

DOI: 10.7596/taksad.v4i2.433

## May Sinclair's and H. G. Wells's Involvement in the Suffrage Movement<sup>1</sup>

Brygida Pudelko<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

For May Sinclair the Woman Suffrage Movement was an idea that shaped her life, or at least the culture that produced her. Sinclair was actively involved and a vocal supporter of the suffrage movement. Not a militant herself, she was a member of the Women's Freedom League for a year. She was also a member of the Women Writers Suffrage League (WWSL). In 1912 she became one of twelve vice-presidents of the WWSL. Sinclair was also not averse to writing statements for publication in *Votes for Women*. But despite her involvement in the suffragette movement in the years leading up to 1914, Sinclair was not comfortable with the aggressive militant side of it.

H. G. Wells was among the considerable number of male writers of the day who openly supported the feminist cause and wrote for women's magazines. Wells supported the demand for the vote, but seeing that more than access to parliamentary democracy would be required if women were really to be free, he had no patience with the limited perspectives of Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst and their movement. Wells's assessment of his own position would seem to prove that he did not intend to make fun of the suffragettes nor of the many other feminists who did not see the wider connections of their movement. Like Sinclair he did not support the militant suffragettes. Rather he despaired of their capacity to accomplish the task they had set themselves. Knowing that feminism was coming into maturity, he had actively supported the campaign for financial and political independence for women.

**Keywords:** May Sinclair, H.G. Wells, feminism, suffragette movement, militant suffragettes.

<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented in the 2nd English Studies Conference which was held between 8-10 May 2015 in Karabuk University.

<sup>2</sup> Opole University, [b.pudelko@op.pl](mailto:b.pudelko@op.pl)

## May Sinclair and the Suffrage Movement

Pre-war fiction dealing with the suffrage movement tends, perhaps not unexpectedly, to be propagandist in one way or another, as most political fictions are. There were a range of negative representations of suffragists written by both men and women writers and, equally, there was suffrage fiction that endorsed the cause for the reading public. These writers contributed through a range of different genres: political writing such as that found in the suffrage weeklies and periodicals; plays by successful dramatists such as Cecily Hamilton, Edith Craig, Christopher St John and Elizabeth Robins; fiction ranging from Evelyn Sharpe's short stories *Rebel Women* (1910) to novels, Gertrude Colmore's *Suffragette Sally* (1911) or Robin's *The Convert* (1907); even poetry and lyrics for the stirring, commissioned music of Ethel Smyth. The literary art of the suffrage movement played a strategic part in the campaign as important as the visual iconography of Sylvia Pankhurst, and contributed to the overall impression of the movement.

Unlike other popular writers, May Sinclair (1863-1946) was sensitive to modernist developments. She was a generation older than Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), T.S. Eliot (1888-1965) and James Joyce (1882-1941) – firmly Edwardian by age and the timing of her success. Born just a few years before H. G. Wells (1866-1946), Arnold Bennett (1867-1931) and John Galsworthy (1867-1933), she published her first novel in 1897, two years after Wells's first. By the time she achieved widespread critical acclaim with *The Divine Fire* (1904), she had begun to explore the dark places of psychology and had always avoided the materialism which Woolf charged the Edwardians. At the height of her career in the early 1920s she was recognized as the best and the most widely known female novelist (Boll, 1973: 16).

May Sinclair was actively involved and a vocal supporter of the suffrage movement. Angela Smith argues that Sinclair was encouraged towards the cause by her anxiety over a move to prevent married women from working, but she also had a lot of friends whose involvement would have brought her into constant contact with the movement's activities (Smith, 2005: 100). Not a militant herself, she was a member of the Women's Freedom League for a year. She was also a member of the Women Writers Suffrage League (WWSL). The formation of the WWSL, by Cicely Hamilton and Bessie Hatton in 1908, was testimony to the interest in the movement held by many literary artists. The novel had become established as a medium of social comment and social protest in the nineteenth century and the trend continues into the new century with suffrage fiction often providing prime examples of such work.

