

Misconception and Misery  
in The Odd Women

Submitted to Dr. Wade Jennings  
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Though man is presented in the works of George Gissing as ever subject to the brute forces of society"<sup>1</sup> and to "aspirations blighted by circumstance," he is also seen as the cause of his own misery as he applies his theories and illusions about life regardless of the reality experience presents to him. The middle-class Victorian society pictured in The Odd Women has institutionalized its own illusions in the "home and hearth" concept of marriage and punishes its members who fail to live up to that ideal. Not only would Gissing have the reader see that "men and women . . . are trapped" and that "there is now way out of the trap"<sup>3</sup> because of the "miserable disorder" of the "social state,"<sup>4</sup> but he also shows us the unhappiness people cause themselves by living by an idealism that is unable to compromise with reality. Characters seek to live by absolutes in a world governed by circumstance and chance. Both society and its members refuse to admit the failure of the ideal, for to do so would shake the very foundations of their lives. This misery caused by man's and society's misconceptions is illustrated in The Odd Women by the institution of

marriage, particularly in the Widdowsons' and Rhoda Nunn and Everard Barfoot's approaches to it.

In considering the Victorian ideal of marriage and the home, we must remember, as John Raleigh points out, that this only middle-class morality. "Above and below, in the relatively small aristocracy and in the immense lower class, the puritanical code did not prevail."<sup>5</sup> However, for the middle-class characters in The Odd Women, and almost all the characters are in that class, the prevailing concept of marriage was aptly expressed by the old king in Tennyson's The Princess:

Man for the field and woman for the hearth;  
 Man for the sword and for the needle she:  
 Man with the head and woman with the heart:  
 Man to command and woman to obey;  
 All else confusion.<sup>6</sup>

The roles of men and women were clearly delineated. The woman was to "a priestess dedicated to preserving the home as a refuge from the abrasive outside world"<sup>7</sup>; the man, as Widdowson so simply sees it, was to be the wife's "benefactor, her providence" (p. 153), amusing the frail, forever child-like creature and keeping her out of mischief (p. 236). The contrast between the ideal and reality, however, is evidenced in the novel by the presentation of the theory's two major flaws. The concept assumes that every woman will find a husband and takes no account of the "odd women," women whose situation is illustrated in the lives of Virginia and Alice Madden, women who have no mates and whose plight is not only in their poverty but also in their extreme loneliness and in the lack of self-respect that is a result of there

being no place for them in their world. The harmful illusions rising from theory become even more clear when the fate of wives, such as Monica Widdowson, is examined. Even the least willful woman cannot find contentment under a lord and master.

Though few of its members live up to the ideal, society punishes those who acknowledge their failure. As Widdowson tells his wife, people have "no right to be miserable," for the knowledge that they are doing their duty ought "to keep them cheerful" (p. 172). Failing to live up to the ideal in itself produces misery for the individual; the married couple feel they have failed because their home is not an idyllic refuge, and the spinster feels useless because she is an alien in her own world. Society's members serve to punish those who openly deviate from convention by closing "decent" homes to the rebels. Even minor infractions of the courtship ritual, such as Monica and Widdowson's making each other's acquaintance with a proper introduction, create embarrassing problems. As Monica tells her future husband, they have gone "against the ordinary rule," and people will make them "suffer for it" (p. 75). Finally, society cannot allow its ideals to be questioned, nor can the individual examine his own situation without upsetting the "order of the world" and flinging "all ideas of religion and morality into wildest confusion" (p. 239). Thus, the institutionalized ideal causes misery for the individual in his relationship to himself, to his neighbors, and to society as a whole.

The first chapter of The Odd Women illustrates the conflict of

the ideal with reality in the situation of the Madden family. Dr. Madden firmly believes in the traditional concept of men and women; he never bothered his wife with matters such as money because the "home must be guarded against sordid cares to the last possible moment" (p. 2). Yet the author tells the reader that Mrs. Madden knew but "little repose" and was beset with "secret anxieties" which along with the bearing of six daughters, her only function "in this wonderful world," contributed to her early death. Dr. Madden's ideal tells him it is man's nature to "grapple with the world'" (p. 1), but the reader sees that the "dreamy" doctor is incapable of shepherding his fold, for "from the contact of coarse actualities his nature shrank" (p. 2). He rears his daughters to be "English ladies of the familiar type," and it's not within his sphere of reference to consider that his daughters should have a practical education (p. 3). Though the ideal has little to do with his experience or his position in society, he clings tenaciously to its precepts: for his "hopes for the race were inseparable from a maintenance of morals and conventions such as the average man assumes in his estimate of women" (p. 3).

