

## **The Futility of Revolt in Arnold Bennett's *The Old Wives' Tale***

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### **Abstract**

This research paper deals with Arnold Bennett's *The Old Wives' Tale* (1908). It aims at showing how meaningless and futile it is to revolt against the iron grip of circumstances, whether social or economic, that shape or determine people's lives and precisely speaking the lives of the Baines sisters, the heroines of the novel. It sheds light on the differences between those sisters and the gap in the degree of their consciousness of the world they live in. It also points to the destructive effect of time upon them and their great effort to adjust themselves to their environment.

*The Old Wives' Tale* was published in 1908. Its main scenes were set in the heart of Staffordshire, "one of the Midlands pottery towns, that later served as a backdrop for [Bennett's] celebrated Five Towns novels."<sup>1</sup> As a product of this fictional manufacturing district in the north of England, and being influenced by the naturalism of Zola, Bennett minutely observed and depicted the grim and sordid lives of shopkeepers and potters. Brought up in this ugly, dull and dirty town, he managed to have a few knowledge of the life there and unconsciously assimilate the very spirit of the later part of the Victorian era of industrial England. This idea, using Dorothy Van Doren's words, is reflected in the following passage :

The potteries and the mines flourished, therefore...The towns suffered smoke, filth, brutality, restraint. And in the midst of this sat the middle class, the employers, the fortunate ones, calm, temperate, decent, hard – working and frugal.. above all frugal. To this class Mr. Bennett belonged and he has given it immortality.<sup>2</sup>

Unable to tolerate the drabness and the narrowness of the Five towns, Bennett gladly escaped from it to find his aspiration in Paris, the place where the first notion for the novel came to him in 1903 as he went out to have dinner, as he used to, in a Parisian restaurant. What Bennett saw in that restaurant opened his mind to the possibility of writing the novel," and to that inspiration the title holds true."<sup>3</sup>

Seeing an old woman made ridiculous and laughed at by time that evening, Bennett comes to the discovery that:

This woman was once young, slim, perhaps beautiful; certainly free from these ridiculous mannerisms. Very probably she

is unconscious of her singularities. Her case is a tragedy.<sup>4</sup>

In his attempt to surpass his French model, Guy de Maupassant, Bennett chooses to make his book "go on better" than "Une Vie" (1883) and be about "the life–history of two women instead of only one."<sup>5</sup> The novel traces the lives, the suffering and the hardships of Constance and Sophia Baines, the two lovely daughters of a Bursley's shopkeeper, from their childhood in their father's shop during the mid–Victorian era to their being old women in the modern industrial age.

As an Edwardian, Bennett tries to depict "selves in a post–cultural crisis."<sup>6</sup> If someone considers the first paragraph of *The Old Wives' Tale*, it will be very clear that Bennett's heroines, i.e., Constance and Sophia, are deeply unconscious of their situation:

Those two girls, Constance and Sophia Baines, paid no heed to the manifold interest of their situation, of which, indeed they had never been conscious. They were, for example, established almost precisely on the fifty–third parallel of latitude.

( *OWT.* , Book I , Ch. 1 )

Consciousness is an essential part to the process of human assimilation and adaptation. In fact, the girls are completely ignorant of their environment and their home. Bennett, in this novel, criticizes the values and the moral system that the inhabitants of St. Luke's square hold. Part of this system, of course, are the Baines, and within "this impressive, unassailable system of stiff values stand Sophia and Constance."<sup>7</sup> Sophia and Constance are two different personalities and so they react differently to "the small tyrannies of Victorian domesticity."<sup>8</sup>

Constance, as her name suggests, is content to remain in her situation. To Mrs. Baines, who is in charge of the Baines household, Constance remits and remains submissive, whereas, Sophia, the more anti-Victorian, conscious, romantic and courageous, meets Mrs. Baines's rule with much resistance. Sophia, as an unconventional woman, longs to follow her own career as a teacher. She wants to escape the narrow and dull middle class provincial values of the family, and of the society as a whole, and be a teacher rather than to assist in her father's shop, as it has "been taken for granted."<sup>9</sup>