In 1912 Sinclair became one of twelve vice-presidents of the WWSL. She was also not averse to writing statements for publication in *Votes for Women*. But despite her involvement in the suffragette movement in the years leading up to 1914, Sinclair was not comfortable with the aggressive militant side of it.

Away from the organized policy of the various suffrage societies, individual writers could be inspired to put pen to paper for the cause, often in response to savage attacks of anti-suffragists who were perhaps as prolific and often as outspoken as the women themselves.

On 28 March 1912, Sir Almroth Wright, a Professor of Experimental Pathology at the University of London, wrote a letter to *The Times* about the militant hysteria of the suffragettes, resting his argument on a number of psychological, social and cultural reasons why Englishwomen should not be given the vote. His polemic against women's suffrage in Britain sees mental disorder at the root of the suffrage movement. According to Wright, women are naturally prone to "phases of hypersensitiveness, unreasonableness and loss of the sense of proportion" and to "serious and long-continued mental disorders". He implies that this distortion of the female mental equilibrium is related to women's "psychological energies" of menstruation, childbearing and the "change of life". Consequently, "the mind of woman is always threatened with danger from reverberations of her psychological emergencies." Wright argues that "there is mixed up with the women's movement much mental disorder" (Wright, 1912: 7-8).<sup>3</sup> He claims that suffragette recruitment comes from the half million excess women who should long ago have been sent overseas to mate. He identifies various types of women: the physically violent, the sexually embittered, those whose personalities have atrophied, and those who have misplaced self-esteem. Wright writes that "unmarried suffragists are teaching young girls in colleges and schools to have much higher expectations and, most intolerably, to become feminists" (Wright, 1912: 7-8).

Wright's article met with different responses. Some agreed with Wright, some rejected his points, and some tried to apply reason. Sinclair responded to *The Times* within days, referring to herself as a "looker-on" who "sees most of the game", and arguing against Wright's unrepresentative sample and "pseudo-scientific" findings (Sinclair, 1912: 7). On the same day (31 March 1912) Sinclair also wrote her essay *Feminism*, which was a much extended reply to Wright. The forty-six page pamphlet, written for the Women Writers

---

<sup>3</sup>Wright later extended his letter to an essay: Wright, Almroth E. (1913). *The Unexpurgated Case Against Woman Suffrage*. London: Constable.

Suffrage League (WWSL), discredits Wright's unscientific approach and rejects his claims that female hysteria, degeneracy and neurosis are the norm in the suffrage movement. "As far as can be made out in the confusion of his onrush" -Sinclair writes - "his hypothesis is that what we may call journalistically the 'hysteria bacillus' is present as the pathogenic agent in every case of what the journalists are calling Suffragists" (Sinclair, 1912: 4).

She makes her own position very clear:

*"I am not an ultra-feminist, and I do not think that the Suffrage movement is a war of one sex against another. I was brought up with men; and I hold no brief for women against men, or for her virtues as his superior. I am not, like Sir Almroth Wright, bringing sweeping charges against a whole sex."* (Sinclair, 1912: 30-31).

In *Feminism* Sinclair takes Wright's argument about hysterical women and turns it on its head, suggesting that there are a great many hysterical men who make women's lives very difficult. She responds to Wright's accusations by exploring different "categories" of women, finding much "scientific" evidence to disprove his ideas. She cites leading members of the suffrage movement, militant and non-militant, using their words and actions as evidence to demonstrate the impossibility of his suggestions. Then the pamphlet moves into a more socialist mode, recasting feminism as socialism, making an economic case by examining the world of work to argue that equal rights for women will mean equal rights for all; by which men will be the first to benefit.

