

Wilde Men and Odd Women: The Threat to Masculinity at the Fin de Siècle

Introduction

1895 marked a watershed in the Fin de Siècle period. It saw the sensational trial and downfall of perhaps the most famous homosexual, Oscar Wilde, who had hitherto enjoyed popular success. Also came the publication of *Jude the Obscure*, a book deemed so obscene the Bishop of Wakefield threw it into the fire, and critics including Mrs Oliphant described it as a polemic against marriage. Unnerved by the reaction, its author Thomas Hardy never wrote another novel. And, as if in response to them both, Max Nordau published the English translation of *Degeneration* in which he lambasted such writers and others whom he saw as being responsible for society's ills and the impending 'Dusk of Nations'.

As Elaine Showalter argues, "Wilde's trial created a moral panic that inaugurated a period of censorship affecting both advanced women and homosexuals."¹ One could go further and argue that this censorship affected all men, not just homosexuals, and forced them to reaffirm their identity by conforming to a masculine ideal. There had existed a comfortable binary system, and this was being challenged by women who refuted traditional feminine roles, and also by men who adopted what was perceived as

¹ Showalter, Elaine (1992), Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle, London, Virago, p171

effeminate behaviour and rejected traditional models of heterosexuality. These groups were “members of an avant garde attacking marriage and reproduction.”²

In order to assert what was wrong, it was necessary to specify what was right. It was far easier to define what was *not* masculine. What was normal? If something was not masculine, was it, by definition, feminine? For the Victorians, anything not readily identifiable was apt to be labelled “degenerate”. This was “anything deviating from a middle-class-defined ‘normalcy’.”³ Nordau conflated Decadence, the movement characterised by aestheticism, with degeneration. This movement was, therefore, symbolic of a nation in decay. To be decadent in an age of utility was an anathema to people like the self-help guru Samuel Smiles, who equated the health of the individual with the health of the nation. Furthermore, the body was an economic unit and should be productive. There was a moral duty to do the best for one’s country, and this required discipline and adherence to societal norms.

The mid-nineteenth century was a predominantly peaceful period and the concept of manliness came to be constructed on ideals other than military achievement. Indeed, at this time 60% of men were unfit for military service, prompting alarm over possible neurasthenia. There was, however, an economic threat from mighty nations, such as

² Showalter, Elaine (1993), Daughters of Decadence: Women Writers at the Fin de Siècle, London, Virago, p ix

³ Ledger, Sally & Luckhurst, Roger (2000), The Fin de Siècle: A Reader in Cultural History c1880-1900, Oxford, Oxford University Press, pxxii

Germany and the USA, and Britain's hard-won Empire needed to be protected by strong men, supported by their dutiful women.

Whilst science was supporting the "Victorian impulse toward scientific classification"⁴ and demarcation of deviance, it was also undermining the idea of human progress. Victorians considered themselves to have reached the apogee of civilisation and were enjoying the concomitant material benefits. Pioneering work by evolutionary scientists, most famously Darwin, showed that species which became too comfortable could suffer arrested development. Darwin had also expounded his theory of the survival of the fittest. The fin-de-siècle man intended to survive, and that meant fighting his enemies.

This paper will identify the perceived enemies of the normative male and examine his reaction to the threats they posed. Firstly, I shall discuss gender conflict in the context of *The Odd Women* and how out of population imbalance arose a band of women who were able to rival the independence enjoyed by men and also challenge their supremacy. Consideration will also be given to shifting perspectives on marriage and the growing incompatibility and spatial segregation of the sexes. Secondly, I shall develop this idea of segregation, along with the institution of Clubland, with its blurred lines between homosociality and heterosexuality. The threat of the homosexual to masculine norms will be considered, and how the ensuing panic resulted in a re-mapping of sexual identity. Lastly, I shall explore male fears of regression and degeneration and how they

⁴ Hurley, Kelly (1996), *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p8

were exacerbated by scientific discourses and dystopic fiction which challenged their hegemony, both at home and abroad.

Sexual Anarchy

“Do you know that there are half a million more women than men in this happy country of ours?” asks Rhoda Nunn in George Gissing’s *The Odd Women*.⁵ “So many *odd* women,” she continues, “no making a pair with them.” The term ‘odd’ was applied not only in the sense of their being surplus to requirements but also eccentric. Such women, in the absence of a man to support them financially, were forced to pursue unprecedentedly independent lives, thus presenting an alternative to marriage. The thought that some women might consequently *choose* to pursue such a course was both perplexing and horrifying to men. Hitherto, the spinster had born the image of a slightly dusty maiden aunt, but now she was a figure of strength and autonomy, and part of a growing political force, the New Woman.

