

## SINGLE WOMEN IN TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY LONDON: EMANCIPATION AND ROMANCE IN *ANN VERONICA*<sup>1</sup>

Maria Teresa Chialant

The topic of the present article has been prompted by the query raised by the conference organized by The H. G. Wells Society in September 2009, ‘*Ann Veronica: Feminist, Flâneuse and Freethinker?*’, which seems to question, in its very title, the uncertain status of the protagonist of this novel. *Ann Veronica* is probably both a feminist, a *flâneuse* and a freethinker, but not without contradictions – which probably was the only way, for the author, to make a credible character of her. My intention here is to discuss to what extent she can be considered a New Woman.

The *fin de siècle* was a crucial period of English history which witnessed radical changes for women in many spheres of society, heralding the pursuit of equal opportunities in education, work and standards of sexual behaviour. *Ann Veronica* – published in 1909 – is a good example of the way in which these issues were dealt with in narratives whose plots unfold around a young woman’s progress in turn-of-the-century London. The eponymous character of Wells’s novel is one of the intelligent, lively and determined heroines who inhabit English fiction in those years.

*Ann Veronica* Stanley is introduced in the first chapter as an attractive and gifted ‘young lady of nearly two-and-twenty,’ ‘vehemently impatient [...] to experience,’ curious, restless and intellectually independent, who rebels against the patriarchal system on different fronts: she chooses to leave her father’s home in the London suburbs and live by herself in the metropolis to pursue a career as a biologist; she gets involved with the Suffragette movement and is arrested after a raid on Parliament in 1908; she proposes to the divorced man she has fallen in love with (Mr. Capes, her teacher) and persuades him to run off with her to the Continent. But, after having started as an active and radical supporter of women’s ‘Cause’ and of sexual liberation, she ends up with marriage, children, a bourgeois home and her father’s final forgiveness. In spite of these apparent contradictions, though, *Ann Veronica* fully embodies the New Woman’s struggle for emancipation.

One of the most innovative traits in the characterisation of the heroine is her determination to become a scientist – an unusual choice for a woman at the time. This is how her interest in this field of knowledge gradually reveals itself to her:

---

<sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of a paper presented at the International Conference of the H. G. Wells Society, *H. G. Wells: From Kent to Cosmopolis* (University of Kent, Canterbury, 9-11 July 2010).

She was a clever girl, the best of her year in the high school [...]. Shamefaced curiosities began to come back into her mind, thinly disguised as literature and art. She read voraciously [...]. She passed her general science examination with

double honours and specialized in science. She happened to have an acute sense of form and unusual mental lucidity, and she found in biology, and particularly in comparative anatomy, a very considerable interest, albeit the illumination it cast upon her personal life was not altogether direct. [...] She discovered a desire to enter as a student in the Imperial College at Westminster, where Russell taught, and go on with her work at the fountain head.<sup>2</sup>

Notwithstanding the seriousness of her goals, Ann Veronica's first gesture of independence is to challenge her father's refusal to allow her to join her friends in a dance soirée, which requires wearing a fancy dress and spending the night in a London hotel. Mr. Stanley's refusal provokes a crisis in Ann Veronica's life. The narrator underlines the relevance of this incident in terms of plot, and defines the novel as 'the history of this crisis and its consequences' (*AV*, 1). From this episode the narrative unfolds, weaving together the threads of the story introduced in the first pages of the text: Ann Veronica's reaction to her father will take her from the quiet suburb of Morningside Park to an adventurous life in London, while her association with the Widgetts, 'a certain family of alien sympathies and artistic quality,' will imply her involvement in the suffrage movement. Here, the irony of the narrator's voice becomes very audible, as in the description of Mr. Widgett – 'a journalist and art critic, addicted to a greenish-grey tweed suit and "art" brown ties' – and of his daughters, who 'went on from the high school to the Fadden Art School and a bright, eventful life of art student dances, Socialist meetings, theatre galleries, talking about work, and even, at intervals, work' (*AV*, 6).