May Sinclair's 1917 novel *The Tree of Heaven* Explores the key issues of the early twentieth century: feminism, modern art, technology and sexual freedom. All represent danger for the growing Harrison children, Dorothea, Michael and Nicholas. Zegger argues that the depiction of the life of the Harrison family in the first section of the novel entitled "Peace" reminds "one of E.M. Foster's *Marianne Thornton* in in the sense that, like Forster, Sinclair captures something of the spirit of Victorian family life – the family as creating its own self sufficient world, the intense relationships within it, the sense of security and emotional richness" (Zegger, 1976: 91). The second section, "Vortex", contains some interesting social history. In *The Tree of Heaven*, the heroine, suffragist Dorothea Harrison, seems to have a difficult time after the death of her fiancé, Frank Drayton, in the early weeks of the First World War. Dorothea is fascinated with feminism, yet, like Sinclair herself, she also fears it. She approves of the idea, but is skeptical about the militant suffragist. The militant suffragettes of the "Women's Franchise Union", led by Mrs. Blathwaite and her

daughter Angela, who are surely ironic representations of Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, are exemplified in the figure of Miss Maud Blackadder, who is a representative of violent militancy. Dorothea is against violent means which, according to her, will not guarantee the desired end. She attacks the militant suffragettes with their own military language:

*“She says that fighters are wanted, and not talkers and writers and thinkers. Are we not then to fight with our tongues and with our brains? Is she leaving us anything but our bare fists? [...] I would let all this pass if Miss Blackadder were not your colour-sergeant. Is it fair to call for volunteers, for raw recruits, and not tell them precisely and clearly what services will be required of them? How many [...] realize that the leaders of your Union, Mrs. Palmerston-Swete, and Mrs. Blathwaite, and Miss Angela Blathwaite, demand from its members blind, unquestioning obedience?”* (Sinclair, 1918: 119-120).

Drawing a parallel between the WSPU’s suffrage campaign and warfare, Dorothea emphasises the authoritarian, army-like structure of the movement. She talks of the same kind of obedience which was demanded by Mrs Pankhurst which caused many women, devoted to the feminist cause, to abandon the Union and seek other means by which to campaign. In *The Tree of Heaven* only the extremists are under attack. Dorothea is not a militant suffragist. She is for campaigning in a constitutional way. Dorothea’s Englishness provides her with the independence of mind to make her own choices concerning her political actions, in contrast to William Tully, who is totally obedient to the leaders of the militant movement.

However, despite her opposition to Miss Blackadder’s style of Union, Dorothea is not able to stand back when she sees violence turned upon the women who demonstrate for their rights. She is imprisoned after a fight with a policeman during a demonstration. In prison she understands that Frank does not “stand for the same ideals” (Sinclair, 1918: 220) as she. It leads to her initial rejection of her lover.

While in prison Dorothea experiences a moment of vision. She begins to see the fight for the vote as a small part of a much wider struggle, the struggle for freedom. The freedom of the individual, male or female, part feminism, part philosophy is a cause more worthy, and it shapes her life in the following chapters. Dorothea tells Drayton: “Everything seemed ended when I went to prison. [...] What I’d got hold of was bigger than that. I knew that all this Women’s Suffrage business was only a part of it, a small, ridiculous part” (Sinclair, 1918: 221).

When Frank Drayton drives Dorothea from prison to the suffrage banquet in honour of the prisoners, she is aware that their relationship is over but, in her heart, “above the aching, there was that queer exaltation that had sustained her in prison” (Sinclair, 1918: 222). Three hundred and thirty women and twenty men waited in the Banquet Hall to receive the prisoners. The high galleries “were festooned with the red, white and blue of the Women’s Franchise Union, and hung with flags and blazoned banners. The silk standards and the emblems of the Women’s Suffrage Leagues and Societies, supported by their tall poles, stood ranged along three walls” (Sinclair, 1918: 223).

As the suffragettes sing out their anthem in celebration of the ex-prisoners, the “singing had threatened [Dorothea] when it began; so that she felt again her old terror of the collective soul. Its massed emotion threatened her. She longed for her white-washed prison-cell, for its hardness, its nakedness, its quiet, its visionary peace” (Sinclair, 1918: 225). She has chosen freedom, and of all the crowd, only she and the spiritual Veronica, the truth-bringer of the novel, can understand such a choice. “Her soul and the soul of Veronica went alone in utter freedom” (Sinclair, 1918: 225).

