

“Self-sacrifice may be Quite Wrong”: Women’s Education and Finances in *The Odd Women* (1893) by George Gissing

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ABSTRACT

In late-nineteenth-century Britain, the surplus number of single women presented an internal crisis that accumulated in a number of debates on the subject in various fields, such as economy and education. While much has been written about these in relation to the social context of the time, little has been said specifically about the way single women and their educational and financial positions are presented in late-nineteenth-century English novels. This paper focuses on George Gissing’s (1857-1903) novel *The Odd Women* (1893) and its portrayal of single women and the parallel roles played by money and education in the women’s decision to remain unmarried. The method applied in this study is based on contextual as well as textual analyses and interpretation of the novel in light of feminist and Marxist literary theories. This study investigates the impact of socio-economic conditions on the lives of single women towards the end of the nineteenth century. The result of this study shows the novel makes a correlation between women’s level of education and financial situation with their choice to remain single.

Key words: Single Women, George Gissing, Education, Finances

INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses primarily on the status and treatment of women in George Gissing’s *The Odd Women* (1893) that is written and set in late-nineteenth-century Britain within the context of women’s education and financial position. A prolific novelist, George Gissing (1857-1903) counted amongst his admirers George Orwell who called him in *Tribune* (1943), “The best novelist England has produced”. Orwell also considered *The Odd Women* as one of Gissing’s “real masterpieces” (Orwell, 1943, 15). It would not be too far-fetched to argue that *The Odd Women* depicted rapid transformations in the lives of women in the late nineteenth century as, by this time, they had begun challenging established social norms by working in offices and shops and, in some instances, gaining the right to attend university or college in fiction as well as in reality (Ledger, 1997; Richardson, 2002). For some of these women, complete autonomy was an aspired yet radical goal. In this context, “The Women Question” is a phrase often used in connection to social changes in the late nineteenth century. Some of these changes included women’s suffrage, reproductive rights, bodily autonomy, property rights, legal rights, medical rights and freedom to cohabit without the ties of marriage. While many studies have focused on these issues, not enough have been said about the way Gissing has portrayed education and its financial implications in light of the situation that most

unmarried women in Britain found themselves facing at the turn of the century. In “The Literal Heroine: A Study of Gissing’s ‘The Odd Women’”, Karen Chase remarks, “Gissing’s statements on the Woman Question were as awkward and confused as his relations with women” (Chase, 1984, 231). However, in his portrayal of “The Women Question” in *The Odd Women*, Gissing, as this paper argues, took the middle-ground as his novel supported neither patriarchy nor the feminist movement. In this paper, we argue that Gissing was deeply concerned with the issue of women’s education as shown in *The Odd Women* and that the narrative implies that only through education by way of vocational training that women could find financial independence and freedom, particularly from forced marriages.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While some reviewers and critics place historical value on *The Odd Women* by connecting it to the time period in which it was written, some others sought to challenge this by focusing on the way it was going against the grain in, what some view, as the author’s support for women’s emancipation. Others, however, were more skeptical as they claim that there is an underlying support for patriarchy and societal convention in Gissing’s novel.

From an unsigned review in *Pall Mall Gazette* (May 29, 1983), readers find support for the notion that he was

a proto-feminist as his novel, *The Odd Women*, focuses on every single issue posed by the women question. The novel, it argues, explores every angle in order to highlight the vulnerable position many unmarried women found themselves in that period. As the anonymous reviewer writes, "His method is to take types that represent the question, or rather the fact, in all its divagations to make them in a purely natural way develop that side of themselves that bears on the position of women in society today" (*Pall Mall Gazette*, 1893, as cited in Coustillas, 1972, 219).