Thus Dr. Madden's education of his daughters totally misprepares them for real life. They have been taught the Victorian ideal of woman's fragility and dependence on a man, yet they are unsuitable for marriage. Without social position or exceptional beauty, few girls will be sought in marriage by a middle-class man. Alice and Virginia become victims of society--members of the "ragged regiment" (p. 52) Rhoda Nunn terms the "odd women," who are condemned to degraded lives of

poverty, loneliness, and uselessness. And Monica, the youngest who has "no aptitude for anything but being a pretty, cheerful, engaging girl, much dependent on the love and gentleness of those about her" (p. 11), is so "frightened" by the example of her sisters' lives that she vows she would rather kill herself than live like that. She therefore enters into an unsuitable marriage that eventually causes her death.

Monica's marriage is doomed to failure not only because of her husband's nature, but also because of her own misconceptions about herself, about Widdowson, and about marriage itself. First of all, Monica fails to understand her own nature. Her guardians raised her to be "half-lady, half-shopgirl" (p. 107), and her experiences with the lower class horrify her as much as the lives of her spinster sisters. She desperately seeks an escape and the "extraordinary" (p. 68) meeting with Widdowson provides her with an opportunity. Believing herself capable of marrying for a comfortable home, she suppresses her romantic tendencies ignoring her disappointment that Widdowson's letters do not "enchant" her nor that his personal appearance doesn't excite envy among her acquaintances (pp. 67-68). And even though she cries dolefully an hour before the wedding, she prides herself on her practicality.

Monica's misconception of herself is closely related to her mistaken notions of her husband and of marriage. Though she believes herself giving up some of her pre-conceived ideas of love in marriage, she still envisions her life as a wife in an unrealistic way. In addition to the freedom from money worries marriage will bring, Monica imagines herself in her social position as Widdowson's wife. Even though the reticent nature of Widdowson has been clear from the beginning, she still secretly hoped "that more than

a glimpse" of Mrs. Luke Widdowson's "gorgeous world might some day be vouchsafed to her" (p. 121). Her ignoring of Widdowson's characteristics that do not fit into Monica's plans is apparent throughout their courtship. During their second meeting, for example, Widdowson tells her that he keeps to himself so much that those who know him consider him "surly and unsociable" (p. 44) and indicates that he is so conservative he disapproves of her "knowledge of London transit" (p. 46). And following this, he keeps a careful watch on her lodgings. In each subsequent encounter Widdowson gives further demonstration of his extreme jealousy, his belief in the child-like nature of women, and his misanthropy. Yet Monica persists in believing that she will "live exactly the life" she "pleases" (p. 111), even though there is no experience upon which to base this assumption.

Monica has even less evidence upon which to base her theories about marriage. When Mildred Vesper suggests to her that "married life is no easy thing even when people are well matched" and that she has "heard the most dreadful stories of quarreling and all sorts of unhappiness" between married people, Monica is insulted (p. 111). She imagines a busy, exciting social life, and has no idea of the boredom of middle-class marriage. When Rhoda Nunn speaks of this idleness, Monica, in her innocence, protests "earnestly" (p. 37). However, when we first see the married Monica in a chapter ironically entitled "The Joys of Home Life," Widdowson has put her into an unvarying "daily routine" (p. 152) which is incompatible with Monica's nature and her theories about marriage. Though the sensitivities of the time in which Gissing wrote would not permit a full discussion of the sexual matters, Monica's ignorance about the "wretchedness" of sleeping every night with a

man she grows to despise (p. 201) is a major factor in producing her miserable marriage. The practical factors of finance and position do not counterbalance the emotional strain of her growing sense of the "dishonor" involved with living with a man she does not love--"a dishonor glorified by social precepts, enforced under dread penalties" (p. 202).

As Monica's more conventional theories about marriage become threatened by her unhappiness, she seeks other ideals by which to live. Her contact with Rhoda Nunn encourages her to blend the ideas of emancipation, which she at best only half understands, with her own suppressed romantic tendencies. When she meets Bevis, she romanticizes the rather shallow young man since that side of her nature has been starved. In addition, her infatuation with Bevis enables her to reassert her former views of marriage--the traditional ideal of woman wasn't wrong; she could love a man "with heart and soul, could make his will her absolute law, could live on his smile, could devote herself to his interests." Her confusing ideas about <sup>m</sup>independence in marriage only meant the "freedom to love" (p. 222). Monica is still convinced she knows herself, but her movement into the extreme romantic position fails just as surely as the "practical" extreme did.

When Bevis fails to live up to her romantic ideal just as her husband did to her marriage concept, Monica falls back even harder on the "old faiths." Society's ideals, however, can offer her no consolation; they only serve to drive her deeper into despair for they label her "a sinner, stubborn in impenitence" (p. 306), an evil woman who betrayed her life's purpose. The "poor little girl" in her attempts to deal with life failed miserably. Her misconceptions about her own nature, about Widdowson, and about marriage

along with her confused attempt to deal with Dr. Madden's and Rhoda Nunn's theories about women doomed her to failure.

