

## **New Historicism in George Gissing's The Odd Women**

The Odd Women is a novel written by the English novelist George Robert Gissing in 1883. Gissing as a novelist was interested in feminist movement. Indeed, he supported women in his novel and based on his experience of the society in the 19th century, he wrote this novel. The novel illustrates how millions of women were considered as strange or odd because they were without pair or husband because they had to choose between their desires and their principles in life. Furthermore, Gissing attempts to portray to us the nature of women in relation to marriage and sexuality, and he depicts this through his characters in the novel. The novel gives vivid images to several issues dominant in the nineteenth century, such as women suffering the humiliation of being elderly and unmarried in the Victorian period, sexual anarchy and sex oppression, and women challenging the most deeply held attitudes and ideologies of the culture. In this paper, I am studying George Gissing in order to explain how sexuality and marriage were regarded in the

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women to men represented the enduring feature of the Victorian Age. This was in line with Victorian theorists who held the view that evolutionary reasons were the justification for the mental and physical differences between the genders. Indeed, Specific ideologies regarding the characteristics of women and their role in society marked the Victorian Era. Their primary role in society was to be a homemaker. She was completely isolated from public life, which was primarily a man's domain.

Furthermore, human society has been historically characterized by stratifications based on gender in virtually all avenues of human participation. As a result, sexuality is among the most critical issues whose views and perspectives exhibit significant variations by different factions of the society.

Victorian period. I also want to examine how views on marriage and sexuality affected the idea of the "others" and how "otherness" appears in the novel.

The Victorian Age marked an era where a rise of oppositional creations ruled literary and social exemplifications of gender. These new rules divided men and women into two distinct worlds in which they performed different roles. While men were able to go about their business and indulge in politics in public, women faced exclusion from any social and public participation. The ideal woman in the Victorian Age had to stay at home, lack any sexual initiative, be selfless, and be morally accountable. She was to be the pillar of the home in both the physical and moral sense. Femininity during the Victorian Age was secondary to masculinity. The submission of



themselves noble and glorious when they are most near the animals" (29).

The purported purity of culture assumes that women have the obligation of remaining chaste, and portraying a modest image to the outside world, a perception ingrained deeply in the growing young generation. For instance, Dr. Madden has a good intention for his six daughters, Virginia, Alice, Isabel, Monica, and Getrude; but following his sudden death with no insurance cover in place, the daughters have to face the fierce world for which they are hardly prepared. This is because "it never occurred to Dr. Madden that his daughters would do well to study with a professional object" (16). George Robert Gissing is regarded as one of the great individuals who, from a contemporary point of view, embraced new historicism,

However, it is almost unanimously acknowledged that gender disparity exists, and this has been largely been associated with the historical background of humanity, where women were delegated subordinate roles and were regarded to serve less importance in the society compared to men. Molly Youngkin observes that the sexuality-related issues continue to haunt the modern American society where women's bodies are often objectified and sexualized (60). Gissing highlights on the feminist activists, Rhoda Nunn and Mary Barfoot, who are shown running a training program where girls are prepared for office jobs. Rhoda believes that most women live in misery because of marriage, and this makes her avoid marrying. However, Mary is convinced that marriage still is ideal for a woman. Rhoda harshly denies this, saying that "women imagine



women resulted in the relegation of women's roles to the household and domestic spheres. Ruskin is bemused by the oppression of the women plight in the Victorian era, especially when women are made to appear as the queens of the kitchen. He believes "we cannot determine what the queenly powers of a woman should be, until we are agreed what their ordinary power should be" (80). This means that it was not enough to imagine how women would be better with education in widening their duties until there was an agreement on their real constant duties in the present.

Therefore, management of the household, looking after children, and acting as the source of entertainment for their husbands were the noblest qualities of a good wife or a good woman. The place of

demonstrated great interest in the feminist movement, and highlighted the issue of sexuality in the society. Through his novel *The Odd Women*, Gissing emerges as one of the advocates of women, with the novel based on his experience of the society in the 19th century. During his time, millions of women encountered much cruelty and high levels of victimization and discrimination, especially those who were not married. For instance, this group of women, who were essentially considered as acting or living awkwardly, were branded strange or odd women, making it extremely hard for the women of the generation to decide between their life principles and their respective life desires.