A similar notion is repeated by another of reviewer, although he found Gissing's narrative to be foolishly idealistic as, according to him, the novel defies the common perception of that time regarding women's less than equal position in society. In the review, published in *Nation* (July 13, 1893), the writer does not care to hide his tone of indignation as well as his prejudicial view of unmarried women in a long diatribe against them. As the reviewer writes, "One of the most encouraging signs of the times is the recognition of the virtues of the old maid'... Through the intemperance of partisanship [Gissing] has perhaps put a scourge in the hands of the enemies of that class which he wishes to exalt, the self-supporting unmarried women". Setting aside any possibility that men and women would ever be able to establish a relationship of equals, the reviewer points out that, "Mr. Gissing points to the voluntary relation between men and women only as the far-off ideal consummation of human striving towards self-knowledge, self-reverence, and self-control". He is also generally dismissive of Gissing's suggestion that a more balanced relationship between men and women has the ability to bring about social progress, "But the time is not yet, and we go so far with the adorers of home and humdrum as to fail to see that its coming is in the line of social progress" (*Nation*, 1893 as cited in Coustillas, 1972, 220-221).

Yet another set of critics believe that despite appearing to support women rights, Gissing still manages to espouse his belief in patriarchy in his novel. Patricia Comitini (1995) believes that while the various feminist ideologies are presented as likely solutions to the issue of female redundancy of this period, these appear almost as a fantasy mechanism that allows for alternative ideologies to be produced that "distantiates, critiques, and puts into dialogue the feminist ideologies present in Victorian society". Through this way, Comitini argues, real problems concerning the women question are never fully resolved in the novel (Comitini, 1995, 530). Indeed, other critics also make it a point to highlight that the narrative never completely strives to envision the way women's emancipation and other rights could have been obtained even within a fictional world. John Halperin in *Gissing: A Life in Books* writes, "*The Odd Women* makes no plea for women's rights since Rhoda allows for some women, those who are best suited, to remain at home and work there" (Halperin, 1982, 42). Similarly, John Goode, in *George Gissing, Ideology and Fiction*, claims that *The Odd Women* "seems to involve itself with what is almost a side issue" (Goode, 1979, 105) because Monica has no opportunity to marry for love, seeing Widdowson almost wholly as her financial saviour.

Some critics, however, disagree with this condemnation of Gissing as a patriarchal author who sets to portray women as helpless without men. They prefer to view him as a writer who offers a faithful rendition of the realities of living in Britain at a time when single women were in surplus numbers and facing serious financial problems. David Kramer in *George Gissing and Women's Work: Contextualizing the Female Professional* writes, "...such complaints (about Gissing being a proto-feminist) are ahistorical and therefore ignore Gissing's point; the novel is not hypothetical, but an examination of the reality of English life. A large, ever-growing number of women needed a viable form of self-support" (Kramer, 2000, 316). Karen Chase, in *The Literal Heroine: A Study of Gissing's The Odd Women*, also claims it is unfair to judge Gissing on the basis of whether or not he supported women's rights. As Chase writes, "Gissing has recently suffered the embarrassments of historical revision. In the last two decades he has been rediscovered both as a proto-feminist and a misogynist, and since compelling evidence can be found on both sides, no point would be served by trying to fix Gissing's attitude with precision. Indeed, it is clear that Gissing possessed nothing determinate as a precise attitude" (Chase, 1984: 240). What was novel in Gissing's treatment of the subject of women rights, according to Chase, is the way his narrative negotiates between the possibility and impossibility of women gaining more freedom and financial stability in a patriarchal society. For Chase, Gissing's *Odd Women* presented a new way of discussing issues surrounding women, as "he was able to raise new possibilities for the Victorian Heroine, in particular, new rhetorical possibilities that reflect changes in the condition of women at the end of the nineteenth century" (Chase, 1984: 240).

Despite these conflicting views on Gissing and women rights in *The Odd Women's*, it could be argued that to a significant degree Gissing was recounting the problems besieging unmarried women at a time where they, in general, were left in a financially disadvantaged position. This paper, hence, is an attempt at addressing the issue of education that was generally withheld from many women in Britain during this time and, in turn, contributed greatly to their inability to financially support themselves in adult life.

