

MARRIAGE OR CAREER? DOMESTIC IDEOLOGY IN  
GEORGE GISSING'S THE ODD WOMEN

by

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ABSTRACT

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Although George Gissing is acclaimed for his progressive thoughts on liberating women from patriarchy by establishing financial independence, some critics challenge such praise for Gissing by arguing that he is still confined within patriarchal thinking because he still adheres to domestic ideology, which advocates that women should stay within the domestic sphere and be protected from corruption of the outside world.

The discussion of this thesis is divided into two main parts: first, despite their efforts to fight for freedom in marriage, women fail to escape from the control of patriarchy because through domestic ideology patriarchy still drives women back to the

domestic sphere. Secondly, though feminists in the novel claim that women can attain to their ultimate independence by establishing financial independence, they are still confined within domestic ideology since their thinking is still in accordance with the norm of Victorian domestic ideology.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Gissing's background information

After many years' oblivion, George Gissing's *The Odd Women*, owing to its depiction of women's emancipation from their traditional bondage in a patriarchal world, received critics' attention with the rise of feminist criticism in the 1970s. George Gissing displayed great sympathy for oppressed people, especially women, because they were less privileged in Victorian society. In one of his letters, Gissing clearly indicated his goal in his life and career—"to bring home to people the ghastly condition (material, mental, and moral) of our poor classes, to show the hideous injustice of our whole system of society, to give light upon the plan of altering it" (*Letters of George Gissing*, 83).

Undoubtedly, Gissing was much displeased with the unfair condition of those oppressed classes, which naturally included women, in Victorian England and aspired to change it by means of his efforts. To prove his determination to save women from their wretched condition, Gissing tried to rescue a prostitute from the street and a working girl from a factory by marrying them. More than that, Gissing even wrote this novel, *The Odd Women*, to inform contemporary Englishmen of the fact that women can gain independence by possessing such a clerical career as typists. In the last chapter of the novel, through the voice of the leading heroine, Rhoda, a radical



feminist, or in late Victorian terminology, a New Woman, who asserts women's independence, Gissing seemed to portray a bright future for women. When seeing the abandoned little girl of Monica, the other heroine of the novel, Rhoda wishes to "Make a brave woman of her" (Gissing 332).<sup>1</sup> Based on the suggestion of the title of the final chapter, "A New Beginning," readers might be able to develop an association between the new-born infant girl and this title. It seems that this little girl actually symbolizes a promising future for women in the coming century as long as they are "brave enough" to fight against those fetters and shackles imposed by a patriarchal society for their ultimate independence.

## 1.2 Criticism of The Odd Women

### 1.2.1 *Critical opinions that favor The Odd Women*

Due to his unreserved adherence to women's emancipation and final independence demonstrated in this novel, Gissing received much acclaim from twentieth-century critics.<sup>2</sup> For instance, Arlene Young expresses her admiration for Gissing's radical feminist, Rhoda, because she "sees white-collar work as liberation from traditional 'womanly' avenues of employment, represents the modern and liberated woman, the one less bound by traditional gender norms," and she may in fact "suggest the hope of a brave new world for the independent working woman" (135).

Besides, Gissing is praised for his contribution of creating heroic women to fight

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<sup>1</sup> All the quotations from Gissing's *The Odd Women* are based on the edition of Broadview Literary Texts, ed. by Arlene Young, Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> As a matter of fact, Gissing's *The Odd Women* was warmly appreciated when it was published in 1893. As a review praised in *Nation* in July 1893, "The story in which the 'odd Women' are thus ably championed is excellent both for construction and for characterization. . . . and it is a pleasure to testify that Mr. Gissing's is, in spite of and on account of its intensity of purpose, an uncommonly good one." For the contemporary review of this novel, see Arlene Young's edition, pp 333-39.

against patriarchy—“how unnatural and confining the sphere assigned to women by society actually was. He [Gissing] takes the ‘odd’ women, women in rebellion against the social order, seriously—that is, he knows these women are heroic and deals with them as such” (Maglin, 219). Moreover, Gissing is acclaimed for his artistic sensibility in the novel: “he achieves in *The Odd Women* a unique boldness of social vision and an unusual effectiveness of artistic presentation which are related aspects of the same cause: a transcendence of the intensely personal involvement with his fiction which often limited his artistic imagination” (Linehan, 359). To be concise, with the rise of feminist criticism in the 1970s, Gissing enjoyed a certain degree of popularity among critics because of this novel.

### 1.2.2 *Critical opinions that criticize The Odd Women*

Yet, not all critics agree as far as Gissing’s attitudes towards women and marriage in this novel are concerned. Although Gissing painstakingly stresses the importance of women’s emancipation and independence in the novel, he is often criticized on the grounds that his attitudes towards women still reflect those of patriarchy. As Deirdre David asserts, “*The Odd Women* resolves the contradictions that it represents. It is, all at once, representation, subversion, and affirmation of particular social, psychological, and sexual realities.” In other words, “the struggle of feminism within an established patriarchal system must inevitably be influenced by the beliefs and practices of what it seeks to change” (120). Thus, according to David’s argument, despite their efforts to free themselves from patriarchy, those feminists in *The Odd Women* are still unable to break the bondage of patriarchy because what they think in

their minds is still under the influence of patriarchy. They are the products of patriarchy.

In addition, since Gissing fails to free himself completely from patriarchal thinking and emphasizes the importance of money and social class in the novel, he is regarded by Robert Selig as, “at best, an ambivalent feminist, because of his own self-centered obsession with money and social position, both of which, he felt, should have descended, by right, to his own intelligent male self” (17). Furthermore, some critics point out that if Gissing tries to present experiments through feminism to rectify the injustice done to women by patriarchy in *The Odd Women*, these experiments do not succeed at all, “While the experiments seek to contest and subvert the dominant patriarchal ideology that defines the ‘natural’ profession for a woman as marriage and hence their only proper means of financial support and emotional fulfillment, the ideological fantasy is still a product of patriarchal hegemony and is therefore subject to it” (Comitini 532). Thus, based on the unfavorable opinions of these critics of Gissing, we can draw a conclusion that the most controversial part in *The Odd Women* is that, despite his sympathy towards women and his efforts to emancipate them by offering them careers such as clerical work, he is, nonetheless, a follower of patriarchy because he still carries patriarchal thinking with him.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Similar views against Gissing’s *The Odd Women* can also be found in Lloyd Fernando’s “Gissing’s Studies in ‘Vulgarism’: Aspects of His Anti-Feminism,” in *George Gissing: Critical Essays*, ed. Jean-Pierre Michaux, London: Vision, 1981, 108-16; Alice Markow’s “George Gissing: Advocate or Provocateur of the Women’s Movement?” *English Literature in Transition* 25 (1982): 58-73.

### 1.3 Thesis statement

Indeed, there is no denying that Gissing does show his sympathy towards women in their predicament of being caught in marriage through the leading character in the novel, Monica, who hopes to escape from the horrible working condition of shopping assistants by seeking marriage as a haven, but becomes even more distressed because of the bondage of marriage. Through Monica, we can see Gissing successful by depicting how futile it can be for women to defy patriarchy to strive for their freedom. However, what is more puzzling about Gissing's attitudes towards feminism is that he and the feminists he creates in the novel still have the remnants of patriarchy even though they painstakingly declare they are feminists. Therefore, from the assumption that Gissing is still under the influence of patriarchy, it is my intention in this thesis to assert that Gissing is not a feminist writer as some critics presume by demonstrating that in *The Odd Women* women still cannot escape from patriarchy in spite of their great efforts for freedom in marriage and aspiration for ultimate independence.

### 1.4 Outline of each chapter

In the second chapter, I will discuss Monica's relationship with her husband, Edmund Widdowson. I will refer to John Ruskin's views towards men's as well as women's roles in marriage in his essay "Of Queen's Gardens." In addition, I will discuss Monica's attempt to attain freedom by strolling in cities and her final destruction as a result of such activity. In the third chapter I will discuss Gissing's

attitudes towards marriage as seen in the novel and indicate that Gissing is still in favor of ideals mentioned in Ruskin's theory to prove that Gissing still serves as the mouthpiece of patriarchy. In the fourth chapter I will discuss the feminists' failures in the novel in terms of their support of domestic ideology by resorting to the concept of "Angel in the House" and display the fact that their efforts to offer women clerical work actually aid and abet the feminization of the office. Finally, in the conclusion chapter I will comment on Gissing's limitation in his awareness of feminism.

