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**FEMALE HEROES AND MALE HEROINES?
THE GENDER INTERPLAY AND POWER STRUGGLE
IN GEORGE GISSING'S *IN THE YEAR OF JUBILEE* (1894)
AND *THE WHIRPOOL* (1896)**

When George Gissing published his twelfth and sixteenth novel in 1894 and 1896 respectively, the New Woman novel was already an established literary and cultural phenomenon. An object of ridicule, contestation and aggression, the New Woman figure impregnated the popular imagination of the late Victorian society, and although as a phenomenon it was short-lived – its heyday occurred in the last decade of the nineteenth century when it transfigured itself into a political Suffragist, its impact was enormous, especially in literary circles. Practically all major writers and journalists of that time, such as Sarah Grand, Mona Caird, Olive Schreiner, Ouida, Grant Allen, or even Thomas Hardy devoted their literary output to, or at least incorporated into some of their works, the New Woman character. The appearance of New Woman “in fiction and in fact”, as Angelique Richardson and Chris Willis put it, avatared the ongoing changes in the social, cultural and political spheres of life with respect to unfavourable position of women and strong postulates to redefine it, since the old customs and traditions were felt, especially by women, to be no longer applicable in reality.

The novelty of such a protagonist naturally led to many discrepancies in the way the New Woman was perceived or constructed, as opposed to a more or less unified personages of Victorian heroes and heroines. Indeed, as Lyn Pykett explains:

The New Woman was by turns: a mannish amazon and a Womanly woman; she was oversexed, undersexed, or same sex identified; she was anti-maternal, or a racial super-mother; she was male-identified, or manhating and/or man-eating, or self-appointed saviour of benighted masculinity; she was anti-domestic, or she sought to make domestic values prevail; she was radical, socialist or revolutionary, she was reactionary and conservative; she was the agent of social and/or racial regeneration, or symptom and agent of decline. (xii)

Such wide spectrum of ideas connected with the New Woman was not coincidental. One can observe that there is a substantial gap between the fictitious creations of New Women in the writings of female and male novelists who used the new literary creation for their own purposes. Sarah Grand or Mona Caird, for example, used the New Woman figure as a carrier of political or social ideals and/or dogmas, and thus departed from its potentially real, living counterpart. Men, on the other hand, often focused solely on sexual politics of the New Woman, and so distorted her image as well. The notorious Grant Allen's novel *The Woman Who Did* (1895), for example, was accused of damaging the feminist cause by "linking 'the claim of women to citizenship and social and industrial independence with attacks upon marriage and the family'" (Milicent Garret Fawcett qtd in: Richardson and Willis, 25).

George Gissing also made an extensive use of the image of the New Woman, in fact the majority of his later novels include at least one female character who does not conform to traditional values cherished by Victorian society: in *In the Year of Jubilee* most of the female protagonists bear an imprint of New Womanhood, likewise in *The Whirpool*, and his best-known novel, *The Odd Women*, is almost completely, if not entirely, dedicated to the "woman question" as it was labelled at the time. In contrast to other writers, however, Gissing seems to have avoided overburdening his novels with too much ideology or pedagogy, and as a result his best characters seem to acquire life-like dimension rather than being impersonations of virtues or vices, which was typical of early mainstream Victorian prose, but which was also quite common in politically engaged New Women writers. Both of the novels I am going to present in this paper, namely *In the Year of Jubilee* and *The Whirpool* manifest an excellent insight into a female psyche of the late nineteenth century middle-class women and their strife for recognition, independence and identity outside and within "the wedlock," by questioning the typical gender roles instilled by law and custom. It must be stressed, nonetheless, that Gissing's attitude towards female emancipation was very ambiguous. Whereas in many cases he appears to be sympathetic and understanding in his portrayals of women and certainly recognises the necessity to grant women more freedom, he also perceives many shortcomings of New Womanhood, such as apparent indifference towards motherhood, household duties or pretentious learning, and often his characters' opinions verge on latent mysoginism of which he has been accused by modern feminist scholars. Paradoxically, I believe that exactly such an attitude enabled him to create a credible and realistic portrayals of not so much New Women in terms of feminist ideology, but young middle-class Modern Women who not only provide a departure from the typical Victorian heroines in literary terms, but introduce an interesting variation of New Women characters as well.

Before turning to the novels themselves, however, I would like to draw attention to the concept of heroine and hero in Victorian fiction, and the gender stereotypes implied in those terms. Susan Koppelman Cornillon in her collection of essays *Images of Women in Fiction* differentiates between three types of female protagonists, namely Woman as Heroine, The Invisible Woman and The Woman as Hero. The first name is applied to women who abide to traditional views of women "of the 'sugar'n spice and everything nice' stereotype" (x), the second, The Invisible Woman, to those women who play a secondary and complimentary role to the male protagonist's activities and heroic (of course) deeds, and lastly The Woman as Hero points to her inner capabilities, ability to coexist with men on equal terms or to lead completely independent life. It may be easily noticed that the first and second category do overlap in many instances, and what they invariably amount to is well described by Susan Gorsky in one of her essays:

The typical Victorian heroine is more than pretty, for while she may not be a classic beauty, her face shows animation, intelligence, and character. Her blue or grey eyes always sparkle, twinkle, or shine, and they subtly reveal love she wants to hide, anger she tries to overcome, and merriment she should suppress. Her nose is well-shaped and slender, her lips are rosy, full, round, pouting, or gently curved, and her teeth are invariably white and even. Her complexion is clear and white but not pale, and the color in her cheeks deepens with exercise, excitement, or embarrassment. Her hair is blond or light brown, occasionally darker, but never red, and is smooth, luxuriant, and thick. [...] She is generally slightly taller than average, and is slender and graceful. At the youngest she is twelve or thirteen, at the oldest twenty-seven or eight, but most frequently the heroine is in her late teens, just at the age when a former brotherly or fatherly friend becomes a potential husband.