METHOD

This study applies both close-reading of textual and contextual analyses of Gissing's novel. It takes its theoretical framework from feminist and Marxist literary approaches in its analysis of the changing perceptions of single women in *The Odd Women*. The feminist existentialist theorist Simone de Beauvoir's (1908-1986) ground breaking work, *The Second Sex*, provides part of the theoretical basis for this paper. It was de Beauvoir who famously said that, "One is not born a woman; one becomes one" (de Beauvoir, 1949, 301). In a patriarchal society, de Beauvoir observes in *The Second Sex*, the most important subjects are men, women's existence depends on the former. While men are able to manipulate, shape and give meaning to their circumstances, women's value depends solely on men. From men's standpoint, women are not only different, they are also inadequate. The word

“woman”, therefore, has the same implications as the word “other”: she is man’s other in terms of being “less” and alienated from him.

Earlier in the nineteenth century another writer, Frederick Engels (1820-1895), who together with Karl Marx founded Marxism, contributed to the feminist movement. In his monumental work, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), he argues that women must have the knowledge to help their children live in a civilized manner. While men are conferred with the status of being the breadwinners of their families, he implies, they are not superior to their wives since the latter play an equal role in keeping families safe. Engels also supports the view that marriages should be based on love and not forced on any of the partners by anyone. This is because, Engels implies, forced marriages could destroy, first, the future of the family, and, secondly, the structure of the society. While Engels was clearly supportive of the feminist movement, Marx did not conduct an extended study on the matter. Much of Engels’ philosophical thoughts and ideas, however, originally came from Marx’s work *Das Kapital* or *Capital* (1867). Since *The Origin of the Family* is generally an anthropological study of primitive societies, this thesis will mention Marx’s writing as providing part of its theoretical framework.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In their fight for women’s socio-economic rights, Victorian feminists focused not only on advancing women’s education, but also on enlarging the range of employment that was opened to them. Within the feminist activist organization of Langham Place Circle, formed in the 1850s, the connection between these two subjects was well understood. Likewise, reviewers of *The Odd Women* drew similar correlations between women’s financial and marital concerns as well as vocational access, and educational opportunities. A review of the novel by Harold Frederic, published in 1895 in the *New York Times*, refers to the Maddens’ struggles in the context of their economic predicament (*New York Times*, 1895, as cited in Coustillas, 1972, 258). Frederic was drawn to the depiction of Dr. Madden discussing the family’s finances with his eldest daughter, Alice, particularly on the subject of insurance coverage. Readers are told that Dr. Madden visualizes his future in terms of money. In one episode, he says to Alice, “I shall take steps for insuring my life for a thousand pounds” (6). Another passage also mentions the father’s concern about money, “When Monica had grown up it would be time for Dr. Madden to retire from practice; by then he would doubtless have saved money” (8). All these examples seem to indicate that money has a prime role in the novel.

The role of money in the lives of the Madden sisters becomes more significant after the death of their father. All the Madden sisters are in pursuit of it through their various vocations: Alice works as a governess; Virginia becomes a companion to an elderly invalid woman; Isabel teaches in Board School at Bridgewater; Monica works as an apprentice to a draper at Weston. Yet it is made clear to readers that the last vocation is deemed the most undesirable: “To serve behind the corner would not have been Monica’s choice if any more

liberal employment had seemed within her reach” (13). For Monica, having a job was not about making a political statement, it was a necessity and a means of survival. It is the same with Alice and Virginia who both initially started to work simply because it is the only way to survive financially,

Alice, if she had ever dreamt of marriage, must by now have resigned herself to spinsterhood. Virginia could scarce hope that her faded prettiness, her health damaged by attendance upon an exacting invalid and in profitless study, when she ought to have been sleeping, would attract any man in search of a wife. (13)

The above-mentioned lines suggest that Alice and Virginia have spent their lives, after their father’s death, struggling to get paid and their meagre salaries have taken a toll on their health and countenance. Working hard to earn money, they have destroyed their youth and beauty, features that normally attract any potential partner for marriage.