## CHAPTER 2

### A GIRL TRAPPED IN MARRIAGE

#### 2.1 Source of domestic ideology

##### 2.1.1 *The definition of The Odd Women*

The very title of this novel, "*The Odd Women*," may indeed seem "odd" to first-time readers when they relate the definition of "odd" to the content of the novel. As Gissing defines the meaning of "odd" through Rhoda, "odd" refers to the status of being extra or surplus, instead of its normal meaning, being strange. When Monica asks Rhoda whether she resents marriage, Rhoda informs Monica of the status of women in Victorian England: "do you know that there are half a million more women than men in this happy country of ours?"<sup>4</sup> Then she defines these "half a million more women" as, "many *odd* women—no making a pair with them. The pessimists call them useless, lost, futile lives" (Gissing 64). Obviously, what can be observed from the definition of "odd" women is that it is related to marriage. Because they are unable to find a mate, these women become extra, redundant in the eye of patriarchy, as if, the only goal for women in this world is to be married. There is no other purpose than that for women's existence in this world. Besides, to return to the original definition of oddness or strangeness, in the eye of patriarchy, this definition of being strange still

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<sup>4</sup> About the cause of "odd" women, some ascribe it to the imbalanced ratio of baby girls to boys; some think the emigration of men to British colonies might contribute to it and some argue that men have to earn enough money to raise a family. See Arlene Young's introduction to Gissing's *The Odd Women*, 9-10.

applies. As long as women fail to find a husband in their life, they will be considered strange creatures. Therefore, whether “odd” can be defined as either “redundant” or “strange,” marriage becomes women’s only natural calling in Victorian England.

### 2.1.2 *Ruskin’s “Of Queen’s Garden”*

Since marriage is assumed to be women’s only calling in Victorian England, the types of roles they are expected to achieve in the institution of marriage become essential. In his lecture, “Of Queen’s Gardens,” John Ruskin lays a theoretical foundation for the roles that women can play in marriage:

But the woman’s power is for rule, not for battle,—and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision. . . . By her office, and place, she is protected from all danger and temptation. The man, in his rough work in open world, must encounter all peril and trial: to him, therefore, must be the failure, the offense, the inevitable error: often he must be wounded, or subdued; often misled; and always hardened. But he guards the woman from all this; within his house, as ruled by her, unless she herself has sought it, need enter no danger, no temptation, no cause of error or offense. This is the true nature of home—it is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division.

And wherever a true wife comes, this home is always round her. The stars only may be over her head; the glowworm in the night cold grass may be the only fire at her foot: but home is yet wherever she is. (68)

According to Ruskin's loquacious praise for woman, it is very clear to see that he designates home as the only domain in which she can exert her power. Outside the home is man's territory. Within home, she holds responsibility for everything related to domestic life. She can give orders to her servants in a delicate, gentle manner and arrange household chores so that the man will have no worries about his house and can concentrate on his career to support his family. Moreover, when encountering frustrations from the outside world, he can seek comfort from his wife because of her caring nature.

In return, he has to protect her from the outside, vicious, tempting world to maintain her angelic innocence so that she can truly deserve the title of "angel in the house." As a "queen," her kingdom to rule is her walled-up home protected by her man. Hence, such domestic ideology as the "Queen's Garden" established by Ruskin helped to construct a myth in Victorian England that defined women's roles as mothers and wives owing to their assumed caring and nurturing nature. Based on Ruskin's theory, many male characters in this novel put this into practice to realize their male fantasy.



## 2.2 Ruskin's theory into practice

### 2.2.1 *Males as financial supporters*

Many male characters in the novel are true believers of Ruskin's dogma that women should be placed at home and protected by men. Monica's father, Dr. Madden, a widower, is one of them. Dr. Madden is a very typical Victorian man who firmly believes that it is men who should always support women. For him, it is out of the question that women should work to support themselves financially, "The thought of his girls having to work for money was so utterly repulsive to him that he could never seriously dwell upon it" (Gissing 33). In his belief, it is men's duty to serve as the breadwinner of the household instead of women. In a talk with Monica's sister, Alice, about how he has made some financial arrangements for them, he comments, "Let men grapple with the world; for, as the old hymn says, 'tis their nature to.' I should grieve indeed if I thought my girls would ever have to distress themselves about money matter" (Gissing 31).

Dr. Madden's ideal may seem perfect—men should 'grapple with the world,' while women should be free from the worry of money matters. However, it does not occur to him or to Ruskin that their theory can be questioned. A problem arises when the breadwinner, the so-called financial support of the family, suddenly dies and does not leave sufficient financial resources for their women to "grapple with the world." This is what really happens to Monica and her sisters when Dr. Madden suddenly dies and does not leave them sufficient financial resources to support themselves. Monica

and her sisters are not well-prepared to face the harshness of the outside world because under Victorian domestic ideology they should stay within their home and be protected by their men. When the protector is gone, women become so vulnerable to the outside world that they are placed in a miserable situation.

### 2.2.2 *Odd women without support*

As a matter of fact, Dr. Madden would be very much distressed to see his daughters disturbed by money matters and the struggle for survival. After their father dies, Monica and her sisters, Alice and Virginia, have to work to support themselves. Because domestic ideology only equips them with a knowledge of household affairs, these women are not professionally competitive in the job market. For Alice and Virginia, they can only work as a governess and a reading companion to a lady. Again, in domestic ideology, serving as governesses and lady companions are the only jobs that are deemed suitable for women because such work requires nurturing and caring, which exactly correspond to the presumed motherly nature of women. To their distress, these two jobs are horrendously low-paid: “Alice obtained a situation as nursery-governess, at sixteen pounds a year. Virginia was fortunate enough to be accepted as companion by a gentlewoman at Weston-super-Mare; her payment, twelve pounds” (Gissing 40).

Whether in the nineteenth-century or twenty-first-century England, 12-16 pounds cannot support a person for a whole year. The lowest income of a male character in *The Odd Women* is seventy pounds. Even a male shop assistant in the

novel can earn one hundred and fifty pounds a year. Because of their scarce income, Alice and Virginia have to expend as little money as possible to survive. They even have to cut down their food expenses to only fourpence a day, dining only on rice with butter, pepper and salt. Since they are lacking in enough money to buy food and gain nutrition, these two women's health condition deteriorates drastically. Alice has headaches and fever and is often confined in bed, while Virginia often faints and has to resort to alcohol to revive herself, which leads to her final addiction. In effect, these women are dying and can barely survive. Therefore, when realizing that they have to live on a life of only fourpence a day, Virginia asks, "Is such a life worthy of the name?" (Gissing 44). Since such a life of supporting oneself becomes so miserable, marriage, especially to marry someone rich, seems to be the only choice for women without support.

### 2.3 Monica as shop assistant

#### 2.3.1 *The working condition of shop assistants*

Monica, like her sisters, must work to support herself after the financial pillar of the family is gone. She works as a shop assistant in a drapery, a type of work that is behind the counter, which is deemed a decent job at first thought by middle class women because it does not involve manual labor, which is too vulgar and considered only suitable for lower-class workers. But that does not assure that it is an ideal job. In fact, its working condition is so notoriously horrible that it can best be summarized in Clara Collet's report to the Royal Commission on Labour about the employment of women in 1893:

The constant supervision of the shop-walker, the patience and politeness to show to the most trying customers, the difficulty of telling the truth about the goods without incurring the displeasure of the managers, the long standing, the close atmosphere even in well ventilated shops when crowded with customers, the short time for meals, the care required to keep things in their right places and to make out accounts correctly, the long evenings with gaslight and the liability to dismissal without warning or explained reason all tend to render the occupation of the shop assistants most trying to the nerves and injurious to health. (qtd. in Gissing 391)<sup>5</sup>

In addition to long working hours, standing up and poor meals, poor salary is also another disadvantage of working as a shop assistant because there are too many girls striving for limited vacancy. In a conversation about the working condition of shop assistants, Monica complains to Rhoda, “if you knew how terribly hard it is for many girls to find a place, even now” (Gissing 62). Consequently, with so many applicants, the employers always have a recruiting pool to choose from so that they can reduce the salary to a very low level.

In this way, Monica cannot support herself by working as a shop assistant, and the horrible working conditions seriously damage her health. As her sister, Virginia, comments to Rhoda, “She [Monica] is worked to death” (Gissing 50). Since the working conditions of shop assistants are so horrible, Monica knows she must find

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<sup>5</sup> For a detailed analysis on the horrible working condition of shop assistants, see Lee Holcombe’s *Victorian Ladies at Work*, Hamden, CT: Archon, 1973, pp 103-17.

another alternative, such as marriage. Otherwise, her future life will be hopeless. To Monica marriage is a good choice and she has a good reason to think so because seeking marriage as a haven is sanctioned by contemporary views. As an official investigator in late Victorian England remarked, “the majority of shop assistants look upon marriage as their one hope of release, and would, as one girl expressed it, ‘marry anybody to get out of the drapery business’” (Holcombe 117).

### 2.3.2 *Choosing an ideal husband*

On the other hand, Monica will not randomly pick out a husband simply for marriage’s sake. Economic competence is her priority when it comes to choosing a mate. When she is courted by her colleague, Bullivant, Monica asks, “How would it be possible for you to support a wife?” To this, Bullivant replies that he will wait to be promoted to a better position with a salary of 150 pounds a year. Still Monica asks Bullivant, “And you would ask me to wait on and on for one of these wonderful chances?” Obviously, Monica is not interested in him because of his unsatisfactory income, and she discourages his proposal: “Mr. Bullivant, I think you ought to wait until you really have prospects. . . . A long engagement, where everything remains doubtful for years, is so wretched that—oh, if I were a man, I would *never* try to persuade a girl into that! I think it wrong and cruel” (Gissing 55-56). It is evident that Monica is by no means the sort of woman who will wait for her man to turn rich after years’ engagement. To Monica, her urgent need is for a rich man who can instantly rescue her from her wretched condition of being enslaved as a shop assistant.

