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A 'Wet Blanket of Intolerable Routine and Deadly Domesticity': The Feelings, Freedoms and Frustrations of Hilda Lessways, Arnold Bennett's 'Ordinary' New Woman

by Sharon Crozier-De Rosa

Introduction

In a 1911 *New York Times* review of the second book in Arnold Bennett's *Clayhanger* trilogy¹, *Hilda Lessways*, the reviewer asserted that, as with the entire novel, 'The attitude of always expecting something tremendous, of being on the eve of ultimate adventure, is the perpetual state of mind of Hilda herself.' Bennett's job, as the reviewer saw it, was to reveal this 'young person' to his readers. And this he argues Bennett did well for, he adds, 'here is the girl, her inmost personality, so far as she can see it herself and so far as Mr. Bennett can see it for her, laid bare and thrust naked under the microscope for the curious reader to watch the quivering and the writhings of it.'² The task of keeping Hilda Lessways in a perpetual state of expectation is achieved, in the reviewer's words again, by 'casting over' her, to keep her 'smouldering', 'a wet blanket of intolerable routine and deadly domesticity.'³

Set in the 1880s and 1890s but written and published in the 1910s, *Hilda Lessways* details the coming of age of a young woman. Hilda Lessways is Arnold Bennett's New Woman. She is a young woman suffocating within the narrow confines of suburban life in the English midlands at the end of the Victorian period. Motivated by the desire to experience a life different from that typically allowed to women of her time and class, Hilda learns shorthand and finds employment in a provincial newspaper office. However, a series of events, over which she has varying degrees of control, end her unusual experiences. Tragically swamped by a dreary and tedious domesticity, Hilda concludes the novel, not as a New Woman separated from her female contemporaries by the breadth of her everyday experience, but rather as a single mother battling to perform the much loathed, but socially acceptable, task of managing a small boarding house in order to keep herself and her son financially afloat. Instead of achieving her desire of escaping the mundane, suffocating confines of female domesticity, Hilda finds herself seeped in it, and this situation is made all the more unbearable by the fact that it is inescapable due to financial necessity.

Hilda Lessways is one further addition to the menagerie of voices that makes up the New Woman of turn-of-the-century Britain, and she further disproves any notion that New Women were a homogenous group. Instead, she supports the much more likely assertion that women

who fitted under this banner were personally diverse but linked by a common thread of frustration with the current role of women and an eagerness to usher in new opportunities. However, Hilda arrives relatively late on the New Woman scene, in the second decade of the twentieth century. Bennett's heroine does not directly accompany the 1890s New Woman, the notorious figure who signified marked social, economic and political changes with profound consequences for the place of women. Subsequently, Hilda does not assume the mantle of the radical 1890s New Woman fighting to live according to the principles of 'free love,' to enter the political arena, or to campaign for the broader rights of women. Rather, she dons the much more modest cloak of the everyday woman struggling to make something of a life outside the suffocating confines of Victorian gender idealism.

Still, Bennett's Hilda reveals much about the attitudes and expectations of early twentieth-century audiences regarding the place of women in turn-of-the-century society. The historical validity or value of Bennett's insights into their interior lives rests with his experience editing the magazine, *Woman*, and the 'new women' he came into contact with there. ⁴ The historical validity or value of his insights into the attitudes of a substantial portion of the general reading public of the time, as revealed through this novel, rest on two main aspects of his writing; namely, his loyalty to the conventions of social and emotional realism and the ongoing level of popularity that he achieved among his contemporaries. Doubtless his popularity (and that of *Hilda Lessways* and the rest of the *Clayhanger* series)⁵ reflected his readership's continuing expectations of this brand of realism. Bennett's portrayal of the desires and frustrations of an 'ordinary' new woman, and of the physical and emotional obstacles placed in her path, merged with his unassailable reputation as a popular middlebrow novelist dealing in the more mundane 'realities' of late Victorian and Edwardian lives (Virginia Woolf famously referred to these as his 'shopkeeper's' view of literature) ⁶.

What does Bennett's popular novel reveal about the early twentieth-century, largely middle-class reading public's expectations of New Women, particularly as these expectations concerned domesticity, employment and feminine idealism, then? ⁷ In the first place, the popularity of this novel confirms that writing about a young woman's inner struggles with societal conventions as they concerned and restricted female behaviour continued to be relevant to the interests of this early twentieth-century audience – relevant to the social and moral climate of the early twentieth century, despite the passing of the great decade of the New Woman novel. The timing of this novel's publication, and the direction that the story takes, also point the historian towards the fact that the general reading public were aware and had accepted that by the 1910s changes had taken place that had tangible effects on the lives of middle-class females. But the ultimate conclusions about Hilda's and other middle-class women's experiences reached during the course of the narrative, the eventual reinstating of traditional gender norms or what the *New York Times* reviewer termed the imposition of a 'wet blanket' of domesticity, ultimately demonstrates that this audience expected that the unusual experiences of the New Woman or 'new woman' would be short-lived: changes may have occurred in the Edwardian world of education and employment, but this did not necessarily imply that these had any long-term effects on middle-class moral and idealistic expectations of women (women's expectations of themselves included). On the contrary,

Bennett's popular fiction illustrates the presence of a growing chasm between the widening arena of acceptable female behaviour and the stagnant realm of traditional moral expectations.

The New Woman and Societal shifts: 1890s and 1910s

The New Woman was, and still is, commonly used to signify the extent of the marked social, moral and economic shifts that turn-of-the-century society experienced regarding middle-class notions of femininity – shifts, both in attitude and in actuality, that had widespread repercussions for individuals, nation and empire. Throughout nineteenth-century England women had been striving for greater emancipation for their sex. What made the 'New Woman' of the 1890s⁸ such a different phenomenon was the nature and the extent of the social change which necessitated and accompanied her emergence, and the fervour of the controversy and discussion resulting from that emergence. Beginning largely as a literary creation, being 'more discussed, debated, newspaper paragraphed, caricatured, howled down and denied, or acknowledged and approved, as the case may be, than any of [the era's 'new' phenomena]', the 'reality' of the New Woman's existence was often debated by contemporaries. ⁹ However, the New Woman, even as she continued to appear in copious novels (ranging from Grant Allen's *The Woman Who Did* [1895], to Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* [1895]), was gradually confirmed as a social 'reality'. Indeed, as one prominent historian in the field has argued, the very fact that someone needed to coin the term New Woman, and that this term caught on so effectively, was the 'result of a growing sense that there were changes in the behaviour, the activities, even the nature of women which needed to be articulated.' ¹⁰

The changes that accompanied the New Woman's emergence were already under way by the 1860s, but they came to a head in the last decade of the nineteenth century. ¹¹ By 1901 a 'surplus' of over one million women was recorded in England and Wales – a figure which included a striking imbalance between the sexes at marriage age. ¹² This imbalance meant that by the latter years of the nineteenth century many women could not marry, whether they wished to or not. The decreased opportunity for marriage, along with increasing opportunities for education (secondary and tertiary) and for various forms of employment prompted a growing number of middle-class women to seek employment and thereby to postpone or even reject the more conventional roles of wife and mother. Changing demand for labour – due, for example, to the expansion of elementary education, or to the technological and consumer changes which made it possible for women to work in offices, using the new office equipment, and in the ever increasing number of more modern shops – meant that middle-class women seeking employment opportunities found newly opened doors, albeit in areas of lowly paid work. ¹³ These are small-scale social changes, but they all contribute to the build-up of a particular image of womanhood in late nineteenth-century Britain that was very different from that of their earlier Victorian counterparts – changes that account at least partly for the emergence of the fin-de-siècle New Woman. ¹⁴

Of course, the New Woman of the 1890s cannot be reduced to only one singular image or set

of characteristics. ¹⁵ As Angelique Richardson and Chris Willis argue, ‘New Women themselves did not always define their goals clearly: their fiction and prose writing reveal contradictions and complexities which resist reductive, monolithic readings.’ ¹⁶ The New Woman is rather a collage of ideas – all with at least one thing in common, the desire for greater female emancipation. ¹⁷ Moreover, although the term may initially have been coined for and applied to a small minority of mainly middle-class women who were perceived as unhappy with the role their society prescribed for them, by the early years of the twentieth century the term New Woman came to mean, more simply, a modern woman who recognised that problems existed and solutions were necessary regarding the emancipation of the female sex in the intellectual, sexual, political, personal, financial, or economic arenas. ¹⁸ The original radical concept of the New Woman hence slowly developed into a more ordinary, everyday concept of political and social awareness. I will mark this difference in the rest of the essay by using the lower-case sister term, ‘new woman.’