Her behaviour is pre-eminently ladylike, which means that she is gentle, quiet, graceful, subordinate, and restrained. She walks up stairs one at a time, sits peacefully for hours with her "fancywork" [...] rides a carefully chosen, gentle horse, arranges flowers for the house, practices playing the piano or singing popular little songs faithfully every day, reads selected books and journals [...], and varies her day by making and receiving visits from neighborhood women or – a far more interesting alternative – receiving visits from men. (31–32)

Of course such a description refers to an ideal of femininity embodied in the figure of Victorian heroine, who naturally had to comply in the end to the moral principles and what was expected of her: marriage, children-bearing, submission, passivity to name just a few. Any departure from the center to the periphery (meaning from heroine to her antithesis) was connected with a violation of commonly accepted values, and the character, "the Bad/Fallen Woman," was sure to be either repulsive or punished or both, and quite often marginalized. (Such example may be Lucy in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, or Mrs Strangeways in Gissing's *The Whirlpool*.) By extension a typical hero would be represented by a young or mature man whose social position would often excel that of the heroine, and of course

whose actions would induce some response-action from her. The action, strength, reason, practical common-sense and dominance are naturally sided with him.

The third type of female protagonist, The Woman as Hero, is much more puzzling, however. First of all, it provides us with an interesting gender-shifting, a lexical cross-dressing, in which a woman becomes almost self-sufficient because she acts two parts: the feminine by physical appearance and male by the position she occupies in the novel, likewise by activity she manifests. As Susan Koppelman Cornillon explains such "woman are portrayed as whole people or as people in the process of creating or discovering their wholeness, [they are] women seeking and finding other metaphors for existence than men, or martyrdom, or selflessness, or intrinsic worthlessness [they are] in other words, human beings" (xi). More importantly, as Declan Kiberd claims, in terms of the psyche the late Victorian lady rediscovers the suppressed male element in herself, which in its simplest form means she begins to act, and to act independently, not as a reaction to man's deeds. Such change, of course, has further implications, namely by redefining the role and position of woman in the novel it is only natural that the same shift shall occur in case of male protagonists. And indeed, men in late Victorian fiction, and especially in George Gissing's novels, seem to acquire feminine dimension, or perhaps, for the first time such dimension is truly and fully acknowledged. Furthermore, such avowal of femininity results in lessening the status quo of the 'hero,' as he loses his power/forcefulness and becomes complimentary to 'woman as hero' rather than being the organising principle. The reason for this may lie in the conviction that "the weak one [a female] who seeks power is always admirable, while the strong one [a male] who yearns for weakness [...] is not" (Kiberd, 10). Thus, if the literary constructs of 'hero' and 'heroine' become dissociated from their gender-like implication, as perhaps the new feminist criticism would have it, then what we may face as a result might be called a 'female hero' and a 'male heroine.' However controversial such division may be, certainly George Gissing's protagonists of *In the Year of Jubilee* and *The Whirlpool* embody manifold variations upon the theme. What seems to justify it even more, is the distinction between the typical 'hero' and 'heroine' proposed by Jane Miller: "A hero who did no more than get married would not be worth marrying. Men in novels become something as well as husbands, while women become something by becoming wives" (134). The two novels seem to defy even that distinction, because the men presented in them do not always do much more than marry, and the women, more often than not, become 'something' apart from being wives.

In the Year of Jubilee published in 1894 did not win a wide acclaim, and indeed it is judged rather poorly by some critics, who perceive it as a weak production with respect to its structural and literary aspects. The

plot is "too disjointed and too episodic" to use Michael Collie's term (who is otherwise quite favourable in his judgement of it) and it has been severely criticised by feminist scholars who perceive it as heavily misogynistic and unjust in Gissing's treatment of female characters, but it does manifest a great study of a woman's psyche (156). The main plot of the novel revolves around the unhappy affair and marriage between a lower middle-class young woman, Nancy Lord, a daughter of a piano dealer, and an upper-middle class gentleman, Lionel Tarrant, a man of 'independent means.' *The Whirpool*, published in 1896 on the other hand is deemed as one of the best novels Gissing ever wrote. Like most of his novels, this one also depicts marital life of middle-class family of Alma and Harvey Rolfe.

In terms of social background and appearance both Nancy and Alma seem to comply to the typical Victorian heroine model: both have middle-class origins and are daughters of thriving businessmen, also both are of most appropriate age to become eligible wives, that is they are twenty-three years old. Both of them also lose their fathers at the most critical points of their lives, which in fact answers later on for much of their misfortunes: Nancy loses her inheritance due to her too hasty marriage with Lionel Tarrant, and Alma's family reputation is shattered when it turns out that her father committed suicide after defrauding large sums of money and also leaves her impecunious. The deaths of the two and sole breadwinners of the Lords and Frothingham's families is not only of great consequence to the 'heroines' but it may point also to something else: namely to the demise of old values and the breach with traditional attitude towards male guardianship. Nancy Lord, for example, openly defies her father's attempts to control her movements when she complains to her friend, Jessica:

'Do you want to go into public-houses?' asked Jessica, laughing.

'Why not? I should like to. It's horrible to be tied up as we are; we're not children.