### 2.3.3 *Widdowson as a good choice*

Compared with Bullivant, Edmund Widdowson, a man in his forties but with an annual income of six hundred pounds a year, seems a much better candidate as Monica's husband. Pondering over the possibility that Widdowson might propose to her, Monica thus imagines:

With what amazement and rapture would any one of her shop companions listen to the advances of a man who had six hundred a year! Yet Monica did not doubt his truthfulness and the honesty of his intentions. . . . As things went in the marriage war, she might esteem herself a most fortunate young woman. It seemed that he had really fallen in love with her; he might prove a devoted husband. She felt no love in return; but between the prospect of a marriage of esteem and that of no marriage at all there was little room for hesitation. The chances were that she might never again receive an offer from a man whose social standing she could respect. (Gissing 91)

Throughout Monica's calculation in choosing a husband, all she is concerned about is whether he is a man of means and can offer her a haven to escape from her horrible work. It matters little to her whether she loves him. In plain words, all she wants is a rich man. Also, Monica is keenly aware of the fact that if she misses such a good choice as Widdowson, it is very likely that she might never have the luck to meet another man like him. As the old saying goes, opportunity seldom knocks twice.

Although Monica might be censured for being too mercenary in choosing her mate, she has good grounds for her attitude. The truth is that it is highly likely that she will end up her life in the drapery shop if she misses this chance. Indeed, Monica sells herself in exchange for an easy and comfortable life because marriage to her is like a gamble of life or death in which she does not have too many choices.<sup>6</sup>

## 2.4 Failures of their marriage

### 2.4.1 *A loveless marriage*

Despite her anticipation that her union with Widdowson will rescue her from the work of shop assistants and bring an easy, comfortable life, Monica's marriage with Widdowson does not go as smoothly as she imagines. It never occurs to her that their marriage is anything but a beginning of a disaster for both of them. When Monica informs her roommate, Mildred Vespers, of the news that she is going to marry Widdowson, Mildred predicts the misfortune that their marriage will produce: "You must let *me* tell the truth as well. I think you're going to marry with altogether wrong ideas. I think you'll do an injustice to Mr. Widdowson. You will marry him for a comfortable home—that's what it amounts to. And you'll repent it bitterly some day—you'll repent" (Gissing 131). It is wise of Mildred to see the real problem of the marriage of Monica and Widdowson—a marriage not based on love but on utility, that is, Monica uses Widdowson to find an easier, more comfortable way of living.

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<sup>6</sup> Mona Caird, a New Woman novelist in the 1890s, expresses a similar view, "It is folly to inveigh against mercenary marriages, however degrading they may be, for a glance at the position of affairs shows that there is no reasonable alternative. We cannot ask every woman to be a heroine and choose a hard and thorny path when a comparatively smooth one, (as it seems), offers itself, and when the pressure of public opinion urges strongly in that direction" (Gissing 360).

Even Monica herself is aware that she does not truly love Widdowson. To Mildred's comments, Monica replies, "He [Widdowson] has made me love him" (Gissing 131). Thus, from such a reply Monica conveys a message that she is forced to love Widdowson. She feels obligated to love him in return for his offering her a comfortable life. In other words, she is not sincerely in love with Widdowson. Within a loveless marriage, it is not too difficult to predict their union will end up in misery.

#### 2.4.2 *Incompatible personalities*

In addition to the fact that there is no mutual love, the essential problem of their marriage is that Monica and Widdowson are incompatible in their personalities. Again, as Mildred points out to Monica another problem of the relationship between her and Widdowson is that "he's too old. Your habits and his won't suit" (Gissing 131). Actually, Widdowson is twice as old as Monica. Owing to such an age difference, they do not share many common interests. Widdowson is such an introvert that he prefers to stay at home rather than go out to seek company. He confesses to Monica that he is not a sociable person when he makes new acquaintance with Monica: "I don't easily make friends; as a rule I can't talk to strangers. I keep so much to myself that those who know me only a little think me surly and unsociable" (Gissing 70).

In contrast to Widdowson's inability to be a sociable person, Monica is an extrovert because of her youthfulness. Contrary to Widdowson, she would rather go out frequently to stroll in the city, meet her friends, and even meet new acquaintances than stay indoors. When on a vacation to a summer resort, Monica suggests to



Widdowson that they should travel more often with the money and leisure they have instead of staying at home all day: “Think of the numbers of people who live a dull, monotonous life just because they can’t help it; how they would envy us, with so much money to spend, and free to do just what we like! Doesn’t it seem a pity to sit there day after day alone” (Gissing 177). Owing to their disparate personalities, conflicts between the couple are unavoidable. And the root of their conflict is that Monica claims more freedom in her relationship with Widdowson.

#### 2.4.3 *More freedom in marriage*

Freedom in her relationship with Widdowson has always been an indispensable feature that Monica emphasizes. In fact, early in Widdowson’s courtship for her, Monica asserts her request for freedom. When Widdowson expresses his desire to see Monica more often, she answers, “I will see you once every week. But I must still be perfectly free” (Gissing 98).

After they are married, Monica still asserts her freedom to go wherever she desires to go. In their discussion of how to improve their relationship, Monica boldly states what she desires: “I should like to make more friends, and to see them often. I want to hear people talk, and know what is going on round about me. And to read a different kind of books; books that would really amuse me, and give me something I could think about with pleasure. Life will be a burden to me before long, if I don’t have more freedom” (Gissing 179). But Widdowson fails to realize his wife’s real needs and that she, as a woman, is also entitled to possess freedom. He tries to refute

her by resorting to the old dogma of patriarchy that men and women are different and thus women should not enjoy as much as freedom as men.

To counteract her husband's fallacy, Monica makes her most daring request—equality in the husband-and-wife relationship, “I can't see that that makes any difference. A woman ought to go about just as freely as a man. I don't think it's just. When I have done my work at home, I think I ought to be every bit as free as you are—every bit as free. And I'm very sure, Edmund, that love needs freedom if it is to remain love in truth” (Gissing 179). However, for fear of losing Monica, Widdowson offers a plan to move to a country mansion so that Monica's freedom will be limited within that remote domestic sphere. Naturally, Monica regards this moving plan as her utter imprisonment by Widdowson: “You have no confidence in me, and you want to get me away into a quiet country place where I shall be under your eyes every moment” (Gissing 210).

Eventually, realizing that Widdowson will not lift his surveillance, Monica gives Widdowson the ultimatum: “I can only say as I have said before, that things will never be better until you come to think of me as your free companion, not as your bondwoman. If you can't do this, you will make me wish that I had never met you, and in the end I am sure it won't be possible for us to go on living together” (Gissing 212-13). Thus, to Monica, marriage has become an even more bitter condition than that of shop assistants: “She thought with envy of the shop-girls in Walworth Road; wished herself back there. What unspeakable folly she had committed!” (Gissing 212). Monica is actually caught in the trap of marriage and cannot find an exit for such a

miserable predicament as a bitter marriage. And the warning of her former roommate, Mildred Vespers, is finally realized. Monica does regret her miserable condition in her torturing marriage—a price she pays too dearly for the sake of a comfortable life.

#### 2.4.4 *Ruskin's bad influence*

In their marriage, not only Monica, but also Widdowson is a victim of patriarchy. As a believer in Ruskin's theories, he endeavors to put them into practice and aspires to create a confined domestic realm for Monica, which subsequently contributes to their endless marital conflicts. In the early period of their marriage, he desires to indoctrinate Monica with Ruskin's theories by giving her a lecture:

Woman's sphere is the home, Monica. Unfortunately, girls are often obliged to go out and earn their living, but this is unnatural, a necessity which advanced civilization will altogether abolish. You shall read John Ruskin; every word he says about women is good and precious. If a woman can neither have a home of her own, nor find occupation in anyone else's she is deeply to be pitied; her life is bound to be unhappy. I sincerely believe that an educated woman had better become a domestic servant than try to imitate the life of a man. (Gissing 168)

Here, Widdowson becomes the spokesman of Ruskin on domestic ideology. The purpose of a woman's existence is totally confined to the home. Her value is judged on her ability to conduct her designated realm. A woman without a home, in Widdowson's eyes, is valueless. Besides, in Widdowson's mind, women not only

should serve as the “domestic servant,” but they should follow their husbands’ guidance and be guarded by them because they are less perfect creatures than their husbands.

Widdowson often views women as “born to perpetual pupilage. Not that their inclinations were necessarily wanton; they were simply incapable of attaining maturity, remained throughout their life imperfect beings, at the mercy of craft, ever liable to be misled by childish misconceptions. Of course he was right; he himself represented the guardian male, the wife-proprietor, who from the dawn of civilization has taken abundant care that woman shall not outgrow her nonage” (Gissing 208).

To Widdowson, women are inferior creatures, and because of their inborn feeble mindedness, they should be under men’s guidance to avoid errors. However, due to his obsession with women’s need for guidance, Widdowson forfeits a chance of redeeming his marriage. He proposes a trip to France, which naturally excites Monica so much that she anticipates this trip with enthusiasm. But being deficient in a knowledge of French, Widdowson imagines “all sorts of humiliating situations resulting from his ignorance. Above everything he dreaded humiliation in Monica’s sight; it would be intolerable to have her comparing him with men who spoke foreign languages” (Gissing 174). Fearing to lose authority in Monica’s eyes because of inability to speak French, Widdowson decides to abandon this trip and causes Monica’s great disappointment, which alienates her from him even more. Therefore, Widdowson is blinded by his prejudices against women which widens the chasm between him and Monica.