Bennett’s ‘new woman’ in the 1910s: Feelings, freedoms and frustrations

So how did Arnold Bennett come to be interested in, and familiar with, the New Woman? Before committing to his writing career on a full-time basis (during which career he assumed an almost unprecedented command of the literary market) ¹⁹, Bennett (1867-1931) ²⁰ worked as a free-lance journalist and then in 1896 assumed the role of chief editor on the weekly journal, *Woman* – a magazine that Peter McDonald describes as ‘a cautiously ‘advanced’ penny weekly whose motto was ‘Forward! But Not Too Fast!’’ ²¹ There, Bennett’s biographer Margaret Drabble claims, he came into contact with working women, those women Drabble refers to as

the single women who were so marked a sociological feature of the time, and whose discontent fed the Suffragette movement: the typists, the secretaries, the failed Ann Veronicas who had broken away from middle-class homes, the overworked shorthand girls who had worked their way up out of the shirt factories. ²²

It was from these women that Bennett derived much material on which to model many of his female protagonists, especially Hilda Lessways. She is Bennett’s chief vehicle for exploring the dreams and frustrations of the ‘ordinary’ new woman, mapping the turmoil of this figure’s interior life. He does not portray her as a conventional Victorian female, nor does he paint her as a stereotypical New Woman; rather, she is a complex mixture of the two in accordance with Bennett’s middle-brow brand of social and emotional realism,.

Hilda’s complex inner nature is in part due to the fact that she is struggling with the tensions between her hopes and ambitions, and the expectations and limitations imposed by the outside world of the English Midlands at the start of the twentieth century. By attempting to find a balm for her disappointment in the predominantly male world of employment, Hilda ultimately experiences the same frustration and displacement that many 1890s New Women felt, which illustrate that the ‘wet blanket’ of domestic expectation was still firmly in place, severely limiting female experience.

As Bennett's novel also demonstrates, however, the complexity of Hilda's character is at least partly due to a more deep-seated interior struggle taking place within this new woman's mind. The product of a transitional society, this 'ordinary' new woman thinking about her place in the wider world mirrors her society's ambiguous attitude towards the changes to middle-class women's roles, especially regarding the tension between the 'traditional' and the 'modern' in a turn-of-the-century environment. Hilda's keen mind is a site of perpetual conflict, contradiction, and negotiation: on the one hand, she has fierce yearnings for individual freedom and independence; and, on the other, she desires to conform to the more traditional ideas of her society. She continually tries to align the visible societal changes with what the seemingly stagnant condition of middle-class idealistic moral expectations, to which she often subscribes. By providing readers with an in-depth insight into the individual thoughts and feelings of this fully realised new woman, Bennett reveals the degree to which a sense of tension coloured the thoughts and experiences of his own era.

Hilda Lessways: '...in the male world but not of it...'

There are many areas of Hilda's life where tensions between old and new, traditional and modern, shackled and free, are played out. While these include love and sex, spirituality and religious belief, education, independence of thought, this paper will focus most on the area of everyday occupation. ²³ Hilda sets up a strict dichotomy between domesticity and paid employment. To her, the former represents much that is wrong, barbaric even, about contemporary women's lives, while the other represents a more civilised way of living to which men are already privy. Contrary to Hilda's reckoning and to the mainstream concept of separate spheres, however, the lines dividing these two realms are not completely rigid or immovable. The tragic irony of *Hilda Lessways* is that by the novel's end Hilda is stuck in the tedious world of domesticity because of financial need. Despite her brief foray into the male world of paid employment, Hilda is presented as having been unsuccessful and unhappy at her job of managing a small boarding house. ²⁴ She had few alternatives, however. Managing a boarding house, straddling the divide between the private domestic environment and the public world of finances and employment, was one of the few acceptable occupations for needy middle-class women in turn-of-the-century society.²⁵

Domesticity

There are many persistent myths and ideals surrounding the Victorian and Edwardian woman's role in the domestic sphere. The more prominent of these concern the notions of the 'idle' or leisurely woman and the inherent purity and therefore physical cleanliness of femininity. Each of these ideals was impossible to achieve in reality. Yet despite widespread recognition of their unworkability, the influence of these ideals on turn-of-the-century society did not necessarily lessen. By the end of the nineteenth century, only women from the upper classes and the upper levels of the middle classes could be said to conform to any conception of an idle or leisurely lady. These upper echelons of society benefited from the increasing amount of wealth to be mined from the growing volume of British financial and commercial

enterprises. 26 Emulating the lives of England's gentry, these families hired increasing numbers of domestic servants. Along with decreasing family sizes, the increasing availability of domestic appliances and pre-packaged goods, together with the reduced amount of time that children tended to spend away from schooling, acted to free these women from much involvement in domestic chores and enabled them to play a more prominent role performing the social and philanthropic duties fitting a woman of the privileged classes. 27

The bulk of women from the middle- and lower classes of turn-of-the-century society led a different life. Women from the working class could not afford to hire servants – many of those being servants themselves, of course. Most of the widely varying occupants of the lower rungs of the middle classes, on the other hand, for the most part could and did hire one domestic servant. The growing notion that femininity was linked to purity and that cleanliness was tied to femininity acted to complicate concerns about women's roles and functions within the domestic realm. Hiring one servant in no way exempted these women from performing domestic chores. 28 Given the reality of households and housecleaning, this middle-class idealism was extremely difficult, if not impossible to maintain in any real sense. Middle-class homes were usually: three-storied; dark (without electricity); filled with elaborate and dusty furnishings (as well as elaborate clothing that required labour-intensive washing and mending); without gas or running water; without modern labour-saving devices such as vacuum cleaners and laundry equipment; and featuring dark and heavy basement kitchens. 29 As Patricia Branca argues,

[r]eality for most middle-class women was that they spent all their days and many evening in scrubbing, dusting, tending fires, for six to ten rooms in a three-to-four story home, in addition to the cooking, shopping, washing and sewing required for a family of seven. While the middle-class woman had assistance in her work, it did not save her from hard physical labour.30

This is a far cry from the pure, almost ethereal image of 'The Angel in the House.' 31 A vast majority of late Victorian and Edwardian middle-class women, therefore, immersed themselves in what Hilda Lessways terms 'the business of domesticity.' 32 However, their reactions to their expected position and role within the home varied. As a popularly read novel immersed in detailing the mundane lives of women within the domestic world, *Hilda Lessways* is one of the few readily available sources that casts light on how a group of women felt about these household duties – a group of women who were not enamoured of their principle occupation and who actively sought out alternatives. Bennett's unique forays into the inner mental landscape of a young, ordinary woman who is keenly and frustratingly aware of her seemingly inescapable position within the mundane domestic realm recommends this text to those studying early twentieth-century reactions to the New Woman.