Why can't we go about as men do?' (*YJ*, pt. I, ch. 3)

and later on she challenges her father in the same mode, when he opposes her wish to go and see the Jubilee festivities:

'What right had you to ask her [Jessica], without first finding whether you could go or not?' [...]

'I am twenty-three years old, father,' she, replied without aggressiveness.

'That would be something of an answer if you were a man,' observed the father, his eyes cast down.

'Because I am a woman, you despise me?'

Stephen [Nancy's father] was startled at this unfamiliar mode of address. (*YJ*, pt. I, ch. 4)

Certainly no typical 'angel in the house' Victorian heroine, would dare to talk to her father like that. Later on, when the fatherly guardianship will

be replaced by the husband's one, the contrast between the strong, authoritarian male figure of the father and the indolent, defensive figure of the 'modern' husband will become even more striking. What is more, Gissing seems to suggest that in fact there is no other choice left, because sticking to traditional assumptions about family and role-sharing in marriage coupled with insistence on woman's 'eternal pupillage' may have even more disastrous consequences, as even most obedient wives rebel under their husband's strict surveillance, what he depicted in his earlier novel *The Odd Women*.

The freedom and liberty of movement likewise the degree to which women should make use of it, was much under discussion in the late nineteenth century. Many women felt under constraint with the strict custom of chaperonage and rebelled against it, putting themselves at risk of losing their good reputation and of being suspected of prostitution. In 1887, the year of Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria, the Contagious Diseases Acts (1869–1886) had just been repealed, but it was still morally questionable to let woman walk the streets alone, especially if she wanted to be perceived as a lady. Thus Stephen Lord, Nancy's father, allows his daughter to take part in the Jubilee festivities, but, much to her discontent, under the supervision of close friend of the family, Samuel Barmby, who is Nancy's father business partner and at the same time Nancy's suitor, whom she openly abhors. They are accompanied by her friend Jessica and Nancy's brother Horace, but no sooner do they leave when Nancy gets lost in the crowd and she does this on purpose – in fact it is a secret scheme she plots with Jessica, to get rid of unpleasant company of her suitor and to feel free just for once. When she does that, not only does she violate the moral principle of chaperonage and propriety, but, as Gissing suggests, Nancy transforms her 'lady-like' bearing into a 'shop-girl' one: "[h]er blood was heated by close air and physical contact [of the masses]. She did not think, and her emotions differed little from those of any shop-girl let loose" (*YJ*, pt. I, ch. 7). Gissing seems to imply that such transgression is a very dangerous one, because it levels Nancy with coarse, ordinary women and it is not far from raising doubts as to her chastity: shopgirls and unchaperoned women were often suspected of being prostitutes or mistresses, and in fact Nancy is accosted by a few passers-by on that account. Nancy does not lose her cold blood, however, and in a very brusque manner delivers herself of unwanted presence of strangers, instead of fainting or screaming for male assistance as should be expected of a typical heroine, but then again, no true Victorian heroine would allow herself to be found in such circumstances of her own will. In *The Whirlpool* also the same issue is raised: when Alma announces to her female companions in a as-a-matter-of-fact tone that her husband "likes to see [her] going about independently" both in the streets and while visiting houses at dinner parties, the only

comment she receives is a short, sneering laugh (*W*, pt. II, ch. 4). Both Alma and Nancy see nothing contemptible about it, however their lack of prudence is severely punished. Alma is being talked about by Felix Dymes, a musician and her acquaintance, behind her back in "leers and half-phrases" that she is "fatally in love with him," (*W*, pt. II, ch. 5) and furthermore, she is even found at Cyrus Redgrave's bachelor's flat alone, a very thing which will lead to the collapse of her marriage. Nancy's lack of prudence will, on the contrary, lead to an unhappy marriage.

The underlying assumption of impropriety and perhaps of wantonness, which Gissing appears to suggest, may not be far off the truth, however. If we assume that the physical appearance in Victorian novel was not just an author's mere fancy but that it encoded certain types of behaviour or traits of character (and indeed, very popular nineteenth century studies on phrenology and heredity seem to confirm it), then Nancy's looks are of no small importance. Gissing describes her as a bit plump but "well-grown girl" with "ripe lips and softly rounded cheeks" and "hair of fine auburn," a colour which was typical of 'morally doubtful' female characters, such as enchantresses, likewise a tendency to plumpiness would manifest their sensuality (*YJ*, pt. I, ch. 3). Moreover, in the course of the story it is discovered that Nancy's mother was of low origins and not much longer after she gave birth to Nancy and her brother Horace, she deserted her family, which appears only to confirm Nancy's corruptive tendencies. She knows how to make use of her feminine charm, and does not hesitate to do it when the occasion arises, so when on the solitary ramble in the streets one day she meets Lukeworth Crewe, a brusque businessman, she is provocative enough to coax him into proposing to her. Moreover, although she realises that marriage between them is out of question, she deludes him with her promise of consent – if he earns sufficiently enough to better her social standing. What is striking in this scene, is that it is Nancy who acts – in fact the meeting between them is arranged by her, just like the seduction game and the audacity with which she responds to Crewe's courtship. What is more, while doing this, Nancy is half-way in love with another man, Lionel Tarrant, notably her would-be husband, whom, as can be guessed she also tries to seduce, but the affair between them is very oblique and unclear.