When he eventually senses the true problem of their marriage, it has become too late to redeem their relationship. In his reflections on the trouble in their relationship, Widdowson finally realizes that “We are unsuited to each other. We do not understand each other. Our marriage is physical, and nothing more. My love—what is my love? I do not love her mind, her intellectual part. . . . Monica’s independence of thought is a perpetual irritation to me. I don’t know what her thoughts really are, what her intellectual life signifies” (Gissing 247). Due to his folly and blindness, their marriage is finally irreparable. Widdowson is in effect the very agent who destroys his own marriage.

#### 2.4.5 *Widdowson’s insecurity*

Although Widdowson is chiefly responsible for the failure of his marriage, still, he can arouse sympathy among readers in that he himself is another victim of social problems caused by patriarchy. It is true that, thanks to his own antisocial personality, he finds it quite difficult to be acquainted with people so that the chances of meeting his mate are limited. But the main reason to explain his failure of mate-finding is due to economic factors. As a clerk with low income, it is unlikely that Widdowson can find a girl willing to marry him for his scanty salary because in domestic ideology the man is the financial provider so that woman can take care of all the domestic affairs. Thus, women will consider poor men very undesirable in a marriage market. Because of his low status, Widdowson has to pass his prime time in celibacy until he inherits a fortune from his dead brother with an annual income of six hundred pounds. Without such a

fortune, Widdowson could end up unmarried all his life. Therefore, when he inherits such wealth and meets Monica, he is keenly aware that he must seize this chance to ask her to be his bride. In his explanation to Monica about his jealousy, Widdowson confesses, “It’s because I have lived so much alone. I have never had more than one or two friends, and I am absurdly jealous when you want to get away from me and amuse yourself with strangers. I can’t talk to such people. I am not suited for society. If I hadn’t met you in that strange way, by miracle, I should never have been able to marry” (Gissing 182).

If Widdowson is likened to a drowning man in the ocean, Monica is the floating plank which he must grip firmly for survival. Monica is his last hope. Out of a sense of insecurity and the fear of losing Monica, Widdowson always keeps his vigilance on Monica. When Monica goes outside, Widdowson has a panicked thought that Monica no longer loves him and will leave him forever. Because of his insecurity, Widdowson naturally develops a morbid attachment to Monica. His desire to be always with Monica is so immense that he actually wants to confine Monica within a world of only two of them.

In their marriage, Widdowson stays home with Monica without seeing anyone for a week and he happily suggests to Monica that, “Now why can’t we always live like this? What have we to do with other people? Let us be everything to each other, and forget that any one else exists. . . . It’s better to talk about ourselves. I shouldn’t care if I never again saw any living creature but you” (Gissing 172). However, this is his only fantasy. Because of their disparate personalities, they are not suitable to live together.

Widdowson fails to understand that the more he tries to draw them together and confine Monica within the domestic sphere, the more he is driving Monica away from him.

From their marital tragedy, we can see that patriarchy not only makes women suffer, but it victimizes men as well. Being the financial supporters, men cannot marry until they accumulate sufficient capital for marriage. But when they are rich enough to marry, they probably will be interested in young women only. Even though they eventually marry, as Widdowson and Monica do, the age difference and incompatible personalities will lead to the final failure of their marriage. Hence, such a marriage between a middle-aged man and a young girl can be a serious social problem in Victorian England and its cause can be traced back to domestic ideology.<sup>7</sup>

## 2.5 Monica's strolling

### 2.5.1 *Strolling without company*

As I mentioned earlier, it is freedom that Monica always desires to gain in her marriage. The embodiment of such a declaration is evinced in her constant mobility from place to place within London. To interpret Monica's nomad-like mobility in traveling from one place to another, a concept from Rosi Braidotti is helpful:

Braidotti defines "nomadism" as "a kind of critical consciousness that resists settling into socially coded modes of behaviour. It is the subversion of set conventions that defines the nomadic state, not the

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<sup>7</sup> Even in Ruskin's own marriage, in which he also marries a young girl, it is also as disastrous as Widdowson's. For a comparative study of these two marriages, see Carolyn Perry's "A Voice of the Past: Ruskin's Pervasive Presence in Gissing's *The Odd Women*," *Publication of the Missouri Philological Association* 13 (1988): 68.

literal act of traveling: the nomad stands for the relinquishing and the deconstruction of any sense of fixed identity. (qtd. in Chialant)

When the concept of nomadism is applied to Monica's activity it is evident that Monica is truly defying the "socially coded modes of behaviour" assigned to women by domestic ideology, according to which women's sphere of mobility is within their home. To refuse to comply with the socially coded modes of behavior, Monica moves like a nomad within London. Unlike other women who live within domestic ideology and have fixed identities, she cannot have a fixed identity. Her new identity is that she is now a woman who is able to move as freely as any man.

Monica's bravery is not only seen in her behavior of constant mobility. She even moves from place to place without company, which is in conflict with the norm of Victorian femininity.<sup>8</sup> It is deemed highly inappropriate for women to be seen in public places without any chaperone for company. If a woman is seen to appear in public places without company, she will hazard the suspicion of being a "public woman," "streetwalker," or namely, prostitute. Therefore, during their initial acquaintance, Monica tells Widdowson that she has to go home by train, "Widdowson cast a curious glance at her. One would have imagined that he found something to disapprove in this

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<sup>8</sup> There is an anxiety among Victorian patriarchy that women's strolling in fact invades the domain traditionally designated to men. As Sally Ledger remarks, "It was the emergence of women in the modern city which threatened that patriarchal construction of the Victorian metropolis as masculine public space, and which problematizes the idea of (definitively male) *flâneur* as a symbol of modernity" *Women* 6.3 (1995): 265; similar views can also be seen in Williams's argument that women's strolling into the City, the commerce center of London, is an invasion of men's field. See his "Gissing and Dixon," *ELT* 45.3 (2002): 264. Hence, women's strolling into the outside world is a great threat to domestic ideology, which clearly specifies that men's domain is outside the home.



ready knowledge of London transit.” And he says, “I will go with you to the station, then” (Gissing 72).

On the literal level, Widdowson displays his courtesy as a gentleman by escorting Monica to the station. But in truth he considers it inappropriate that Monica moves within London all by herself without any company. What he disapproves of is not the London transit but rather Monica’s indecent behavior, which is not appropriate for a Victorian lady. By escorting her to the train station, Widdowson is trying to rid Monica of being seen as a “public woman.” Besides, being escorted by Widdowson, Monica is, as a matter of fact, under a man’s surveillance again because of her inappropriate behavior. Monica here is like a child who wanders into the wrong path and needs a man’s guidance to return to the right path again.

### *2.5.2 Strolling at night*

However, what is even worse than Monica’s constant mobility all alone is that she goes out at night. According to Victorian ideology women should not be seen at night outside even in public places unless they are prostitutes. One night, talking to her sister, Virginia, about Alice’s new job offering on the street, Monica runs the risk of being identified as a prostitute, “It was an odd little scene on the London pavement at ten o’clock at night; so intimately domestic amid surroundings the very antithesis of domesticity. Only a few yards away, a girl to whom the pavement was a place of commerce stood laughing with two men; the sound of her voice hinted to Monica the

advisability of walking as they conversed, and they moved towards Walworth Road Station” (Gissing 88).

In this scene, it is implied that the girl talking to two men on the street at night is actually a prostitute. It is surely odd for Monica to be seen with a prostitute around at night, and it is likely she would be mistaken for a prostitute if she lingered there. To avoid such an embarrassing situation for Monica, the best way is not to appear at night, and this is what Widdowson urges Monica to do—“I had a foolish dislike of your walking in the streets unaccompanied at so late an hour. I believe that any man who had newly made your acquaintance, and had thought as much about you as I have, would have experienced the same feeling” (Gissing 90). Once again, it is not difficult to see that, by means of its agent, Widdowson, patriarchy desires to redress Monica’s indecent, unwomanly behavior and return her to the norm that any decent woman is expected to perform.

### *2.5.3 Strolling leads to moral corruption*

Since Monica’s strolling does not adhere to the norm of Victorian femininity, she is morally questionable by the Victorian moral standard for women. Although strolling will make her a morally questionable woman, Monica still persists in her promenade without a chaperone. When Monica’s marriage with Widdowson is on the verge of disruption, a man named Bevis in the wine trade appears and wins Monica’s affection with ease. However, Bevis does not have decent thoughts towards Monica.

He invites her to his place and lies that his sisters desire Monica's company so that he can ask her to come "alone." But to her surprise, Bevis's sisters are not present to serve as the chaperones. Thus, there is no one else there except an unmarried man, Bevis, and a married woman, Monica. It is very improper for Monica to stay there under such a circumstance: "in this little set of rooms it was doubtfully permissible for her to sit *tête-à-tête* with a young man, under any excuse" (Gissing 217). But Monica, as a rebel against the norm of Victorian femininity, decides to cast aside such a suspicion that might put her into moral depravity by defending herself "against the charge of impropriety. What wrong was she committing? What matter that they were alone? Their talk was precisely what it might have been in other people's presence. . . . The objections were all cant, and cant of the worst kind. She would not be a slave of such ignoble prejudices" (Gissing 219).