Hilda's feelings about 'the business of domesticity' are unequivocal. She loathes the common domestic life conventionally expected of women of her class in this era. She loathes the domestic machine and the perfunctory role of women within this mechanism. She fears the inescapable future of everyday drudgery and boredom, and laments the tragic lack of larger opportunities that come with being trapped in so minuscule and private a realm. In short, the

‘business of domesticity’ offends her. In the first place, she is offended by the lack of higher ambition that is associated with the performance of such menial, unintellectual tasks. Secondly, she despises the squalor that accompanies the physical side of life. Thirdly, she has no tolerance for the chaos and the inefficiency that characterises this realm. And finally, Hilda objects to what she identifies as the more sinister effects of being forced to reside, fully submerged, in the squalid world of housework.

From the outset of the novel, Bennett’s readers are assured that this occupation is firmly entrenched within the female world of experience and that Hilda’s feelings about it are atypical. ³³ Women ‘with a sufficient income, a comfortable house, and fair health,’ Bennett argues, are much more likely to accept their position within the domestic realm than to question it as Hilda does. ³⁴ Hilda herself notes that as a daily occupation it is almost an obsession. It consumes the daily existence of most middle-class women of her time. Moreover, no matter how much Hilda desires to break free from assuming this role (and tellingly, she never does), she clearly realises that she will never be able to make these women see just how ‘ridiculous’ this whole preoccupation with housekeeping is:

All over the town, in every street of the town, behind all the nice curtains and blinds, the same hidden shame was being enacted: a vast, sloppy, steaming, greasy, social horror – inevitable! It amounted to barbarism, Hilda thought in her revolt. She turned from it with loathing. And yet nobody else seemed to turn from it with loathing. Nobody else seemed to perceive that this business of domesticity was not life itself, was at best the clumsy external machinery of life. On the contrary, about half the adult population worshipped it as an exercise sacred and paramount, enlarging its importance and with positive gusto permitting it to monopolize their existence.³⁵

Interestingly, Hilda directly rebukes any notion of feminine idealism as it concerns domesticity in this passage. For her there is no shroud of idealism that can hide the ‘shame’ of a life subsumed by the attempt to cleanse dirt and control squalor. Here morality and a sense of honour clash head-to-head with middle-class values. Moreover, and contrary to dominant notions about the superior level of British civilisation, in the mind of this frustrated new woman the constant expectation that the nation’s women devote their collective lives to the attempt to cleanse dirt and control squalor is testimony not to the exemplary state of British civilisation, but rather to recognition of the fact that the middle-class values and the ‘reality’ on which British’s civilising mission rests equals ‘barbarism.’ This assertion is made by numerous Victorian feminists, but it seems particularly bold when made by a young English female protagonist portrayed as ‘ordinary’ or everyday, and rendered by a popular middlebrow author, at the height of British imperial feeling.³⁶

To Hilda, housework represents a monotonous state of ‘vacuous idleness’. And she is harsh on those who seem content to spend their lives following a simple pattern of ‘placid expectancy of a very similar day on the morrow, and of an interminable succession of such days.’ ³⁷ Women from the middle classes who ‘chose’ to spend their lives in this manner, without challenging the validity of such a life are not to be pitied. Women from the working class, however, those who perform the bulk of these physical chores, like Florrie, the Lessways’ young servant, are regarded by Hilda as sacrificial ‘victim[s] of the business of

domesticity'; human beings who are gradually metamorphosed into 'dehumanized drudge[s].'
38 Domesticity is not simply degrading; for Hilda, it also conceals elements that are more ominous and foreboding.

Certainly, domesticity performs an ominous role in Hilda's life. Given that this is a novel about the life of a new woman, it only takes five chapters, from a total of 37, for the protagonist's reprieve from a life monopolised by domesticity to end permanently. After experiencing a brief adventure in the world of journalism, Hilda discovers that 'Domesticity had closed in on her once more.'
39 By the novel's final chapters, she is without hope of liberty; for Hilda – soon to be a single mother, with a despairing and ailing spinster to support in Sarah Gailey, and sole control over a boarding house she knows she does not have the skills to run successfully – the future looks 'appalling':40

she envisaged the years to come, the messy and endless struggle, the necessary avarice and trickeries incidental to it – and perhaps the ultimate failure....And she pictured what she would be in ten years: the hard-driven landlady, up to every subterfuge – with a child to feed and educate, and perhaps a bedridden, querulous invalid to support. And there was no alternative to this tableau.41

By the end of the novel, societal as well as personal expectations condemn this new woman to the domestic world. Hilda believes that she has completed her journey frustrated by the knowledge that she alone cannot affect the relentless machinery of domesticity. 42

Paid Employment

Hilda's unending confinement within 'intolerable routine and deadly domesticity' occurs after her brief 'adventures' in the male realm end. It is within the narration of these prior adventures that Bennett offers historians invaluable insights into the motivations and reactions of a young turn-of-the-century woman engaged in a relatively new form of middle-class paid employment. Hilda Lessways' desire to escape the mundane world of domesticity and her search for exceptional experiences are the main reasons why she enters into office work – one of the few suitable, newly available occupations open to women of the middle classes.

It is generally agreed that the late Victorian era's much discussed 'surplus' of women and the changing nature of industrial and commercial enterprises both created the demand for and helped to fulfil the supply of substantially well-educated, cheap female labour. General attitudes gradually endorsed, or at least tolerated, certain strains of job expansion for women, but a great deal of tension concerning the proper role of women in turn-of-the-century society still remained. 43 According to historian David Rubinstein, the proportion of women employed in England varied little between 1871 and 1911. Over 25 per cent of the female population were in some form of paid employment, and women composed about 30 per cent of the workforce – although both of these figures declined slightly towards the end of the century. 44 Therefore, interest in women's employment in the 1890s, it seems, stems more from the changing distribution of this work, than from any dramatic increase in the numbers

of women being employed. ⁴⁵ That is to say, greater numbers of middle-class women entered the workforce in more female-centered places of work. ⁴⁶ The newly created or recently expanded areas of employment most suited to middle-class women included the Civil Service and commercial and financial industries requiring the use of the type-writer and shorthand, newly established and expanded education and health facilities, and sales environments – those catering for the increased demand for ready-made clothing and pre-packaged food. ⁴⁷ One early twentieth-century commentator estimated in 1881 that 12.6 per cent of working women were employed in these middle-class occupations, whereas this figure had risen to 23.7 per cent by 1911.⁴⁸

These recently developed areas of employment shared a couple of important characteristics that rendered them suitable for middle-class women. In the first place, they fitted the Victorian ideal in that the work involved was (fairly) ‘clean, light, respectable, carried out mainly among other women: heavy physical work and the moral dangers of mixing with large numbers of men were both excluded.’ ⁴⁹ And, secondly, they required a reasonable level of education. ⁵⁰ Much of the demand for these new positions was only beginning to be heard by the 1880s, but by the early decades of the twentieth century their reputation as female dominated areas of work was largely assured. ⁵¹

The introduction of women into office work between 1850 and 1914 was dramatic, and this is the form of employment that Hilda embraces as well. Indeed, by 1914, after shop assistants and teachers, women clerks had become ‘the most numerous and important group of middle-class working women in the country.’ ⁵² Clerical work previously had been dominated by men. But with office development – for instance, with the use of the typewriter, telephone, telegraphy, dictating and adding machines, and new methods of filing and retrieving data – clerical work became more suited to the growth of a cheaper, well-educated female workforce. This growing feminisation of office work has also been attributed to the increasingly routine nature of the work and to the subsequent lack of promotion opportunities. Women, historian Pat Thane argues, ‘appropriated or were assigned such work where it was new, without a male tradition, and where it could be routinised and clearly separated from a career ladder.’ ⁵³ It is likely, however, that the majority of female clerks rarely questioned the routine nature of their jobs or challenged the lack of promotional opportunities offered to them. The conditions that many of these women worked in were unpleasant, but the important thing was that the work was considered to be female-appropriate. ⁵⁴ Moreover, despite the unpleasant conditions, there is no doubting that a majority of female clerks took great pride in their work. But this pride did not necessarily motivate them to agitate for higher wages, for example. ⁵⁵ Rather, Meta Zimmeck argues, the fact that most of the women who entered into the clerical profession during this era were inspired by ‘an enormous zest for life and adventure’ and that they were aware of their position as pioneers, persuaded many of them to regard these inadequate conditions and the existence of absurd restraints with ‘good-natured’ indignation.⁵⁶