The general tone of the narrative is light and humorous; the novel is interspersed with a series of witty remarks on both traditionally sexist points of view and feminist and free-thinking positions. Of Ann Veronica's father, an old-fashioned, extremely strict man, with a hobby for microscopic petrography – which provides him with an alibi to isolate himself from his family – we learn that 'His ideas about girls and women were of a sentimental and modest quality: they were creatures, he thought, either too bad for a modern vocabulary, and then frequently most undesirably desirable, or too pure and good for life'. For him 'Women are made like the potter's vessels, either for worship or contumely, and are withal fragile vessels' (*AV*, 9). Therefore, he worries about 'his little Vee [...] going about with hatless friends to Socialist meetings and art-class dances, and displaying a disposition to carry her scientific ambitions to unwomanly lengths' (*AV*, 11). On the opposite ideological side, an easy target of the narrator's irony is the group of suffragettes and other bohemian types (which include Tolstoyans and Fabians)

---

<sup>2</sup> H. G. Wells, *Ann Veronica* (London: Virago, 1984), 5; hereafter *AV*.

with whom Ann Veronica becomes familiar in her ‘political’ phase. Whenever a suffragette appears in the novel, she is made to look ridiculous; Ann Veronica, who is struggling for a degree of personal and sexual freedom, is disappointed by them, ‘by their narrowness, prejudice and sexual orthodoxy’.<sup>3</sup>

Actually, Ann Veronica’s progress as an emancipated woman shows her moving from a phase of total involvement with politics to one of sudden reaction against it. While kept in Canongate Prison, she says: “‘The real reason why I am out of place here is because I like men. I can talk with them. I’ve never found them hostile: I’ve got no feminine class feeling. I don’t want any laws or freedoms to protect me from a man like Mr. Capes. I know that in my heart I would take whatever he gave...’” (*AV*, 206-7).

The paradox with Ann Veronica is that her unconventional behaviour in sexual matters is no guarantee of an emancipated attitude in her relationships with the other sex. Towards the end of the novel, when she and her lover are on a sort of honeymoon in the Swiss mountains, she declares her love to Capes with the following words:

‘I wonder [...] why I love you – and love you so much? ...I know now what it is to be an abandoned female. I *am* an abandoned female. I’m not ashamed – of the things I’m doing. I want to put myself into your hands. You know I wish I could roll my little body up small and squeeze it into your hand and grip your fingers upon it. Tight. I want you to hold me and have me *so*. ... Everything. Everything. It’s a pure joy of giving – giving to *you*. I have never spoken of these things to any human being. Just dreamt – and ran away even from my dreams. It is as if my lips had been sealed about them. And now I break the seals – for you.’ (*AV*, 274)

These expressions of utter adoration for her lover surprise Capes, who is perplexed by ‘her capacity for blind obedience,’ to the point that he asks her to be a ‘free woman – and equal’ (*AV*, 278), but the girl explains her previous rebelliousness, ‘those nameless discontents,’ just as ‘love’s birth-pangs’ (*AV*, 285).

Ann Veronica’s story of emancipation and romance shares some features with two earlier novels: Ella Hepworth Dixon’s *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894), which belongs to the so called ‘New Woman Fiction’ genre, and George Gissing’s *Eve’s Ransom* (1895), a minor text within this author’s *oeuvre* which has recently

---

<sup>3</sup> Patricia Stubbs, *Women and Fiction: Feminism and the Novel 1880-1920* (London: Methuen, 1979), 187. Stubbs speaks, here, of Wells’s ambiguity towards feminism, and particularly of his attitude to the WSPU and the suffragettes: ‘He supported the demand for the vote, but [...] he had no patience with the limited perspectives of Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst and their movement’ (186). She finds evidence of this claim both in Wells’s *Experiment in Autobiography* and in *Ann Veronica*, with the caricature of the suffragettes as ‘sexless, doctrinaire zealots’ and the merciless treatment of Miss Miniver (187). See also Emma V. Miller, ‘Re-reading H. G. Wells’s Social Agenda in *Ann Veronica* through A. S. Byatt’s *The Children’s Book*: Male Fantasy or Feminist Revolutionary?’, *Wellsian*, 33 (2010), 72-85.

undergone a well-deserved reappraisal. Mary and Eve, the respective protagonists of these late-Victorian novels, both pursue economic independence, in spite of their different social origins: the former belongs to the intellectual London bourgeoisie, the latter to a lower-middle class Midlands family.

