



The Feminism and Femininity of Ann Veronica In H. G. Wells' Ann Veronica

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Abstract

H.G. Wells' Ann Veronica structurally seems to be divided into two parts; the first deals with Ann Veronica's struggle to get equality with men and freedom in most aspects of life, such as in politics, economics, education, and sexuality; the second describes much the other side of her individuality which she cannot deny, namely her femininity, such as her crave for love, marriage, maternity, and beauty. H.G. Wells describes vividly the two elements in Ann Veronica, feminism and femininity. As a feminist, Ann Veronica rebelled against her authoritative Victorian father, who regarded women only as men's property to be protected from the harsh world outside. On the other side, Ann could not deny her being a woman after she fell in love with Capes. Her femininity from the second half of the novel then is explored. Although the novel ends with the depiction of the domestic life of Ann Veronica, it does not mean that the feminism is gone altogether. The key point is that the family life Ann chooses as a 'submissive' wife and good mother is her choice. It is very different if it is forced on her to do. Thus, this novel depicts both sides of Ann Veronica, her feminism and her femininity.

Keywords: *feminism, femininity/feminine, freedom, independence, choice, equality, maternity, marriage, love.*

H.G. Wells' Ann Veronica was a very controversial novel when it was published in October 1909. A year before, the novel was rejected by Macmillan publishers. It raised direct responses both pro and contra in the same month. As early as October 4, 1909, Scott-James in the *Daily Review* made a complimentary comment that "it is an excellent novel" because "the characters gradually grow into vital personalities" (as cited in Wells, 1999, p. 266). However, the novel also made another critic in November 20, 1909 in the *Spectator* write a review as an unsigned reviewer who labelled it as 'a poisonous book ...capable of poisoning the minds of those who read it' (as cited in Parrinder, 1972, pp. 169-70). The controversy of the novel lies in the fact that it violates the Victorian norms of decency and morality. Miller states that:

In general, the critics' distress stemmed from the fact not only did Wells depict Ann Veronica as having sexual desires, but that he characterized those desires as healthy and natural; departing from nineteenth-century novelistic tradition, Wells declined to make Ann Veronica 'pay' for her sexuality, or for her adulterous relationship with her professor, Capes (Miller, 1994, p. 165).

Miller goes on by underlining critics' assumption that "fiction influenced life, and novels which depicted rebellion and female sexuality threatened social stability" (Miller, 1994, p. 165). Much of the element of the novel's controversy has a close relationship

with the rising movement of the time, namely feminism. In this article, however, I will try to show that Wells presents in *Ann Veronica* not only feminism but also femininity.

Definition of two key terms

The two terms femininity and feminism require clarification at once in order that the discussion in this article should bring any fruit to my effort at all. First of all, the word 'femininity' is not an easy word to define. Toril Moi differentiates three different terms: *feminism*, which "is a political position," *femaleness*, as "a matter of biology," and *femininity*, which is "a set of CULTURALLY defined characteristics" (as cited in Hawthorn, 1998, p. 113). The word 'cultural' here suggests that the difference between masculinity and femininity is a social construct. The anatomical difference between the two can be easily recognized and admitted regarding certain women's physical capabilities that are denied in men and vice versa. Selous has another term for 'cultural' construction of gender, namely 'ideological.' Thus, any discussion of the gender positions and functions is culturally bound. Nevertheless, Selous admits that there are some "dominant ideological constructions of gender" (Selous, 1988, p. 7). Thus, the femininity of women might be understood for example in the sense that "the physical appearance of women should be 'softer' and 'prettier' than that of men, or that most women are 'by nature' gentler and less aggressive than most men" (Selous, 1988, p. 7) (*italics mine*). Of course the definition is quite limited because it actually covers as complicated an understanding as Selous' attempt to investigate "the development of ideas of 'the feminine' within psychoanalysis" (Selous, 1988, p. 6). However, for practical purposes, the above definition will suffice for the discussion in this article.

