount, enlarging its importance and with positive gusto permitting it to monopolize their existence'.<sup>xxviii</sup>

There are women in Bennett's novels who have no choice but to undertake paid employment.<sup>xxix</sup> The previously mentioned Helen Rathbone (*HWTHH*) is a teacher because she has to support herself financially. A more tragic, pathetic example, is the ailing spinster Sarah Gailey (*TOWT*), an arthritic former dancing teacher who runs her brother's boarding houses out of necessity. More unusually, there is Rosa Stanway from *Leonora* who single-mindedly pursues a career in nursing out of a sense of vocation. But the example of a middle-class woman worker that Bennett allows his readership to really delve into is Hilda Lessways. Bennett allows Hilda to have the experience she really wants – working in the



male world of employment – albeit only a brief experience. She undertakes clerical work and shorthand training for a job in a local newspaper office. She understands that she is a pioneer, if not in London, then at least in the Five Towns.<sup>xxx</sup> In the English midlands, Hilda is a ‘new woman’. And, like most other New Women, she is aware that her experiences are far removed from those of their male counterparts.<sup>xxxii</sup> She does not want equality as such, but she does envy many of what she perceives to be male advantages. She envies the relative freedom of men and their sense of superiority. She has ‘money, freedom and ambition’, all of which she regards as typically male.<sup>xxxiii</sup> With the help of George Cannon, she uses these male assets to access the experiences that she so desperately craves. Bennett sums up her state of bliss: ‘And what was she? Nothing but a clerk, at a commencing salary of fifteen shillings per week! Ah! But she was a priestess! She had a vocation which was unsoiled by the economic excuse.’<sup>xxxiii</sup> Still, conventional distractions, duties and longings end her unconventional experiences. In the end, Hilda chooses to give into guilt over neglected family duties and elects to marry Cannon, thereby choosing the conventional lot of wife. These decisions cement the end of her dreams of ‘an enlarged liberty, of wide interests, and of original activities – such as no woman to her knowledge had ever had’.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Hilda returns to the repulsive, ‘odious mess of the whole business of domesticity’.<sup>xxxv</sup> This ‘new woman’ goes forward toward the landscape that was to be occupied by the ‘modern’ girl, only to find that conventional duties and desires drag her back to the life assigned to the Victorian woman.

### **Bennett, women and post-war changes**

Bennett’s story before the onset of World War One was one of slow, gradual reform affecting a partial opening up of education and employment opportunities for women and a slight loosening of social conventions. For the most part his pre-war works detailed the lives of middle-class characters as they coped with both the familiar, but restricting confines and tantalising, if for some intimidating, increasing opportunities of the late-Victorian world and immediately after. His story in the post-war era is a different one. Here Bennett deals with what he calls the ‘Time-Spirit’; the ‘irresistible’ spirit of change.<sup>xxxvi</sup> As the fabulously wealthy entrepreneur from Bennett’s 1930 novel, *Imperial Palace (IP)*, declares: time marches on; we don’t stand still; we simply don’t go backwards; change is happening and the environment is transforming.<sup>xxxvii</sup> In his non-fictional *Our Women (OW)*, (1920), Bennett

argues that whether his readers believe that the Victorian era is over or not – he writes, for instance, that ‘common consensus’ has just closed this period – or whether they believe, as Bennett claims to, that changes that started in the Victorian period have flowed into the ‘new’ era thereby joining rather than separating these different periods, there has recently occurred a transformation more striking than any other and that is a revolution in relations between the sexes.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

The Victorian middle classes sought, Bennett claims, to establish social customs that more than anything else artificially exaggerated the differences existing between the sexes.<sup>xxxix</sup>

This had profound and ultimately negative consequences for women in that as part of this master plan, the middle classes sought to create the now iconic idle Victorian wife.

Consequently, Bennett continues, the ‘destiny and honour of woman was to be parasitic’.

And ‘if circumstances in the early years of womanhood forced her not to be parasitic her aim was nevertheless to become parasitic as soon as possible and as completely as possible’.<sup>xl</sup>

The implications of this middle-class imposition for women, middle-class women in particular?