Mary Erle is the daughter of a scientist, a widower, with whose death the novel opens. This proves to be an effective narrative device: being an orphan, the girl has to provide for her own living, and become independent. At this point, Hepworth Dixon introduces two professions in which her heroine puts herself to the test, painting and writing, which offer the author the opportunity ‘to place her in a variety of critically-observed settings, each illustrating a facet of the fashionable London world and its self-important inhabitants,’ but also to underline the difficulties a woman has to meet in competing with men.<sup>4</sup> Mary gives up her plans to become a painter after failing her entrance examination to the British School of Art, and attempts a career in journalism; so, she ventures into Grub Street, only to find that there are no chances for her but to produce hack-work for second-rate magazines. She receives her first job at a weekly publication called *Illustrations*, for which she is required to write stories that other young ladies would be pleased to read: romantic fiction to fit the magazine drawings. Her next job also requires writing, but this time for a journal called *The Fan*, whose editor is even less demanding than the previous one, as he only expects Mary to write articles with ‘little bits of gossip’ that the other ladies’ papers ‘can’t possibly get hold of’ (115). Mary’s frustrations concern her sentimental life as well. Vincent Hemming, the man she loves, marries a woman who promises to facilitate his career in Parliament, and asks Mary to become his mistress; she refuses, not as an act of moral self-assertion but out of female solidarity to his wife and daughter: “‘All we modern women mean to help each other now. [...] If women only used their power in the right way! If we were only united we could lead the world. But we’re not – we’re not,’” she said, closing her eyes with a tired gesture’ (255, 213). Mary chooses, in the end, to join the ranks of ‘the odd women’.

If Hepworth Dixon’s novel is the story of a brave young woman, Gissing’s might be read, at a superficial level, as the story of an opportunist. Eve Madeley comes from a large family of modest background living in Dudley, the industrial town near Birmingham. Here she gets an education, works as a teacher in the local school, and then becomes a book-keeper in an ironmonger’s shop. In her early twenties, Eve leaves her native town for London, in search of a new job and freedom from a depressing life in a narrow, suffocating environment. Once in the great city, she remains entangled with a man who turns out to be married; then she meets Maurice Hilliard, who helps her break the ‘dangerous’ liaison by lending her some money, a gesture that proves to be an obstacle to the growth of their

---

<sup>4</sup> Kate Flint, ‘Introduction’ to Ellen Hepworth Dixon, *The Story of a Modern Woman* (London: Merlin Press, 1990), iii-xvi (vi). All further references to this book are contained parenthetically within the text.

relationship, as it introduces an element of ambiguity between them. In fact, the ‘ransom’ mentioned in the title implies, for the protagonist, submission to Hilliard out of gratitude; so, he saves Eve but also enslaves her and, in the end, loses her. According to Rachel Bowlby, Eve is entrapped in her involvements with men, which deprive her of the self-sufficiency identified with the possession of money: ‘She is caught in a double bind with Hilliard and enters into his ideological universe consisting of relations of bondage and mastery [...]. Eve is indeed the site of an anomaly, or, in Hilliard’s terms, a “problem”.’<sup>5</sup> Hilliard’s plan, in fact, is ‘to mould Eve, to teach and educate her according to his example. His aim is to bring her as close as possible to the image in the photograph as he has seen it, with its ‘ever-increasing suggestiveness of those qualities he desired in woman’.<sup>6</sup> In the end, Eve rejects him and marries instead Robert Narramore, who is less educated but much richer than Maurice Hilliard.<sup>7</sup> Although the narrative device of a marriage of convenience (as it appears to be) might change her role from a New Woman to a conventional heroine, Eve’s choice is, indeed, much more complex than that. Her seeming lack of emotional involvement with the man she marries probably conceals a need to preserve a sort of inner freedom which her ambivalent relationship with Hilliard would not have allowed her to; apparently, only breaking free from her submission to Hilliard she can be in charge of her own destiny. So, with a female character torn between the fear of poverty and the aspiration to an independent life, *Eve’s Ransom* presents itself as a convincing example of the interconnections between class and gender, and of the contradictions a woman has to face in the modern world.