In spite of her naïve belief that she can ignore those prejudices, Monica will be considered extremely morally questionable by the standard of Victorian morality because under no circumstances can a married woman be alone with a man in an enclosed sphere without any company. Therefore, what follows between Monica and Bevis truly confirms the fears of Victorian morality. After her secret rendezvous with Bevis, Monica eventually falls for Bevis and begins her love affair with him. Thus, by the standard of Victorian morality, Monica is doomed, a fallen woman because of her infidelity to her husband. As far as Victorian morality is concerned, the fall of Monica is related to her indulgence in strolling.

As the case of Monica shows, she is the very embodiment of the streetwalker, a morally corrupted woman. The fall of Monica can, for Victorian morality, best serve as the exemplar of domestic ideology—women should stay within their domestic realm and receive men’s protection. Once they lose that protection, their innocence and virtues will be endangered and corrupted, which will, as what happens to Monica, eventually lead to their irredeemable fall.

## 2.6 Corrupted shop assistants

### 2.6.1 *Chances of meeting men*

In addition to strolling, Monica’s working experience as a shop assistant can also be seen to contribute to her moral depravity. Within domestic ideology, the profession for women is a dutiful wife and a nurturing mother. Unless they are in extreme financial difficulties, women are not encouraged to work outside their home. Even though it necessitates working outside, being a governess was a preferred choice because a governess still worked within the home of her employer. In other words, she still performed her work within the domestic sphere, which met the expectation that women should stay within their home.

Nonetheless, as commerce expanded, more shops were opened, which meant more women were recruited to fill in the vacancy of shop assistants. There was an anxiety among supporters of domestic ideology that by working outside their home women’s morality was threatened due to the increasing probability of encountering the

temptation of the outside world.<sup>9</sup> As Meta Zimmeck notices, “Shop work, also an expanding field, was tainted by the moral dangers of the living-in system and exposure to the attention of male staff and customers” (157). Since shop assistants were in the constant danger of meeting men other than their own family members, it was deemed indecent for women to engage in such morally dubious work as shop assistants and the morality of shop assistants, therefore, was suspect.

### 2.6.2 *Shop assistants as merchandise*

Not only did working as shop assistants increase the chances for women to meet men outside their home, but it also made them a commodity ready for sale just like the goods they were endeavoring to sell to their customers. As I have discussed in the section about the horrible working conditions of shop assistants, one of the unpleasant things about working as a shop assistant was the low salary. Even more distressing was that they had to expend a great part of their low salary on purchasing clothes: “the pay of shop assistants was liable to further heavy exactions. One major expense was that of clothing. To obtain good positions, assistants had to make a very neat and prosperous appearance. . . . Young women working in drapers’ shops faced a special temptation in this respect, for their employers often encouraged them to ‘book their wages,’ that is to take their pay in the form of goods from the shop” (Holcombe 113).

Holcombe’s observation on shop assistants’ purchasing clothes is interesting because the real motive behind such buying behavior is revealed. On the surface level,

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<sup>9</sup> In fact, as early as in the mid 1840s, a consensus has been reached that working women should be returned to the domestic sphere. See Patricia Johnson’s *Hidden Hands*, Athens: Ohio UP, 2001, pp 6-7.

as Holcombe explains, the motive was the desire to “gain good positions.” To achieve this purpose, the ability of shop assistants to sell goods had to be extraordinary so that they could be promoted to the managerial level. For the purpose of selling goods well, they had to spend a great amount of money on clothes to beautify their appearance and allure the attention of customers so that the possibility for them to sell goods to their customers was increased. In the field of marketing, to promote the goods for sale, it is indispensable to beautifully decorate them. The more the goods can be beautifully decorated, the more they can be sold. Hence, decoration has become a vital part for the sale of goods. The goods displayed in the window of the shop need to be decorated for a good sale and so do the shop assistants who are responsible for the sale of these goods. It becomes reasonable for shop assistants to spend their salary on clothes for decorating themselves to promote the goods they try to sell. Thus, shop assistants became an essential part within the whole system of the goods-selling industry. They actually became commodified and inseparable from the goods they sold, that is, women who worked as shop assistants were “one of many elements in the display of goods for sale” (Sanders 191). Because of their commodification, women as shop assistants were considered sellable. Based upon such an assumption, it was not surprising for Victorians to see shop assistants sell themselves and become “fallen women.”

### 2.6.3 *Examples of fallen shop girls*

Examples of shop assistants as fallen women are not unusual in *The Odd Women*. When talking to Rhoda, Mary Barfoot, another feminist who sets up a typing

school for girls to give them professional training, displays her scorn of Monica's background as a shop assistant. In a conversation, Rhoda is amazed that Widdowson would marry Monica, "It strikes me that Mr. Widdowson must be of a confiding nature. I don't think men in general, at all events those with money, care to propose marriage to girls they encounter by the way." To Rhoda, Mary Barfoot replies with scorn about Monica, "Her shop training accounts for much. The elder sisters could never have found a husband in this way. The revelation must have shocked them at first" (Gissing 139). Indeed, the way Widdowson makes acquaintance with Monica is rather unusual for the Victorian time since a woman should be first introduced to her future possible spouse by way of a third party, a go-between figure.

But Widdowson simply omits the procedure of the go-between, accosting Monica on the street and asking for her acquaintance. Mary Barfoot's remark conveys the message that because of what she has learned through her shop assistant's training, Monica is capable of finding a husband on the street by making men accost her for conversation. Her sisters, Virginia and Alice, on the other hand, are unable to find their husbands on the street because they lack that sort of training acquired from the working experiences as shop assistants.

Everard Barfoot, cousin of Mary Barfoot and Rhoda's admirer, who believes in free union rather than marriage, relates his experience with a shop girl, Amy Drake, in a confession-like conversation to his friend. When he returns to London by train, Everard meets this shop girl, "Amy put herself in my way, so that I was obliged to begin talking with her. This behaviour rather surprised me. . . . At all events, Amy

managed to get me into the same carriage with herself, and on the way to London we were alone. You foresee the end of it. At Paddington Station the girl and I went off together, and she didn't get to her sister's till the evening" (Gissing 116). Though Everard's description does not tell readers what really happens between him and Amy Drake in detail, readers can "fill in the blank" for the rest of the story—they develop a casual relationship. From Everard's description, he is indicating that instead of being a seducer, as people presume men would be, it was he who was seduced by a shop girl. Thus, shop girls have become temptresses, and loose women.

While waiting for a train at the station, Monica is stopped by a former colleague, Miss Eade. The appearance of Miss Eade has changed "noticeably in the eighteen months since she [Monica] last saw it." And Miss Eade "no longer dressed as in those days; cheap finery of the 'loudest' description arrayed her form and it needed little scrutiny to perceive that her thin cheeks were artificially reddened." Then Miss Eade explained to Monica that she was expecting her brother, "a traveler for a west-end shop; makes five hundred a year. I keep house for him, because of course he's a widower.' The 'of course' puzzled Monica for a moment. . . . However, the story did not win her credence" (Gissing 298). Monica has good reasons to doubt the truth of Miss Eade's story because a decent woman will not have her face "artificially reddened" except for the fact that she is a prostitute. Although Gissing does not actually say that Miss Eade is a prostitute, he hints in the Miss Eade episode that she might be engaging in some indecent trade. The man who she is waiting for might not



be “her brother,” but a “customer” whom she will serve in a minute just as the customer she used to serve when she was still a shop girl.

Therefore, what shop girls sell is no longer the goods in the store but themselves. They become the most despicable women of all—fallen women by the standard of Victorian morality. However, not only are shop girls considered despicable, but the place where they work is also seen as morally corrupting. When Bevis, Monica’s lover, departs for France, he asks Monica to send her love letters to a shop where the love letters will be forwarded to him even when he is in France. Following Bevis’s direction, Monica searches for “the kind of shop that might answer her purpose. The receiving letters which, for one reason or another, must be dispatched to a secret address, is a very ordinary complaisance on the part of small London stationers; hundreds of such letters are sent and called for every week within the metropolitan postal area. It did not take Monica long to find an obliging shopkeeper” (Gissing 253). Here, the shop store functions as the very place where the infidels can exchange their love messages and undoubtedly the shop store is a morally corrupted place. No wonder girls are in danger of becoming fallen women if they work there because the shop store, by the standard of Victorian morality, is the source of depravity.

### 2.7 Monica’s tragedy

From Monica’s story, we can see how helpless a woman is and how futile her efforts can be when she dares to challenge domestic ideology by leaving her domain within her home and striving for her freedom in marriage. To prevent more women from abandoning their assigned roles as mothers and wives within the domestic sphere,

such a rebellious woman as Monica must be relentlessly punished and her punishment is death. For Victorians, Monica's death reassures women that they must follow domestic ideology because they will be protected within the domestic sphere from the temptation and vices of the outside world. Once women are away from such protection and exposed to the outside world by working outside their domestic sphere, they are doomed for destruction. Perhaps, for Monica, being trapped in marriage and unable to find a place to accommodate herself, death will be her final deliverance.