The intelligence of woman was frustrated, and her conscience dulled, by the great design of display, parade, intentional waste, and exquisite futility; and even the exercise of her charm was impaired and shamed because it was confined mainly to the charms of her body.<sup>xli</sup>

Men, he noted, were not induced to be idle; in manufacturing this system of unnatural relations between the sexes, they recognised idleness as a ‘bore’ and so only imposed it on the opposite sex. At a premium in this resulting regime then, to Bennett’s mind, were less the crimes of cruelty or injustice, and more those of ‘inefficiency’ and ‘futility’.<sup>xlii</sup>

So, what provoked these changes? In Bennett’s telling of the story, given evidence of the intense waste of human resources – of ‘good material’ – and discontent with the slow pace of reform, ‘certain women, in concert with certain men, revolted’.<sup>xliii</sup> Freedom, they said, had not kept pace with knowledge. Accordingly, those at the radical end of the feminist spectrum campaigned for a complete overhaul in relations between the sexes. Fortunately, he explains, they failed, for some distinctions between the sexes – gender differences – should prevail.

But, importantly, while failing to deliver a complete overhaul of sexual relations, these feminists – aided by technological advancements – did help to secure some welcome changes, thereby transforming early twentieth century society. The war provided opportunities for women to assume roles and undertake tasks that would, Bennett wrote, have caused many in the eighteenth century to be ‘laid low with a paralysis of shame’.<sup>xliv</sup> Feminist agitation, technological progress, the war, all of these combined to usher in a new era; to form a new social, physical and moral landscape, a changing landscape epitomised by factors such as the female franchise, further employment opportunities for middle-class women and a general breakdown of Victorian social conventions.<sup>xlv</sup> The ‘modern girl’ was to grace this new post-war landscape. This, he writes, was a girl hardly recognisable as stemming from the now archaic Victorian girl; what Bennett calls the girl of old or the ‘ancient’ girl. Whereas the Victorian Girl was insipid, her modern counterpart was feisty; whereas the girl of old was ignorant and unexperienced, the girl of new was knowledgeable, informed; whereas the ‘ancient girl’ was idle and useless, the progressive girl was a salaried worker who contributed to the wider society.<sup>xlvi</sup> The ‘ancient girl’ was still being manufactured, Bennett insisted, but she was fast being overtaken by the ‘modern girl’; fast being declared ‘an anachronism’.<sup>xlvii</sup>

It is the act of undertaking paid employment, Bennett infers, that most distinguishes the ‘modern girl’ from the girl of old. Indeed, in *Our Women* he equates the ‘modern girl’ with ‘the girl who earns a living’ (obviously the middle-class ‘girl’ or woman for, of course, working-class girls and women had little choice but to earn a living whether in the pre- or post-war world).<sup>xlviii</sup> Engaging in paid employment, travelling unchaperoned, experiencing much more of the public world whether through work or newspapers or conversations with other young men and women, these, Bennett writes, are conditions that shape a model of woman in the post-war era that is very different from her pre-war counterpart. The ‘modern girl’ is to a degree ‘mature’ and she has to be because she has to be to earn a livelihood. It is no longer her business, as it was that of the Victorian girl, to appear ‘immature and naïve’, and exaggeratingly so. She is both ‘knowledgeable’ and ‘talkative’. Unchaperoned, able to read and with access to newspapers, it would be futile to tell a modern girl not to know or talk about what she knows. In fact, unlike the ‘dull’ and ‘artificial’ girl of old, the male youth of today can talk to the modern girl about everything: ‘trains, tubes, motor-bus routes, season-tickets, typewriters, tea-shops, cigarettes, music-halls, offices, subscription dances, filing

systems, hours of work, bridge, actresses, politicians, politics, strikes, income tax, housing problems, excursions, motorbikes, football, newspapers, law cases'.<sup>xlix</sup> On the issue of whether the modern girl is 'self-confident', Bennett asserts, that, like all young people, she pretends to be so in order to be taken seriously on whatever subject she's talking about. On the matter of pleasure, she is fond of entertainment. All young people should be fond of pleasure, Bennett argues. The only difference between the modern girl and the girl of old on this score is that the modern girl has so many more options for entertainment open to her and much more freedom to enjoy these. And, finally, the modern girl, Bennett claims, is 'fond of work'; surely another positive trait to add to a bevy of positive traits.<sup>1</sup>