The three novels under discussion differ from one another in the emphasis each of them puts on particular aspects connected to the issue of women’s emancipation at the *fin de siècle*: the pursuit of financial independence and female solidarity in *The Story of a Modern Woman*, the conflicts between agency and subjection in *Eve’s Ransom*, and the desire for sexual liberation in *Ann Veronica*. Some crucial features that define the figure of the New Woman emerge from the characterisation of the three protagonists: intellectual and artistic aspirations (as in the case of Mary, who becomes a journalist after having tried to be a painter, and Ann Veronica, who attempts a career as a biologist); the need for distance from paternal

---

<sup>5</sup> Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola* (New York and London: Methuen, 1985), 49, 50.

<sup>6</sup> Patrick Parrinder, ‘Gissing’s Eve: Fair Lady or Ungentle Reader?’, in *Eve’s Ransom: George Gissing e le sfide del romanzo tardo-vittoriano*, ed. Maria Teresa Chialant (Rome: Aracne, 2010), 51-65 (53).

<sup>7</sup> See this dialogue between Eve and Hilliard before she marries Narramore: ““Your love happens to fall upon a man who has solid possessions.” “It’s easy to speak so scornfully. I have not pretended to love the man you mean.” “Yet you have brought him to think that you are willing to marry him.” “Without any word of love from me. If I had been free I would have married him – just because I am sick of the life I lead, and long for the life he offered me.” George Gissing, *Eve’s Ransom* (New York: Dover, 1980), 116-7.

influence and interference (both Eve and Ann Veronica leave home and start a life of their own); the choice of singleness and the possibility of solitude as a proof of women's capacity to achieve self-fulfilment (as witnessed by Mary's story); the challenges of the metropolis and its impact on personal life (particularly in the case of Eve, a Black Country girl); the involvement in the social and political struggle for women's suffrage (specifically in Wells's novel).

Although the rejection of patriarchal codes shared by the three heroines is articulated by different strategies in terms of gender politics and narrative solutions, one common feature to these novels is London, which is both their geographical and cultural setting. The city provides the backdrop against which the characters' lives unfold, and supplies nourishment for their intellectual aspirations: the Central London School of Art in Hepworth Dixon's novel, Mudie's Circulating Library in Gissing's, Imperial College in Wells's, together with such leisure haunts as shops, theatres and museums.

Mary, Eve and Ann Veronica embody a new category of women who, through new activities, functions and social roles, transform, in Sally Ledger's words, 'the modern city at the *fin de siècle* into a contested socio-cultural terrain, radically challenging the traditional masculine gendering of modernity'.<sup>8</sup> Finding themselves associated with the freedom of the street and of other public spaces from which (respectable) women had been up to then excluded, these characters experience the new situation with a sense of elation, but one that is not without its problems and contradictions.

Mary, too much oppressed by the difficulties of her life, does not seem to take much pleasure in the city as a modern woman is expected to; on the contrary, Eve and Ann Veronica do love London.<sup>9</sup> The former, who has chosen to move there from the province, avails herself freely of the opportunities it offers: she eats out unchaperoned, goes to places of public entertainment, and becomes a regular subscriber of Mudie's Circulating Library – an institution which, by the way, is mentioned also in Wells's novel (*AV*, 105). Ann Veronica, who has left her father's home in Morningside Park to live on her own, discovers the metropolis with the neophyte's enthusiasm: 'And this great mellow place, this London, now was hers, to struggle with, to go where she pleased in, to overcome and live in. "I'm glad," she told herself, "I came"' (*AV*, 78). We see her loitering about, 'not going anywhere in particular; for the first time in her life it seemed to her she was taking

---

<sup>8</sup> Sally Ledger, 'Gissing, the Shopgirl and the New Woman', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 6 (1995), 256-74 (267).

<sup>9</sup> In *The Story of a Modern Woman*, London appears very little, as in some descriptions of the urban landscape, either to introduce the Central London School of Art, located 'in a dreary by-street near Portland Road' (62), or at the end of the novel, when Mary goes to visit her father's grave in the Highgate Cemetery, and admires the metropolis from afar: 'It was London that lay stretched out at her feet; majestic, awe-inspiring, inexorable, triumphant London.' But, in spite of the beauty and poetry of nature around her, she feels lonely and unhappy: 'In all this gaiety of a new-born world only she was to have no part' (271).