Mrs. Baines, as a symbol of the old generation, or of the Victorian past, thinks of the idea of education with abhorrence:

Why in the name of heaven had the girl taken such a notion into her head? Orphans, widows, and spinsters of a certain age suddenly thrown on the world—these were the women who, naturally, became teachers, because they had to become something. But that the daughters of comfortable parents, surrounded by love and the pleasures of an excellent home, should wish to teach in a school was beyond the horizons of Mrs. Baines's common sense.

( *OWT.* , Book I , Ch. 3 )

In the Five Towns of Victorian England, it is forbidden for a girl to follow a business career. She is to sit at home and thus Sophia does not have the opportunity to complete her education and get graduated. She has to surrender to her family's rigid system and not to be a nay-sayer. As a matter of fact, Bennett tries to emphasize the idea of the difficulty of social change, and he, being an Edwardian, is occupied with questioning the Victorian values and its moral system, the notion that Jefferson Hunter sums up in the following:

Bennett makes change occur imperceptibly, in the midst of an environment hostile to drama and even to the idea of change. Ideals die while one's head is turned, he remarks in *The Old Wives' Tale* .... To adapt John Gross' phrase for Bennett, he is almost unsurpassed at showing how nothing remains the same but everything goes on as usual.<sup>10</sup>

In this sense, the novel, using Robert Squillace's words, can be read as an anti-patriarchal "analysis of secrecy and its exposure."<sup>11</sup> Greatly intent on showing the irrationalities of the society that he lives in, Bennett organizes his works, including *The Old Wives' Tale*, around this idea of "the modern search for a rationally organized mode of existence, rehearsing in them the struggle against the survival of the authoritarian patriarchal system that turned on the years of faith and obedience."<sup>12</sup> Sophia, as a rebel, rejects to stay in her family's

oppressive home. Though Sophia's father, John Baines, is an invalid, paralyzed old man, he "still attempts to dominate his womenfolk."<sup>13</sup> As a symbol of "decaying patriarchy,"<sup>14</sup> he, too, rejects Sophia's plan and desire to become a teacher:

Here was this antique wreck, helpless, useless, powerless—merely pathetic—actually thinking that he had only to mumble in order to make her 'understand'! He knew nothing; he perceived nothing; he was a ferocious egoist, like most bedridden invalids, out of touch with life—and he thought himself justified in making destinies, and capable of making them!

( *OWT.* , Book I , Ch. 3 )

Her father's reaction from her father strengthens Sophia for she now feels that she is older than her father due to her consciousness. This process of ageing makes her be more mature than she is when depicted at the beginning of the novel:

Sophia could not perhaps, define the feelings which overwhelmed her; but she was conscious of their tendency. They aged her, by years. They aged her so that, in a kind of momentary ecstasy of insight, she felt older than her father himself.

( *Ibid.* )

Another situation that emphasizes that Sophia is a defiant character is her insistence upon encountering her lover, the handsome Gerald Scale, a sales representative who "comes to town on business,"<sup>15</sup> and whom she thinks is the perfect man who would show her the world. Her correspondence with this dandyish salesman not only intensifies the tension between Sophia herself and Mrs. Baines, but also has been the cause of Mr. Baines's death. Because of her irresponsibility, Mr. Baines, who is supposed to be watched by his spoiled daughter, Sophia, he chokes and dies. Eventually, Sophia scandalously escapes with Gerald to Paris and she is not to be heard of again in Bursley for more than twenty years. Meanwhile, Constance, much like her mother, marries a reliable unadventurous man, her father's former assistant, Samuel Povey. After six years of marriage, a son, Cyril, was born. The married couple devote their lives to their son, who departs for London to study art and proves to be unfaithful and

ungrateful to them. To her distress, Constance feels more lonely after the departure of her spoiled, selfish, self absorbed and insensitive son who never visits her, than by her husband's death. Left by her only interest in life, i.e., her son, she reflects on her monotonous and unhappy life saying:

I'm a lonely old woman now. I've nothing to live for any more, and I'm no use to anybody. Once I was young and proud. And this is what my life has come to! This is the end!