Men were not exempted either from this struggle for wealth since they were required to hold well-paying jobs in order to be eligible enough to get married. It would not be out of place for Monica to expect her suitor, Mr. Bullivant, to be resourceful enough to support his would-be wife. For example, when Mr. Bullivant expresses his interest in forming a relationship with Monica, she says to him, “Mr. Bullivant, I think you ought to wait until you really have prospects. How would it be possible for you to support a wife” (90). Monica is also single minded in her belief that there are monetary benefits attached to being married. Likewise, Monica sees Widdowson as her financier instead of a romantic potential husband. In the episode where Widdowson proposes to Monica, she does not refuse him as she thinks that, “she might never again receive an offer from a man whose social standing she could respect” (63). It is obvious that she is interested in him only as someone who has the means to support her financially. De Beauvoir in her seminal book, *The Second Sex* (1949), remarks on the conventional expectation of that time wherein it is generally believed that a woman would only look forward to an advantageous marriage to a man who is “superior” to her:

In some bourgeois classes a girl is still left incapable of earning a living; she can only vegetate as a parasite in her father’s home or accept some lowly position in a stranger’s home. Even when she is more emancipated, the economic advantage held by males forces her to prefer marriage over a career: she will look for a husband whose situation is superior to her own, a husband she hopes will “get ahead” faster and further than she could. (163)

Like the woman whom de Beauvoir describes as marrying for the sake of money only, Monica enters into a marriage of convenience simply because of its financial benefits. She confesses, in a passage, that while Widdowson was not a companion to be ashamed of, she does not feel any emotional attachment to him. He has qualities that Monica values, but these are inseparable from financial implications. This is made abundantly clear in one episode when her sister, Virginia, asks her to tell her more about Mr. Widdowson and Monica replies, “His name is Mr. Edmund Widdowson. He is very well-off, and has a house at Herne Hill” (103). After

seeing his house, Monica suddenly speaks of her desire for owning a home in front of Widdowson's, "All my life I have wished to have a house of my own" (68). This episode could be viewed as implying that Monica is satisfied with her life prospects with Widdowson and is willing to accept him as a partner in marriage. As the narrative makes clear, society and its expectations objectify both men and women. However, while marriages provide men with a means to pursue their ambitions more intensely as they would have someone to attend to their domestic needs, it would most often serve as a barrier for women from fulfilling their personal aspirations and from the ability to be financially independent because they no longer have to work.

Yet the problems faced by married women in marriages of convenience are often eclipsed in this period by the poor working conditions that await many working women, like Monica. For instance, one episode shows that in Rhoda's eyes, the single and working Monica looks like a recuperating fever patient. David Kramer comments in his article, "George Gissing and Women's Work", "The need for single women to find work could be desperate" (Kramer, 2000, 317). But her work is the only recourse Monica has of improving her situation as she has no desire at all to further her studies. Asked by Mr. Widdowson about whether she has read any books, she is forced to admit that, "I never read very much, and I feel very ignorant" (40). Monica's intellect is clearly suffering from the monotonous nature of her job. This episode could also be suggestive of the possibility that if women were allowed to study, their minds would be better utilised, allowing them to have access to jobs that could help them reach their fullest potential. Also the fact that Monica feels ignorant is indicative of her dissatisfaction with her lack of education.

Women's Education and Financial Position

The narrative alludes to the importance of education to improve women's condition. At a time when the compounds of universities were off-limits to women as women themselves were clearly prohibited against furthering their studies in these institutions, there were fathers who tried to provide informal education to their children, including daughters, by cultivating their interest in reading. Dr. Madden follows the standard Victorian tradition of reading loudly to his daughters and his fondness for picking poems from Coleridge and Tennyson suggests that he wants to cultivate a passion for high culture in his daughters.