## CHAPTER 3

### MARRIAGES IN THE ODD WOMEN

#### 3.1 Bad marriages

Based on the previous discussion, Gissing's desire to display women's suffering in a marriage built upon domestic ideology is clear. Indeed, the problem caused by marriage is one of the many aspects which require particular discussion in *The Odd Women*. All but one of the marriages that Gissing intends to depict ends up in misery.

Besides Monica's miserable marriage with Widdowson, there are two other bad marriages, in which the stupid wives cause the lives of their husbands to be so unbearable that they deserve to be scolded for their folly. In addressing Rhoda about the unhappy marital life of his friend, Mr. Poppleton, Everard observes that "To the amazement of every one who knew him [Poppleton], he married perhaps the dullest woman he could have found. Mrs. Poppleton not only never made a joke, but couldn't understand what joking meant. Only the flattest literalism was intelligible to her; she could follow nothing but the very macadam of conversation—had no palate for anything but the suet-pudding of talk" (Gissing 102).

In addition to this moronic wife, Everard even criticizes his brother's wife, whose selfishness and negligence make his brother's life miserable and lead to his death. Everard thus concludes to Rhoda that "women must first be civilized" (Gissing 124) and wants to beat his brother's wife, "I felt most terribly tempted to beat her.

There's a great deal to be said for woman-beating. I am quite sure that many a labouring man who pommels his wife is doing exactly the right thing" (Gissing 201). Clearly, in Everard's recount of these two examples on marriage, it is women who become the murderers of marriage because of their stupidity and despicable character.

In fact, such hostile criticism against women is not surprising if we realize that Gissing himself once made similar and even worse comments towards women. In a letter to his friend Eduard Bertz, Gissing reproached women for their stupidity: "I am driven frantic by the crass imbecility of the typical woman" (*Letters of George Gissing*, 171). As far as he is concerned, due to his first two unsuccessful marriages, Gissing believes that he is entitled to make such bitter comments against women. Gissing's first two marriages seem to torture him significantly. His first wife was a prostitute and Gissing's bright future as a promising scholar was ruined because of her. His second wife was a factory girl who became insane and was eventually sent to an asylum. With these two bad experiences in marriage, it is reasonable to assume that Gissing became so resentful about the "crass imbecility" he saw in women and emphasized women's lack of intellectual ability so much. It is not difficult to understand why Gissing would describe these two bad-marriage episodes in the novel; but by associating them with his own two bad marriages, Gissing seems to argue that women, especially stupid women, are the true source of bad marriages.

### 3.2 The only good marriage

On the other hand, the only good marriage in the novel is noteworthy. It is that of Everard's friend, Micklethwaite, who marries his wife, Fanny, after they have been engaged for over seventeen years because he is too poor to support a family. When Everard meets Fanny Wheatley for the first time after twenty years, he notices how old she looks:

At three-and-twenty she had possessed a sweet simple comeliness on which any man's eye would have rested with pleasure; at forty she was wrinkled, hollow-cheeked, sallow indelible weariness stamped upon her brows and lips. She looked much older than Mary Barfoot, though they were just of an age. (Gissing 142).

But when Everard visits Micklethwaite and Fanny after they are married some time later, something magical happens to Fanny:

From the very door-step Everard became conscious of a domestic atmosphere that told soothingly upon his nerves. The little servant who opened to him exhibited a gentle, noiseless demeanour which was no doubt the result of careful discipline. Micklethwaite himself, who at once came out into the passage, gave proof of a like influence; his hearty greeting was spoken in soft tones; a placid happiness beamed from his face. . . . the glow of a hospitable fire showed the hostess and her blind sister standing in expectation; to Everard's eyes both of them looked a far better in health than a few months ago. Mrs. Micklethwaite was no

longer so distressingly old; an expression that resembled girlish pleasure lit up her countenance as she stepped forward; nay, if he mistook not, there came a gentle warmth to her cheek, and the momentary downward glance was as graceful and modest as in a youthful bride. (Gissing 188).

What is important about this lengthy passage is that in the whole novel this is the only one which shows an ebullient and warm domestic atmosphere. As soon as he enters the sphere of the Micklethwaite's residence, Everard can sense the comfortable domestic atmosphere caused by a happy marriage. The servant is well trained because of the hostess's good supervision. Everyone in this family is happy.

All this can be attributed to Fanny, now referred to as Mrs. Micklethwaite, "who had made a home which in its way was beautiful" (Gissing 188). In other words, whether a home deserves its name is all dependent on the efforts of its hostess. She is the maker of a successful domestic atmosphere.

Moreover, what is even more striking about this passage is the appearance of Mrs. Micklethwaite. Compared with the passage quoted previously, she undergoes extraordinary changes. Before she marries Micklethwaite, she looks much older than her real age because of her inability to be married. But after she is married to Micklethwaite, she regains her youthful appearance. Here Gissing suggests that marriage is the most efficient cosmetics women can have to restore youthful appearance. Hence, they should be married to stay young. The reason why Mrs. Micklethwaite can make a beautiful home is that she is supported by her husband, Mr. Micklethwaite, who adheres to Ruskin's theory with enthusiasm, firmly believing "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” (Gissing 115).

### 3.3 Gissing supports domestic ideology

In comparing bad marriages with the only good one, we can see that Gissing still subscribes to Ruskin’s theory on domestic ideology. From the only happy marriage in the novel, Gissing contends that a successful marriage depends on whether the husband is capable of keeping his wife within the domestic sphere so that the wife can fulfill her wifely duties. Hence, it might raise doubt to claim that Gissing is a supporter of women’s emancipation from domestic ideology as some critics argue.

## CHAPTER 4

### NEW WOMEN; OLD THINKING

#### 4.1 New women still within domestic ideology

##### 4.1.1 *The fallacy of the new woman*

In addition to his espousal of domestic ideology as seen in the elaborate portrayal of the only happy marriage in the novel, Gissing's attitudes towards women's emancipation can also arouse doubts. In *The Odd Women*, two "odd" women, both Mary Barfoot, founder of a typing school for girls, and her assistant, Rhoda Nunn, hold a conviction that by offering these girls typing training, they will establish self-respect, gain economic independence and attain their final emancipation. In her lecture to her pupils in the typing school, Mary Barfoot mentions an urgent need for "New Women":

We ourselves are escaping from a hardship that has become intolerable. We are educating ourselves. There must be a new type of woman, active in every sphere of life: a new worker out in the world, a new ruler of the home. Of the old ideal virtues we can retain many, but we have to add to them those which have been thought appropriate only in men. Let a woman be gentle, but at the same time let her be strong; let her be pure of heart, but none the less wise and instructed. Because we have to set an example to the sleepy of our sex, we must carry on an active warfare, must be invaders. . . . Enough for us to know that our natural growth has



been stunted. The mass of women have always been paltry creatures, and their paltriness has proved a curse to men.—So, if you like to put it in this way, we are working for the advantage of men as well as for our own. Let the responsibility for disorder rest on those who have made us despise our old selves. At any cost—at any cost—we will free ourselves from the heritage of weakness and contempt! (Gissing 153)

Undoubtedly, this is a treatise on women's emancipation. Mary Barfoot is arguing that, to be emancipated, a new type of woman is needed and must be granted some privileges which used to belong to men so that she can invade the working sphere labeled as men's sphere.

However, some fallacies can be found in her argument and thus undermine the validity of this treatise on women's emancipation. First, as a woman, Mary Barfoot reveals her negative attitudes towards her own sex by saying that women are paltry, worthless creatures. Second, even though women are worthless, it should not be men's concern, but because of their paltriness, women are a great curse for men. Mary Barfoot argues that if, through women's emancipation, women would not be so worthless, or even become useful, it would be a great blessing for men. It seems Mary Barfoot looks at women's emancipation from men's perspective, arguing that such emancipation will relieve the "curse" of men, who actually benefit most from women's emancipation. But it would be more meaningful if women could benefit from women's emancipation first, then men would be benefited. However, Mary Barfoot's argument reverses that direction and makes women's emancipation a service for men. Thus, it is

not surprising that she says they are working for men's advantage first, then for women's. She actually serves as Gissing's mouthpiece and takes men's benefit first into consideration when it comes to the emancipation of women.

#### 4.1.2 *New women as hostesses*

Such a contradiction is by no means the only one in the novel. The most ironic contradiction is that both Mary Barfoot and Rhoda are referred to by the narrator through a domestic term—"hostess." A hostess is, as we know, is the female counterpart of "host" within the household, and her duty is involved in domestic affairs—receiving and entertaining guests, arranging meals, supervising servants, conducting charity works, etc. Even though Mary Barfoot and Rhoda remain unmarried throughout the novel and firmly devote themselves to the emancipation of women, in the eye of the narrator, they are still functioning as the "hostess" of the household. What is ironic about their being viewed as "hostess" is that Monica, the married wife who truly deserves the title, is seldom referred to as "hostess." Rather it is these two feminists who are supposed to deliver women from their domestic bondage that are considered "hostesses" by the narrator, who is correct in calling them this because what Mary Barfoot and Rhoda actually engage in the novel is precisely in accord with the behavior of a dutiful hostess.