Whilst male supremacy was being steadily compromised by social changes, the position of women had been bolstered by a raft of legislative measures, such as the Married Woman’s Property Acts, which made them independent of their husbands. Although far from having achieved equal status, the fin-de-siècle woman was no longer completely subsumed into the identity of her husband, or indeed necessarily obliged to find one. Reactionary voices such as William Greg referred to the surplus women as “an unwholesome social state,” and suggested the rather peremptory solution of government-

⁵ Gissing, George (1993), *The Odd Women*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, p41

sponsored emigration to the colonies.⁶ The implication was that women were yet another commodity to be bandied around Britain's Empire. He also espoused the idea of such women being forcibly entered into domestic service, thus supporting the nation in a less independent and challenging role. Echoing his sentiments, Edmund Widdowson, *The Odd Women's* proponent of the values of a bye-gone era believes that "an educated woman had better become a domestic servant than try to imitate the life of a man."⁷

Gissing himself took a more equivocal, and reluctantly feminist, view. He mused that "more than half the misery of life is due to the ignorance and childishness of women" and could be ameliorated by providing them with the opportunity of developing their mental faculties.⁸ He acknowledged that addressing the educational needs of women would bring "sexual anarchy" for a time, but maintained that the ramifications would not be too destructive. *The Odd Women* encapsulates the tumult of this period, beginning with the "emblematic demise of the Victorian patriarch" and ending with "the birth of his granddaughter, perhaps the birth of a brave 'New Woman'."⁹ The changing image of woman is examined through the trials of the archetypal, largely passive, spinsters

⁶ *Sexual Anarchy*, p18

⁷ *The Odd Women*, p173

⁸ Korg, Jacob (1963), George Gissing: A Critical Biography, London, Methuen, p185

⁹ David, Deirdre (1984), "Ideologies of Patriarchy, Feminism, and Fiction in 'The Odd Women'", *Feminist Studies*, 10(1): 117-139, p117

Virginia and Alice Madden, who are “useful for nothing,”¹⁰ and also the independent feminists, Rhoda Nunn and Mary Barfoot, who run a typing school for girls.

The girls are also taught shorthand and book-keeping, thus rendering them attractive to the labour market and ultimately independent. Whilst Mary appears to be fulfilling a philanthropic role, Rhoda is portrayed as a militant and described as “quite like a man in energy and resources”¹¹ She is a ‘Nunn’ in a different sense, having taken a vow of chastity and become a bride of feminism. Her view of the “superfluous females” is as a “great reserve,” offering a “substitute for the world’s work when other women vanish in matrimony.”¹² She employs martial imagery, referring to “a new order”¹³ and talking of the “glory of conquering,”¹⁴ as though she is issuing a war cry or call to arms.

Mary is more practical and realistic than Rhoda: “women have thought as I do at any time in history. Miss Nunn, however, has much zeal for womanhood militant.”¹⁵ Whilst Rhoda makes much of her “bodily vigour,” Mary maintains that “to work for women one must keep one’s womanhood.”¹⁶ Deirdre David sees Gissing’s attitude towards feminism

¹⁰ *The Odd Women*, p56

¹¹ *The Odd Women*, p32

¹² *The Odd Women*, p41

¹³ *The Odd Women*, p65

¹⁴ *The Odd Women*, p97

¹⁵ *The Odd Women*, p93

¹⁶ *The Odd Women*, p33

as ambiguous and contradictory, citing his unsympathetic treatment of Rhoda Nunn as a character.¹⁷ However, he seems not to be simply attacking feminists, suggesting rather that women will not succeed by emulating men and displaying the male characteristics, such as implacability, that they presumably disliked. It is merely an *ad feminam* attack on what Rhoda represents.