But there are also very visible changes that accompany the emergence of the 'modern girl' that Bennett explores; changes that by their blatant visibility disconcert the more conservative mindset. The image of women smoking tobacco – a new image on the English landscape – is one of these. Indeed, so tremendous and controversial is this new female pastime that it receives substantial coverage in both Bennett's fiction and his non-fiction.<sup>li</sup> Of the fictional Jack Cradock, respected London butcher in *Imperial Palace* who is offended by young 'ladies' smoking, Bennett remarks, he had seen 'ancient hags' smoking cutty pipes with 'indrawn lips' but that 'a fresh young girl, personable, virginal, should brazenly puff tobacco – that was different'.<sup>lii</sup> In his non-fiction, Bennett contextualises this controversy, employing the much-used analogy of Jack and Jill to denote husband and wife to do so:

There always is trouble when Jills try to do what no previous Jills have done. When, for example, a Jill began to copy Jack's bad habit of smoking, she could at first only smoke under pain of being unsexed theoretically. To-day, after much turmoil, all Jills throughout the world may smoke in the homes over which they preside, and still remain within the bounds of social correctness.<sup>liii</sup>

For it is not only 'fast' women like beautiful, wealthy adventuress (and ex-race-car driver) Gracie Savott (*IP*) who smoke; so too do practical girls, like the housekeeper manager of the Imperial Palace Hotel Evelyn Orham eventually marries, Violet Powler. The difference is, however, that 'nice' girls do it in private creating no public spectacle, inviting no controversy.<sup>liv</sup>

More threatening to the continued relevance of the demure image of Victorian womanhood than smoking and certainly more spectacularly visual, if only for those entering the clubs and hotels of the Jazz Age, is hedonistic pleasure. Bennett's women assume a somewhat ambiguous role on this stage. In *Imperial Palace*, Bennett as author and Evelyn Orcham as narrator voice little opposition to an older male character's assertion that excessive drinking, 'young women as brazen as strumpets painting their faces in public' and 'smoking like chimneys', 'libidinous old women' dancing with hired hands, all these images mar the age. If these are 'the times', he says, then he is glad that he hasn't moved with them.<sup>lv</sup> Yet, in his post-war fiction – where there is room for more artistic licence than in his non-fiction and so more room for exploration of controversial topics – Bennett gladly explores a loosening of sexual mores that permits greater female sexual display. The Imperial Palace Hotel finally succumbs, he writes, to the 'Time-Spirit' and plays host to the cabaret.

Here at the cabaret, Bennett confronts his readers with the image of a woman, clad only in a leotard, performing short, abrupt, powerful, essentially ugly, but sexual and sensual movements. Her muscles ripple – expanding and contracting – she circles the floor: 'faster and faster, in gyrations of the body, stoopings, risings, whirlings: arms uplifted, disclosing the secrets of the arm-pits'. Her rapt face close, Evelyn can hear her hard breathing. 'The sexual, sinister quality of her long body frightened and enchanted him.' Her heaving breasts and tremendously powerful legs mesmerise him so that he comes to see her as both graceful and beautiful. He is not alone in his appreciation as the 'applause roared about the great room, every wave of it responding to every visible wave of conquering sensual sexuality which effused powerfully from her accomplished body'.<sup>lvi</sup> "“That wouldn't do in a drawing-room,”” Gracie correctly asserts.<sup>lvii</sup> But it is a part of the post-Victorian world. Whether welcomed or not, it is an intrinsic aspect of modern pleasure. As Evelyn explains:

Now before the war that turn wouldn't have been respectable. I do believe it would have emptied any restaurant – or filled it with exactly the sort of person *we* don't want. But we give it now, and the Palace is just as respectable as ever it was. More, even. Look at the people here!<sup>lviii</sup>

Gracie's appreciation of the 'shamelessness' of the performance startles the more staid, middle-aged Evelyn; but it also confirms her as the 'modern girl' in his mind.<sup>lix</sup> He is both repulsed by and attracted to her. Certainly he is attracted enough to enter into a short-lived,

but passionate relationship with her. It is an uncomfortable relationship that forces him to reassess his ideas about female sexuality – such as when he asks himself whether or not it matters that she might not be a virgin – and then to attempt to seek out a comfortable position for himself and his moral code in this ever changing physical and moral environment.<sup>lx</sup>

Gracie's extraordinary position as a character of extreme wealth and independence means that she is to Evelyn's mind 'entitled to a code of her own'; there is no word about women occupying lesser positions and their accepted codes. Although, the fact that Evelyn chooses to marry a less exceptional, less sexually threatening woman, but one who likes to indulge, privately, in a little swearing and smoking, is indicative of the place that he mapped out for himself in this volatile moral environment.