The trauma of the coming war brings about a renewal of their relationship, which is again ended by the call of the army. Like Sinclair, she “had joined a motor-ambulance as a chauffeur, driving the big Morss car” (Sinclair, 1918: 229). This was a course of action popular with members of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), a good way of demonstrating oneself to be worthy of citizenship.

The difficulty with this novel is not Dorothea’s decision to put aside the fight for suffrage and embark on war work. In doing this she is only following the example of many of the leading figures in the suffrage movement, and, it is also easy to see how former concerns might have seemed “silly” in the context of the war.

*“Yet it looked as if all the women would be mobilized before all the men. The gates of Holloway were opened, and Mrs. Blathwaite and her followers received a free pardon on their pledge to abstain from violence during the period of the War. And instantly, in the first week of war, the Suffrage Unions and Leagues and Societies (already organized and disciplined by seven years’ methodical resistance) presented their late enemy, the Government, with an instrument of national service made to its hand and none the worse because originally devised for its torture and embarrassment.”* (Sinclair, 1918: 229).

What is difficult to understand is that Sinclair appears to devalue, and even condemn the movement in which she had previously been so active. “The little vortex of the Woman’s Movement was swept without a sound into the immense vortex of the War. The women rose up all over England and went into uniform” (Sinclair, 1918: 229).

Sinclair is not concerned with the many suffragists whose response to the war was quite different. She offers no place to organizations which continued to lobby for the vote. She does not make any reference to those who adopted a more pace-orientated approach to war, either. For the purpose of the novel, the suffrage movement exists only in its most extreme form, a form which Sinclair herself was opposed to. Yet, perhaps ironically, many of the most extreme suffragettes chose to take a patriotic stand most compatible with Sinclair’s own propagandist writing.

It becomes difficult to see Dorothea as an active feminist in the conventional suffrage sense by the end of the novel. For Dorothea suffrage is an extremist vortex, one which is finally resisted by her. In the ironic context of the prison Dorothea Harrison comes to a conclusion that it is the individual who is important, and it is not the herd-soul that will change the world, but the individuals who have found their own words to free themselves. Angela K. Smith argues that in *The Tree of Heaven* Sinclair identifies “the danger of the herd-instinct, not only in the suffrage movement through Dorothea, but also within modernism, through her brother Michael Harrison and within the sphere of the general public in its response to the outbreak of the War” (Smith, 2005: 9).

*The Tree of Heaven* is Sinclair’s war novel which borrows elements of the suffrage campaign to illustrate broader ideas. The extreme activities of the suffragettes are presented ironically and critically. The Harrisons cast modernity aside in favour of the cultural hegemony of their parents. But the cause, “that silly suffrage”, remained despite these and other problematic wartime representations. Paradoxically, the war, that great crisis, proved that women were worthy of citizenship, and Sinclair was among those fortunate enough to have their names securely placed on the electoral roll in 1918.

### **Wells’s Feminism**

In the 1890s established writers such as George More (1852-1933), George Gissing (1857-1903), Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) George Meredith (1828-1909), Henry James (1843-1916) or H. G. Wells were inspired to push for greater artistic freedom of expression, in particular, greater sexual frankness in their fiction. At the same time, what was generally

known as the Woman Question was becoming one of the most popularly discussed and volatile issues of the decade; increased opportunities for education and employment for women, and feminist challenges to conventional gender roles and the sexual double standard, prompted an ongoing debate in newspapers, magazines and journals about the nature and status of women. Rejecting the Victorian value of reticence, the authors of this new fiction broke with a long tradition of silence about female sexuality. This in turn allowed writers to present the emotions and motivations of women and men with a new psychological honesty and depth. A large number of women writers, as well as male writers, saw the new trend towards greater realism in fiction as an opportunity to write about women's lives with an unprecedented fairness and specificity.