Rhoda's primary battle is with Mary's cousin, Everard Barfoot. He is symbolic of a man whose rational elements acknowledge the inequitable position of women, but at the same time cannot quite relinquish the power afforded him by his position of dominance. "Delighting in her independence of mind, he still desired to see her in complete subjugation to him," and he is satisfied with "nothing short of unconditional surrender."¹⁸ They struggle for supremacy in the relationship and eventually part, due to what Deirdre David refers to as "their inability to free themselves from a destructive need to control each other."¹⁹ Whilst Rhoda is strengthened by having resisted the temptation to compromise, Barfoot turns to the less challenging Agnes Brissenden, a woman who can boast of traditional Victorian accomplishments.

Barfoot appears to marry through an unconscious desire for that state. He refers to marriage as "*a pis aller*," and proclaims that "the vast majority of men must make a

¹⁷ David, p127

¹⁸ *The Odd Women*, p299

¹⁹ David, p119

marriage that is doomed to be a dismal failure.”²⁰ The institution of marriage was under the microscope at this time, with Mona Caird’s 1888 column in *The Daily Telegraph*, ‘Is Marriage a Failure?’, eliciting 27,000 replies.²¹ Most responses were in the affirmative, although in *The Diary of a Nobody*, the Pooters conclude that it had not been a failure in their case, and they talk over their happy experiences.²² Mrs Cosgrove, *The Odd Women*’s redoubtable widow, declares “marriage in general is *such* a humbug,” and, reflecting the author’s opinions, continues that “we shall have to go through a stage of anarchy, you know, before reconstruction begins.”²³ This anarchy causes Barfoot to retreat after an impasse, and Widdowson to accept defeat. The latter has waited a long time for marriage and then is utterly bewildered by it. They are challenged by what Federico calls the “masculine dilemma” – the “desire for the female ideal and the intrusiveness of female reality.”²⁴

Widdowson detests change – an unfortunate position in this period of flux. He desires a young, malleable girl, and believes it his duty to manage her. He keeps her under surveillance during their courtship and, in a display of masculine hubris, wishes to destroy the street where she worked. He views women earning a living as unnatural, “a

²⁰ *The Odd Women*, p115

²¹ Tucker, Herbert (1999), *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture*, Oxford, Blackwell, p136

²² Grossmith, George & Weedon, *The Diary of a Nobody*, Ware, Wordsworth, p72

²³ *The Odd Women*, p326

²⁴ Federico, Annette (1991), *Masculine Identity in Hardy and Gissing*, London, Associated University Presses, p87

necessity which advanced civilisations will altogether abolish.”²⁵ Indeed, he seeks to also control Monica’s sisters, taking over where their father, Dr Madden, left off. Monica warns him that “things will never be better until you come to think of me as your free companion, not as your bondwoman,”²⁶ but the repeated threats to his manhood provoke a murderous rage, as though revealing his true monstrous nature. He claims “only by homicide can a man maintain his dignity in a situation like this,”²⁷ thereby suggesting that his type can provide no rational riposte to the thrust of New Woman.

He ultimately seeks respite by setting up home with his friend, Newdick. He is able to maintain a position of financial dominance, without the female challenge to his authority. Similarly, Jocelyn Pierston in *The Well-Beloved* finally relinquishes his dream of the perfect woman, instead opting to undertake municipal works, an area refreshingly free of women. As Rhoda Nunn declares:

“There’s one advantage in being a woman. A woman with brains and will may hope to distinguish herself in the greatest movement of our time – that of emancipating her sex. But what can a man do, unless he has genius?”²⁸

Widdowson certainly does not have genius, having obtained his money and relative comforts through inheritance, rather than through labour. He is therefore forced into the sanctuary of the homosocial environment. Showalter describes women as having been

²⁵ *The Odd Women*, p173

²⁶ *The Odd Women*, p230

²⁷ *The Odd Women*, p288

²⁸ *The Odd Women*, p97

“potential disrupters of masculine boundary systems.”²⁹ Previously confined largely to the domestic sphere, they were now entering the public arena. Tosh asserts that “much of man’s power has resided in their privileged freedom to pass at will between public and private,”³⁰ but women were appropriating similar powers. Men were therefore forced to seek sanctuary in Clubland.