Zimmeck’s interpretation of female motivations for entering into clerical work is affirmed by Bennett’s popular fiction. However, more importantly, given this novel’s popularly endorsed

and deeper exploration of the likely thoughts and feelings of an 'ordinary' New Woman with its navigating of the rifts existing between personal desires and societal mores, such explanations of personal motivations are also expanded on (as elaborated below). Hilda Lessways desires adventure and challenge outside the realm of conventional female existence. 57 Clerical training and securing a job in the local newspaper office afford her the opportunity to fulfil both of these desires. It offers this provincial new woman a chance to achieve a degree of freedom and a sense of purpose comparable to that common among male experience.

Author, audience and female protagonist are aware that Hilda's yearnings and experiences in a newspaper office are unusual for a woman of her class and era. For example, and in spite of Bennett's often ironic tone, it is made clear that Hilda gains experiences beyond the reach of most of the women with whom she comes into contact: 'She was a pioneer. No young woman had ever done what she was doing. She was the only girl in the Five Towns who knew shorthand.' 58 This new woman's musings about her present place in society and the notion of separate spheres for men and women, her knowledge of possible ways of breaching these spheres, and thoughts about the longevity or otherwise of her career prove that she is one of Bennett's unusually articulate female characters. However, her pioneer status does not imply that she is a public activist of any kind or involved in any organised movement. Rather she is motivated by an individual sense of personal ambition – by an envy of many of what she perceives to be male advantages. She envies the relative freedom of men and the sense of superiority that this seems to lend them. She does not expect or even ask for equality with her male peers. Like many of the era's female clerks, she is aware of the limitations of turn-of-the-century reality to understand that her experiences are far removed from those of their male counterparts. 59

Bennett's portrayal of Hilda's participation in the newspaper office and the many positive feelings it affords her, usefulness and freedom from routine included, provides historians with an elaboration on Zimmeck's descriptions of women's experiences in the clerical profession. In the first place, Hilda is relieved of performing chores within the suffocating confines of the physical and moral space of the home. In her paid position she finds that she enjoys being considered valuable to the point that any hint from her employer that she might be dispensable, or not needed for every step of the newspaper's creation, wounds her ego. Her daily tasks may be viewed by male contemporaries or distanced observers as quite basic, quite narrow, but they are enough to consume her full attention: 60

Save for her desire to perfect herself in her duties, she had no desire. She was content. In this dismal, dirty, untidy, untidiable, uncomfortable office, arctic near the windows, and tropic near the stove, with dust on her dress and ink on her fingers and the fumes of gas in her quivering nostrils, and her mind strained and racked by an exaggerated sense of her own responsibilities, she was in heaven! She who so vehemently objected to the squalid mess of the business of domesticity, revelled in the squalid mess of this business. She whose heart would revolt because Florrie's work was never done, was delighted to wait all hours on the convenience of men who seemed to be the very incarnation of incalculable change and caprice. 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.61

At this point in the novel, Hilda has a private income (she loses this access to a personal income later, necessitating her work in a boarding house). Unlike the majority of middle-class women engaged in paid employment at this time, she does not have a financial need to work. This situation reinforces the notion that her decision to work is based solely on an almost spiritual need to fulfil her personal ambitions regarding her usefulness and self-worth. This factor soon proves to have negative consequences for Hilda, for this new woman works in a world where physical opportunities for employment are increasingly available while the moral expectations typically placed on women have not dissipated or lessened greatly. For a middle-class woman who does not need to work, society still judges placing personal fulfilment above such moral expectations to be inordinately selfish.

Secondly, working in an office allows Hilda to temporarily avoid the routine that typically accompanies female domestic responsibilities. Her position excuses her, for example, from accompanying her mother on a trip to London. Her mother's absence at home, then, enables her to leave work when she pleases, to take work home with her, and to apply herself to it over dinner. Such deviations from usual practice produce a sense of exhilaration – one that she had never before experienced: 'She was alone, free; and she tasted her freedom to the point of ecstasy.' 62 Freedom from the stifling pattern of everyday life, in Hilda's mind, confirms the existence of a wider world of experience, one not dominated by 'intolerable routine and deadly domesticity.' Zimmeck's writing on female clerical workers supports this coveting of physical freedom from domestic routine. Female clerks, Zimmeck argues, saw 'the typewriter, the ledger, and the shorthand writer's pad' not as tools of 'oppression' but rather as instruments of 'liberation.' 63

Indeed, this escape from domestic routine did not only appeal to female clerks. Drawing on the writing of real-life feminist and suffragist Helena Swanwick, for example, one discerns many similarities between Swanwick's reactions as a new Girton College student and the fictional Hilda's as a more modest provincial clerk. For example, the scant furnishings of the college study and bedroom inspired in Swanwick a sense of exhilaration brought about by her impending 'ownership' of that space, despite her mother's judgment of these furnishings as so 'utterly dismal' that they move her to tears. 64 Additionally, like Hilda's appreciation of a life free from ordinary domestic and filial duties, Swanwick's discovery that she could put an 'Engaged' sign on her college door, thereby avoiding the constant interruptions she experienced and endured in her domestic life (including her mother's constant resentment of anything that lay outside the familial and domestic realm occupying her daughter's mind) strike her as such a 'privilege' that she finds that she is so excited that she cannot sleep.65

The new woman, moral expectations and personal sacrifices

Bennett's text extends discussions about female occupations and resulting freedom from domestic routine to argue that this 'liberation' is not without negative consequences, nor is it

without barriers to other life experiences (such as marriage). Achieving this sense of liberation typically draws on personal sacrifices which, Bennett intimates, not all women are willing or equipped to make. For example, Hilda's choice of momentary loyalty to employment over her filial duties is a decision that does not sit comfortably with her. Her personal reaction to the catastrophic consequences of this decision leads her to forego any more hope of a career. Secondly, dedication to a career rivals that to the expected marriage path of Victorian and Edwardian women. In the case of this provincial new woman, marriage to a prominent figure in the community, one whom she can influence, represents an acceptable alternative to leading an active life in her own right.

Hence in *Hilda Lessways*, physical distance from the routine domestic environment does not automatically entail a sense of freedom from middle-class moral expectations. Such distance does allow the new woman the space within which to test the boundaries of these notions of morality, however, for example the boundaries of her allegiance to notions of personal integrity and filial duty. Hilda's immediate employment experiences infuse her with a sense of usefulness, purpose and wellbeing, albeit not without challenges. In the long term, the tests her personal loyalties and preferences undergo in the novel do confirm that this turn-of-the-century new woman is as shackled to middle-class notions of morality as she is to the physical sphere of typical middle-class female experience.