( *OWT.* , Book II , Ch.8 )

Constance has endured much to survive in the Five Towns. Her perseverance is reflected at the end of her days in the following lines:

Constance never pitied herself. She did not consider that fate had treated her badly. She was not very discontented with herself .... True, she was old! So were thousands of other people in Bursley. She was in pain. So there were thousands of other people. With whom would she be willing to exchange lots? She had many dissatisfactions. But she rose superior to them. When she surveyed her life, and life in general, she would think, with a sort of tart but not sour cheerfulness: "well, that is what life is!"

( *OWT.* , Book III , Ch. 5 )

Sophia's life is not different from Constance's. Though she elopes with Gerald Scales to Paris, "to a world opposite of the Five Towns in all its appearance and attraction,"<sup>16</sup> she does not find satisfaction. She soon gets disillusioned by her scoundrel husband, who abandons her when she refuses to write to her family for money. In fact her elopement is predetermined by the Five Towns. Belonging to such provincial background, and being inexperienced enough, she is unable to see her lover's true character and is mistaken by him. Thus in her advanced days, she has no alternative other than to return to Bursley "to live out her last years with Constance."<sup>17</sup> She, like her sister, ends up, being deserted, lonely and unhappy. Finally, she succumbs to her second and fatal stroke and dies. The Grieving Constance, upon Sophia's death, comments:

Hers had not been a life at all. And the reason? It is strange how fate persists in justifying the harsh generalization of Puritan morals, of the morals in which Constance had been brought up by stern parents! Sophia had sinned. It was therefore inevitable that she should suffer. And adventure such as she had in wicked and capricious pride undertaken with Gerald Scales, could not otherwise than it had concluded. It could have brought nothing but evil.

( *OWT.* , Book , IV , Ch. 4 )

Thus the novel ends with the conquering death of its heroines. They are overtaken by old age and die "without realizing the great changes that have taken place around them."<sup>17</sup> Time has a great effect upon those two sisters, who have been completely unaware of its destructiveness. It is, as E. M. Forster thinks:

the real hero of *the Old Wives' Tale*....Our daily life in time is exactly this business of getting old which clogs the arteries of Sophia and Constance, and the story that is a story and sounded so healthy and stood no nonsense cannot sincerely head to any conclusion but the grave .<sup>19</sup>

### Conclusion

Reading Arnold Bennett's *The Old Wives' Tale*, one comes to the conclusion that it is useless and meaningless to struggle against society and its inadequacies. Man has to accept his own fate or destiny with great stoicism, otherwise, he would be defeated. This is really true of Sophia. As she goes through her life, she becomes more experienced and conscious. Life makes her conscious of the futility of her existence, the idea that is clearly shown through her reaction to the sight of her husband's dead body . "I wish I was dead. I have been through too much" ( *OWT.* , Book IV , Ch. 4 ). After her endless fight, she comes to cope with her wasted life and disillusionment. But the value that she gains is wisdom and maturity. Her vision of her wasted aspiration and life at the death bed of her husband, who betrays her, indicates how mature and experienced she becomes.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Anonymous , " *The Old Wives' Tale* , " nd.np. 11/ 12/ 2012 . << [www .powells. com/ biblio / 65- 9786140182 552- 2 - 76k](http://www.powells.com/biblio/65-9786140182552-2-76k) >> .