Queer Street

Clubland was a network of institutions that allowed men to socialise freely, and provided a welcome relief from the pressures of the home. They formed the last bastion of masculinity, with women on the move, “invading and appropriating male prerogatives and discourse.”³¹ In Gissing’s *The Whirlpool*, Alma Rolfe says her husband is a different man after he has been to his club. Showalter claims that Clubland “reinforced the spatial as well as the social boundaries separating men and women,”³² and Stetz develops this idea, writing of “two worlds, one occupied by men, the other by women.”³³ Oscar Wilde presented a challenge to masculine norms by spanning both of these worlds. He rejected

²⁹ *Sexual Anarchy*, p8

³⁰ Tosh, John (2007), *A Man’s Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England*, New Haven, Yale University Press, p2

³¹ Doane, Janice & Hodges, Devon (1989), “Demonic Disturbances of Sexual Identity: The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr/s Hyde”, *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 23(1): 63-74, p65

³² *Sexual Anarchy*, p11

³³ Stetz, Margaret Diaine (2001), “The Bi-Social Oscar Wilde and ‘Modern Woman’”, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 55(4): 515-537, p537

an exclusively homosocial milieu in favour of a “bi-social” existence in which he also sought the company of women.³⁴

The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, with its all-male cast, presents a predominantly homosocial environment. However, this is an arid landscape; the main characters are all unmarried and presumably, therefore, without issue, and appear to lack the charms necessary to remedy this situation. Mr Utterson is “cold, scanty, and embarrassed in discourse”³⁵ and does not socialise, other than during his Sunday afternoon constitutional with Enfield. The characters’ attempts to maintain boundaries have resulted in sterility. Showalter writes of a further “fragile boundary separating Clubland from homosexuality, and manly misogyny from homoeroticism.”³⁶ She describes the novel as a “case study of male hysteria,” suggesting that Hyde represents the fears or emotional excesses of Jekyll. However, it could be argued that the locus is the danger of suppressing one’s true identity or “man’s dual nature.”³⁷ Jekyll’s fugue-like transformation into Hyde illustrates the struggle between conflicting identities in an age when only conformity was acceptable. Although a sense of hysteria can be inferred by Hyde “weeping like a woman” and being “knit closer than a wife” to Jekyll, his symbiote, this also implies a duality of nature which undermines the traditional dichotomy of gender.

³⁴ Stetz, p525

³⁵ Stevenson, Robert Louis (2003), Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, New York, W W Norton & Company, p7

³⁶ *Sexual Anarchy*, p13

³⁷ *Jekyll and Hyde*, p48

Jekyll and Hyde has been popularly read as a tale of homosexual panic, Hyde representing the respectable Jekyll's Uranian alter ego. The text contains a plethora of possible dysphemisms for sodomy, including "moral weakness," and "undignified pleasures." The sodomite threatened the world of masculine respectability, and pubs in the areas he frequented, such as Charing Cross, carried signs bearing the warning "Beware of Sods."³⁸ Hitherto seen largely as a working-class pursuit, homosexuality had now pervaded the inner sanctum of the middle classes. Whilst buggery was an accepted part of the public school system, boys were supposed to renounce it when they reached maturity. Continuing such practices thereafter denoted alarming proclivities. Dellamora writes of a "tendency to quarantine known homosexuals"³⁹ and Cocks sees this era as marking the establishment of the closet.⁴⁰ Respectability could be maintained through a system of calumny and blackmail – men could distract attention from themselves by accusing another, and there was money to be made when that accusation proved true. Homosexuals were herded out of polite society, unless they were prepared to keep quiet about their inclinations. This vendetta was underpinned by the 1885 Labouchere Amendment, commonly known as the Blackmailer's Charter, which punished acts of 'gross indecency' between men, whether in public or private. Ostensibly, the Amendment was designed to improve 'social purity' by raising the age of consent for

³⁸ Pearsall, Ronald (2003), The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality, Stroud, Sutton Publishing, p450

³⁹ Dellamora, Richard (1990), Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, p204

⁴⁰ Cocks, H G (2003), Nameless Offences: Homosexual Desire in the 19th Century, London, I B Tauris, p116

girls and regulating non-marital sexual relations, but it was used essentially to control homosexual men and women of the night. As Weeks writes, “in terms of social obloquy, all homosexual males as a class were equated with female prostitutes.”⁴¹

This climate of persecution is portrayed in *Jekyll and Hyde*. Hyde lives in Black Mail House on Queer Street. Although at this time ‘queer’ had not as yet come to mean ‘homosexual’, the allegorical nature of the novel means it can be interpreted as such. The nature of Sir Danvers Carew’s death at the dockyard suggests the murder of a client by a male prostitute. Homosexuals are thus seen to be policing themselves and removing ‘undesirable’ elements from society. Utterson says that Jekyll was “wild when he was young” and there is the “ghost of some old sin, the cancer of some concealed disgrace.”⁴² Utterson represents society’s puritanical streak, and also what Stevenson saw as Calvinistic hypocrisy, explored earlier in his compatriot James Hogg’s *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. The Christian doctrine stressed the “ability of the dominant, moral brain to contain and control its potentially wayward other.”⁴³ People were impressionable and should exercise self-restraint in order to avoid becoming perverted.