During this era, the predominant Victorian approach to the nature of



women and womanliness, thus highlighting on the obligatory burdens that sexual divisions brought about, all of which were legitimized by the views of natural differences between men and women.

Different theories have since emerged in relation to the history of sexuality. According to Michel Foucault, human thinking about sexuality is majorly under the influence of the "repressive hypothesis," that states that sexuality history in the past three decades has been marred with repression. Therefore, apart from the procreation purposes for which are meant, any other reason for which sex is done is a taboo. The sole way of liberating humanity from the perceived repression, based on this hypothesis, is becoming more open regarding our sexuality, engaging in talks about sex, and ensuring maximum enjoyment of sex. However,

a woman was identified to be in homes where they could stay in privacy and they were not afforded any kind of sociability or public capacities (Molly 66). The nature of a woman was thought to exclude her from what were regarded activities that were men's domain. During this period, Gissing reports that women's nature was considered to be naturally meant for complementing men, and this meant that the desires and ambitions of the Victorian women were summed up by marriage. According to the Victorian attitude, the womanliness essence was domesticity and the duty to the husband and family, and anything else that partly or entirely fell outside these demarcations was regarded unwomanly. Therefore, it is upon these observations that Gissing, through *The Odd Women*, puts significant emphasis on Victorian attitudes towards the nature of



cultures have regarded sex as a knowledge object, where it is thought to be sensual pleasure art. Foucault thinks our culture is fairly different in the manner it treats sex as distanced object for scientific investigation. The answer to this lies in the association between sex and knowledge and power. He condemns the "juridico- discursive" perspective of power as a mere restrictor and repressor, always appearing in the form of a law (Foucault 11). Therefore, he notes that power is equally productive as is repressive, and that power is omnipresent and multifaceted. He supposes that power functions in all directions, and that sexuality cannot be repressed by power, asserting that sexuality itself is a great power conduit.

In his observations, Foucault notes four main points of focus, including sexuality for women, children,

Foucault shows his discontent with this theory, which claims there has been a deliberate silencing and repression of sex. In his view, the discourse about sex has significantly proliferated and intensified in the period after the eighteenth century. He says, "By placing the advent of age of repression in the seventeenth century, after hundreds of years of open spaces and free expression, one adjusts it to coincide with the development of capitalism" (Faucalt 5). With the discourse proliferation and intensification, there was the shift of emphasis from the married couples towards sexual perversion cases, which included homosexuality and child sexuality among others. An individual's sexuality was also believed to give explanations on much of the individual's character.

Over time, sex grew into a knowledge object, and numerous



shares various aspects with the *Odd Women* presentation by Gissing. For instance, Gissing's perspective shares the power relations perspective that is virtually dominant in sexuality in both the ancient and modern generations. Both Gissing and Foucault acknowledge the presence of a social control element in the power relations. Foucault describes the power relation created between the confessant and the preacher, which is in this case analogous to the relationships established between a man and a woman in the ancient generation in sexuality (Foucault 28). Foucault believes power relations are central to any societal analysis, and this is true in the sexuality matters. Power relations must be developed in all associations that exhibit differences. One important aspect in Gissing's perspective of power relations in *The Odd Women* is the manner in which

married couples, and the sexually perverse population. Sexuality deployment through the four points enables spread of power in families and the society . He says, "It would be less than exact to say that the pedagogical institution has imposed a ponderous silence on the sex of children and adolescents" (Faucault 29). In essence, Foucault proposes some questions through concerning the repressive hypothesis. For instance, he wonders whether or not it is accurate historically to follow up the perceived modern sexual repression and link it to the 17<sup>th</sup> century bourgeois' rise (Foucault 30). In addition, Foucault asks if the societal power is basically expressed in the form of regression, and asks if the current discourse regarding sexuality is a real break from the regression history or just a constituent of a similar history.

Foucault's theory on sexuality history



shocking for the society and its conservative norms, although this happened as an outcome of the rare or absolute lack or access to other noble career alternatives dominated by men.