Hilda initially discovers that her conscience does not sit well with the loose morality inherent in the murky world of journalism. She finds that she actively has to adjust her mindset to accustom herself to the everyday promotion of 'lies.' She shows ideal womanly feeling in that she blushes when copying out information that she knows to be false. However, she strives to abandon this aspect of her feminine outlook. She even feels angry at the fact that her conscience takes offence. In her mind there exists something of a battle between duty to instilled moral values and duty to her new position and her new world of enlarged experiences. Her sense of duty to her new life begins to win her over, and accepting this new code of morality becomes a sure sign that she is really becoming part of this coveted male world. Learning to overcome her feelings of feminine delicacy and accepting this 'wickedness' produces a strong sense of pride. 66

Dealing with an ingrained sense of filial duty is another matter though. Hilda soon finds out that she cannot drown out her conscience's objections against her lapses in daughterly duty as easily as it can those against telling professional untruths. At a pivotal point in the novel, Hilda makes the decision to temporarily give precedence to her duty to her job over that to her mother. Instead of rushing to London to her sick mother's bedside, she delays in favour of finishing her work; her desire to be professionally useful overrides that to be of comfort to her family. As a consequence, she is absent when Mrs Lessways dies, and her resulting feelings of guilt and nervous breakdown effectively end any hopes of furthering her career.

What is interesting about this pivotal moment in the novel's plot of the novel is that Bennett seems to assume his audience's expectation that this new woman's experiences in the male realm should end. Hilda cannot forgive herself for her lapse. She does not consider her duty

to herself and her yearning for intellectual fulfilment above that of her duty to her mother. Neither, Bennett's writing argues, does the bulk of turn-of-the-century society. ⁶⁷ The effects of Victorian ideals of femininity, traditional notions of familial and social obligations, on the lives of 'ordinary' middle-class women, then, are very much in evidence in his fictional realism. In the moral and social climate of her contemporary society, Hilda Lessways cannot be allowed to continue on the path on which she has started, where her life and her interests are too heavily focused on personal fulfilment to the detriment of her familial and social duties. ⁶⁸ Again, opportunities may have widened for middle-class females in turn-of-the-century England, but moral expectations eventually reassert themselves at the forefront of these women's lives. That is to say, the audience's perceptions of the moral consequences expected from certain forms of female behaviour reassert themselves, no matter what the reality of widening opportunities for female employment may be.

There were, of course, also prominent more traditional voices in the turn-of-the-century British gender debate that showed some awareness of the negative restrictions set in place by society. The prominent Scottish writer and nineteenth-century public figure Margaret Oliphant, for example, was 'painfully aware of the limitations imposed upon women's lives by the unthinking tyranny of cultural tradition,' as her biographer argues, nevertheless wanted to 'distinguish these from the sacrifices which, consciously embraced, might bear fruit in the refinement of the moral spirit.' ⁶⁹ Women were disadvantaged in so many aspects of turn-of-the-century life, but there were also some clear moral advantages to be wrought from practising traditional womanly sacrifices to the benefit of home and family. Although such an attitude seems antithetic to late Victorian and Edwardian feminism, it can also be read as being reflective of the often ambiguous stance of living in a society that was in a state of social, economic, political and moral flux. Rather than imposing a unified, ordered narrative on Hilda Lessways' thoughts and feelings, Bennett portrays them in all their contradictory complexity. This is Bennett's primary value for historians who seek to uncover the likely thoughts and feelings of 'ordinary' new women and their audiences' expectations. Of all literary genres, novels are considered to have 'a specific allegiance to reality' – they are the literary form that 'we interpret as closest to life itself.' ⁷⁰ That novelists typically explore human interiority further recommends them to historians of interior lives, for their highly receptive and flexible form means that there are few aspects of human experience that they cannot embrace. ⁷¹ Moreover, as both the literary and cultural critic Lionel Trilling and the cultural historian Raymond Williams argue, novels are renowned for reflecting the complexities of lived experience, as well as mirroring its dynamism. ⁷² They typically record active experiences, their human analyses meshing with prominent concerns of the time. Bennett offers us a snapshot of human interiority, in all its complexity, dynamism, and contemporary relevance. Quite in line with reader-response theories it is the mental world, not only Bennett's but also his audience's, *Hilda Lessways* allows us to enter *Hilda Lessways*. ⁷³

Furthermore, given the controversy regarding the existence of the turn-of-the-century New Woman in fiction versus reality, and given popular condemnation of the radicalism of the 'endlessly self-analytical heroine of New Woman fiction' who has 'little relevance to the

average woman' (in the words of Mrs M Eastwood, writing for the *Humanitarian* in 1894), Bennett's portrayal of Hilda Lessways offers contemporary and modern readers an example of a fictional 'new woman' who was, perhaps, more relevant to the everyday reader than her more radical fictional counterpart. ⁷⁴ That Hilda is a provincial 'new woman' and not portrayed as one of her more radical metropolitan sisters is further indicative of her likely relevance to the ordinary reader. Situating Hilda in the more narrow and conservative confines of the English midlands, rather than in the more radicalised and anonymous streets of London, allows Bennett to explore the reactions of a young woman who does not see herself as being at the vanguard of turn-of-the-century feminism, thereby facilitating the portrayal of a fictional New Woman who comes closer to Mrs Eastwood's 'average woman'.

Idealistic concerns are not the only factors to influence Hilda's decision to avoid re-entering the clerical realm; there are others as well. Not least of these factors are her sexual yearnings and the desire for marriage. Dealing as he so often does in the details of everyday reality, Bennett's writing assumes that the coexistence of marriage and a career for a middle-class woman was an anomaly in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century society. ⁷⁵ His reading public would have been well aware of this assumption. The pursuit of one implied the rejection of the other, at least for a while. Despite her aching desire for experiences different to those of her peers, then, and given the obvious limitations set in place by society, Hilda does not make the decision to sacrifice her chance of marrying in favour of pursuing a career. As the only acceptable outlet for the fulfilment of her sexual desires, marriage is Hilda's ultimate life choice. And as an ordinary new woman, as opposed to any radical conception of this figure, Hilda is not inclined to deliberately or openly flout accepted sexual conventions. Not only that, but with the knowledge that her career in all likelihood will be shortlived, this 'ordinary' new woman harbours the pragmatic desire to become the wife of an influential man. She regards this option as one of the few available to her as a late Victorian or Edwardian middle-class woman to achieve any lasting form of social power or influence.

In thoughts reminiscent of mid-Victorian domestic idealism, Hilda allows herself to dream of future domestic bliss with Edwin Clayhanger, but only if he becomes an influential, highly respected man of the town and if she can wield some power and influence behind the scenes. ⁷⁶ The more immediate and accessible promise of becoming the influential wife behind her employer, the seemingly publicly successful George Cannon is one of the most important factors motivating her hasty decision to enter a disastrous marriage with him. ⁷⁷ It is not until she has irreversibly entered into this sexual relationship (soon becoming pregnant with Cannon's child) and has made the added decision to aid the now financially troubled Cannon and his half-sister, the ailing spinster Sarah Gailey, by helping them to manage their boarding house, that Hilda realises that foregoing a career and marrying has only served to reinstate her, this time permanently, in the suffocating world of conventional middle-class female existence. These decisions, self-serving as well as altruistic, guided by the social, moral and economic restrictions placed on late Victorian women's lives, serve to end this new woman's dreams – dreams of 'an enlarged liberty, of wide interests, and of original activities – such as no woman to her knowledge had ever had.' ⁷⁸

Bennett's popular fictional account of a provincial new woman informs us that although turn-of-the-century society increasingly, though very gradually, offered women the limited means by which to temporarily flee an outwardly conventional female existence, it did not offer any accompanying freedom from social, moral, and sexual conventions. Ultimately, Hilda Lessways' susceptibility to aspects of middle-class feminine idealism (such as the acceptance of male supremacy, filial duty, and expected altruism) and her loyalty to conventional behaviour (such as sexual fulfilment within marriage only), firmly bind her to traditional female roles. Bennett's novel also demonstrates to historians the reading public's awareness that the firm line of distinction between the gender spheres was undergoing some challenge, even transformation. Nevertheless, boundaries still remained in place: women might gain experience in the male realm, but they rarely find themselves belonging there. Hilda realizes that

[s]he had had glimpses, once, of the male world; she had made herself the only woman shorthand-writer in the Five Towns, and one of the earliest in England - dizzy thought! But the glimpses had been in vain and tantalizing. She had been in the male world, but not of it, as though encircled in a glass ball which neither she nor the males could shatter.⁷⁹

Physical barriers to women participating in the male realm may have been fragile and shifting, but moral expectations of the time rarely were.