In terms of education, the link between *The Odd Women* and the time it is written is of paramount importance. The first passage begins with, "In 1872, Dr. Madden is at the age of forty-nine" (6). The novel could, thus, be said to begin two years after The Elementary Education Act of 1870 made education obligatory for children between the ages of five and thirteen in England. While Alice, the eldest Madden sister, who at nineteen, could be considered as being too old to have benefitted from the Act, her younger sister, Monica, could have benefitted from it. But as Zarina Aslami makes clear in her article, "The State of Optimism: State Fantasy and the Case of 'The Odd Women'" (2004), as a father,

Dr. Madden chooses to bequeath the legacy of culture and not financial security to his children. The girls, readers are told, are not educated for the working world but, "had received instruction suitable to their breeding, and the elder ones were disposed to better this education by private study. The atmosphere of the house was intellectual; books, especially the poets, lay in every room" (33).

Clearly, the kind of informal education that the Madden sisters received is also limited by the type of books that were available to them. The books that Alice possessed are only novels and other light reading materials while Virginia's volumes are on ecclesiastical history. Hence, when Miss Barfoot asks Rhoda if she could help improve the Maddens family's financial situation, Rhoda replies, "They are excellent creatures, kind, innocent women; but useful for nothing. The eldest can't teach seriously but she can keep young children out of mischief and give them a nice way of speaking" (48). As this episode shows, Rhoda is clearly dismissive of the Madden sister's inability to engage themselves in any work that requires skills that could earn them enough money to support themselves. The Madden sisters' future also appears bleak as they could not envision studying all over again. As depicted in one episode, "In a conversation with Monica while discussing about Monica's job and life, Rhoda asks her. "You have no inclination to study now?". Monica replies, "I am afraid not. Certainly, I should like to be better educated, but I don't think I could study seriously, to earn my living by it" (34). Even though she is reluctant to retrain for a new vocation, Monica has the audacity to blame her two older sisters for her current predicament by complaining to Rhoda, "Alice and Virginia were afraid of having me trained for a school, I wish now they had brought me up to do something different" (34).

Gissing's own personal perception on the importance of education for women was revealed in his letter to his friend Eduard Bertz. The letter was sent after Bertz had read and praised *The Odd Women*. In it Gissing explained his rationale for dealing with the subject in his novel: "I am convinced there will be no social peace until women are intellectually trained very much as men are. More than half the misery of life is due to the ignorance and childishness of women" (Young, 1961, 2). A prime example of this type of childish woman is Rhoda and Mary's student, Bella Royston, who elopes with a man and, after some time, decides to go back to her school because she is jilted by her lover. Afraid that Miss Royston's action might set a bad example for the rest of the students, Rhonda is reluctant to welcome her back as she says to her friend, Mary, "One of the supreme social needs of our day is the education of women in self-respect and self-restraint. There are plenty of people—men chiefly, but a few women also of a certain temperament—who cry for a reckless individualism in these matters" (53). Rhoda's view suggests that Miss Royston has lost her self-respect and has failed to transform her life even though she has acquired rudimentary secretarial skills.

Money, Class and Single Women

Besides the difficulties that some women faced in obtaining access to formal education, there is also the question of

financial status and how this influences their decision on either to remain single or get married in *The Odd Women*. The connection between having an income and marital status in the novel is one that corresponded to the socio-economic conditions of working single women at turn-of-the-century Britain. Sally Ledger in her *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism* argues, “At the turn of the century, new employment opportunities were rapidly evolving. [...] It was clear towards the close of the century that women were becoming competitors in the more privileged sections of the economic marketplace” (Ledger, 1991, 19). Financial independence provided by the newer employments was perceived as a threat to Victorian domesticity. As a result, a new definition of femininity began to emerge, embodied in a figure of the New Women who often appeared in English fictional works of the period. Whether or not the narrative itself sought to advocate the ideals of feminism remains questionable. As Deirdre David explains in “Ideologies of Patriarchy, Feminism, and Fiction in *The Odd Women*”, “Dr. Madden’s death at the beginning of the novel symbolizes the death of patriarchy” (David, 1984, 117). Yet, she argues, it is strikingly ironic that the problems that the Madden girls encountered happened only after their father had died which seems to suggest that the girls suffered from a lack of financial support and, correspondingly, social status only when there are no more male family members to support them (David, 1984, 117). That Gissing himself was a supporter of established conventions as opposed to revolutionary ideas finds support in Peter Allan Dale’s argument in “Gissing and Bosanquet: Culture Unhoused” in which he observes, “Gissing was himself attached to a notion of culture, but also bitterly aware of how social status, education, and wealth constrained the quest for it” (Dale, 2008, 272). Consequently, we argue, that he may have thought that women could acquire a higher status in society through education and employment. Even Alice appears to attach happiness to a well-respected position, as when Alice and Virginia receive Rhoda’s letter, the former exclaims in wonder, “she writes cheerfully; I am sure she must be in a good position” (18). Alice clearly correlates happiness to a person’s social position in society.