The major impetus of the male support for emancipation goes back to the Quaker movement<sup>4</sup> where women were considered equal to men in the eyes of God, and to the days of Chartism.<sup>5</sup> Anne Holden Rønning writes that the extent to which the Chartists were willing to give their women the franchise is doubtful, as critics disagree on the genuineness of their intentions, but such people as Robert Owen (1771-1858) and Richard Carlle (1790-1843) wrote many speeches and articles in favour of women's equality, and are often looked upon as the fathers of feminism. William Thompson's *Appeal of one Half of the Human Race, Women against the Pretensions of the Other Half, Man, to Retain them in Political, and thence in Civil and Domestic Slavery* (1825) is one of the classics of early male support for emancipation (Rønning, 1995: 68-69).

The major support for women came in the 1860s with the publication of John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869), and his speeches in Parliament for the equality of women. In Mill's opinion this could only be achieved by giving women the vote. It was also Mill who together with Henry Fawcett introduced the first Bill for women's suffrage in Parliament on 20 May 1867. Another man who fought for the cause in its early stages was Jacob Bright (1821-1899), Liberal MP for Manchester. The "Women's Disabilities Bill" he introduced in 1870, received a majority of 33 in favour, and passed to the second reading, but

---

<sup>4</sup> The Quaker movement was founded in England by George Fox (1624-1691), a nonconformist religious reformer. The Quakers believed that every man and woman has direct access to God and that every person - male or female, slave or free is of equal worth.

<sup>5</sup> Chartism - class movement for parliamentary reform named after the People's Charter, a bill drafted by the London radical William Lovett in May 1838. It contained six demands: universal manhood suffrage, equal electoral districts, vote by ballot, annually elected Parliaments, payment of members of Parliament, and abolition of the property qualifications for membership. Chartism was the first movement both working class in character and national in scope that grew out of the protest against the injustices of the new industrial and political order in Britain. While composed of working people, Chartism was also mobilized around populism as well as clan identity.

was rejected in Committee. He also introduced Bills in 1871, 1872, 1873 and 1877. W. Forsyth, Conservative, introduced Bills in 1874, 1875 and 1876, while William Woodall, Liberal, introduced Bills in 1884/1885, 1887, 1889, and 1890/1891. Bright and Woodall wrote from time to time in the women's magazines and newspapers expounding their views in favour of the women getting the vote, and the other cases they fought for (Rønning, 1995: 69).

The second wave of male support for emancipation was in the early years of the twentieth century when militancy was seen more and more as the only possible course to follow. Keir Hardie (1856-1915), the first leader of the Labour Party, published "The Citizenship of Women. A Plea for Women's Suffrage" in 1903 (Rønning, 1995: 70). It was contemporaneous with a marked political commitment from men and women, and the start of the WSPU – all this going in the early years of the twentieth century when John Galsworthy, E. M. Foster and H. G. Wells were writing. They were all sympathetic towards the women's movement and the suffragists – the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), but not so the militant suffragettes.<sup>6</sup>

Galsworthy and Wells were among the considerable number of male writers of the day who openly supported the feminist cause and wrote for women's magazines. In *Socialism and Family* Wells writes on the women's fight for emancipation, a proper position in society and financial:

*"Every intelligent woman understands that, as a matter of hard fact, beneath all the civilities of to-day, she is actual or potential property, and has to treat herself and keep herself as that. She may by force or subtlety turn her chains into weapons, she may succeed in exacting a reciprocal property in a man, the fact remains fundamental that she is either isolated or owned."*(Wells, 1906: 29).