#### 4.1.3 *Plain, black dress*

To begin with, the dress of the “hostess” is of great interest:

Dressed, like the hostess, in black, and without ornaments of any kind save silver buckle at her waist, Rhoda seemed to have endeavoured to liken herself to the suggestion of her name by the excessive plainness with which she had arranged her hair. (Gissing 101)

In the description of Rhoda’s dress, two features are striking. One is the color and the other is the plainness of the dress, both of which satisfy the demand of Victorian femininity. Dressed in black, due to the solemnity that the color represents, a Victorian lady displays her decorum. Besides, the black color can prevent men from indecent thoughts about her. As for the plainness of a dress, it is even highly recommended by Victorian etiquette, “Remember, however, that it is better to be too plainly dressed than too much dressed. Nothing has a more vulgar appearance than being too fine” (qtd. in Langland 35). Owing to her black dress without ornament, Rhoda, by the standard of Victorian femininity, truly meets the requirement for the dress of a decent lady. However, it is ironic to see that a feminist has to meet the demand of the ideology that she strives to escape.

#### 4.1.4 *Receiving calls*

Besides their decent Victorian ladies’ dress, these so-called feminists also conduct one of the duties required for a successful hostess—receiving calls from visitors. During Victorian times, it was essential for women to visit other women and

receive such calls from other women. The reason for paying such calls was not for gossiping, but rather, making calls was a most effective way for a woman to establish a connection with her peers or superiors so that a particular group of acquaintances could be formed and consolidated. Paying calls, in effect, became a social ritual for Victorian ladies to observe, “Because the custom of calling functioned to define and solidify a social group, women faced a heavy burden of maintaining acquaintance through visiting” (Langland 32). Hence, women and some men in the novels frequently pay visits to each other. Mary Barfoot and Rhoda, as the center of their social circle, receive constant calls from Virginia, Monica and Everard. Thus, Mary Barfoot and Rhoda are more like hostesses than supporters of women’s emancipation. As the narrator describes, “Miss Barfoot received him [Everard] as any hostess would have done” (Gissing 156). What is puzzling about these two feminists is their sharp contrast with Monica. In the novel, ironically, it is feminists who fulfill the duty of a domestic hostess to receive calls. Monica, on the other hand, neglects her domestic duty as a hostess, and becomes a stroller, roaming in London at will.

If Mary Barfoot and Rhoda are genuine feminists as they believe they are, they should defy such regulations as receiving calls decreed by domestic ideology and stroll on the streets of London, as Monica does, instead of staying within the domestic sphere to function as hostesses. Thus, whether Mary Barfoot and Rhoda can be regarded as feminists is up for debate.

#### 4.1.5 *Supervising servants*

Another criterion that can be employed to testify to her competence as a successful hostess is if she can supervise her servants well within the household. A competent hostess has to be “convinced that every thing depends on her vigilance and studious care in the superintendence of her household” (Beeton 504). Once she can prove that she is capable of supervising her servants well, she can even apply such supervision to other fields outside her household. For instance, Florence Nightingale’s nursing profession, as Elizabeth Langland argues, is a reproduction of such household management. By borrowing the concept from Anne Summers that a hostess-like figure in the hospital can be “found in the person of head nurse, ward sister or lady superintendent drawn from a higher social class than the ordinary hospital nurses and their patients” (49), Langland regards the head nurse in the hospital as the hostess and the ordinary nurses as the servants of the household under the supervision of the hostess/ head nurse.

If management within the nursing profession can be viewed as the replica of household management, so can Mary Barfoot and Rhoda’s typing school. In the description of this typing school, the narrator thus observes, “to superintend this department was Miss Nunn’s [Rhoda] chief duty, together with business correspondence under the principal’s [Mary Barfoot] direction. In the second room, Miss Barfoot instructed her pupils, never more than three being with her at a time” (Gissing 79). Here, the roles of both Mary Barfoot and Rhoda in the typing school are equivalent to that of a hostess—“to superintend, give directions to, instruct

pupils/servants.” Actually, they do treat one of their pupils as their servant. When Rhoda plans a vacation and tries to find a person to manage her room, Mary Barfoot recommends a pupil, Mildred Vesper, the former roommate of Monica, “[she] can manage your room very well.” And Rhoda replies that “Yes. Miss Vesper is getting to be very useful and trustworthy” (Gissing 224). By her management of Rhoda’s room, Mildred switches her role from pupil to servant and Rhoda becomes her hostess. Although they are not real hostesses, Mary Barfoot and Rhoda, through their supervision of their pupils, reproduce domestic ideology in their typing school and become the true hostesses there, which proves their failure to emancipate themselves from domestic ideology.

## 4.2 Old thinking

### 4.2.1 *Support for virginity*

Besides her adherence to domestic ideology, Rhoda still reveals her confinement within patriarchal thinking by emphasizing the significance of women’s virginity. In her debate with Mary Barfoot over the issue of whether they should accept Bella Royston, a former pupil, but now abandoned by her lover back into their school, Rhoda asserts her status of ascetic-like chastity: “I am seriously convinced that before the female sex can be raised from its low level there will have to be a widespread revolt against sexual instinct. Christianity couldn’t spread over the world without help of the ascetic ideal, and this great movement for woman’s emancipation must also have its ascetics” (Gissing 84). As her surname “Nunn” suggests, Rhoda truly lives a nun-like ascetic life in the novel so that she can be completely dedicated to her religion—the

emancipation of women. Rhoda here echoes what the early Christian church fathers said about the importance of women maintaining their virginity.

As a believer in women's emancipation, Rhoda is not aware that virginity is a means for men to control women's bodies. Furthermore, what Rhoda says about women's virginity really confirms the Victorian notion that women, being morally superior to men and thus serving as men's guides, should be void of sexual passion. Owing to her being sexually ascetic, Rhoda can act as the voice for Victorians on retaining women's virginity. Thus, it is highly doubtful that Rhoda can be deemed a loyal follower of women's emancipation if she herself cannot break the bondage of patriarchal thinking.

#### *4.2.2 Desire for marriage*

What undermines their creditability of the supporters of women's emancipation, however, is their support for the institution of marriage. In their debate over rescuing Bella Royston, Mary Barfoot claims that "the vast majority of women would lead a wasted life if they did not marry" (Gissing 83). She still believes that marriage is women's only natural calling. It is rather astonishing to learn that such words should be uttered by a woman who supports women's emancipation. As a believer in women's emancipation, Mary Barfoot ought to be keenly aware of the fact that it is marriage that traps many women and causes their suffering, as Monica's marriage reveals. Thus, Mary Barfoot cannot be said to be a true supporter of women's emancipation.

Rhoda, on the other hand, displays her resentment towards marriage when she first makes Everard's acquaintance, "I would have girls taught that marriage is a thing to be avoided rather than hoped for. I would teach them that for the majority of women marriage means disgrace. . . . Because the majority of men are without sense of honour. To be bound to them in wedlock is shame and misery" (Gissing 120). Ironically, when realizing that she has finally won Everard's submission and they will seek the registrar for a marriage license, Rhoda changes most drastically,

She had triumphed splendidly. In the world's eye, this marriage of hers was far better than any she could reasonably have hoped, and her heart approved it with rapture. At a stage in life when she had sternly reconciled herself never to know a man's love, this love had sought her with passionate persistency of which even a beautiful young girl might feel proud. . . . She herself was no longer one of the "odd women"; fortune had—or seemed to have—been kind to her. (Gissing 274)

Evidently, despite her past resentment towards marriage, when her chance finally comes, Rhoda will seize it without hesitation to escape from the infamous title of "the odd women" and embrace marriage. Although they do not marry in the end because of their mutual intention to subjugate each other, Rhoda's desire for marriage is so lucid that her reasons for marriage resentment prove very unconvincing. It might be argued that Rhoda's love struggle with Everard is to test if she is truly dedicated to women's emancipation. It can also be argued, however, that if a man is willing to be subjugated to Rhoda, she is very likely to be his wife. Since Mary Barfoot and Rhoda are so



imbued with self-contradictory thinking, believers in women's emancipation as they claim they are, the authenticity of such a claim is questionable.

#### 4.3 Clerical work and domestic ideology

##### 4.3.1 *Is clerical work a promising alternative?*

In a lecture to her pupils at the typing school, Mary Barfoot indicates her confidence in the promising future that clerical work can bring:

An excellent governess, a perfect hospital nurse, do work which is invaluable; but for our cause of emancipation they are no good; nay, they are harmful. Men point to them, and say: Imitate these, keep to your proper world.—Our proper world is the world of intelligence, of honest effort, of moral strength. The old types of womanly perfection are no longer helpful to us. . . . We have to ask ourselves: What course of training will wake women up, make them conscious of their souls, startle them into healthy activity? (Gissing 152-53)

In this passage, Mary Barfoot reveals little appreciation for such professions as governesses and nurses, which are considered suitable for women in the Victorian period because of their nurturing and caring nature. Therefore, it is her conviction that they cannot be conducive to women's emancipation and a new profession is needed to replace these two old professions sanctioned by domestic ideology.