As a new historicism narrator, Gissing reports on a generation with which he shared many of the societal norms and social circumstances, which is contrary to Foucault whose knowledge of the new historicism and his argument of the repressive theory is devoid of the real experience of the sexuality history, which he merely questions and provides opinions from his own reasoning (Zarena 65). The context in which *The Odd Women* is narrated differs from the perception taken by Foucault through his history of sexuality. Gissing directly tackles the statistical imbalances that have been widely highlighted as

financial agencies of the time, amongst which was the Maddens. It is on this basis that the exigencies promoted moral compromise and biased power relations since the women had very limited means of supporting themselves. Essentially, the power imbalance was a characteristic of the Gissing's period, where the women were the others and their otherness was reflected greatly in their subordinate role in the power relations (Gissing 47). In addition, the uncomfortable proximity regarding good marriage to the prostitute was a significant theme that was frequently portrayed in the Victorian context. Gissing talks about how daughters and their mothers made the same bargain daily in *Vanity Fair*. In this case, the woman would opt for investing her beauty in exchange for a remarkable financial return. Apparently this looked very





their domestic sphere. This example is shown through Dr. Madden, who tells her daughters, the Madden sisters, concerning his belief about financial matters. He is quoted by saying "I don't think girls ought to be troubled about this kind of thing. Let men grapple with the world; for, as the old hymn says, 'tis their nature to" (Gissing 67). Therefore, these girls are taught from their early nature lives that the nature of women bars them from engaging in activities linked to social roles for men.

Because of the limitation of women to private and domestic affairs that profoundly deprived them of their economic opportunities, it is evident that women were raised in readiness of marriage and nothing more. The idea that the women's nature

whose entirely intertwined with getting married, as observed by

characterizing men and women of the time by different scholars, including W. R. Greg's in his essay "Why Women Are Redundant" (Molly 62).

Therefore, the new historicism study reveals that power must not be necessarily what is actually meant by the world at large. Power relations could be something so ubiquitous hence cannot be being dual, but leads to divisions between those under domination and those exerting the dominance. This power perception of the society is conceived differently and impacts significantly on the sexuality relations during Gissing's period, as demonstrated through *The Odd Women* (Zarena 65). For instance, beginning from the young ages, girls grow up knowing that womanness is synonymous to childlike, and that womanness lacks the capacity to deal with matters that lie beyond



marriage. The words she speaks give a hint that her decision on whether to marry Mr. Widdowson or not did not hinge on the love she had for him, but on the fact that the man had demonstrated willingness to marry her. This is another scenario of power relations where there is an outright dominance of one party over the other (Zarena 72). The Victorian attitude to womanliness is responsible for the fact that she did not have much room for hesitation due to fear that this was only a privilege that could probably not reappear should she turn down the marriage offer. As the new historicism activist, Gissing gives much emphasis to the notion that marriage, during this time, marked the ultimate endpoint of women. Similarly, he shows that marriage was a principal criterion for women, but not for men. However much a

Gissing during his era, was a very common perception in Victorian Britain, thus representing the majority of women's ambitions. For example, after following the meeting and corresponding with Mr. Widdowson on several occasions, Monica Madden shares what she thought was the importance of marriage. The potential within men is directly contrasted from that of women during the Victorian era. Ruskin thinks it is foolish to praise how superior a man is to a woman, yet the two cannot be compared based on similar things. For instance, he says, "each has what the other does not: each completes the other, and is completed by the other: they are in nothing alike" (81).

The thoughts of marriage as demonstrated by Monica echo the society's views implications on the nature of women as associated with



fulfilled. The sexual divisions emanating from the prevalent Victorian attitudes about the nature of men and women developed great burdens for both men and women, according to Gissing. Since the aspiration of marriage was the duty of a woman, men had the obligation of marrying. On their part, men were expected to work hard in order to secure an estate for self and wife to whom they were married.

Since the Victorian attitude towards the nature of women prohibited respectable women from public life and work, it was the duty of men to handle the burden of providing support for their wives and families at large even though many men, as demonstrated in Micklethwaite's case, did not have income that was inordinately higher than that of the odd women with no husbands, who necessarily had themselves as their obligations. As Micklethwaite

woman desired to have a certain meaningfulness in her life beyond marriage, or to gain recognition by both her husband and the outside world, the Victorian attitude towards the nature of women and hence, the women role, dictated that the duty in marriage for the women superseded all other responsibilities and callings that could come their way.