This understanding that women themselves supported the belief that a good social standing brings about happiness is echoed throughout the novel. When after meeting Monica, both Rhoda and Miss Barfoot converse together about the former’s life and her future and Rhonda makes the remark, “If Monica marry at all, she will marry badly. The family is branded. They belong to the class we know so well. With no social position, and unable to win an individual one” (49). Rhoda firmly believes that Monica has no chance at getting married to a suitable man without first gaining a respectable position in society. From this, readers can conclude that even feminists still expound the idea that every woman should still aspire to get married even though it is a form of servitude to men.

Yet the idea that in order to get married, one must be financially comfortable was not just shared amongst women. Men also had to shoulder the burden of ensuring that they are able to support their wives financially once married.

Everard’s friend, Micklethwaite, reminds him that, “It is the duty of every man, who has sufficient means, to maintain a wife. The life of unmarried women is a wretched one; every man who is able ought to save one of them from that fate” (104). Without mincing his words, Micklethwaite clearly indicates the suffering that single women have to endure when they live without enough money to support themselves. Also Micklethwaite is himself a victim of circumstances as he only manages to get married after a seventeen-year-long engagement. Micklethwaite further says, “Barfoot, you are in debt to some worthy woman to the extent of half your income. Be quick and find her” (105). For Micklethwaite, as it probably was for most men at that time, a single woman’s salvation from further wretchedness is to marry a man who can support her financially. Ironically, Everard himself considers his annual salary of four hundred and fifty pounds to be insufficient to support a family. This shows that men were also not exempted from viewing the importance of having sufficient money as a requirement for getting married. While both Rhonda and Everard may have contrastive views on marriage, both basically believe that it requires a sound financial standing.

The emphasis on having enough money before getting married indicates the highly materialistic nature of British society at the turn of the century as both Engels and Marx had noted in their theory. In describing Marxism, Lois Tyson, in her *Critical Theory Today: A User Friendly Guide*, states, “For Marxism, getting and keeping economic power is the motive behind all social and political activities, including education, philosophy, religion, government, the arts, science, technology, the media and so on” (Tyson, 2006, 54). Both Rhoda and Micklethwaite also view women whom Rhoda call “That ragged regiment” (57) in terms of demand and supply. Lawton A. Brewer in his “George Gissing Manifesto: *The Odd Women* and *The Unclassed*”, remarks on Karl Marx’s views as implied in the novel by stating, “Karl Marx identified the basic elements of the labour process in capitalism in terms Rhoda and Mary themselves no doubt recognize and, though in a slightly altered version, employ: “Our present business is with the production of commodities [...]” (Marx, 179, as cited in Brewer, 2008). Indeed, the idea that marriage is a form of financial transaction is repeatedly present in the minds of characters in the novel.