One more element of femininity especially in relation to the 'New Woman novel' will help analyse Ann Veronica satisfactorily. Miller explains that this phrase is applied though "rather indiscriminately by the popular press to any novel which featured a heroine who was frankly 'advanced' in her views about women and marriage" (Miller, 1994, p. 14). She then describes the 'New Woman' as "... independent, outspoken and creative" and "antithetical to the Victorian stereotypes of the proper lady and the angel in the house" (Miller, 1994, p. 14). Although the heroines of this new novel can speak about sexuality with frankness and openness, the conventions of plot and narrative resolution of the late-Victorian novel still pertain, that is "romantic desire was the principal narrative impetus for women, and marriage was the ultimate expression of feminine success and social integration" (Miller, 1994, p. 19). Sarah Grand as the "most influential and most popular of the New Woman novelists" (Miller, 1994, p. 18) still emphasises the "feminine qualities, such as self-renunciation and a need for romantic love" (Miller, 1994, p. 20). Hence, the feminine qualities cover the need for romance, marriage, and instinctual drive for motherhood.

Secondly, the term 'feminism' poses more difficulties. Mary Eagleton in Feminist theory: a reader gives a list of many sub-entries for the index entry under 'feminism' including "academic/activist; bourgeois; cultural; cyberfeminism; French; international; Marxist; materialist; negative; object-relation; radical; separatist; socialist" (as cited in Hawthorn, 1998, p. 115). In general, however, one might agree to the limitation of the movement as given by Rosalind Delmar in What is feminism?, when she defines 'a feminist' as:

someone who holds that women suffer *discrimination* because of their sex, that they have specific needs which remain negated and unsatisfied, and that the satisfaction



of these needs would require a radical change (some would say a revolution even) in the social, economic and political order (as cited in Mitchell, 1986, p. 8) (*italics mine*).

This definition will be much of more use if it is related to the context of Edwardian fiction dealing with the topic of feminism. Miller explains that “one of the most popular heroines in Edwardian fiction is the rebellious woman,” and she goes on to say of rebellious women:

Some want independence, some want a career, some want to redefine marriage, and some want the vote. But what all these various rebel women have in common is a dissatisfaction with the circumstances of their lives, and a recognition that those circumstances are dictated in large part by the fact of their being women (Miller, 1994, p. 4).

In this new situation that demands novel techniques from the authors, the Edwardian novelists “were then confronted with the formidable problem of constructing new narratives” (Miller, 1994, p. 4). Miller then elucidates that:

the principal difficulty they faced was the centrality of marriage to the novel, both as a subject and as a structuring principle; tradition dictated that the dominant narrative desire of female characters be romance, and that the achievement of marriage signify their ultimate fulfilment. Edwardian novelists created modern heroines who refused to accept *marriage and motherhood as their only destiny*, and defied gender definitions in their ‘unfeminine’ desires for independence and sexual fulfilment and vocation (Miller, 1994, p. 4) (*italics mine*).

The key points of the explanation above in Ann Veronica is the refusal of marriage and motherhood as her ‘destiny,’ and those ‘desires for independence and sexual fulfilment and vocation’ as ‘unfeminine.’

Feminism in Wells's time, especially from the mid-Victorian to the first decade of the twentieth century, had already shown its multi facets covering the women's movement for social and political reform such as the attempt to get the vote; for economic independence such as the attempt to get more access to employment; for the equality in higher education; for the freedom from the male oppression in domestic life such as the attempt to gain property in married life (Caine, 1997, p. 102-103). There are some feminists in the mid-Victorian era focusing their concerns on the matter of sexuality and marriage life. Those pro or contra to marriage were involved in the debate about the “New Woman” both in and outside fiction as has been mentioned briefly in the previous paragraphs. To mention among the novelists, George Gissing, Thomas Hardy, and Grant Allen marked the ‘new woman’ by showing in their female characters's rejection of marriage and their preferment to free sexual relations. While Sarah Grand, Emma Brooke, and Mona Caired sharply pointed the “moral and physical sufferings and degradation which married women suffered at the hands of their husbands and families” (Caine, 1997, p. 136).

Mona Caired for instance saw the conventional marriage, namely that based on legal and economic basis, bring “spiritual death for women, involving as it did enslavement to domestic labour and child care, and the complete sacrifice of their own intellectual, emotional, and physical needs” (Caine, 1997, p. 137). For her, marriage would only be tolerable when men and women were guaranteed equality regarding “their right to privacy, freedom, and to terminate their relationship” (p. 137). The feminists, though critical over the conventional marriage, still believed that “individual marriages and ‘true’ marriages based on love could be happy ones “ (p. 137). Wells in his novel Ann Veronica seemed to share both sides of these mid-Victorian feminists's beliefs as will be

explicated in the following paragraphs. I will also try to show throughout the discussion in this essay that both elements, feminism and femininity, are equally prevalent in Ann Veronica.