The Victorian way of dealing with such perversion was to suppress mention of it. Homosexuality could be tolerated if those who practiced it stayed behind locked doors.

⁴¹ Weeks, Jeffrey (1989), *Sex, Politics & Society: The Regulation of Sexuality Since 1800*, London, Longman, p97

⁴² *Jekyll and Hyde*, p18

⁴³ Bourne Taylor, Jenny and Shuttleworth, Sally (1998), *Embodied Selves: An Anthology of Psychological Texts, 1830-90*, London, Clarendon Press, p127

Oscar Wilde flouted this rule spectacularly, with his flamboyant persona and colourful, and very public, sex life. There was a sense that personal appearance indicated sexual preference, and it was suggested that Wilde's sexuality had been determined by his mother having dressed him in frocks as a small boy.⁴⁴ However, as the images below show, Robert Baden-Powell, contemporary of Wilde and personification of Victorian masculinity, was similarly attired at a formative stage of his life.



Oscar Wilde as a child



Robert Baden-Powell, aged three

Wilde at least has a slightly Cavalier air, whilst Baden-Powell resembles a small Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

⁴⁴ Ellmann, Richard (1987), Oscar Wilde, London, Hamish Hamilton, p17

There was a growing belief that transvestism and homosexuality were inextricably linked, and this was brought into focus during the infamous trial of Boulton and Park. Under the soubriquets of Stella and Fanny, Bolton and Park acted as ‘male’ prostitutes, moving in predominantly upper class circles. After a sensational court case in 1870, they were acquitted on the charge of conspiring to commit sodomy. This acquittal came as a relief to their consorts, who undoubtedly would have been destroyed by the scandal. Whilst the pronouncement of ‘not guilty’ ensured their immunity, it also issued a very clear warning. The nascent science of sexology had not yet established a clear link between female impersonation and sexuality, but a popular rhyme of the day suggests the connection had been made in at least some areas of society:

There was an old person of Sark
Who buggered a pig in the dark;
The swine in surprise
Murmured: “God blast your eyes
Do you take me for Boulton or Park?”⁴⁵

Such behaviour was certainly ‘queer’ and undesirable, but not specifically homosexual. The ensuing scientific discourse would seek to clarify such matters in order to reinforce the image of what constituted ‘masculine’ and expunge those elements that did not conform to it.

There was a concerted effort to pathologise certain areas of what Foucault calls the “sexual mosaic.”⁴⁶ In *The History of Sexuality*, he disputes the popularly-held view that

⁴⁵ McLaren, Angus (1997), *The Trials of Masculinity: Policing Sexual Boundaries, 1870-1930*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, p217

the Victorians were repressed when it came to the discussion of sexual matters. However, although the age saw the birth of sexology, conservative elements sought to use sexual mapping to reinforce the profile of the normative male. Distinctions were important, as “for a man to be a man’s man is separated only by an invisible, carefully blurred, always-already-crossed line from being interested in men.”⁴⁷ Prior to this time, same-sex desire between men was not seen not as a defining act, it was merely an aberration that was safely confined to discreet and secret spaces. Once the likes of Oscar Wilde and Boulton and Park had brought it into the public sphere, however, it became a threat to masculinity which had to be clearly defined and then punished. Heterosexual men guilty of sexual misconduct were often able to escape recriminations. Whilst arguably a distinctly queer text, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* shows Dorian behaving in an archetypally rakish manner and getting away with it. As the journalist W T Stead commented after Wilde’s trial:

If Oscar Wilde, instead of indulging in dirty tricks with boys and men, had ruined the lives of half a dozen simpletons of girls, or had broken up the home of his friend’s wife, no-one would have laid a finger on him.⁴⁸

Labouchere, the man responsible for the “Blackmailer’s Charter” led an adulterous lifestyle which appeared not to disqualify him from pronouncing on other people’s behaviour.