Gissing’s life shows that he was no stranger to the financial problems that a middle-class gentleman like him had to face in society. Gissing’s biographer John Halperin explains his economic determinism in *Gissing: A Life in Books*:

No other novelist has written so movingly of the pulverizing effects of poverty and the money-race on the sentient spirit and of the ways in which human feelings can be degraded by economic pressures. It is the focus on the individual confronted by circumstances, social and financial, beyond his control that gives such power to Gissing’s best novels—the confrontation of men and economic systems, the brute force of money, the negation of the individual in a money-grubbing system. (Halperin, 1987, 5-6)

Similarly, Gissing’s female characters were often enslaved by their working conditions as a result of the paltry

income that women were often given during that time for what was considered women's work. The only option left for many of these women was to get married. Without concealing the inequality gap between the amount of salaries that men and women often earned, the narrative clearly spells out how much each of the characters earn annually. While Widdowson lives on £600 a year and Everard's salary is a decent £450, Alice's salary is £16 a year when she works as a nursery-governess, and Virginia's is £12 as a "companion" (15). Moreover, from a reference to another shop girl's salary, readers can surmise that Monica receives about £15 while working six days a week for thirteen to sixteen hours each day at the drapery factory (31).

The Question of Choice

Because the narrative deals with issues regarding limited education and financial difficulties faced by single women on a daily basis, one would expect that their lives were frequently hampered by such circumstances. The opposite, however, was the truth as the narrative informs its readers. Almost all of the female characters in the novel make their own individual choices. Monica always take on fate by the throat as she makes her own decision throughout the novel. She embarks on an existentialist journey when she decides to marry Widdowson on her own accord, making it a marriage of convenience as it allows her to escape a life of labour. Later, she moves from one lodging to another according to her own wishes. Monica's most obvious show of having an independent mind, of course, would be her having an extra-marital affair with a man and her inevitable separation from her husband that ends with her adamant refusal to return to her husband's house. As the narrative tells readers, "She refused to go again under her husband's roof" (265). The reason for Monica's single-mindedness is explained by Susan Colón who argues in her "Professionalism and Domesticity in George Gissing's *The Odd Women*", "she may have too little education and energy to succeed in the working world, but she also has too much of those qualities to be happy in a traditionally confined marriage" (Colón, 2001, 446-7). While Monica clearly does not want to go back to working, she can no longer deny her desire to be involved in a romantic relationship.

Even though the two may have different beliefs regarding feminism, Rhoda is similar to Monica in that both tend to make their own decisions. In one example, Rhoda says to Monica that age should not be a barrier to leading life as a single woman if one is decisive and strong-minded, "Thirty-one or fifty-one is much the same for a woman who has made up her mind to live alone and work steadily for a definite object" (84). Yet unlike Monica, who cannot view life without being married, Rhonda's choice to be single is a conscious one, as she says, "So many *odd* women, no making a pair with them. The pessimists call them useless, lost, futile lives. I, naturally - being one of them myself - take another view" (86). These lines show that Rhonda has a strong determination and is opinionated as a person. That the other characters found this to be evident is demonstrated in one episode when Virginia leaves for