At this point it would be easy to dismiss Nancy as a typical Victorian Flirt or a Jilt, or even worse, as the Schemer, according to Susan Gorsky's classification of nineteenth century heroines (44–45). Still, there is a difference between her and other disreputable conniving female characters: contrary to them she is a sympathetic and amiable protagonist, who justifies her actions partially by the circumstances and partially by the reality she finds herself in. She is neither a weakling Victorian angel eager to please everybody around, nor is she 'intentionally' wicked in order to take advantage of

others, although, as Michael Collie in his study of Gissing explains, the novel underwent serious changes and was rewritten several times, due to Gissing's publishers unwillingness to print it in its original version. Thus,

[i]n the unrevised novel Nancy Lord forced Tarrant to marry her and then found out that he was illegitimate. In the published novel the reader is not told what passed between them beyond the fact that their first sexual encounter immediately led to marriage. In the unrevised novel, called at first 'Miss Lord' and then 'Miss Lord of Camberwell', this was seen as partly Nancy Lord's doing, was in fact a consequence of the woman's as well as of the man's sexuality. (157)

By recognising the female sexuality and its possible prevalence over moral scruples, Gissing aligns himself with other New Woman writers like Olive Schreiner or George Egerton, for example, and departs even further from the stereotype of Victorian heroine, who certainly was, if not deprived of it, then used it solely for reproductive purposes. On the contrary, hero was sure to have occasional sexual intercourses, to which writers more or less explicitly referred. In the very same novel, Lionel Tarrant, after marrying Nancy and his departure abroad, admits that "[f]aithful in the technical sense he had not been" but there are no consequences of his immoral behaviour (*YJ*, pt. V, ch. 5). Even more striking is the notion, which in the original is explicitly shown, that it is a woman who picks up her man and makes him marry her not only against his liking, but also without her father's consent or even knowledge of it, without proper engagement or wedding ceremony. But even in the published version, after deleting all the 'morally questionable' passages (such as Tarrant's illegitimacy), it is still the woman who initiates the love affair as much because of her love for the man, as for her acknowledged eroticism:

The physical attraction of which she had always been conscious in Tarrant's presence seemed to have grown stronger since she had dismissed him from her mind. Comparing him with Lukeworth Crewe, she felt only a contemptuous distaste for the coarse vitality and vigour, whereto she had half surrendered herself, when hopeless of the more ambitious desire. (*YJ*, pt. II, ch. 4)

Alma in *The Whirpool* also gives some encouragement to Harvey Rolfe, her would-be husband, although she plays on his senses much more subtly, and when it comes to giving her consent to marry him it is she who behaves very rationally, asking him all sorts of practical questions: "What kind of life do you look forward to? [...] [H]ow and where do you wish to live? What thoughts had you about the future? [...] What about my art – my career?" (*W*, pt. I, ch. 11) for which Harvey later on praises her: "I liked you for the common-sense you showed, and I remember patting myself on the back for a rational bit of behaviour at a time when I felt rather crazy" (*W*, pt. III, ch. 3). It is certainly Alma who sets the tone of

the conversation, whereas Harvey seems to discard all the practical matters for a moment, and in fact the impression he leaves is that he has no definite ideas as far as their future is concerned, but is carried on by the feeling of elation and desire. Jane Miller explains such state of affair is dictated by women's experience:

Marriage, the question of whom to marry, is the most critical decision of a woman's life. It is finally a decision which young and inexperienced women have to make for themselves and on their own. They may have the right of refusal, but they rarely get choice or a second chance. (62-63)

Alma seems to realise that only to well to indulge herself in pure love-making, she also is aware that she has no great choice – as a impoverished daughter of a swindler and bankrupt she has no real prospects for finding a man of better standing.

When Alma asks Harvey “[w]hat about my art – my career?” (*W*, pt. I, ch. 3), she asks perhaps the most important question in the whole novel, and in fact, *The Whirpool* is primarily a novel about Alma's struggle for independence and meaningful life of an artist within marriage. Career and job opportunities for women lied at the heart of debates over New Womanhood in the nineteenth century, but it should be remembered that they were allowed, in a very restricted form, only to young girls or unmarried women who had to provide for themselves. Once married, the ‘career’ of a middle-class woman was sure to come to an end, although the word ‘career’ signified for her not much more than just an opportunity to work an earn very poor wages. The most popular facet of the New Woman was the so-called Type-Writer Girl carrying out ‘mechanical’ tasks, such as shorthand or type writing. As Christopher Keep comments:

Businesses were restructured in such a way [...] men, who were felt to possess superior intellectual abilities and greater strength of character, continued to be placed in positions which allowed them to rise in the administrative ranks, while women were confined to jobs which were in effect occupational dead ends.

In literary works, however, the career opportunities were much more versatile, as for example in George Gissing's *The Odd Women*, in which he sympathetically depicts a school for young middle-class women who can train as chemists or journalists apart from type-writing. In *The Whirpool*, however, Gissing moves forward – Alma's career is that of a professional violinist, in other words that of an artist. The position of artist in the late nineteenth century was still perceived as morally doubtful and certainly excluded for a married woman, as it unavoidably meant mingling with a *demi-monde* sort of people who “would not be admitted to any scrupulous respectability” (*W*, pt. II, ch. 5). Still, it could be acceptable for a male

artist, such as Herr Wilensky – a violinist virtuoso and Alma's teacher, or Felix Dymes, a successful composer of popular tunes, whose respectability is at least controversial. But should it be acceptable for a woman? Gissing seems to be in two minds about it, as he acknowledges that women may have some talent, if not genius, and that they may feel need to fulfill themselves in professional, even if artistic, life. When Alma is depressed after her father's death and her family infamy, she turns to music as a remedy for her suffering and, in fact, previously meaningless and unproductive life:

'It isn't that I want to make, a name, or anything of that sort,' said Alma [...] 'I dared say I never should; I might just support myself, and that would be all. But I want to be free – I want to be free – I want to break away. [...] 'I could live on little enough, and work, and feel free. [...] I have been feeling so bound and helpless; and now [...] nobody has any right to hinder me [...] (*W*, pt. I, ch. 6)

Such strong assertion of independence and wish to break free is omnipresent throughout the whole novel, and it is significant that each moment she gives it up, for example after the birth of her first baby, in the first years of her marriage with Harvey, she seems to lose her strength and self-appreciation because she loses an opportunity for self-expression. Her sacrifice for Harvey and for conventional domestic life results in her dullness and absent-mindedness and perhaps her apparent lack of interest in her own son is also a manifestation against "typical womanly condition," that is she realises that her child is an obstacle to her "career" and a hindrance to her independence. On the other hand, Gissing seems to undermine Alma's professions of "violin as her religion" by suggesting that her playing is all "sham" and mere fancy of a proud and eager for recognition young woman, who could never become second Herr Wilensky, a true virtuoso because, perhaps as a woman, she lacked genius reserved only for men. "Ha! There indeed sounded the violin! It needed no technical intelligence to distinguish between the playing of Wilenski and that of Alma Frothingham. Her religion, forsooth! [...] What did Alma think as she listened? Was she overcome by the despair of the artist-soul struggling in its immaturity?" (*W*, pt. I, ch. 4). Moreover, Gissing also appears to uphold the opinion that in order to become a true genius one needs physical and psychological strength, which are inimical to biologically feeble women. When Alma "comes out" and gives public performance, she does this by sacrificing her family life and finding herself on the brink of total collapse, from which she never fully recovers and which is responsible for her final downfall and death. To be sure, the fact that Alma dies at the novel's closure may be a warning which Gissing utters: by becoming an artist a woman violates the commonly accepted norms of propriety. What is

worse, Alma neglects her son thus committing a sin beyond repentance. But she goes even further – being an artist in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as Charles Bernheimer explains (qtd. in Celia Marshik), meant selling oneself to the public and that was close to prostitution, especially with respect to women. It is no coincidence then, that Harvey feels humiliated and repulsion when he sees Alma's name printed in the newspapers and before the entrance to a music hall:

He opened it [newspaper], not with any intention of reading, but because he had no mind to talk; Alma's name exhibited in staring letters at the entrance of the public building, had oppressed him with a sense of degradation; he felt ignoble, much as a man might feel who had consented to his own dishonour. (*W*, pt. II, ch. 14)

Much the same can be said in the case of Nancy Lord's attempts at writing and publishing her novel – she turns to writing after her husband's departure abroad as a means of earning money. It takes her a lot of effort, time and pains to have the novel finished, but eventually she manages to complete the book of which she is more than proud. The completion of the novel coincides with her husband's comeback, who, on reading the book asserts that it cannot ever be published “[b]ecause it isn't literature, but a little bit of Nancy's mind and heart not to be profaned by vulgar handling. To sell it for hard cash would be horrible. Leave that to the poor creatures who have no choice. You are not obliged to go into the market” (*YJ*, pt. VI, ch. 5). On the other hand Tarrant, who also lives by writing, justifies himself as an author because he “know[s] nothing else open to [him] except pen-work” (*YJ*, pt. VI, ch. 5). His justification goes even further and reveals the “gendered ideology of social space” (Marshik, 854): “Whatever trash I turned out, I should be justified; as a man, it's my duty to join in the rough-and-tumble for more or less dirty ha'pence. You, as a woman, have no such duty; nay, it's your positive duty to keep out of the beastly scrimmage” (*YJ*, pt. VI, ch. 5). In this short passage it seems that the whole ideology, which New Women, especially those who were writers themselves, tried to challenge is laid out: the traditional ‘artistic’ careers should belong to man's domain because of the creative output and distribution, which in sexual terms could be compared to “fertilising” the minds of the reader/audience. The woman, on the other hand, who by nature is receptive and passive does not possess the ‘right’ qualities to match up to the male standard/genius. If, however, she decided to cross the border of “gendered spheres,” and publish/perform in public, her literary/artistic output being sold “for hard cash” would level the female writer/performer with prostitutes. As Celia Marshik explains:

The etymological roots of "prostitute" (to place before or expose publicly) and "publish" (to place before or offer to the public) raise questions about a woman novelist's respectability when her texts, which bear her name and represent her authorial persona, become objects accessible to any individual who can meet her price. (880)

Of course we could assume that Tarrant was right and that the novel was in fact 'weak', or to use George Eliot phrase 'silly' (in her essay "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists"), who admitted that many women writers who tried to put their life experiences and dreams into fiction lack true skill and workmanship to do it successfully (Spender and Todd, 518–535). Still, it does not account for why Tarrant should possess more genuine talent, if we know that he was also 'untrained' writer himself.