For Mary Barfoot, clerical work can meet this demand and open a new outlet for women because "I [Mary Barfoot] myself have had an education in clerkship, and have most capacity for such employment, I look about for girls of like mind, and do my best

to prepare them for work in offices” (Gissing 152). As for Rhoda, she is also optimistic about the beneficial future of typewriting for women and urges Monica to try it when she is eager to seek a haven to escape from shopping assistants: “There’s a good deal of employment for women who learn to use a type-writer” (Gissing 62). However, is typing or clerical work truly so promising for women, as Mary Barfoot and Rhoda foresee? The answer might not be as positive as they believe.

#### 4.3.2 *Widdowson’s resentment of clerkship*

In his initial relationship with Monica, Widdowson, who used to work as a clerk, recounts to Monica what he feels about clerkship:

I have always hated office-work, and business of every kind; yet I could never see an opening in any other direction. I have been all my life a clerk—like so many thousands of other men. Nowadays, if I happen to be in the city when all the clerks are coming away from business, I feel an inexpressible pity for them. I feel I should like to find two or three of the hardest driven, and just divide without any hope of rising—that is a hideous fate! (Gissing 70)

In contrast with Widdowson’s antipathy towards clerkship and Mary Barfoot’s enthusiasm for it, an interesting phenomenon can be noticed, “clerkship, [is] a living hell for men and feminist salvation for women” (Selig 20). It is ironic that men’s curse should turn out to be women’s blessing. If clerical work is no opening for men, it does not follow that clerical work will be suitable for women because those afflictions which

men suffer from will also be felt by women or even worse. Thus, the issue of whether clerkship is for men or women in the novel witnesses Gissing's ambivalence—through Widdowson, he displays the pain of serving as a clerk, however, in Mary Barfoot, he displays the bright side of clerkship. With such a contradiction, that clerical work can help women with their emancipation is not convincing.

#### 4.3.3 *Poor salary*

When it comes to the hardships of clerical work, the most notorious one is, like that of being shop assistants, the low salary.<sup>10</sup> In the late Victorian period, the number of women clerks was tremendous, “Between 1861 and 1911 the number of male clerical workers increased fivefold, while the number of women clerks increased no less than four hundred times over” (Holcombe 146). Too many women clerks competed for limited vacancies. With such a plentiful workforce, there was no need for employers to find employees since it had become easy to find one and thus they could exploit their employees to the extreme and lower the hiring cost. It has been estimated that “the average of all women clerks’ salaries was only £45 a year” (Holcombe 151). In the novel, the lowest salary of a male shop assistant is still 150 pounds a year, not to mention the fact that the other male characters all have an annual income of 600 pounds a year. Therefore, women clerks’ salaries are pitifully low.

Presumably, women clerks could only lead a meager life. With such a low salary, it should be asked whether it was worthwhile to encourage more women to work

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<sup>10</sup> Besides poor salary, other disadvantages of clerkship are long working hours and unhealthy working environment. See Holcombe's *Victorian Ladies at Work*, pp 148-50.

as clerks. While encouraging her pupils to emancipate themselves through clerical work, Mary Barfoot received a letter, “written by some clerk out of employment, abusing her roundly for encouragement of female competition in the clerkly world. . . . This abusive correspondent, who declared that he was supplanted by a young woman who did his work for smaller payment, doubtless had a grievance” (Gissing 151). This letter censuring Mary Barfoot reflects a fact—male clerks were supplanted by an even cheaper labor—women. However, that does not necessarily mean women’s lives can be improved when they can secure a profession. Conversely, owing to their cheap labor, they were susceptible to exploitation and thus placed at the very bottom of the labor hierarchy. With so humble an income, women as clerical workers might not be able to live a comfortable life. In the novel, one of the best pupils at the typing school, Mildred Vesper, Monica’s former roommate, admits to Monica that, even though she works industriously, she “has been trying to find some one to share my rent” (Gissing 92). It can be assumed that Mildred’s economic condition is not greatly improved and a roommate is needed to release her financial burden.

Furthermore, based upon the description of her rooms, it seems that her life is only modest: “Miss Vesper’s two rooms were very humble” and “It was only of late that Miss Vesper had been able to buy furniture (four sovereigns it cost in all), and thus to allow herself the luxury of two rooms at the rent she previously paid for one” (Gissing 92-93). From this, Mildred seems to have saved enough money for a long time so that she can afford some furniture. Thus, whether clerical work can offer a promising and comfortable life as Mary Barfoot fervently predicts in her lecture is

really doubtful. If women clerical workers are poorly paid, as shop assistants are, it is possible that another clerk girl, like Monica, will marry some rich man simply for the sake of searching for a more comfortable life and this might lead to a marital life as tragic as Monica's. Hence, Mary Barfoot's typing school, at best, can only promise humble lives for girls. Their eventual economic independence is still a long way off.

#### 4.3.4 *Typing and piano*

Typewriters, owing to the design of employing keyboards to strike keys on paper, are often associated with pianos in the nineteenth century. When advising Monica to consider typing a replacing career for shop assistants, Rhoda asks Monica if she can play the piano. To this Monica replies no. Then Rhoda remarks in a regretful tone, "No more did I, and I was sorry for it when I went to type-writing. The fingers have to be light and supple and quick" (Gissing 63). What is intriguing behind Rhoda's regretful tone is that she does not sense that she actually designates typing as a women's profession by the analogy of piano-playing with typing.

In the nineteenth century, women were not expected to receive an intellectual education but they were advised to have some dilettante knowledge in music learning, not simply so that they could entertain themselves through music but so that they could also become more elegant and more lady-like. Consequently, the ability to play some musical instruments was one essential part of a lady's education. In fact, almost all piano-players in the novel are women. Naturally, piano-playing is recognized as an element of femininity. If piano-playing is considered women's domain, it can be

concluded that, through the association of typing with piano-playing, typing belongs to the women's domain and thus is a suitable profession for women. It is true that "typewriting was from the beginning an almost exclusively feminine occupation" (Holcombe 146).<sup>11</sup>

#### 4.3.5 *Home-like office*

Other reasons that explain why typing or similar clerical work was suitable for women include: "It was clean. It was dainty. It allowed women to dress nicely. It could be organized so as to limit contact with social inferiors and with men" (Zimmeck 158). Of these reasons, "limited contact with men" is worthy of a discussion. During the Victorian era, there was an anxiety that women could easily fall prey to temptation because of their vulnerability, especially temptations from men. Therefore, how to protect them from temptation became the priority for Victorians to consider when women had to work.

Women's working environment should be as enclosed as possible so that they can avoid contact from men. The office, compared with the shop store, because of its sphere of enclosure, could exclude women from contact with men and was relatively "safer" for women's work. In fact, because of domestic ideology, women's domain was within home, when they were out at work, which has long been viewed as men's domain, they are in the hazard of becoming men. The best method to prevent this

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<sup>11</sup> In fact, when the inventor of the typewriter, Christopher Scholes, coined the word "typewriter," he referred it both to the machine and the woman who uses it. Thus, typing is considered a profession for women when the machine is seen in the market. See Holcombe's *Victorian Ladies at Work*, 143.

hideous situation from occurring, for Victorians, was that women should stay within their enclosed home.

If it is unavoidable for women to work, they should work within a home-like, enclosed environment as if they were still within the domestic sphere. Hence, such professions as governesses and clerical work were sanctioned by Victorians for women because of the enclosure characteristic in these professions. When women worked as governesses or clerks, they were still working within a domestic sphere, which was what Victorians approved of since women were still under the “protection” of domestic ideology.

Thus, it is rather ironic to see that Mary Barfoot’s and Rhoda’s efforts to emancipate women from domestic ideology by establishing their typing school are futile. They despise the work of governesses since it is still within domestic ideology. However, they fail to see that the typing career they advocate still places women in the domestic sphere. What Mary Barfoot and Rhoda undertake does not emancipate women from domestic ideology but imprisons them into a career immersed in the domestic atmosphere. Therefore, it is impossible for women to escape from the surveillance of domestic ideology.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

As we have seen in the introduction, Gissing in his novel, *The Odd Women*, displays his ambivalence and contradictory attitudes. On the one hand, he is sympathetic towards women's suffering in a trapped marriage. On the other hand, however, he shows his bitter resentment towards women's supposed lack of intelligence. There is no denying that Gissing, as a sensitive novelist, pointed out the problems in Victorian domestic ideology and successfully reflected such a problem in the manner of social realism. The concept that man is the financial support of a family is questionable especially when he dies without leaving sufficient financial resources to women in his family. For women, as Monica's story reveals, marriage cannot be a perfect solution for such an unenviable situation.

Indeed, Gissing is correct in offering the concept that women can be independent when they can support themselves financially. However, the fallacy of Gissing's novel and the feminists he creates is that they are still confined within patriarchal thinking and clerical work will not allow women to establish their independence. Gissing optimistically presumes that by providing women with a technical knowledge such as training in typing they can achieve their emancipation. However, based on the discussion in this essay, whether this assumption can be validated is doubtful. Gissing is undoubtedly successful in presenting marital



problems. Nevertheless, he is still prevented by patriarchy from imagining full emancipation for women.

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