Wells's thinking about women was shaped by the particular anxieties of pre-war England, but it was also a product of his own personal experiences. When we look closely at his private life, we can see his interest in free love and sexual liberation of women was too closely related to his own sexual needs. Wells was notorious for his affairs and liaisons. He was married twice – this is not of course significant in itself, but his first wife Isabel divorced

---

<sup>6</sup>The Suffragists were set up in 1897 by Millicent Fawcett. They campaigned peacefully through means such as meetings, debates, leaflets, petitions etc. They also put forwards male candidates in elections as opposition to liberal and Tory candidates who opposed women suffrage. The Suffragettes were founded in 1903 by Emmeline Pankhurst, a suffragist who was frustrated by the suffragists' apparent lack of progress. They campaigned through more direct action such as harassing MPs, disrupting meetings, and even burning postboxes and buildings.

him for adultery and he was repeatedly unfaithful to the second, Catherine Wells. Catherine seems to have been a remarkable woman who was able to adjust to Wells's affairs. These included, among others, Rebeca West, Amber Reeves and one of Hubert Bland's daughters. In 1909 a scandal over the Amber Reeves affair became a serious threat to his career and fixed his public image as a philanderer. It was this that caused him to back down over the free love issue. And his involvement with the daughters of two members of the Fabian executive contributed to his breach with the society in 1908. Beatrice was particularly shocked that the affair with Amber Reeves was "consummated within the very walls of Newnham College" (Carpenter, 1916: 94). Wells was a prisoner of his own sexual and emotional needs. He respected Catherine and needed the stability and security she provided, but at the same time he was suffocated by marriage, its ties, duties and responsibilities. He suffered from what he called "domestic claustrophobia" and was driven to lead a permanent and hectic double life, living now at home with Catherine and his legitimate family, now with current mistress. This meant that in his personal life he exploited women. He used his wife, and he used his mistresses. He suffered only in reputation, but Catherine and his lovers suffered in their whole lives. Amber, for instance, became pregnant by Wells, and apparently loved him, but realising that marriage to him was out of the question, she married another man who was prepared to accept the child. Wells meanwhile was boasting with Arnold Bennett that the affair went on after the marriage, which was apparently untrue (Usher, 1898: 84).

It is very important to see Wells's proselytizing in the cause of freer sexual relations for women in the light of these adventures. At the time when contraception was hardly available, pleas for free love only too often meant the sexual exploitation of the woman. Wells's relations with Amber and Rebeca west both resulted in children, who were brought up by the women.

Wells articulated his feminism best in *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934), where he summed up his views on the feminist movement from a historical point of view, describing it as "giving up its bloomers and becoming smart, energetic and ambitious" (Wells, 1967: 406). Wells, similarly to May Sinclair, was sceptical about "this new and transitory being: the Militant Suffragette" (Wells, 1967: 408). He supported the demand for the vote, but seeing that more than access to parliamentary democracy would be required if women were really to be free, he had no patience with the limited perspectives of Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst and their movement. Wells's assessment of his own position would seem to prove that he did not intend to make fun of the suffragettes nor of the many other feminists who did

not see the wider connections of their movement. Rather he despaired of their capacity to accomplish the task they had set themselves. He describes the suffragettes as a “fluttering swarm of disillusioned and wildly exasperated human beings, all a little frightened at what they were doing, and with no clearer conception than any other angry crowd of what had set them going and what was to be done about it” (Wells, 1967: 409).

Knowing that feminism was coming into maturity, he had actively supported the campaign for financial and political independence for women. But his tone in *Experiment in Autobiography* is complacent. An important part of Wells’s thinking about women was a pet scheme which he called the “endowment of motherhood”. This was to be a comprehensive system of state support for women who wanted to have children, but did not want to be economically dependent on men. Wells says:

*“Helpfully and with the brightest hopes he produced his carefully reasoned diagnosis of their grievances; he spread his ingenious arrangement of Neo-Malthusianism, Free Love (“ton corps est à toi”), economic independence, the endowment of motherhood and the systematic suppression of jealousy as an animal vice, and he found his lucid and complete statement thrust aside, while the riot passed on, after the manner of riots, vehemently loudly and vacuously, to a purely symbolic end - the Vote in this case - and essential frustration and dispersal.”* (Wells, 1967: 409).