The structure of Ann Veronica seems to be divided into two equal parts; the first part deals much with Ann Veronica's feminism, and the second with her femininity, although the elements are interspersed here and there a little in both. From the very beginning of the novel up to Chapter VIII section 4, Ann Veronica's feminism is much described, and only from that section to the end of the novel does Ann's psychological development turn to another side of her, that is the *feminine* side when she realises that she falls in love with Capes as the first step for her emotional development. Therefore, the rest of the paragraphs of this article will follow the main structure of the novel, from feminism to the femininity side of Ann Veronica.

Ann Veronica's Feminism

First of all, Ann Veronica is described as an intelligent girl who starts asking about life and who wants to know more, to get freedom and adventure:

'I'm not sure. I want to know—just as much as I can'

Well, I do. It's just that I want to say. I want to be a human being; I want to learn about things and know about things, and not to be protected as something too precious for life, cooped up in one narrow little corner (Wells, 1999, p. 22).

She indeed gets bored with the 'wrapped' life in his Victorian father's house. What she can do as an ideal 'feminine' *Victorian* girl is to do little activities at home or in the neighbourhood such as playing tennis, reading novels, a little walk, dusting (p. 6), and waiting for someone to propose marriage (p. 23). Her father just wants her to "live at home" (p. 6). She wants to break off the conventional image of a girl. Therefore, she wants to go to the modern Fancy Dress Ball in London with the Fidgetts and to study biology at the Imperial College at Westminster (p. 7). This idea is of course beyond measure of possibility for a *Victorian* father, who regards his daughters as "his absolute property, bound to obey him" (p. 11), and while she lives in his house she must follow his ideas (p. 23). Her father minds her going to the ball for a reason of decency and of protection against pitfalls of evil, from which she must be "shielded at all costs" (p. 13). Here the rebellious character of Ann against a Victorian tradition as represented by her father is clearly depicted. She does not only rebel in ideas but also in action as humorously described when she struggles with her father to get out of the house for the ball (pp. 62-63).

Secondly, the idea of marriage and mothering is repugnant to Ann Veronica because it will hamper her ambition to know the world and to get new experience. By avoiding and repressing such an idea and the tendency in her, she thinks she will be freed from the duty of a mother who only takes care of domestic matters and of children. For her "marriage and mother and the rest of it" is only "a song" (p. 45), a very ideal condition but unrealistic and it sounds a *fairylike* kind of life, constraining all her potential to be actualised. The rejection of marriage and antagonism of sex or the image of woman as a man-hater are shared by Ann's female friends in Miss Miniver and Kitty Brett. For Miss Miniver men are brutes (p. 127), who only exercise power and violence and not (much) reason (pp. 26-27). For Miss Miniver, and Ann later convinced by her (p. 46), maternity has been their "undoing" (p. 27) because the idea of freedom for women



through marriage has only proven wrong and ends in “slavery” (p. 26) The absolute rejection of marriage and maternity that will only make them become slaves to men and children, though partial and as a result of emotional anger, shows the element of feminism in both Ann and Miss Miniver.

Furthermore, Ann Veronica is a girl who wants equality of freedom with men. She wants to do whatever she likes without restriction of man-constructed ideal images of manner and morality. She sits in a train in a manner that would have shocked her mother (p. 3), discusses sex and love-making in public with Mr. Ramage, which indeed humiliates her father (p. 17), reads books that her father thinks unsuitable for her, practises ju-jitsu, and most importantly she demands economic independence. Her statement to Mr. Ramage makes her position as a feminist clear: “Until a girl can go away as a son does and earn her independent income, she's still on a string [..] Every one wants to be independent, [...] Every one. Man or woman” (p. 56), an idea of sheer impossibility for Mr. Ramage which he analogises with “an archangel going on the Stock Exchange—or Christ selling doves” (p. 91). She really envies the freedom a boy can enjoy: “But a boy—a boy goes out into the world and presently stands on his own feet. He buys his own clothes, chooses his own company, makes his own way of living” (p. 56). She idealises Vivien Warren, a character in Bernard Shaw's play, and puts herself much in Mrs. Warren's position, who can be independent: “hard, capable, successful, bullying, and ordering” (pp. 71-72).