*Imperial Palace* may be distrusting of hedonism, but Bennett was by no means opposed to pleasure-seeking in the main. Rather, increased provision for pleasure and entertainment is one of the other saving graces of the new modern landscape. It is a departure from the 'doom of ennui' that plagued a society of 50 years ago; a society that made little provision for pleasure. The conservative mindset might condemn the 'craze for dancing', but in his non-fiction Bennett argues that increased avenues for entertainment is just the natural outcome of a society that has 'organised itself better for work'.<sup>lxi</sup> Pleasure is the flip-side of work. More efficiently organised work and pleasure, he argues, makes for a more giving, more enjoyable life: 'Life is made to yield more than it used to yield, and yet life lasts longer and youth lasts longer.'<sup>lxii</sup>

Yet, it is not so much the lives of pleasure-seeking exceptional women, but rather the daily occupations of the unexceptional women that furnish the English landscape – and the pages of its fiction – that are Bennett's primary concern. Cabaret performances, smoking, loose sexual encounters, champagne cocktails, these are not the things of most of Bennett's 'ordinary' heroines, nor of the 'ordinary' middle class women that he writes about in his non-fiction. Work and domesticity, then – the daily occupations of everyday women – changes to these are the changes that most affect the lives of these women. One of the fundamental factors transforming English society, then, is the notion that it is 'no longer quite correct for a truly proper and unexceptionable woman not to have something to do apart from her husband and her house'.<sup>lxiii</sup> And, by 'something', Bennett does not mean traditional charity work;

rather, he spurns the ‘odious’ Lady Bountiful of old. Instead, he means useful paid employment. Undertaking paid employment allows women to prove themselves useful contributors to society; good citizens. But it also rids society of one of those much-despised blights of the imposition of middle-class social mores, namely unfamiliarity with the opposite sex. Working ‘girls’ find many more chances to meet and interact with working men. Indeed, salary-earning girls in the post-war era, Bennett contends, ‘meet as many men in a day as their predecessors of similar standing met in a month’; many of these predecessors having met men, other than their relatives, ‘about as often as they met giraffes’.<sup>lxiv</sup> Despite the playful tone, the implication is, of course, that with increased familiarity, perhaps many of the misguided decisions caused by social and sexual naivety of the past – those painfully detailed in Bennett’s pre-war fiction – can be avoided in this ‘new’ era.

So, how does Bennett deal with the timeless issue of women balancing work and home? He does so by calling, once again, on the analogous Jack and Jill. In *Our Women*, Bennett tells the often referred to Jill that she must continue to perform her job of keeping the house and looking after her husband – charming the ‘savage’ – even in this modern era.<sup>lxv</sup> Jill’s understandably indignant retort is:

Here I am to go to work and have responsibilities same as Jack, and rush home tired out and prepare myself to charm Jack. I tell you one thing and I know what I’m talking about you can’t be charming when you’re tired out, unless you’re an angel. And I’m not an angel.<sup>lxvi</sup>

Bennett’s calm, considered response in the face of this female emotion is to reply that he does not want Jill to be an angel, not least because an angel (with its unmistakable Coventry Patmore connotations) would drive Jack to his club every night. The whole point, Bennett says, is that Jill ought never to look at work the same way that Jack does. The laws of nature – that is to say, the fact that females are society’s necessary child bearers – makes domestic concerns paramount in women’s lives. Jill’s primary concern, even in this modern age, then, is still the household. However, the old artificial conventions that dictated that women should immerse themselves fully in housekeeping – when it was clear that there were not enough household chores to keep any capable person occupied for the entire day, Bennett dictates – were no longer applicable. Consequently, the excess time that women really had

after performing their household tasks could and should be used to engage in useful, paid employment.<sup>lxvii</sup> Bennett thereby consigned women to part-time employment only.