⁴⁶ Foucault, Michel (1998), *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Know*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, p47

⁴⁷ Kosofsky Sedgwick, Eve (1985), *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, New York, Columbia University Press, p89

⁴⁸ McLaren, p30

Homosexuality became a medical problem and gay men were seen as phenotypically male and psychologically female – a woman trapped in a man’s body. However, as Andrew Smith argues:

Havelock Ellis and Edward Carpenter radically problematised the relationship between gender and sex designation by suggesting that a subject’s adherence to the dominant masculine script was no guarantee of that subject’s sexual preferences.⁴⁹

In *The Intermediate Sex*, Carpenter stated that homosexuality manifested itself in “men and women of quite normal and unsensational exterior.”⁵⁰ Although defenders of ‘normalcy’ were attempting to strengthen the binary concept of male and female, in so doing, they were highlighting the ‘other’, or what became known as the ‘invert’, and thereby presenting it as an alternative. Hurley suggests that these “hegemonic discourses produce the very oppositional possibilities they are designed to pre-empt.”⁵¹ The controversy was compounded by the work of Krafft-Ebing, who in *Psychopathia Sexualis* argued that although aesthetically repugnant, homosexuality was in fact normal. *Sexual Inversion* by Havelock Ellis made similar assertions and in 1898, after the moral backlash against Wilde, police seized the manuscript to prevent “the growth of a Frankenstein

⁴⁹ Smith, Andrew (2004), Victorian Demons: Medicine, Masculinity and the Gothic at the Fin-de-Siècle, Manchester, Manchester University Press, p3

⁵⁰ Ledger and Luckhurst, p306

⁵¹ Hurley, p8

monster wrecking the marriage laws of our country, and perhaps carrying off the general respect of all law.”⁵² The threat was thus intensified, rather than mitigated.

The Descent of Man

One of the primary objections to homosexuals was that they were unfruitful. The duty of a man was to be productive both physically and biologically, otherwise humankind would degenerate. Max Nordau claimed that Wilde’s “personal eccentricities” were the “pathological aberration of a racial instinct.”⁵³ Rather than challenge the normative sexual model, Wilde consented with this classification in order to secure his release from jail. Whether he disliked the idea of representing a ‘third sex’ or was merely being expedient is debatable. This idea of a racial instinct manifesting itself is explored in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Hyde is described as being “ape-like,” accentuating the national fear of simian atavism. Jekyll attempts to evolve himself by purging the “lower elements” in his soul, those that are inimical to his nature, as though performing fractional distillation.⁵⁴ Darwin’s *The Descent of Man* had dispelled any illusions of racial purity and realisation dawned that humankind would not necessarily move in an upward trajectory. Evolution was not synonymous with progress. Given that man had evolved from higher primates, could they not return to that state?

⁵² Marsden, Gordon (1990), Victorian Values: Personalities and Perspectives in Nineteenth Century Society, Harlow, Longman, p209

⁵³ Nordau, Max (1993), Degeneration, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, p318

⁵⁴ *Jekyll and Hyde*, p50

Nordau's hyperbolic *Degeneration* was given scientific weight by Edwin Lankester, who defined degeneration as the "gradual change of the structure in which the organism becomes adapted to *less* varied and *less* complex conditions of life."⁵⁵ He argued that once an animal's food and safety were secured, degeneration ensued. This was in an era of relative peace in the homeland, where industrialisation had ensured food in bountiful supply for those who could afford it. Once the parasitic life was established, bodily features started to disappear and the creature became a "mere sac," reduced to absorbing nourishment and laying eggs. They were, he claimed "intellectual Barnacles," attaching to rocks and regressing in form, who would then lead a "contented life of material enjoyment accompanied by ignorance and superstition."⁵⁶

H G Wells' dystopic vision in *The Time Machine* is heavily influenced by these ideas. The Eloi, the Upper-world dwellers, have decayed to a "mere beautiful futility," are child-like with a short attention span, and believe the Sun to have strange powers.⁵⁷ The implication is that decadent behaviour has caused them to degenerate to the point where they are aesthetically pleasing, but utterly useless. The species has lost all secondary sexual characteristics, although they are portrayed as being feminine, rather than androgynous. Hurley suggests that:

⁵⁵ Ledger and Luckhurst, p3

⁵⁶ Ledger and Luckhurst, p5

⁵⁷ Wells, H G (2002), *The Time Machine*, New York, Signet, p27

Perhaps because they are feminised, they cannot arouse objection, for the Time Traveller's own distinctly human (here coded masculine) qualities – strength, forcefulness, courage, energy – appear to advantage beside them.⁵⁸

This weakness is, in fact, appealing to the fin-de-siècle man, as the New Woman denies him the opportunity to be dominant. Weena provides the infantile malleability favoured by old-fashioned literary patriarchs, such as Widdowson in *The Odd Women* and Torvald Helmer in *A Doll's House*. “She was exactly like a child,” following him everywhere and they enjoy a “queer friendship.”⁵⁹ The Time Traveller feels uncomfortable with this dynamic, possibly because he realises that such passivity is an outmoded concept. The moral appears to be that the seemingly attractive ideal of limitless leisure and child-like submission in women is not as appealing in reality.

The Morlocks, the subterranean workers with whom the Eloi have a gruesome symbiotic relationship, are “ape-like creatures” who provide all the labour in the future world. This labour is not without its cost, however, as these “bleached, obscene creatures”⁶⁰ feed on the Eloi, who have lost the ability to resist natural predators. The Morlocks represent the masses who were perceived to be prepotent in terms of reproduction. Anxiety over working-class fertility dominated contemporary scientific debate, and preoccupied the Francis Galton, the Father of Eugenics. As Ledger claims, “the political emphasis of

⁵⁸ Hurley, p84

⁵⁹ *The Time Machine*, p49

⁶⁰ *The Time Machine*, p54

eugenic discourses was primarily focused on the preservation and continuation of the English middle classes.”⁶¹

Wells, like many of his intellectual contemporaries, favoured population control, believing that any human progress was being countered by the proliferation of the lower orders. They were the “vicious, helpless and pauper masses” and to protect and cherish them was to be “swamped in their fecundity.”⁶² On this issue, there an unlikely note of harmony with New Woman writers such as Sarah Grand, who believed that the middle classes provided the best breeding stock:

It is in the middle class itself that the best breeding, the greatest refinement, the prettiest manners and the highest culture are now to be found.⁶³

Conversely, the emancipated New Woman was questioning her destiny of motherhood and taking control of her reproductive rights. This was a risk to the racial future and purity of Britain. Imperialist politics of the time were based on “robust masculinity, as Theodore Roosevelt proclaimed:

There is no place in the world for nations who have become enervated by the soft and easy life, or who have lost their fibre of vigorous hardness and masculinity.⁶⁴

⁶¹Ledger, Sally (1995), “In Darkest England: The Terror of Degeneration in Fin de Siècle Britain”, *Literature and History*, 4(2): 71-86, p73

⁶² Childs, Donald J (2001), Moderism and Eugenics: Woolf, Eliot, Yeats, and the Culture of Degeneration, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p9

⁶³ Richardson, Angelique (2003), Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p95

⁶⁴ *Sexual Anarchy*, p10

In *The Time Machine*, the Time Traveller and his fellow professional middle-class cohorts represent the normative male. He combines the Eloi's refinement and the Morlocks' strength is exactly the type required to save humankind. However, there is no Time Traveller's Wife to produce refined progeny, and the future is uncertain.

In Wells' *The Island of Dr Moreau*, the solution appears to be reproduction through vivisection, thus removing the agency of woman. However, it is a pyrrhic victory for man, as the female puma becomes an "angry virago" and kills Moreau.⁶⁵ Even on a remote island in the Pacific, men are not safe from the perniciousness of woman and the inexorable force of degeneration. Of the other male protagonists, the intrepid Prendick is unable to build a raft and Montgomery is given a dubious sexual past and the "ghost of a [presumably effeminate] lisp."⁶⁶ Men are enervated to the point where they can no longer withstand the threat to their primacy. Prendick broods "I feel as though...presently the degradation of the Islanders will be played over again on a larger scale."⁶⁷ Wells later wrote that *The Island of Dr Moreau* had been inspired by the trial of Oscar Wilde:

It is written to give the utmost possible vividness to that conception of men as hewn and confused and tormented beasts.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Wells, H G (2005), *The Island of Dr Moreau*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, p98

⁶⁶ *The Island of Dr Moreau*, p10

⁶⁷ *The Island of Dr Moreau*, p107

⁶⁸ Gagnier, Regenia (1986), *Idylls of the Marketplace*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, p225

They are no better than the Beast Folk in the House of Pain, at the mercy of a malevolent and deterministic power. Elsewhere at the Fin de Siècle, authors played with the idea of male reproduction – in *Jekyll and Hyde* through cloning, and aesthetically in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, through the anthropomorphism of his portrait.