When Ann discusses love with Mr. Ramage at a dinner, she says that “I have been trying to keep myself from thinking about love...I have been training myself to look askance at beautiful things” (p. 126). She *intentionally* and *consciously* keeps herself off the *feminine* side of her, which later she really questions about her own self-conscious upbringing not to be like a *dignified ladylike* person (p. 152). She indulges herself instead in the typically *masculine* world of interests. She *dissects* a frog and keeps it in “a sealed bottle” in her bedroom (p. 43) as an accessory, has “scientific ambitions to unwomanly lengths” (p. 11), defeats her father's rational thinking and addresses her father as *dogmatic*, and shows a very good command of argument (pp. 21—22, 24, 26), has interests in politics which Mr. Manning regards as the absolute territory of man and opposite to woman's femininity (p. 36), visits the Socialist meetings (p. 11), gets involved in the suffragettes' raid to the House of Commons (p. 166), and even declares herself to be a ‘man’: “I will not be slave to the thought of any man, slave to the customs of any time. Confound this slavery of sex! I am a man!” (p. 161). Of course she cannot deny the fact of her being a woman. Her declaration as a ‘man’ and all those quotations above only show her feminist veins in her and have become a symbol of freedom she yearns for, freedom that will place her on an equal position with men.

The final trait of Ann's feminism can be seen in her unwavering belief in freedom when she chooses a married man to be her husband. This is a slap in the face of the Edwardian people and Wells' audience. Indeed, a girl proclaiming that she wants Capes, the married man and her professor, is extraordinary and in this context she could be called a feminist: “ ‘What do you want?’ he asked bluntly. ‘You!’ said Ann Veronica” (p. 213). Even Capes seems to hold more the *femininity* of women and the Victorian morality than Ann does when he explains that his scandalous past really matters for their relationship because “it prevents our [their] marrying. It forbids—all sorts of things” (p. 216), and when he says that “a man has more freedom to do evil than a woman” (p. 218). The conventional ideal woman is the one adhered to by her aunt, her father, Mr. Manning—who proposes to her through the letter (pp. 39-42), and Miss Garvice—who regards woman's place is home as wife and mother (p. 155). A woman

must be waiting passively until the time comes when a man proposes to her. Ann Veronica rejects this idea and custom altogether by rejecting Mr. Manning's proposal and by choosing Capes. It is not Capes who comes and gets her, it is she who gets Capes (p. 220), and it is she who encourages Capes in his doubt to kiss her—she asks to be kissed (p. 220)

Ann Veronica's Femininity

The second part of the novel makes a shift of exploration in Ann Veronica's psychological development. As hinted above, Ann starts to realize her *femininity* when she knows that she falls in love with Capes. She starts to question the hostility to men that is shown in Miss Miniver's attitude (p. 127). She becomes sensitive to beautiful things:

Then, arising she knew not how, like a new-born appetite, came a craving in Ann Veronica for the sight and sound of beauty.

It was as if her aesthetic sense had become inflamed. Her mind turned and accused itself of having been cold and hard. She began to look for beauty and discovered it in unexpected aspects and places. Hitherto she had seen it chiefly in pictures and other works of art, incidentally, and as a thing taken out of life. Now the sense of beauty was spreading to a multitude of hitherto unsuspected aspects of the world about her. The thought of beauty became an obsession (p. 128).

Before her experience of falling in love with Capes, beauty is only *conceptual* and *pictorial*. Then it becomes real for her. She also suddenly becomes aware of the very minute details of Cape's physical appearance and the beauty of them (p. 130). She is capable to look at her life in a holistic view that she consists not only of mind or reason but of body as well (p. 127).