Bennett did not simply call on biological reasoning to justify his consignment of women to the part-time hearth, he also appealed to intellectual theories, namely the old ideal of male superiority, that which was so thoroughly explored in his pre-war novels. By virtue of their intellectual and creative superiority, men were the natural workers. It was more efficient to employ their talents on a full-time basis and use women's inferior and certainly split or distracted (by domestic concerns) talents as a form of support. Women had been given ample opportunity for proving that they had intellectual and creative abilities equal to those of men, he argued. But, apart from the anomalous example of Emily Bronte, they had failed to do so. Therefore, Bennett was 'inclined to think that no amount of education and liberty of action' would sensibly alter the situation.<sup>lxviii</sup> Not even the most ambitious, most driven of womankind – feminists – looked like altering this imbalance for feminists, he argued, simply sought to tread a pathway already woven by men. They had done nothing to prove themselves capable of unique or original thought.<sup>lxix</sup> Because of this, Bennett felt himself well-placed to assure the readers of his non-fiction that only in some futuristic utopia would women be the superior sex; and, for this to happen, this utopia would need to be characterised by the favouring of sentimentality above reason.<sup>lxx</sup>

Readers of his fiction were likewise presented with a similar tale. Novels like the 1923 *Riceyman's Steps* and the 1930 *The Imperial Palace* may have depicted a very changed post-war world – one featuring everything from the tragedy of weakened, shell-shocked manhood, to the almost sickening and wasteful luxury of a near hedonistic world, to a world where women could be anything from hotel housekeepers and laundresses to cabaret dancers, racing car drivers and famous writers (tellingly, they could only be successful as writers of popular genres such as gossip journalism and personal memoirs) – but, some things did not change. Women – from *The Imperial Palace's* exceptional Gracie Savott to *Riceyman Steps's* (RS) more mundane Mrs Belrose – still wanted to be to rely on men to be superior, dominant, someone to rely on especially in uncertain or troubled times. Like their pre-war fictional predecessors, these female characters still long to play the game of male supremacy whatever their respective personalities and abilities.<sup>lxxi</sup> Indeed, perhaps the only inversion of this



narrative is that involving the slatternly charwoman, Elsie, and her tragic, shell-shocked lover, Joe (*RS*). In this tale, Elsie is not given the opportunity of playing the submissive female in the presence of a commanding masculinity. Rather, she has to be the dominant force. And Joe, traumatised by the effects of the horrific war from which he has just returned, does not see Elsie, as those around her do, as the dreary drudge; instead he sees 'a powerful protectress, a bright angel, a being different from, and superior to, any other being'.<sup>lxxii</sup> But this example is anomalous where the tragic Joe, destroyed by the effects of Britain's imperial war, represents almost an inversion of traditional British manhood. By the time of *Imperial Palace*'s publication at the beginning of a new century, Britain's manhood and the game of sexual difference and male supremacy, seems to have once again been restored.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

In contrast to the 'too many' who, Bennett complained lamented the passing of the old era, this ever-practical, ever-realistic writer embraced the new landscape of modernity. He did not hark back nostalgically to the bygone Victorian world; to the so-called 'grand romantic world'. And the modern girl was one of the main reasons why he was so positive, so optimistic, and so opposed to the sentimentality of nostalgia. The post-war modern girl represented a revolution in relations between the sexes. She symbolised a break from the contrived and artificial world created by the Victorian middle classes. She participated in freer, more natural relations with members of the opposite sex that could only be good for early twentieth century society as a whole. Yet, it was now time to stop agitating for change, Bennett declared. Women had come forward a long way. They had affected something of a revolution. But it would be a mistake to carry this change any further, for to do so would result in an obliteration of sexual difference. The sex-discord, he argued, was a natural and necessary aspect of social and sexual relations. More than this, there were inherent differences between the sexes that could not be obliterated. Women were naturally the nation's child bearers; participation in the public sphere, though beneficial for them and society as a whole, could only be partial. Whatever the external changes, domesticity prevailed as a feminine occupation. Men, on the other hand, were intellectually and creatively superior to women. The public world was theirs wholly, for it was their primary concern. From the man who wrote *How to Live on 24 Hours a Day*, this model of modern

society was lesson in efficiency. It was also a lesson in how to negotiate a changing world. In *Our Women*, Bennett wrote that he might sound like an ‘old-fashioned man’ but is in fact a ‘feminist to the point of passionateness’.<sup>lxxiii</sup> His extensive writing on women – fictional and non-fictional – support the contention that he was a bit of both.