H. G. Wells presents the core feminist issues in *Ann Veronica* (1909), but he also voiced his opinion on the women’s movement in other texts. He wrote several passages in *The New Machiavelli* and *The Wife of Sir Isaac Harman* on suffragist demonstrations and imprisonment. What emerges from these texts is that Wells regarded the Vote as only one of the issues at stake. Although he stood for the liberation of women and for the Vote, he introduced his prominent suffragettes only to make them ridiculous.

During the first decade of the twentieth century, demands for the vote were becoming more insistent and better organised. Some thought that winning the vote would in itself answer all social problems, while others considered it the first and necessary step to equality. The debate within the Women’s Movement about ends and means was fierce: not all supporters endorsed the militant tactics of the recently founded Women’s Social and Political Union. The summer of 1908 saw thousands of women marching peacefully through London with large banners demanding the vote, but also it witnessed provocative attacks on property and deliberate confrontations with police and politicians. *Ann Veronica* was written on the rising tide if this

activity, and the “pantehnicon” raid that leads to her arrest was closely modelled on the raid or “rush” from Caxton Hall to the House of Commons, Westminster, in October 1908. A crowded and excited meeting of suffragettes had been held at Caxton Hall. Among those arrested, tried at Bow Street and sentenced to Holloway Prison were leading activists: Emmeline Pankhurst, who had slapped a police officer on both cheeks, her daughter Christabel and the fierce and diminutive Flora Drummond, known as “the General”.

The eponymous heroine in *Ann Veronica* embraces new womanhood and a range of feminisms in her search for life. This includes the suffrage movement, to which she is introduced by Miss Miniver. There is a logical progression in Ann Veronica’s engagement in the suffragette movement. In some few lines Wells sums up a major aspect of the emancipation issue, whether the ideal of a goddess can be combined with the political woman. Ann Veronica’s demand “I want a vote” (Wells, 2005: 44), is met with a reply from Manning which elaborates the contrast between the ideal of woman - the “Angel in the House” and the “Woman on a Pedestal” image - and the sordidness of politics. Ann Veronica attends suffrage and other radical meetings in London once she has left her father and home in order to “live”, but it is only when she realises that her personal situation is in crisis that she becomes actively involved. In her own journey through life, and meetings with people and causes, Ann Veronica’s awakening is when Ramage tries to seduce her. Only then does it occur to Ann Veronica that what these feminists are fighting for is that women need not be subject to a man. She faced “the facts of a woman’s position in the world—the meagre realities of such freedom as it permitted her, the almost unavoidable obligation to some individual man under which she must labor for even a foothold in the world” (Wells, 2005: 172).

When she learns the hard way that the “loan” she accepted from the businessman, Ramage, was actually intended to buy her, she is appalled by the economic power wielded by men over women. This inspires her to join the movement and to take part in a raid on the House of Commons, during which she is arrested while trying to defend an elderly suffragette. However, the harshness of prison life forces Ann Veronica to see the error of her ways and to seek a reconciliation with her father upon her release. Here, militant suffragism is portrayed as a turning point. It is a reaction that brings down all the powers of patriarchy upon her and causes her to accept life as it is rather than seek to change it. As a feminist heroine, Ann Veronica is redeemed when she enters into a relationship with her tutor, Capes, outside of marriage, demonstrating a determination to live her life as she wishes, outside the rules of society if necessary. But the collective campaigning of women is presented ironically or with

negative undertones throughout, and the novel ends with true Victorian closure, presenting a happily married Mr and Mrs Capes being welcomed back into society and expecting their first child. There is little that is challenging in the final pages, and the fact that it is Capes who repays Ann Veronica's debt to Ramage does nothing whatsoever to further cause of women's power, economic or otherwise.

Like several male feminist supporters Wells saw the fundamental link between suffrage and sexuality, and was thus critical of suffragettes who pretended that their sexual life and needs were irrelevant in the question of the vote. In Wells's opinion, sex could not be excluded from the issue as long as social laws governed a woman's life to such a large extent, especially the marriage laws.