Not only does she become sensitive, but also she can trust Capes beyond measure after she falls in love (p. 130). This attitude is the opposite of the particular *masculine* attitude as a natural reaction toward man's world that is described by Mr. Ramage as "a great, ugly, endless wilderness of selfish, sweating, vulgar competition" (p. 93) from which a woman must be protected at home. This view of home as protection is reiterated even by Capes: "Every home is a little recess, a niche, out of the world, of business and competition, in which women and the future shelter" (p. 156). She trusts Capes at all costs even after knowing his past scandalous affair with an eight year older woman (p. 281), she wants to give herself to him (p. 220). This proves Mr. Ramage's analysis of woman's psyche that "a woman comes into life thinking instinctively how best she may give herself" (p. 125). This is proven when she dares to pay anything for her love: "hardship and danger, for better or worse, for richer or poorer" (p. 224), which remind us of couples' wedding ceremonial oaths in churches, only their oaths are said outside the suppressing institution for their free expression of freedom.

Ann Veronica also consciously admits the ladylike theory to Capes: "There is something to be said for the ladylike theory after all, [...] Women ought to be gentle and submissive persons" (p. 176). This is of course the other and opposite side of Ann Veronica who is described in the first part of the novel as a deviant and rebellious character. She even admits the truth of Mr. Ramage's words that the centre of woman's life is love and sex (pp. 108, 125). She starts to realise that all this time she fears to talk



about love and blocks herself off from it. After Mr. Ramage confronts her with the 'truth' of woman's life, she:

gave herself permission now to look at this squarely. She made herself a private declaration of liberty. 'This is mere nonsense, mere tongue-tied fear!' she said. 'This is the slavery of the veiled life. I might as well be at Morningside Park. This business of love is the supreme affair in life, it is the woman's one event and crisis that makes up for all her other restrictions, and I cower—as we all cower—with a blushing and paralysed mind until it overtakes me! (p. 126)

It would be quite ironic indeed if she, who strives hard to get freedom in anything, should fear to talk about love. That is why later she discusses love openly with Miss Miniver who only thinks of love as something Platonic, and body as something 'horrible' (127). Ann Veronica refutes Miss Miniver's idea vehemently and says that she and Miss Miniver only "pretend [that] bodies are ugly" (p. 127). Later when Capes asks her why at all she says that she loves him and does not care about his scandalous past, she answers "I couldn't help it. It was an impulse. I *had* to" (p. 214).

However, the impulse she admits to Capes becomes a conscious state of mind when she acknowledges almost at the end of the novel that "I'm a female thing at bottom. I like high tone for a flourish and stars and ideas; but I want my things" (p. 237). Her things are really her *feminine* drives for love, marriage, and maternity. Ann Veronica later on expresses the drive of maternity as one of the 'female things at bottom' verbally:

...we're going to have children.'

'Girls!' cried Ann Veronica.

'Boys!' said Capes.

'Both!' said Ann Veronica. 'Lots of `em!'

Capes chuckled. 'You delicate female!'

'Who cares,' said Ann Veronica, 'seeing it's you? Warm, soft little wonders! Of course I want them' (p. 247).

She does not care to be addressed as "a delicate female" by Capes because her love and her motherly instinct have come to their fullest and to be actualised. Even though she has to pay her motherly instinct with the loss of chance for adventure, and there is a tone of nostalgia in her words, she knows that her life has achieved its fulfilment:

... I want children like the mountains and life like the sky. Oh! And love—love! We've had so splendid a time, and fought our fight and won. And it's like the petals falling from a flower. Oh, I've loved love, dear! I've loved love and you, and the glory of you; and the great time is over, and I have to go carefully and bear children, and - take care of my hair—and when I am done with that I shall be an old woman. The petals have fallen—the red petals we loved so (p. 257).

Her motherhood instinct intensifies her sensitivity to things that she never gives attention to before. She cares now about her appearance that presents her in a more ladylike fashion:

Ann Veronica was nearly half an inch taller; her face was at once stronger and *softer*, her neck former and rounder, and her carriage definitely more *womanly* than it had been in the days of her rebellion. She was a *woman* now to the tips of her fingers; she had said good-bye to her girlhood in the old garden four years and a quarter ago. She was dressed in a simple evening gown of soft creamy silk, with a yoke of dark old embroidery that enhanced the *gentle* gravity of her style, and her

black hair flowed off her open forehead to pass under the control of a simple *ribbon* of silver. A silver necklace enhanced the dusky beauty of her neck (p. 250) (*italics mine*).