<sup>2</sup>Cited in Agnes' Laye Babcock , *Interpretation of the Social Tendencies Found in Arnold Bennett* , unpublished thesis (Chicago, Loyola University, 1937 . << [http : // ecommons .luc . edu/ tuc-theses / 33](http://ecommons.luc.edu/tuc-theses/33)>> . P. 1 .

<sup>3</sup>Sierra Prasada , " *The Old Wives' Tale* , " 2012 . np. 11/ 12/ 2012 . << [www. Sierra Prasada . com / 2012 / 06 / 04 / 1908-the-old-wives-tale / -32k](http://www.SierraPrasada.com/2012/06/04/1908-the-old-wives-tale/-32k) >> .

<sup>4</sup>Arnold Bennett , " preface " in *The Old Wives' Tale* , ( South Australia The University of Adelaide , 2012 ) << [http : // ebooks . Adelaide . edu .](http://ebooks.adelaide.edu) >> .All subsequent references to the novel are taken from this text.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>William Bellamy , *The Novels of Wells , Bennett and Galsworthy 1890-1910* ( London , Routledge & Kegan Paul , 1971 ) , P.2.

<sup>7</sup>Mathew Bin, " *A Christ – like , All – Embracing " Method : From Tragic to Compassionate in Selected Novels of Arnold Bennett* , McMaster University, 1997 << [http : // digital – commons mcmaster . ca / opendissertations / 5986](http://digital-commons.mcmaster.ca/opendissertations/5986) >> .

<sup>8</sup>David Waldo Clarke, *Modern English Writers* ( London, Longmans, Green & Co. Ltd. , 1947 ) , P. 35 .

<sup>9</sup>Frank N. Magill, ed. *Masterpieces of World Literature in Digest form* ( New York , Harper & Brothers – publishers , 1952 ) , P. 684 .

<sup>10</sup>Cited in Mathew Bin . P. 48 .

<sup>11</sup>Cited in Rudolph Glitz, " *The Old Wives' Tale* , " *The Literary Encyclopedia* . 13 April 2011 . 15 / 4 / 2011 . << [http : // www. litencyc . com / php / sworks . php ? rec= true &UID = 9696](http://www.litencyc.com/php/sworks.php?rec=true&UID=9696) >> .

<sup>12</sup>Robert Squillace,*Modernism , Modernity and Arnold Bennett* ( London , Associated university presses ,Inc. , 1997 ) , p. 21 .

<sup>13</sup>Patricia Stubbs, *Women & Fiction Feminism and the Novel 1880 – 1920* ( London , Methuen & Co. Ltd. , 1979 ) , P. 199 .

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Devon S. " *The Old Wives' Tale* , " August 2010 . 11 / 12 /2010. << [modern library list. blogsport. com / 2010 / 11 / 87 old-wives-tale- by 57 k](http://modernlibrarylist.blogspot.com/2010/11/87-old-wives-tale-by-57k) >> .

<sup>16</sup>Arnold Kettle , *An Introduction to the English Novel* , Vol. II (London, Hutchinson University Library, 1967 ) , P. 78 .

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Clarke , P. 35 .

<sup>19</sup> Cited in Kettle , P. 79 .

## عبث التمرد في رواية حكاية السيدات المسنات لأرنولد بينت

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### الخلاصة

يتناول البحث رواية حكاية السيدات المسنات لارنولد بينت ( 1908 ). يبين البحث ان التمرد ضد الظروف القاسية والصعبة ، سواء كانت اجتماعية او اقتصادية ، والتي ترسم وتحدد مصير او حياة الناس ، وبالتحديد حياة بنات عائلة بينز بطلنا الرواية ، عديم الجدوى وبدون أي هدف . يسلط البحث الضوء ايضا على الفرق بين هاتين الاخنتين وعلى درجة وعيها للعالم الذي يعيشان فيه . يشير البحث ايضا الى تأثير الزمن المدمر لهما وجهودهما القصوى في العيش والتكيف مع البيئة التي يعيشان فيها .