Widdowson, like Monica, deals with the world in terms of theories that refuse to compromise with reality. He, too, has misconceptions about his own nature, about Monica, and about marriage. He is a man of "essentially middle-class sensibilities" with a "small knowledge of the world" (p. 236), who had spent most of his life as a clerk with no hope of bettering his position (p. 43). The sudden inheritance of money from his brother gives him a new independence that disorients him and takes him into a world for which he is ill-prepared. His one wish in life had been to have a house which would be his refuge from the world with his sole companion, his beloved child-wife (p. 73)--the middle-class ideal of the "blessedness" of the home (p. 236). He marries Monica because he imagines her to be a "docile" girl whom he could conform to his will. Before his marriage, it never occurs to Widdowson that "a wife remains an individual, with rights and obligations independent of her wifely condition . . .; he took for granted that it was his to direct, hers to be guided" (p. 152).

Before the actual day-to-day experience of marriage, Widdowson had no difficulty in dealing with threats to his theories of marriage; he simply refused to believe them. When Mrs. Luke Widdowson tries to point out to him that spinsters are not cheerful doing their duties and would "simply" jump at marrying a man with money to save them from "horrors," Widdowson's answer is quite simple when he states, "Excuse me if I say that I don't believe it" (p. 119). He finds, however, that "intimacy with Monica . . . greatly affected his views, . . . chiefly by disturbing them; no firmer ground offered itself to his threading when he perforce admitted that former

standpoint was every day assailed by some uncontested piece of evidence." His discovery that women have "individual characters" astonishes him, but it is impossible for him to go one step further and regard Monica "simply as a human being." So Widdowson decides to pay "more attention to the hints . . . afforded him by his reading" (pp. 236-237). His attitude toward Monica, which prevents him from dealing with the reality of marriage, seems to have been shaped by his reading the sentiments expressed by popular authors, for, as Gissing tells us, "a man with small knowledge of the world is impressed by dicta" of books. One of the reasons he decides his wife has betrayed him with another man is that he is jealous and "he had read somewhere that a persistently jealous husband may not improbably end by irritating an innocent wife into affording real ground for jealousy" (p. 236).

Though for a short time, after a meeting with a bar-maid and musing as to the true criteria he wanted in an ideal wife, Widdowson considers that marriage had always seemed to him very simple, and yet "how far from simple he had found it" (p. 239). But Widdowson cannot consider these radical ideas for they would disturb his theories which are, for him, the foundation of all civilization. So rather than judging his ideals by experience, he fits his life into his illusions. And when his life fails to live up to the ideals, he considers that he has failed as a man. He retreats further into his books and away from the chaos of reality, becoming prematurely old as a result of the conflict.

Neither Monica nor Widdowson is able to compromise ideal with reality, or to learn from experience. Their own misconceptions, along with society's enforcement of its ideals, finally destroy them.

Another couple in The Odd Women also struggle with the middle-class institution of marriage. Though Rhoda Nunn and Everard Barfoot realize the inadequacy of the Victorian ideal, they too fail to create a harmonious relationship because of their own misconceptions.

Rhoda Nunn's relationship with Everard Barfoot is as doomed to failure as Monica Madden's with Edmund Widdowson. Rhoda, too, has her own absolute theories by which she attempts to live in a world governed by chance. Rhoda is a prime example of what Everard Barfoot terms the "new woman" full of "zeal for womanhood militant" (p. 85). Describing herself to Monica Madden, Rhoda says she is "a woman who has made up her mind to live alone and work steadily for a definite object" which she states is "to make women hard-hearted" (p. 37). Ignoring the reality of her own and of human nature, Rhoda applies her philosophy, instead of her experience, to life.

Nevertheless experience shows flaws in Rhoda's theories as surely as it does in the Victorian marriage concept. The idealized home has no place for the "odd women" Rhoda wishes to save, but she has no use for those like Monica Madden who have "no aptitude for anything but being a pretty . . . girl" (p. 11) or like Bella Royston who haven't sufficient self-restraint or self-respect. Rhoda has as much contempt for these aliens in her idealized society as the middle-class has for the odd women. She, too, creates a class of outcasts in her projected world.