London in ' (AV, 79). And, in spite of a few episodes of mild street-harassment, she thoroughly enjoys the city.<sup>10</sup>

So, both Eve and Ann Veronica can be defined as *flâneuses*, female urban observers who, to quote Deborah Parsons, 'can be found in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when women were achieving greater liberation as walkers and observers in the public spaces of the city'.<sup>11</sup>

From the comparison between Hepworth Dixon's, Gissing's and Wells's heroines, one could conclude that while Mary is the only one to behave in a consistent way in terms of gender politics, and Eve possesses an inscrutable, intriguing personality – a mystery till the very last – Ann Veronica is the most attractively drawn as a character, owing to her free spirit and rebellious temperament – but her choices pose a series of questions.

One wonders why, after having left home to pursue her education, she abandons her ambitions when she becomes involved with Capes; or why, after her initial enthusiasm for the suffrage movement, she abruptly gives it up, having decided that it was not political rights she was after, but Capes.<sup>12</sup> In short, she seems unable to reconcile her intellectual interests and aspirations with her erotic desires and expectations. Her behaviour seems inconsistent with her feminist convictions except in the choice of practising free love, and even her final reconciliation with her father sounds like a surrender to traditional values. Her ambivalence towards feminism is probably a projection of H. G. Wells's own ambiguity on this issue; so, in spite of her determinate, rebellious personality, Ann Veronica is split between, on the one hand, her curiosity for new ideas and her impatience 'to experience,' and, on the other, her need for a solid, protective male figure which her father is unable to offer, and which Capes, instead, represents.

The novel caused a scandal when it appeared.<sup>13</sup> After all, when H. G. Wells wrote it, it was still a period in which the legal bond between husband and wife guaranteed the unity of society; the establishment's desire to defend marriage as an

---

<sup>10</sup> The city shows also its dangerous face to the unprotected girl walking around by herself in the twilight; when Ann Veronica risks being molested by a middle-aged gentleman, all the glory of London departs: 'Against the sinister, the threatening, monstrous inhumanity of the limitless city, there was nothing now but this supreme, ugly fact of a pursuit – the pursuit of the undesired, persistent male' (AV, 83)

<sup>11</sup> Deborah Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 6. Eve is a real *flâneuse* on account of the genuine pleasure she feels in discovering London and enjoying the freedom its public spaces offer to her. In Ann Veronica's case, London is mainly the place where she pursues her sexual liberation.

<sup>12</sup> Cliona Murphy, 'H. G. Wells: Educationalist, Utopian, and Feminist?', in *H. G. Wells under Revision: Proceedings of the International H. G. Wells Symposium, London, July 1986*, ed. Patrick Parrinder and Christopher Rolfe (London: Associated University Presses, 1990), 218-25 (223).

<sup>13</sup> It was banned from the libraries, and Wells's publisher Frederick Macmillan refused to handle it; it was attacked by the press and even called by *The Spectator* 'this poisonous book' (Stubbs, 184). Fortunately, the emerging publisher T. Fisher Unwin chose to publish it.

institution was underpinned by a belief that, “without conventional marriage and domestic arrangements, the social fabric upon which Victorian society was based would begin to crumble”.<sup>14</sup> Wells boasted of the pioneering function of his novel, and wrote in his autobiography: ‘After Ann Veronica, things were never quite the same again in the world of popular English fiction; young heroines with a temperamental zest for illicit love-making and no sense of an inevitable Nemesis, increased and multiplied not only in novels but in real life.’<sup>15</sup>

In conclusion, notwithstanding her undecided behaviour, the protagonist is a truly emancipated woman. Patricia Stubbs has argued that, although the conventional happy ending is unconvincing, ‘the point [...] is that Ann Veronica is not punished. She has claimed the right to love how and where she wants.’<sup>16</sup> And this was, for the times, a little revolution in itself. It has been rightly noticed that while other ‘fallen women’ in Gaskell’s and Hardy’s novels (and one could add Dickens’s and George Eliot’s) were punished for their transgressions by death, this heroine survives and thrives – but, of course, with her we are at the beginning of the new century.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 12.

<sup>15</sup> H. G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography: Discoveries and Conclusions of a Very Ordinary Brain (since 1886)*, 2 vols (London: Gollancz, 1934), vol. 2, 470.

<sup>16</sup> Stubbs, 184.

<sup>17</sup> Emelyne Godfrey, ‘Uses for a Hatpin: Self-Defence for Women as Pioneered in the Fiction of H. G. Wells’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 5 February 2010, 14.