One of the explanations, and perhaps the crucial one, is the collision of woman's career and motherhood, which in many debates over New Womanhood appeared simultaneously. The 'manliness' of women and their usurping male-privileged roles of the sole breadwinners threatened the crystal-clear division into the male and female spheres of life. Elaine Showalter in her study *The Female Malady* writes that:

[t]he appearance of the New Woman, with her demands for education, work and personal freedom, presented Darwinian psychiatry with a direct challenge to its social gospel. At the same time that new opportunities for self-cultivation and self-fulfillment in education and work were offered to women, doctors warned them that pursuit of such opportunities would lead to sickness, sterility, and race suicide. (121)

Moreover, Darwinian psychiatrists agreed that women who underwent such changes, could transmit this sickness to their female children, and thus weaken the human race, which would degenerate. Gissing also explores this idea, as he often makes his characters ponder over or discuss the possibility of inheriting bad qualities from their mothers, not restricting this possibility to female offspring solely. And indeed, those women characters who are strong and independent or openly express their 'annoyance' with becoming pregnant, are either sterile, like for example Alma's friend Sybil Carnaby, a *femme fatale* who refuses to take care of the household, or are simply bad mothers, like Mrs Abbott, who loses her child due to lack of proper attention – her penitence will be taking care of and teaching small children of other people after her husband's death (in fact only then does she become an amiable person). But perhaps the saddest example of a threatened true womanhood, according to Darwinian psychiatry, is Alma herself. Being occupied with her career, she manifestly rejects taking care of her first-born son, Hughie, who is a hindrance to her ideals and independence. In fact the association of her son with submission and resignation makes her often secretly hostile towards him, and so she refuses to take the child for walks or spend time with him. Moreover, the self-imposed captivity

Alma agreed to at the beginning of her marriage, since the birth of her son oppresses her, and she suffers on many occasions from utter boredom and gloom:

With a wave of her hand, Alma passed to sitting-room, where she stood by the window, watching till Mrs. Frothingham's [her stepmother's] sunshade had disappeared. Then she moved about, like one of search of occupation; taking up a book only to throw it down again, gazing vacantly at a picture, or giving a touch to a bowl of flowers (*W*, pt. I, ch. 12)

She also suffers from the 'external' change which occurred to her body after the first childbirth, and now, when she anticipates the second pregnancy, she often examines herself in the mirror, only to become more disconsolate:

She stood before the mirror, and looked at herself, blankly, gloomily. Her eyes fell a little, and took a new expression, that of anxious scrutiny. Gazing still, she raised her arms, much as though she were standing to be measured by the dressmaker; then she turned, so as to obtain a view of her figure sideways. Her arms fell again, apathetically, and she moved away. (*W*, pt. I, ch. 12)

Alma, however, does not give a birth to her second child – she suffers from a miscarriage, due to her irresponsible and mad-like drive in a dogcart she chose to drive herself and alone, despite her lack of any experience in that matter. No doubt she wanted to impress her husband and their visitor, Mrs. Abbott, alike, but the outcome makes her suspiciously happy, as Gissing seems to point out: "He [Harvey] saw, [...] beyond doubt, that the illness seemed to her a blessing; its result, which some women would have wept over, brought joy into her eyes" (*W*, pt. II, ch. 3).

Gissing appeared to complain on many occasions of women's incapability and irresponsibility to take care of their children appropriately, and he saw this as a symptom of generally decaying state of family life and shared responsibilities. It is very likely that such a pessimistic attitude he derived from his own unhappy marriages, and in his diaries he often complained that his second wife, Edith, was the most incompetent mother he had ever seen. In the above excerpt, it is this incompetence that he attacks, but he may also indirectly imply that the miscarriage was self-induced by Alma, a case not so infrequent in Victorian times. After her miscarriage Alma revives but still she turns down her child. Whenever it is possible, she sends her son to her stepmother or nurses (even for so long as several months) and she refuses to teach him when he comes of appropriate age. If she does take care of him, the state of 'dullness' and resignation returns, as it happens after her recital and withdrawal from the society into the countryside, where she tries unsuccessfully to recover from the stress and collapse.

Such open indifference towards her child troubles her husband, who, previously much against children as such, suddenly is faced with no other option but to take care of the child himself. Surprisingly, he manages to do it very well, so that the child feels more affinity with his father rather than mother. It is Harvey who notices gradual development of Hugie, and who not only provides financially for the well-being of child, but also who is greatly concerned with his education, even when, at the age of three, the child should be still under his mother's care. Alma does not change her attitude towards Hughie when she loses her third child, this time a daughter, due to her drug addiction, probably to opium, which was a typical medicament for treating sleeplessness. She is greatly concerned for the child, but the infant is born too weak to survive, and dies after few days.

Nancy Lord, on the other hand, is the opposite of Alma in this stance. Paradoxically, whereas Alma would gladly get rid of the child, Nancy has to hide the fact that she is a mother, and give her son under the supervision of strangers. When she becomes pregnant and reveals that fact to Tarrant, this time it is the husband who cannot cope with the responsibility of fatherhood. The revelation makes Tarrant almost angry with Nancy and himself – he feels that by this marriage “he [has] made a fool of himself” and that it introduces “complication oppressive to his indolence, to his hodiernal philosophy [...]” (*YJ*, pt. III, ch. 6):

Tarrant thought not of the peril to her material prospects; on that score he was indifferent [...] But he feared for his liberty, in the first place, and in the second, abhorred the change that must come over Nancy herself. Nancy a mother – he repelled the image, as though it degraded her.” (*YJ*, pt. III, ch. 6)

And indeed, Tarrant feels so repelled, that he decides to warehouse his furniture, let his lodgings and depart for the Bahamas, where, as he explains to Nancy, he may make a fortune, but this seems unconvincing even to himself. Shaking off responsibility and inability to cope with life difficulties seem to be inherent in his character, likewise his indolence. Scared with the prospect of fathering a child, “a threat to his liberty”, he loses his self-possession and obstinately refuses to change his prospects for the future. In other words, as a a man – ‘hero’ he fails to stand up to the challenge, because even if initially he offers to make their marriage public, he is sure that Nancy will not agree to this, to which she does not. Moreover, when she realises that no pleading will make him stay, she is strong enough to take it as a matter of fact:

‘It’s a very pleasant surprise,’ he continued, watching her as she threw off her out-door things. ‘I expected a doleful visage, eyes red with weeping.’
‘Did you? See how much a man thinks of himself! If you choose to go away, I choose to think of you as little as possible. That’s common sense – isn’t it?’