In the quotation above, H.G. Wells really portrays Ann Veronica as a *feminine* figure who has left the rebellious character, behaviour, and appearance. In contrast to the appearance of a rebellious and adventurous spirit, when she wanted to wear trousers to the Fancy Dress Ball—which startled her aunt, kept shorts that “could hardly reach below the knee” (p. 43), wore “a leather belt and loose knickerbockers and puttees—a costume that suited the fine, long lines of her limbs far better than any feminine walking dress” (p. 246), Ann Veronica quite shows *femininity* in her. She also wonders about herself when she suddenly notices her father's posture and appearance so sensitively: “...It seemed to her that her father was in some inexplicable way meaner-looking than she had supposed, and yet also, as unaccountably, appealing. His tie had demanded a struggle; he ought to have taken a clean one after his first failure. Why was she noting things like this?” (p. 254)

Ann Veronica's femininity, however, is not only shown from her instinct for love, romance, marriage, and motherhood, but it also can be seen from the scene when Wells describes her self-consciousness as a woman in her lost way on the street in the evening in London. In her musing of mind to answer the question how people get work, she suddenly realises that she has lost her way, her sense of direction, and she feels that a strange man follows her (pp. 72-73). She is afraid, but cannot understand why: “...She was afraid people would follow her, she was afraid of the dark, open doorways she passed, and afraid of the blazes of light; she was afraid to be alone, and she knew not what it was she feared” (p. 75). Her consciousness as a woman reminds her of the possibility of being raped. Indeed, a woman's place is not in the wide world but at home. This idea reverberates her brother Roddy's view that “Life's hard enough nowadays for an unprotected male. Let alone a girl” (p. 90) and Mr. Manning's view that the world outside is not a safe place for a girl (p. 93), and Capes' view of home as a “niche,” a place of protection. Ann Veronica is afraid of “the sinister, the threatening, monstrous inhumanity of the limitless city,” but most of all she fears “the supreme, ugly fact of pursuit—the pursuit of the undesired, persistent male” (p. 74). Here Ann is portrayed seemingly to agree that a girl should be protected at a safe place, home.

Conclusion

To summarise, Ann Veronica's psychological development only shows the two elements in her, namely *feminism* and *femininity*. Ann Veronica's feminism can be seen in her fight for economic, political (as her involvement in the suffragettes' raid shows), educational, and sexual freedom, the *freedom* that puts her on equal footing with men. Although she becomes submissive to her husband at the end of the novel, Ann Veronica declares that she does it by her “own free will” (p. 243), her own choice. It is quite different from something that is *forced* on her to do. That makes her different from her sister Alice (p. 256). Although Alice did defy her father by marrying the man she loved and left her father, it was the man who came and *took* her away. In Ann Veronica's words: “She [Alice] didn't *choose* her man” [emphasis added] (p. 256). In Ann Veronica's case, it is she who *determines* to choose Capes, instead of Capes making a proposal to her. That makes all the difference.



In the second half of the novel, Ann Veronica's femininity is portrayed in her inner nature of woman that craves for love, romance, beauty and gentleness, marriage, and maternity. However, it does not mean at all that because she fulfils her *instinctual* drive for maternity the feminism in her is abolished. It is her choice. Thus, marriage and maternity do not become slavery for her but her fulfilment as a free, mature, balanced adult female.

Although Miller regards that Wells “exposes the inconsistencies in his narrative and his feminism” when he “depicts the daily domestic life of Ann Veronica and Capes four years after their elopement” (p. 169), I would rather contend to say that this novel indeed presents a feminist character who cannot deny her own femininity, her womanhood. Patricia Stubbs in Women and Fiction: feminism and the novel 1880-1920 also noticed that Wells supported freer sexual relations not because of his intellectual commitment to it but “out of personal necessity” since Wells married twice and made affairs with Rebecca West, Amber Reeves and one of Hubert Bland's daughters (p. 183). The critics's comments on Wells's work might bear much truth viewed from his biographical accounts and his technical difficulty in keeping consistency as Miller hinted, but I do not try to find Wells's feminism in the novel and to prove that this is a *feminist* novel. Rather, I have shown in my discussion that this novel deals with both feminism and femininity. It is about Ann Veronica the *feminine feminist!*

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