For instance, Everard tells Mary, his cousin that "Remember that when a man chooses his calling he chooses it for life. A girl cannot but remember that if she marries her calling at once changes. The old business is thrown aside—henceforth profitless" (Gissing 147). Everard words serve as reinforcement to the already predominant notion of the Victorian that the nature of women relegated them to domestic spheres, meaning that marriage should be the only criterion through which women's ambitions, identity, and desires are

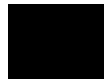


life was essentially wasted if she never got married (Zarena 82). On the other hand, the movement was tasked with offering help to those women who had to live alone as a sheer necessity, and these included the women that were ridiculed by vulgar opinion. In this case, the movement worked towards legitimizing the means through which such women supported themselves. Similarly, the movement sought to establish the ability to have a comfortable independent life for women, and this would eventually serve a common good for both men and women, since the women would be able to facilitate the lifting of the burden that had been historically shouldered by men.

The intellectual inferiority of women in marriage, which was the major agenda promoted by the Victorian attitudes was a great impediment to

eventually tells Everard, "You are in debt to some worthy woman to the extent of half your income. Be quick and find her. It will be better for you," (Gissing 356), and this exhibits the normality that the financial burden associated with marriage and support for a family entirely fell on Victorian men's shoulders. The Victorian attitude towards manliness essentially created social precepts that made it necessary that men were able and entirely responsible for taking care of their families.

It is noted that the early proponents of the women's movement were not keen on usurping the nature of men, but were basically interested in reforming the social conception hierarchy of womanly and manliness. For instance, the movement was aimed at combating the dominant Victorian attitude regarding womanliness, where the woman's



womanliness and manliness, early feminists were interested in emancipating both women and men from the limitations on society.

In conclusion, Gissing portrays Victorian society in an excellent way and he did this through showing the nature of women in regard to marriage and sexuality. Indeed, he depicts contemporary problems of Victorian society through his characters in the novel. *The Odd Women* examines shifting roles of women in the society because each woman plays an important role in the novel. As an example, Rhoda has inverted gender role traits. She, as an educated woman, does not show any kind of interest for marriage. She believes marriage is a disastrous choice for women. She is quite opposite to conventional Victorian society. Gissing explains the theme of feminism by referring to marriage, sex, and love. He raises all these

the ambitions and spirit of able women population in the society, whose utilization and recognition would result in a better human society. Mary Barfoot remarks that "The mass of women have always been paltry creatures, and their paltriness has proved a curse to men. So, if you like to put it in this way, we are working to the advantage of men as well as for our own" (Gissing 256). The early Victorian feminists were champions of reconceptualization of the nature of men and women with the intention of legitimizing the women's shift into what was a previously regarded male sphere. Similarly, the feminists were focused on lifting the burdens resulting from the lack of education and idleness among women, which would inevitably come as a sigh of relief for both genders. Therefore, seeking to reduce the Victorian conceptions of hierarchy for



reporting of the sexuality may have exhibited oddly ancient practices but it is on this basis that the modern society can be able to determine the success made by the feminist movements and the world in general towards the realization of a fair and just society for all genders.

As guided by the philosophy portrayed by Michel Foucault, the analysis of Gissing's work as a true reflection of the beliefs, environmental influence and prejudice of the time shows how significant the feminist movements have been over the last three centuries. Examination of the Gissing's literature of the wider historical points of view, where examination is done based on Gissing's time and how this affected the societal practices reveals how successful his study

issues through the lives of several contrasting women. Gissing's interest in people and daily experience led him to make his novels tests of both characters and ideas. He uses the characteristic Victorian narrative technique in order to show us the link between new women and unhappy married women, the *Odd Women* dramatize the problems of reconciling theory and practice.

New historicism, as a literary theory, has its basis on the viewpoint that the study and interpretation of literature should be done in the historical contexts of the author together with the critic's history. The *Odd Women* by Gissing is both inspiring and informative of the dynamics encountered in modern day understandings of sexuality. Gissing's perspective and



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was and how effective the *Odd  
Women* is in communicating to the  
audience for which it was meant.

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