'I don't want you to cry about it.'

'Oh yes, you do. It flatters you, and you like flattery. But I've been too obliging. I feel myself again, and there's no more flattery for you – till you come back. I don't ask you when this will be. I ask you nothing at all. I am independent of you.' (YJ, pt. III, ch 8)

Nancy's refusal to admit defeat and insistence on common-sense and practical view on the matter make Tarrant's behaviour seem childish and cowardly. After his departure and his gradual silence (which is almost literal because he vanishes from the pages of the book) Nancy is practically left to herself. Still, she does not give up but instead she affirms that:

If I have to support myself and the child, I shall do it. How, I don't know; but other women find a way, and I should. If he deserts me, I am not such a poor creature as to grieve on that account; I should despise him too much even to hate him. (YJ, pt. IV, ch. 6)

Eventually she finds employment in a millinery shop, although it means for her degradation. Nonetheless, Nancy for the first time finds her independence, which gives her self-esteem and pride. When she says: "What a blessed thing it is for a woman to have money of her own! It's because most women haven't, that they're such poor, wretched slaves," (YJ, pt. IV, ch. 7) she mouths exactly what the New Women feminists recognized and demanded.

It is interesting that at this point Gissing makes Tarrant reappear in the story, when after more than a year of his absence, he 'invades' Nancy's private space she designed for herself so laboriously. At first Nancy is very determined to keep aloof and to go on with her life as it was, but when Tarrant finds out about her 'shop-girl' post, he is determined to 'liberate' her from disgrace and announce publicly that he is her husband and a father of her child, whether she likes it or not: "It's not too late, happily, to drag you out of this wretched slough into which you are sinking. Whatever the cost, *that* shall be done!" (YJ, pt. V, ch. 8). In other words, Nancy's independence is transformed into economic but also emotional dependence once again: after the public announcement of her being married she loses not only her inheritance but her house as well, and has to move to cheaper lodgings for which Tarrant may pay. Gradually, he makes her surrender herself solely to motherhood and himself, and he achieves that preying on her love for him, which despite her assertions to the contrary, she retained. She is thrust into the domestic role of 'angel in the house', who waits on her husband and 'receives' him, like a mistress, once in two weeks. Tarrant uses his influence over Nancy as a means of appropriation – he refuses to cohabit with her on the assumption that this would go against his semi-bachelor life and render his journalistic work impossible:

However self-willed I am, I am not selfish; and to see you living a monotonous, imprisoned life would be a serious hindrance to me in my own living and working. Of course the fact is so at present, and I often enough think in a troubled way about you; but you are out of my sight, and that enables me to keep you out of mind. If I am away from home till one or two in the morning, there is no lonely wife fretting and wondering about me. For work such as mine, I must live as though I were not married at all. (*YJ*, pt. VI, ch. 3)

And so he does. His regular, but scarce visits to Nancy, leave her in an unenviable position, but which was a common situation of married women, especially of middle-classes, and although she acquiesces to his views, "the monotony of her own days lay heavy upon her while he [Tarrant] talked" about his visits to the theatres and dinner-parties (*YJ*, pt. VI, ch. 3).

However dissatisfied with such condition Nancy may be, her behaviour eventually is rectified, appropriated to conventional womanly way of life and for this reason she is absolved from her 'independence' yearnings. Alma's life is an example of the contrary – unable to conform to traditional role of a wife and a mother, she succumbs to a drug addiction and eventually dies. It is also noticeable that her collapse after the recital becomes a turning point in her marriage: till then Harvey was unable and unwilling to take control of the marital concerns, perhaps because of the strength and will-power of Alma. When she collapses however, he may gradually usurp and exercise his power as a man and a husband. From that moment on he becomes uncompromising and deaf to Alma's pleadings which leads to further estrangement between the couple. Christina Sjöholm in her case study of marriages in George Gissing's fiction puts forward an idea that the names Gissing used were often telling, and so Harvey's surname 'Rolfe' resembles that of 'Wolfe', as he proves to be a "wolf in sheep's clothing" (129). Likewise the full name of Nancy's husband: Lionel Tarrant reminds of 'lion' and 'tyrant', which he in fact is.

The relationship between wives and husbands in *In the Year of Jubilee* and in *The Whirlpool* is very significant in George Gissing's novels. If Gissing was troubled by the behaviour of "the wives in revolt" then he equally had to question the male authority of husbands. For the most part of the novels, it is Alma and Nancy who take control of their lives, who are self-willed, dominant and active, thus they trespass into the typically male dominium. Both of them are also creative and productive. By contrast their husbands, Harvey and Lionel, are withdrawn. Harvey is passive, indifferent and non-active for the most part of the novel. In fact he acts only when he is forced to, and as a response to Alma's behaviour, and only when situation aggravates to such an extent that inaction would lead to a catastrophe. Bookish and reserved by nature, he cannot comprehend Alma's need for fame and recognition. Although initially he agrees to her career

plans because of their professed mutual independence within marriage, at heart he despises the whole affair. He has neither faith nor respect for his wife's potential, which he manifests by his complete indifference to what his wife does, even when he could and should instruct her or at least give her his counsel. Instead he withdraws and subjects to Alma's wishes but without his approval. The lack of response makes Alma pursue her goal even more fervently, as she tries to prove she is worth of him, but since her attempts are ineffective, she conceives the idea that "[h]e had no faith in her as artist; he had no faith in her as a woman" (*W*, pt. II, ch. 8). Paradoxically it leads to yet another conclusion of Alma:

Alma was at heart dissatisfied with the liberty, the independence, which her husband seemed so willing to allow her. This, again, helped to confirm the impression that Harvey held her in small esteem. He did not think it worth while to oppose her; she might go her frivolous way, and he would watch with careless amusement. At moments, it was true, he appeared on the point of ill-humour; once or twice she had thought (perhaps had hoped) that he could lay down the law in masculine fashion; but no – he laughed, and it was over. (*W*, pt. II, ch. 8)

Declan Kiberd in his book *Men and Feminism in Modern Literature* explains such yearning may be due to "a paradox whereby the woman who insists most forcefully on independence often secretly despises the man who concedes it" (25) not only because it might mean that he is not really interested in her, but because he seems unmanly. And in fact Harvey questions himself, on more than one occasion, about his manliness, or rather possible lack of it. His attempt to regain the husband's power in order to restore his marriage ends up in further estrangement between the couple, as it reveals that 'independence' – the lying foundation of his and Alma union was perceived by him as "an experiment", which has now come to an end (*W*, pt. III, ch. 3). Such a treatment of once their common ideals, allows Harvey to appropriate his wife's conduct in an instant and restore the traditional gendered division within marriage, placing himself in a favourable position. But at the same time it reveals the false pretences on which he contracted his marriage, and the realisation of this fact leaves Alma in an even more deplorable situation than just her ill-state because she agreed to this marriage exactly on the 'equality and independence' basis. The scene in which they discuss over the matter is perhaps the most dramatic turning point in Alma's life:

'I don't enjoy that prospect [of their housekeeper Ruth leaving them], and I shall want a good deal of help from you in bearing the discomfort.'

'What kind of help? Of course, I shall see that the house goes on as usual.'

'Then it's quite certain you will have no time left for a "professional career".'

'If I understand you, you don't wish me to have any time for it.'

Harvey still smiled, though he could not conceal his nervousness.

'I'm afraid it comes to that.'

So little had Alma expected such a declaration that she gazed at him in frank surprise.

'Then you are going to oppose me in everything?'

'I hope not. In that case we should do much better to say goodbye.' [...]

'Please let us understand each other.' She spoke with demonstrative calmness. 'Are we talking on equal terms, or is it master and servant?'

'Husband and wife, Alma, that's all.'

'With a new meaning in the words.'

'No, a very old one [...]' (*W*, pt. II, ch. 3)

The two last utterances are crucial here, as they describe a clash of notions of husband and wife in the way Alma and Harvey conceived them. After such an open confrontation Alma is left disillusioned, as she knows she lost her independence once and for all, inasmuch Harvey might pretend this is not so: he will not oppose her as long as she conforms to typical wifely condition. In other words he designs her personal space by means of appropriation and imposing his male authority: he abruptly proclaims the marital experiment to be finished, and thus goes from one extreme to another, hoping that this is the best remedy for their marital problems. Alma realises that she will have to succumb to that. She tries, in a last attempt, to save her dignity by shouting out "I am no slave! I shall live where and how I choose" (*W*, pt II, ch. 3) and proposing separation as yet another solution, but, predictably, Harvey even does not want to hear about it. Thus, he leaves Alma in pretty much the same position as Lionel leaves Nancy, when he announces that, whether she likes it or not, their marriage will be made public and yes, she may lose her possessions, but at least she will be saved from disgrace of working in a shop and writing novels that "will never be literature".

Towards the end of the novels, both Alma and Nancy find themselves in a similar position – they are forced to accept their subjection, and sacrifice their hard-won independence to the tradition and custom. None of their position is enviable: Nancy has to assume the role of half-wife half-mistress visited by her husband once in a fortnight, even though she would like to conform to traditional marriage and cohabitation. Paradoxically, she is refused that by Lionel, who guards his independence and freedom of movement regardless of the fact that he hurts her feelings and self-esteem. Alma, on the contrary, finally is refused the very freedom and career she craved for and of which she was ensured, and her unwilling subjection results in dullness and gradual apathy, opium-eating and premature death. Yet, perhaps by contrast to their husbands, it is Alma and Nancy who emerge as more powerful and fully developed characters who defy conventional attitudes towards marriage, motherhood and womanhood, even if they fail to match the role model of fully emancipated women, as some

feminist scholars claim. But what is more important, such female characters paved the way for a new bulk of independent, self-willed women who started to appear more and more frequently in fiction, and whose position in literary canon also began to evolve. As Charlotte Perkins Gilman in her *Women and Economics* (1898) observed:

in the fiction of today women are continually taking larger place in the action of the story. They are given personal characteristics beyond those of physical beauty. And they are no longer content simply to be: they do. They are showing qualities of bravery, endurance, strength, foresight, and power for the swift execution of well-conceived plans. They have ideas and purposes of their own; and even when, as in so many cases described by the more reactionary novelists, the efforts of the heroine are shown entirely futile, and she comes back with a rush to the self-effacement of marriage with economic dependence, still the efforts were there. (qtd. in Richardson, 1)

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