Conclusion

The popularity of *Hilda Lessways* upon its publication in 1911 reveals some of the interests and the English reading public's expectations in the early decades of the twentieth century, particularly as these concerned the place and aspirations of middle-class Edwardian women. Given that so much of the content of *Hilda Lessways* centres on detailing the feelings of an ordinary new woman, the largely middle-class readers were obviously interested in reading about a frustrated young woman's dreams of enlarged or unusual experiences. Bennett's portrayal of Hilda's yearnings and frustrations seems uniquely different from other portrayals of the New Woman in the Edwardian period, in that this 'ordinary' new woman took advantage of opportunities presented to her in the public sphere, not out of financial need, but rather because of a more spiritual need to experience a sense of usefulness and self-worth. Given the popularity of *Hilda Lessways*, it can be argued that a substantial proportion of the reading public must have been at least empathetic towards those aspirations, as modest in scope as these dreams tended to be. In tune with Bennett's own renown as a pragmatic novelist, a pragmatic audience would also have realised the limitations in place that stunted the extent of the ordinary new woman's experiences in the social and moral climate of the time. In a 1910s novel about a New Woman, therefore, readers accept and perhaps empathise with dreams of female freedom, but they also expect any resulting adventures to be short-lived, whatever the reality of widening opportunities for women may have been.

To sum up, Arnold Bennett's writing creates a firm sense of the obstacles that society places in the way of women performing tasks outside the home. The writer and his readers were

acutely aware that the social, economic and political mechanisms of society still largely dictated any potential alternatives offered to women. However, Bennett's narratives also account for the limited participation of women in the public sphere in a less visible, sometimes more personal sense. Turn-of-the-century society was in a state of transition as far as tangible opportunities for women were concerned, but as Bennett illustrates via the case of Hilda, her emotional reactions to events also played a part in limiting her experiences, including her ingrained sense of filial duty, or the emotional urge to assist others (even as this involves sacrificing her own aspirations, which means that Hilda is effectively giving up her much cherished hope for 'freedom and change and luxury'). ⁸⁰ Lastly, Hilda's natural yearnings for sexual fulfilment within the conventionally accepted, socially useful status afforded by marriage, as anticipated by most other late Victorian and Edwardian women, firmly reinstate her in the home and in the domestic sphere. As Bennett's in-depth treatment of this new woman illustrates, Edwardian women often found that they could not evade the social and economic realities of their era and could not escape the emotional and the moral concerns that formed a substantial part of their upbringing. In these ways Arnold Bennett's popular fiction, in particular *Hilda Lessways*, poignantly illustrates the presence of an ever-widening chasm between the broadening arena of acceptable female behaviour and the stagnant realm of traditional moral expectations.

Endnotes

Thank you to the anonymous reviewers of *The Latchkey* for their helpful and insightful comments and advice.

Editor's note: All citations refer to the works listed below in the Bibliography.

1. The *Clayhanger* 'trilogy' consists of: *Clayhanger*, 1910; *Hilda Lessways*, 1911; *These Twain*, 1916; and, *The Roll-Call* (1918). The trilogy was adapted for television by British television company, Associated TeleVision (ATV), in the 1970s.
2. Writing on Bennett's fiction, John Carey agrees with this appraisal. He states that by probing behind the 'mundane façades' of the 'ordinary' man or woman in the street, Bennett gives us access to 'the realities that blaze and coruscate inside dowdy or commonplace bodies' (p. 164).
3. See [Anon. Reviewer], *The Girlhood of Clayhanger's Wife: "Hilda Lessways."*
4. This paper does not classify Arnold Bennett as a 'New Woman writer' as such, although he does meet some of Ann Heilmann's criteria for writers of New Woman fiction in that he was born in the mid-nineteenth century and many of his main works did fall within the 30 year period from 1880 to 1910 (p.4). But his reputation is not substantially connected to his production of New Woman writing. (Certainly, his new woman novel does not meet with his contemporary, W. T. Stead's criteria for 'the modern woman novel' by virtue of his gender for his novel is not 'a novel written by a woman, or a novel written about a woman, but ... a novel written by a woman about a woman from the standpoint of women' (quoted in Juliet Gardiner, ed., p.5). Moreover, such classification is not necessary as this paper is a historical study centred on the reading public's opinions of 'new women' rather than on Bennett's

views as an individual or an individual writer.

5. It is difficult to access precise sales figures for Bennett's novels. However, it is widely acknowledged that his popularity grew substantially after the success of *The Old Wives' Tale* in 1908. *Clayhanger* was published in 1910 and immediately successful in England and America; it helped solidify Bennett's position as an important man of letters, as did its sequel, *Hilda Lessways*, published in 1911. See *Guide to the La Fayette Butler Collection of Arnold Bennett Publishing Correspondence and Manuscripts, 1903-1931*, Accession number: 1982-0024R, University Libraries, The Pennsylvania State University, Special Collections Library, Rare Books and Manuscripts,

<http://www.libraries.psu.edu/speccolls/FindingAids/bennett.pdf>, accessed 10.37 281209.

6. See Virginia Woolf's criticism of what she termed Bennett's 'shopkeeper's' view of literature in her 1924 essay, 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' (in *Collected Essays I*, London: Hogarth Press, 1966, pp. 319-337). Woolf claimed that Bennett (along with writers such as John Galsworthy and H. G. Wells) relied far too heavily on descriptions of material and social environment, thereby ignoring what she claimed was the author's fundamental task of portraying the inner life of a character. Since this condemnation, there has been much debate as to the merit of her argument. It has been largely agreed that her essay on Bennett probably had some effect in influencing his reputation among her peers, but there is little to suggest that it did any damage to his popularity among the general readership of the time. See Irving Howe, pp. 26-29, for a more detailed discussion of Woolf's criticisms.

7. See, for example, Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p.115, for mention of the year 1880. For more on the middle-class makeup of the turn-of-the-century English reading public, see a number of scholars, including Richard Altick (p. 83), Peter Keating (p. 437) and Timothy J. Wager (p. 183), who agree that the growing middle classes supplied a substantial proportion of this expanding readership.

8. It is widely accepted that the term 'New Woman' was first coined in 1894 by the novelist Sarah Grand. Grand's discussion of this female figure provoked an immediate reply from the popular nineteenth-century novelist 'Ouida' (Louise Ramé), initiating a debate that raged in contemporary journals and newspapers until the phrase itself faded into the twentieth century. (Sarah Grand is the pseudonym of Frances Elizabeth Belleuden Clarke, author of *The Heavenly Twins*, 1893.) Grand's article entitled 'The New Aspect of the Woman Question,' in which she uses the term 'New Woman', was published in 1894, in the *North American Review*. See David Rubinstein, pp. 15-16, and Barbara Caine, p. 252. For an extensive discussion of Grand and the New Woman novel see Teresa Mangu's *Married, Middlebrow, and Militant: Sarah Grand and the New Woman Novel*.

9. C. Morgan-Dockrell, 'Is the New Woman a Myth?', 1896, cited in Juliet Gardiner (ed.), *The New Woman. Women's Voices 1880-1918*, Collins and Brown, London, 1993, p. 16.