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## Notes

- <sup>i</sup> For more on Bennett and *Woman*, see Clotilde De Stasio (1995) ‘Arnold Bennett and Late-Victorian *Woman*’ in *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 28, 1, 40-53.
- <sup>ii</sup> Some of the examples used in this first section of the paper are elaborated on in Sharon Crozier-De Rosa (2010) *The Middle-Class Novels of Arnold Bennett and Marie Corelli. Realising the Ideals and Emotions of Late Victorian and Edwardian Women* (Lewiston, New York: Mellen).
- <sup>iii</sup> For a discussion of spinsterhood, see Jane Lewis (1984) *Women in England 1870-1950: Sexual Divisions and Social Change* (Sussex: Wheatsheaf Books), p. 3.
- <sup>iv</sup> For a fabulously ironic treatment of romantic sentimentality, see the love song passage in Arnold Bennett (1983 [1910]) *Helen with the High Hand* (Gloucester: Alan Sutton), p. 74.
- <sup>v</sup> Arnold Bennett (1975 [1910]) *Clayhanger* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin), pp.196, 206.
- <sup>vi</sup> Bennett, *Clayhanger*, pp.257, 267.
- <sup>vii</sup> Arnold Bennett (1994 [1902]) *Anna of the Five Towns* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics), p.176.
- <sup>viii</sup> Arnold Bennett (n.d. [1908]) *The Old Wives’ Tale* (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons), p.149.
- <sup>ix</sup> Arnold Bennett (1920), *Our Women. Chapters on the Sex-Discord* (New York: George H. Doran Co.), p.116.
- <sup>x</sup> Arnold Bennett (1976 [1911]) *Hilda Lessways* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin), pp.225-226.
- <sup>xi</sup> Bennett, *HL*, p.202.
- <sup>xii</sup> Arnold Bennett (1926 [1914]) *The Price of Love* (London: Methuen), pp.11, 41.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Bennett, *TPO*L, p.41.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Bennett, *TPO*L, pp.338-351.
- <sup>xv</sup> For more on Victorian women and sexuality see, for example: Patricia Anderson (1995) *When Passion Reigned. Sex and the Victorians* (New York: BasicBooks); Michael Mason (1994) *The Making of Victorian Sexuality* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press); Joan Perkin (1993) *Victorian Women* (New York: New York University Press); Carol and Peter Stearns (1985) ‘Victorian Sexuality: Can Historians Do it Better?’, *Journal of Social History*, 18, 625-634; and, Matthew Sweet (2001) *Inventing the Victorians* (London: Faber and Faber).
- <sup>xvi</sup> Bennett, *TOWT*, p.291.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Bennett, *TOWT*, pp.421-422.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Bennett, *TOWT*, p.570.
- <sup>xix</sup> Bennett, *HL*, pp.233-234.

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<sup>xx</sup> For more on nineteenth-century middle-class domestic ideals, see, for example: Leonore Davidoff (1995) *Worlds Between. Historical Perspectives on Gender and Class* (Cambridge: Polity Press); M. Jeanne Peterson (1989) *Family, Love and Work in the Lives of Victorian Gentlewomen* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press); and, Pat Thane (1988) 'Late Victorian Women' in T. R. Gourvish and Alan O'Day (eds.) *Later Victorian Britain, 1867-1900* (Basingstoke, Hampshire and London: Macmillan, Houndsmill), pp.175-208.

<sup>xxi</sup> Bennett, *TOWT*, p.222.

<sup>xxii</sup> Bennett, *TOWT*, p.223.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Bennett, *AOTFT*, p.74.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Bennett, *TPOL*, pp.64-6, 74.

<sup>xxv</sup> Bennett, *HWTHH*, p.19.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Arnold Bennett (1975 [1903]) *Leonora. A Novel* (Plainview, New York: Books for Libraries Press), pp. 20, 87.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 36. For more on the reality of household chores as opposed to the ideal, see Patricia Branca (1974) 'Image and Reality: The Myth of the Idle Victorian Woman' in Mary Hartman and Lois W. Banner (eds.) *Clio's Consciousness Raised: New Perspectives on the History of Women* (New York and London: Harper and Row), pp.179-191.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 36.