Elizabeth Robins (1862-1952), author of the highly influential play *Votes for Women* (performed in April 1907) and friend of the Reeves family, objected to *Ann Veronica* not on the grounds of sexual morality, but because of its hostile depiction of suffragettes. Wells protested that there was "nothing [...] against the suffrage" in the novel – "only a gentle kindly criticism of the suffragette side of it" (Smith, 1998: 276). Robins was not convinced, and succeeding generations of feminist critics have shared her scepticism. Such critics particularly dislike the satirical portrait of the badly dressed, muddle-headed, sexually unattractive Miss Miniver (Wells, 2005: 33-34). Her name is also diminutive and diminishing. Margaret Drabble in her Introduction to *Ann Veronica* writes that "in *Ancilla's Share*, a proto-feminist discussion of sex antagonism published anonymously in 1924, Robins pilloried Wells as a literary Grand Turk who thought women existed only to please men, and whose ideas were already dated." Each suspected the other of hypocrisy. Wells replied that she thought she was at war with men, when she was really at war with sex (Wells, 2005: xxvi).

Both *Ann Veronica* and *Lady Harman* revolt against paternal domination or tyranny of a nasty husband. In so doing, they fight against overburdening and artificial restraints, and help bring about the profound changes that had for some time been in progress and were affecting the political status of women, the relation between the sexes, and the whole moral code. Believing that the Vote will not come as an isolated phenomenon, they turn towards the suffragettes, asking them how the work for it might really serve women. To *Ann Veronica*, the question is much more complicated than that of "equal citizenship of men and women" (Wells, 2005: 185). To *Lady Harman*, the Vote means less than the modernization of the

status of married woman and the improvement of the conditions under which the husband's female employees are working and living.

Both Ann Veronica and Dorothea Harrison regard the Vote as only one point in a wide programme for the elevation of their sex. They have no clear conception of the new position of women in society, but are much disappointed to find that the prominent suffragettes have in reality no grasp of the profound changes that are taking place in the relationship between the sexes, nor of how little the Vote itself means. They are equally disappointed as Wells and Sinclair were. The militant suffragettes appear to them ridiculous in posing as the champions of progress, while in reality they are shallow and foolish, imagining that once they have got the Vote, everything else will be all right. The characters, who believe in, think much of, or stand for the particular things Wells and Sinclair hated are portrayed as comic or foolish.

## References

- Boll, Theophilus (1973). *Miss May Sinclair: Novelist*. Rutherford: H.J., Fairleigh Dickinson UP.
- Carpenter, Edward (1916). *My Days and Dreams*. London: Unwin.
- John, Angela J. (1995). *Elizabeth Robins: Staging a Life*. London: Routledge.
- Rønning, Anne Holden (1995). *Hidden and Visible Suffrage*. Berlin: Peter Lang.
- Sinclair, May (1912). *Feminism*. London: The Women Writers' Suffrage League.
- Sinclair, May (1912, April 4). Sir Almroth Wright on Woman Suffrage: Miss May Sinclair's Reply. *The Times*, p. 7.
- Sinclair, May (1918). *The Tree of Heaven*. London: Macmillan.
- Smith, Angela, K. (2004). *Suffrage Discourse in Britain during the First World War*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Smith, David C. (Ed.). (1998). *The Correspondence of H.G. Wells* London: Pickering and Chatto, vol. 2 (1904-1918).

Ussher, Richard (1898). *Neo-Malthusianism. An Enquiry to That System with regard to its Economy and Morality*. London: Gibbings & Co.

Wells, H. G. (2005). *Ann Veronica*. London: Penguin.

Wells, H. G. (1967). *Experiment in Autobiography*. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott.

Wells, H. G. (1906). *Socialism and the Family*. London: Fifield.

Wright, Almroth E. (1912, March 8). Sir Almroth Wright on Militant Hysteria. In: Letters to the Editor. *The Times*, 7-8.

Zegger, Hrisey Dimitrakis (1976). *May Sinclair*. Boston: Twayne Publishers.