10. Caine, p. 252.

11. One only has to look to Eliza Lynn Linton's frequent criticisms of 'modern' women. Her critical 'The Girl of the Period' articles, for example, date back to 1868; in 1871 she also published work attacking feminism with references to what she termed the 'Shrieking Sisterhood'; and in 1891 and 1892 she condemned the modern and 'Wild Woman' of English society (Rubenstein, p.17). Additionally, during the 1880s, journalistic debate also centred around the notion of the 'revolt of the daughters' and around the idea of the modern

girl (Caine, p.252).

12. Rubinstein, p. 12. A comparatively high male emigration rate is one given explanation for such a discrepancy. For example, see Jane Lewis, pp. 3-4, and Rubinstein, p. 12.

13. Rubinstein, chapter 6 'Salaried Ladies' (pp. 69-93), and Olive Banks, p. 181.

14. Caine, p. 249.

15. However, Amy Cruse paints a picture of the New Woman which is highly unified. Her set of qualifying specifications that the New Woman had to measure up to are extremely rigid – leaving little or no room for the inevitable individuality and diversity that any collection of people displays (p. 338).

16. Angelique Richardson and Chris Willis, pp.1-38, 12. For some of the differences in New Woman preoccupations and concerns see, for example, Grant Allen's Herminia Barton (*The Woman Who Did*) who made the decision to have a child outside of marriage; Sarah Grand's Evadne's (*The Heavenly Twins*) refusal to consummate her marriage; Olive Schreiner's Lyndall (*The Story of an African Farm*) who confesses that she does 'not so greatly admire the crying of babies'; or even Marie Corelli's Lady Sibyl (*The Sorrows of Satan*) who desires extra-marital sensual experiences (sensationally with Satan himself!). See Richardson and Willis, pp.13-24; Carolyn Burdett, pp.167-182,167; and Marie Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan or The Strange Experience of One Geoffrey Tempest, Millionaire..*

17. According to Susan Higgins, the New Woman of New Woman fiction, for example, is a heroine who articulates her feelings on controversial topics, such as marriage and prostitution, more than her predecessors did, but who does not 'triumph', nor does she 'recant'. She is a woman who is 'generally portrayed as morally aware and true to her unconventional principles, and she is no sexual libertarian' (pp. 9-11).

18. By the turn of the twentieth century, as the number of women affected by changing social conditions grew, the label New Woman and all that it stood for became applicable less to the radical few, and more to the larger band of women who believed that their sex needed or desired greater social and personal freedom. Hugh Stutfield, in his *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* article 'The Psychology of Feminism' in 1897, agreed with this. To him the New Woman meant 'simply the woman of today striving to shake off old shackles' – anything from the existence of a sexual double standard and the inferior legal position of the wife, to the lower wages of female workers and the lack of adequate education opportunities for women. Stutfield was at least one contemporary who was convinced of the reality of the New Woman: 'the immense mass of "revolting" literature cannot have grown out of nothing, or continue to flourish upon mere curiosity' (cited in Rubinstein, p. 20).

19. According to Peter McDonald, he 'played' the literary field. Sandra Kemp, Charlotte Mitchell and David Trotter write, 'The epitome of the twentieth-century professional writer, Bennett had published by the time of his death thirty-seven novels, seven collections of short stories, fifteen plays, thirteen works of non-fiction, an autobiography, four volumes of essays, five volumes of letters, five travel books, and three volumes of journals.' As further example of Bennett's recognised status as a professional writer in an age when the professional writer was a relatively new concept, John Lucas, in his study of Bennett's novels, entitles his second chapter 'The Professional.'

20. Lucas, pp. 111-115. Other monograph studies of Bennett include Margaret Drabble's , Georges Lafourcade's; shorter readings include the 'Bennett' entry in Kemp, Mitchell and

Trotter, pp. 27-28, and Anita Miller, pp. 17-28.

21. Bennett obtained the post of assistant editor of *Woman* in 1893 and started on New Year's Day, 1894. Between 1896 and 1900 he was the chief editor (Drabble, p. 55; McDonald, p. 69). Clotilde De Stasio voices her surprise that so little has been written on, and therefore seemingly little importance attached to, Bennett's work on *Woman* in the 1890s (pp. 40-53, p. 40). Since De Stasio's article in 1995, Margaret Beetham and Peter D. McDonald have written on Bennett's literary career, concentrating on his serial publications, but including the time he spent working on *Woman*. For a detailed discussion on *Woman*, for example, see chapter 12 'Forward But Not Too Fast': The Advanced Magazine?' in Margaret Beetham's *A Magazine of Her Own*

22. Drabble, p. 57.

23. For a discussion of Bennett's treatment of Hilda in relation to other areas of her life (such as romantic love, sexual desire and religious belief) see Sharon Crozier-De Rosa, *The Middle Class Novels of Arnold Bennett and Marie Corelli*.

24. Bennett, *Clayhanger*, p. 447.

25. In her article, 'The Separation of Home and Work?', Leonora Davidoff argues that this role did not represent a challenge towards idealistic notions (see especially p. 85).

26. The upper middle class still consisted of manufacturers, especially from the industrial North and Midlands, but economic changes in the later decades of the nineteenth century saw the increased participation in this social stratum of rising members of the professions, including doctors, lawyers and highly positioned members of the Civil Service, and the increasingly wealthy, and therefore increasingly prominent, city merchants and bankers. See J. F. C. Harrison, pp. 50-58; Jose Harris, p. 108; H. C. G. Matthew and Kenneth O. Morgan, p. 27; and François Bédarida, pp. 149-152.

27. Matthew, for example, writes of upper middle-class women: 'Women, thus partially liberated, played an important role in charities, churches, local politics, and the arts, especially music'. (p. 29.) For information on falling birth rates, see Harrison, p. 13 and Harris, p. 62. Harris also argues, in reference to the middle classes during this era, that 'tens of thousands of boys, and to a lesser extent girls, were at any one time incarcerated in boarding-schools' – a factor, for example, that, when viewed alongside falling birth rates, rising incomes, easily available domestic service and better medical services, meant that 'an intelligent middle-class mother was able both to excel at and to enjoy motherhood probably to a greater extent than at any previous time in human history' (p. 82).

28. Harris notes that there were many complaints during the 1900s that middle-class women were increasingly delegating the bulk of domestic tasks to servants. She adds, however, that it is very likely that these complaints were exaggerated on the grounds that few middle-class homes could afford 'a wholly idle wife' (p. 71). See also Harrison, p. 58.

29. See Patricia Branca (p. 185); Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, p. 79; Christina Hardyment, p. 13. See also Yaffa Draznin, chapter 5, for detailed descriptions of household chores and of the difficulties inherent in cleaning a Victorian home without the aid of labour-saving appliances.

30. Branca, p. 185.

31. Here I refer to Coventry Patmore's 1862 poem of the same title.

32. Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 10.

33. There are numerous other references to the domestic space as a female space. Bennett entitles the chapter which revolves around the visit the solicitor, George Cannon, made to the Lessways' household, 'Domesticity Invaded' (pp. 30-39). Arthur Twemlow, a businessman in the novel *Leonora*, on visit to Leonora's home, finds himself enchanted by the calm female world before him – the 'intimate charm of the domesticity' subdues him, partly fulfilling a longing or an ideal that he had always harboured – of a domestic hearth of security and serenity (pp. 98, 104.) His novels clearly delineate between male and female spaces. In *Hilda Lessways*, for instance, Janet Orgreaves is described as 'a destined queen of the home' – a young woman 'content within her sphere' (p. 66). In another scene in the same book Bennett claims that Hilda Lessways 'had been in the male world, but not of it, as though encircled in a glass ball which neither she nor the males could shatter' (p. 45).