home after meeting Rhoda as the narrative states, "It was the first time in Virginia's life that she had spoken with a woman daring enough to think an act for herself" (48). It is also evident to critics that Rhonda is unlike other female characters in the novel as Deirdre David in "Ideologies of Patriarchy, Feminism, and Fiction in *The Odd Women*" (1984) notes, there is an underlying support in the novel for patriarchy as, "Just as *The Odd Women* itself, is in part, the fictive response to all the vapid mush fed to poorly educated, confused women, against which Rhoda rails" (David, 1984, 132). Yet Rhoda is an admirable character as she takes it upon herself to help other "feeble, purposeless, hopeless woman; type of a whole class; living only to deteriorate" (322). Her strong-mindedness and determination even leads one reviewer from *The Academy* to claim, "one feels that Mr. Gissing has deliberately denied to Rhoda success which she ought to have had." (as cited in Cotterell, 1893, 542). Yet not all reviews lauded Rhonda's choice to remain single as one reviewer in *The Literary World* viewed Rhoda as, "in the end chagrined, disappointed, and with a loss of self-respect" (Anon., 1893, 178). Even the feminist library-goer, Clementina Black, registered her protests in an unsigned review published in *Illustrated London News* dated April, 1890, that the "natural end" to Rhoda's storyline "would be a real marriage—that is to say, an equal union" (as cited in Coustillas, 1972, 224). Clearly many critics and women themselves, such as Black, wanted to impose their own views on marriage on Rhoda. Black argues that Gissing had cheated on Rhoda's character—making her "ungenerous, a selfish, and especially an undisciplined woman"—in order to avoid giving her a 'conventional 'happy ending'" (as cited in Coustillas, 1972, 224). An object of male desire and control, Rhonda cannot be allowed to escape patriarchal unwritten codes of conduct. According to these critics, Rhonda is victimised simply for speaking what was in her mind and ignoring her emotional and natural needs. But, we argue, it would be virtually out of character for someone as fiercely independent and single-minded as Rhonda to marry and settle down quietly to raise a family. In her conversation with Monica, she stresses the need for social reform as Rhoda proclaims, "I wish girls fell down and died of hunger in the streets, instead of creeping to their garrets and the hospitals. I should like to see their dead bodies collected together in some open place for the crowd to stare at" (42). She also makes it clear that she will "scorn the old idea that a woman's life is wasted if she does not marry" (204). Rhonda's choice to remain celibate was a bold step on Gissing's part particularly because of the long engagement subplot between Rhoda and Everard, one that contemporary critics of the novel never complained about. Rhoda's choice to remain single was a conscious one, perhaps shaped by her education and awareness for the need to address the issue of "superfluous" women. Everard also believes in Rhoda's determination and single-mindedness. In one episode, when Everard is anxiously wondering if Rhonda was going to meet him or not, he thinks that, "It was not in Rhoda's nature to play tricks; if she had not meant to meet him she would have said so resolutely" (232).

CONCLUSION

Gissing’s *The Odd Women* reveals not so much the tragic circumstances of unmarried women as the dire social circumstances and fate that possibly awaits them. However difficult a single woman’s life could be, a marriage of convenience is shown not to be the answer to such woes. If anything, the narrative’s emphasis on the life of single woman during this time period shows the dire need for social reforms that could potentially transform women’s lives for the better in the coming century. Gissing’s novel, then, according to Patricia Ingham, in her “Introduction” to *The Odd Women*,

is best illuminated by showing how it engages with all the major social and sexual issues that were fiercely debated as the nineteenth century approached its close. The debates were fuelled, as in other centuries, by the sense of dissolution that accompanied the century’s end. The period was often seen as anarchic in predictable Armageddon scenarios. (Ingham, 2000, ix)

Yet the number of unmarried women has and continues to be viewed by many as a national problem. This paper explores the parallel roles played by money and education in the conscious choice that some women made about not getting married. While the issue of unmarried women would continue to remain unsolved in the centuries following the publication of the novel, there have been major advancements in women’s lives in terms of the number of women who have charted previously unexplored territories in various fields such as medicine, education and many others. This has been facilitated by the opening of higher learning institutions for women, such as Girton College at Cambridge University. It would seem that the hard-won efforts by persons, like Rhoda and Mary, who have endeavoured to prepare many female students at their school in Great Portland Street, are not wasted, as the narrative mentions, “two girls were preparing themselves to be pharmaceutical chemists; two others had been aided by Miss Barfoot to open a bookseller’s shop; and several who had clerkships” (51). Similarly, Alice also confides to Widdowson about opening a school by saying, “When Monica’s baby is about two years old we will do what we have been purposing for a long time. We will open a school for young children” (296). The Madden sisters are also planning on educating young women so that they are fit to join the working world because as Rhonda and Mary have proven throughout the course of the novel, women can prove their worth by being productive in their financial and intellectual pursuits. The narrative also makes obvious that education and the job opportunities that accompany it should be made accessible to women who are entrapped by the debilitating circumstances of living in a patriarchal world. As the narrative informs us, Rhonda and her feminist friends plan to publish a monthly newsletter as Rhoda mentions to Alice, “[T]he first number will be out in a month. The world is moving!” (296). This newspaper is the narrative way of indicating better economic and educational conditions in the future for women. It is also telling that “A New Beginning” is the title of the concluding chapter of the novel, which also contains debates mainly on education that shows the

link between a fresh start for women and reforms in their education.

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