The novels expressing the fears of men were countered by the male quest romances of Rudyard Kipling and H. Rider Haggard. Showalter writes that they appealed to men who were:

Yearning for escape from a confining society, rigidly structured in terms of gender, class and race, to a mythologised place elsewhere where men can be freed from the constraints of Victorian morality.⁶⁹

They also portrayed other worlds, where men could eschew the established order, with all its inherent problems. Wells' parables remind the reader that there is always a stronger force than man, be it nature, martians or woman. The corollary of such antics would be a society in which savagery was endemic and the beast in the ascendant, the ultimate conclusion being darkness.

At the end of *The Time Machine*, the Time Traveller advances 30 million years into the future and discovers that humans have been wiped out. Even worse that the “obscene” Morlocks is the minatory giant crab and its “vast ungainly claws” descending upon him.⁷⁰ Exploiting fears of extinction and the “sunset of mankind”, it reinforced the Hardy-esque

⁶⁹ *Sexual Anarchy*, p81

⁷⁰ *The Time Machine*, p97

idea that those who don't adapt, don't survive. Ultimately, the earth ceases to revolve and the sun dies, echoing that other critique of imperialism, *Heart of Darkness*. Nordau's theory of the 'Dusk of Nations' was gathering momentum.

Conclusion

Middle-class men were threatened by, amongst other factors, women, sexual deviants, and the malignity of nature. Andrew Smith argues that this notion of crisis was staged within the dominant masculinist culture, rather than being caused by external factors. This is certainly true in terms of the bifurcation of subjectivity portrayed in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and the 'beast in man' fears explored in *The Time Machine* and *The Island of Dr Moreau*. However, this view is to negate the impact of women, both New and Odd. The fin-de-siècle woman had progressed beyond the dreams of her mid-century sisters. She wielded far more power in the home, the sphere that was supposed to support male privilege. As Tosh writes, "masculine identity was subject to constant negotiation with the opposite sex." Thanks to remedial legislation, marriage for the man was no longer, in corporate terms, a matter of hostile takeover and asset-stripping. Men were concluding that bachelorhood was preferable to the emasculation of marriage.

The literature of the age reflected the sense of defeat amongst men, unable to adapt to the New Order. Phillotson in *Jude the Obscure* speak for them all when he moans "What do I care about J S Mill? I only wanted to lead a quiet life."⁷¹ In both *In the Year of Jubilee*

⁷¹ Hardy, Thomas (1999), *Jude the Obscure*, New York, W W Norton & Company, p230

and *The Whirlpool*, beleaguered husbands are forced to look after their children when their wives reject their 'natural' role. There was increasing incompatibility and misunderstanding between the sexes. As Showalter writes:

“To many late nineteenth and early twentieth century men, women seemed to be agents of an alien world that evoked anger and anguish, while to women in those years men appeared as aggrieved defenders of an indefensible order.”⁷²

Men responded by establishing “strict border controls around the idea of gender.”⁷³ However, the concepts of masculine and feminine were socially constructed and therefore not immutable.

The fault lines in the concept of 'masculine' had become apparent when sexologists presented non-normative example of men, and refused to dismiss them as morally deviant. Victorian men were trying to narrow, rather than expand, their definition of masculinity. There was a fear that the “anarchy of multiple interpretations will replace the safety of one view of the world.”⁷⁴ The old world represented stability, whereas the new one suggested only chaos. McLaren comments, “there was no force of will required to be a woman, she was born one. Exertion and activity was required to 'be a man'.”⁷⁵ In order to prove this, men were busy building a hegemonic order on which their ideal

⁷² *Sexual Anarchy*, p7

⁷³ *Sexual Anarchy*, p4

⁷⁴ Ledger and McCracken, p138

⁷⁵ McLaren, p34

was based, but their creation seemed incapable of providing them with a fulfilling private sphere, as well as a public one.

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