34. Ibid., p. 10.

35. Ibid., p. 36.

36. The interesting question of what impact, if any, the emergence of the new Woman had on notions of 'civilisation' as well as on Britain's imperial mission is not discussed in this paper. For analyses of this aspect see Iveta Jusová; LeeAnne Richardson; and Sally Mitchell. For my argument that bitter attacks on the 1890s New Woman were linked to fears for 'civilisation', race and empire, see Sharon Crozier-De Rosa, 'Marie Corelli's British new woman.'

37. Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 10.

38. Hilda remarks that Florrie, this 'charming young creature, full of slender grace' will fall prey to the demands of the life she will be expected to lead – a life immersed in all the squalor of the home (p. 36.)

39. Ibid., p. 45.

40. Ibid., p. 325.

41. Ibid., pp. 325-326.

42. Hilda views domesticity as an unrelenting machine or as an interminable organism. She refers, for example, to the 'the organism of the boarding house' – an organism that appears pathetically tragic and sorrowful. However, this is also the organism that manages to swallow up most of her life – up until Edwin Clayhanger rescues her and her son a decade or so after the collapse of her marriage (see *ibid.*, p. 209.)

43. For broader, more detailed discussions of this 'surplus' of women and the social and economic shifts affecting Late Victorian and Edwardian society, see, for example, Joan Perkin; Jose Harris; and J. F. C. Harrison,.

44. Rubinstein, p. 69.

45. Ibid. See also Suzann Buckley, p. 135. Buckley pays more attention to the small fluctuations in the percentage of employed women (that is, girls over ten years old). She reports that there was a decline, between 1891 and 1901, in the percentage of employed women in England, but that, by 1911 had experienced a slight reversal. In 1891 31.14 per cent were employed, which dropped to 29.1 per cent in 1901, before rising slightly to 29.7 per cent in 1911.

46. For example, in 1901, 54 per cent of these women were working in occupations where 80 per cent or more of the employees were female, although, by 1911 this figure stood at 50 per cent (Jane E. Lewis, p. 33).

47. Rubinstein, p. 71, and Buckley, p. 136.

48. A.L. Bowley, cited in Rubinstein, p. 70.

49. Jane Rendall, p. 71.

50. Ibid., pp. 71-72.

51. Ibid.

52. Lee Holcombe, p. 141. There are differing estimations of the rise in the numbers of female clerks employed – all, however, support the argument that it was a dramatic increase. Holcombe calculates that women represented 0.3 per cent of the total number of clerks in 1861 and that this rose to 18.1 per cent in 1911 and then to 46.1 per cent in 1921. From Table 4a, 'Number of Clerks Employed in England and Wales, 1861-1911' in Holcombe, p. 210, and also Table 2.3, 'Number of Clerks Employed, Male and Female, England and Wales, 1861-1981' in Lewis, 'Women Clerical Workers,' p. 34. Meta Zimmeck argues that that female clerks as a proportion of all clerks rose from 2 per cent in 1851 to 20 per cent in 1911 – that the number of males employed during this time multiplied by 7 (from 93,000 to 677,000), whereas the number of women clerks multiplied by 83 (from 2,000 to 166,000). See Meta Zimmeck, p. 154. Jane Lewis provides similar evidence. Between 1871 and 1881 the participation rates of women from 15 to 24 years old 'showed a general absolute increase and after 1881 women aged 20-34 increased their participation relative to men of the same age' (p. 32.)

53. Pat Thane, p. 192. See also Zimmeck, p. 154; Rubinstein, p. 72; Holcombe, pp. 142-148; and Rendall, p. 77. Rendall also refers to the argument that the typewriter, sold widely from 1882, required skills that were frequently compared to those required for playing the piano – further cementing the use of this piece of office equipment as appropriately feminine. However, even clerical work pointed to the existence of discrepancies between the feminine ideal and the reality of the job. As Perkin argues, '[a]lthough clerical work was considered 'genteel', requiring a degree of literacy and a formality of dress associated with professional life, working conditions were often unpleasant. Women worked as long as twelve hours a day in poorly ventilated, dirty rooms with inadequate toilet facilities' (pp. 166-167).

54. For example, see Lewis, pp. 32, 36.

55. Ibid., p. 42; and Zimmeck, p. 166. Holcombe discusses the direction and results of union campaigns to improve office conditions and wages (pp. 157-162).

56. Zimmeck, p. 164.

57. See, for example, Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, pp. 58-59. Just visiting the local solicitor's office to inquire about the details of her father's will is an excursion that provides an enormous sense of 'adventure' in Hilda's mind (p. 32).

58. Ibid., p. 60; see also p. 87.

59. Zimmeck claims that female clerks were enthusiastic, though not naive. They were very aware of the position they occupied on the employment, and social, scene – they understood clearly that as long as they worked in this environment they were governed by constraints not applied to men, and that their overall position was inferior. She adds that although some women keenly felt the inferiority of their position to the point of doing something about it – from attempting to reform to playing the system for all it was worth – for the most part, 'Within the boundaries of the women's sphere most women clerks attempted to make the best

of a bad deal' (p. 165).

60. Bennett explains: 'Her sole interest – but it was tremendous! – lay in what she herself had to do – namely, take down from dictation, transcribe, copy, classify, and keep letters and documents, and occasionally correct proofs. All beyond this was misty for her, and she never adjusted her sight in order to pierce the mist' (*Hilda Lessways*, p. 60).

61. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

63. Referring to the responsibilities of office employment in the minds of female clerks, Zimmeck claims: 'They felt in themselves the power to do something productive and meaningful and real – to plunge into the hurly-burly of the world hitherto monopolized by men, to become, in the words of Gissing's Miss Barfoot, proprietor of a typewriting school and agency, '*rational and responsible human beings*,' to work' (p. 165).

64. Helena Swanwick, *I Have Been Young*, 1935, quoted in Juliet Gardiner (ed.), p.85.

65. *Ibid.*

66. Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, pp. 99-101.

67. See *ibid.*, chapters 12 to 14.

68. The fact that the chapter detailing Hilda's reactions to her new world of office work is entitled 'Hilda's World' (with all that that implies about living obsessively within her own insular sphere), and that the chapter detailing her gradual recovery from the breakdown is entitled 'Sin' (with all that that in turn implies about the negative moral interpretation of Hilda's failure to rush to her mother's side), is indicative of society's disapproval of individual female ambition over filial or familial duty.

69. Elizabeth Jay, p.48.

70. Andrew Michael Roberts, p.3. For a much more detailed discussion of the nature of Victorian and Edwardian novels, and their usefulness to historians of *mentalité*, see Chapter 2, 'Using Fiction as a Historical Source', in Crozier-De Rosa, *The Middle Class Novels of Arnold Bennett and Marie Corelli*, pp. 67-91.

71. Roberts, p.31.

72. Lionel Trilling, p. 211, and Raymond Williams, p.126.

73. Of course, reader-reception theories are much more complex than this assertion allows. Again, refer to Chapter 2, 'Using Fiction as a Historical Source', in Crozier-De Rosa, *The Middle Class Novels of Arnold Bennett and Marie Corelli*.

74. Mrs M Eastwood, 'The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact', quoted in Richardson and Willis, 'Introduction', in Richardson and Willis (eds.), pp. 10-11.

75. For more on attitudes towards the marriage bar, for example, see Lewis, 'Women Clerical Workers', especially p. 42.

76. Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 137.

77. *Ibid.*, p. 235.

78. *Ibid.*, pp. 255-256.

79. *Ibid.*, p. 256.

80. Hilda knows that by helping the ailing spinster, Sarah Gailey, or her former employer, George Cannon, she is effectively giving up her much cherished hope for a different or atypical life (see p. 186). For further discussion of Hilda's sense of duty to Sarah Gailey and George Cannon see pp. 103-109, pp. 113-120, p. 177, and p. 305.

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