<sup>xxix</sup> For more on employment for middle class women during the nineteenth- and early twentieth century, see Lee Holcombe (1973) *Victorian Ladies at Work. Middle Class Working Women in England and Wales 1850-1914* (Newton Abbot, Devon: David Charles); Jane Humphries (1995) 'Women and Paid Work' in June Purvis (ed.) *Women's History: Britain, 1850-1945. An Introduction* (London: UCL Press), pp.85-106; David Rubinstein (1986) *Before the Suffragettes. Women's Emancipation in the 1890s* (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press); and, Jane Rendall (1993) *Women in an Industrializing Society: England 1750-1880* (Oxford and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell).

<sup>xxx</sup> Bennett, *HL*, pp.60, 87.

<sup>xxxi</sup> This mentality is supported by historian Meta Zimmeck who claims that female clerks were very aware of the reality of the restricted position they occupied. (Meta Zimmeck (1986) 'Jobs For The Girls: The Expansion of Clerical Work for Women, 1850-1914' in Angela V. John (ed.) *Unequal Opportunities. Women's Employment in England 1800-1918* (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell), pp.153-177, 165.)

<sup>xxxii</sup> Bennett, *HL*, p.256.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Bennett, *HL*, p.60.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Bennett, *HL*, pp.255-256.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Bennett, *HL*, p.325.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Arnold Bennett (1969 [1930]) *Imperial Palace* (London: Cassell), p.89.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Bennett, *IP*, p.168.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Bennett, *OW* pp.42-3.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Bennett, *OW*, pp.31.

<sup>xl</sup> Bennett, *OW*, pp.39.

<sup>xli</sup> Bennett, *OW*, pp.40.

<sup>xlii</sup> Bennett, *OW*, pp.40.

<sup>xliii</sup> Bennett, *OW*, pp.43.

<sup>xliv</sup> Bennett, *OW* p.56.

<sup>xlv</sup> For a general guide to feminism in England at this time, see Barbara Caine (1997) *English Feminism, 1780-1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

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xlvi Bennett, *OW*, p.138.

xlvii Bennett, *OW*, p.151.

xlviii Bennett, *OW*, p.144.

xlix Bennett, *OW*, p.149.

<sup>1</sup> See Bennett's discussion of an exchange that takes place between he and a 'grey-haired lady' regarding the 'modern girl' in *OW*, pp144-145.

<sup>li</sup> More generally, increasingly, the issue of women smoking was also the subject of upper-working and lower-middle-class women's magazines. Penny Tinkler (2001) 'Rebellion, modernity, and romance: Smoking as a gendered practice in popular young women's magazines, Britain 1918–1939', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 24, 1, pp.111–122.

<sup>lii</sup> Bennett, *IP*, p.13

<sup>liii</sup> Bennett, *OW*, pp.49-50.

<sup>liv</sup> Bennett, *IP*, p.232.

<sup>lv</sup> Bennett, *IP*, pp.555-556.

<sup>lvi</sup> Bennett, *IP*, pp.90-91.

<sup>lvii</sup> Bennett, *IP*, p.93.

<sup>lviii</sup> Bennett, *IP*, p.93.

<sup>lix</sup> Bennett, *IP*, pp.93-4

<sup>lx</sup> Bennett, *IP*, pp.460-461

<sup>lxi</sup> Bennett, *OW*, pp.146-147.

<sup>lxii</sup> Bennett, *OW*, p.146.

<sup>lxiii</sup> Bennett, *OW*, p.44.

<sup>lxiv</sup> Bennett, *OW*, pp.139-140.

<sup>lxv</sup> Bennett, *OW*, p.101.

<sup>lxvi</sup> Bennett, *OW*, p.101.

<sup>lxvii</sup> Bennett, *OW*, p.102.

<sup>lxviii</sup> Bennett, *OW*, p.115.

<sup>lxix</sup> Bennett, *OW*, p.126.

<sup>lxx</sup> Bennett, *OW*, p.132.

<sup>lxxi</sup> Gracie Savott desires to look up to Evelyn as the competent manager of such an immense organism as the modern hotel; and, Mrs Belrose – more 'impressive' than her husband – allows him to think he has the superior wisdom (for example, Arnold Bennett (1964 [1923]) *Riceman Steps* (London: Pan Books), 254).

<sup>lxxii</sup> Bennett, *RS*, p.261.

<sup>lxxiii</sup> Bennett, *OW*, p.116.