Belying her own passionate nature in her theory, Rhoda has tried to suppress all emotion in herself to the point that, as Mary Barfoot put it, she has "hardened her heart with theory" (p. 132). Upset by Rhoda's "utter coldness" (p. 132) to Bella Royston's suicide, Mary cautions her about her

zealousness, about her "forced, exaggerated sentiment" against human weakness (p. 133). Rhoda, however, insists that emotion only clouds the "simple truth," and she remains unshakable in her beliefs. For she believes that to compromise her ideal, to admit that she could sympathize with a weak woman, would mean that she did not completely understand herself. And a lack of complete self-knowledge would cause her never again to "speak on any grave subject" (p. 133). Just as the middle-class Victorian society must maintain its ideals, so must Rhoda, for to admit a single flaw would cause the entire structure to fail.

Rhoda, however, proves her misunderstanding of human nature in her relationship with Everard Barfoot. Though disdainful of love, she finds herself drawn into a romantic affair; though holding in contempt the baser emotions, when she sees Monica with Everard, she cannot control her feelings of jealousy and suspicion; though she believes "marriage is an alliance of intellects" (p. 58), she loves "with passion, allowing herself to indulge the luxurious emotion" (p. 264). In addition to the suppression of her passionate nature, Rhoda fails to see the role intellectual pride plays in maintaining his illusions. She is "intrigued by Barfoot, in part, because she knows he "was one of the men for whom women . . . had sacrificed themselves," and she had secretly "deemed it a hard thing" never to have a man make love to her. She believed "it took away from the merit of her position as a leader and encourager of women living independently" (p. 147). So in addition to her sexual attraction to Barfoot, she is interested because "to reject a lover in so many respects desirable, whom so many women might envy her, would fortify her self-esteem" (p. 148). She soon, however, finds that her

emotions are a strong force that cannot be ignored. She had planned on basing her marriage on equality, putting aside the out-dated social conventions, only to discover how attractive the security of those legal vows are. Her fear of humiliation forces her to consider the new marriage form, for it would be crushing for her to return as a bride to those girls she had so adamantly preached the single life. The ideal of her cause, however, is finally more comfortable for Rhoda to live with than the chaotic experience life offers. Her "'perfect day'" with Barfoot "was marred" by her weakness (p. 326), and she will now be strong. In her last moments with Barfoot she urges him leave while her vision of things is "so straight--and clear" (p. 327).

Everard Barfoot also has his ideals and misconceptions which cloud reality and contribute to the failure of his relationship with Rhoda Nunn. Mary Barfoot, his cousin, tells Rhoda the story of Everard's early life, explaining that his "vigor of character" and his "desire to oppose his father in everything" made Everard a radical (p. 85). Everard's father, a self-made man, wanted his sons to be gentlemen, but the young man only developed hatred and scorn for the aristocrats he associated with at Eton. This self-pride remains a fundamental element of his personality. But this pride is tempered with a rather noble obstinacy--when Amy Drake tries to trap him into marriage, he lets himself be disinherited rather than compromise his principles. This unwillingness to compromise, apparent in Rhoda Nunn as well, works only as long as his ideals correspond with reality.

Barfoot describes his ideal marriage as involving "perfect freedom on both sides" (p. 104). Yet throughout his relationship with Rhoda Nunn he

seeks to impose his will upon her. He wishes to overpower her physically, for he likes "to feel superior" to her in some things (p. 256). Though he believes that he delights in Rhoda's "independence of mind," he still desires "to see her in complete subjugation to him" (p. 261). Like Bevis, he seems, at times, unable to perceive when he is playing and when he is in earnest. His own thoughts and actions contrast with his theories, yet he fails to perceive the discrepancy.

Barfoot's inability to compromise plays an important part in his relationship to Rhoda. He demands, in his ideal, that she "must rise far above the level of ordinary intelligent women." "She must manifest an absolute confidence in him" (p. 261). He expects Rhoda to trust him on a purely emotional basis, for he has given her no empirical evidence of his trustworthiness. This demand is a grave one to make for an alliance founded on intellect. So the question of Barfoot's relationship with Monica arises, and Barfoot refuses to compromise his principles. The relationship falters.

After leaving Rhoda after their argument, Barfoot spends more time with Agnes Brissendon where he realizes "the full extent of his sympathies with the social principles" of men and women "not in declared revolt against the order of things" (p. 319). Like the other characters discussed, he falls back upon the idea of conventional marriage to add stability to his world. During his last visit with Rhoda, he asked her to marry him, viewing their previous thoughts of rebellion against society as a "fantastic idealism" (p. 327). Rhoda refuses, and Barfoot marries Agnes, a girl who finally answers the ideal he has struggled to define.

Both Rhoda Nunn and Everard Barfoot believe they understand them-

selves, each other, and marriage, just as the Widdowsons do. Both the attempts at conventional and non-conventional marriage fail. But as Mary Barfoot cautions Rhoda, one must not "blame the institution of marriage with what is chargeable to human fate," for "a vain and miserable life is the lot of nearly all mortals" (p. 59). The Odd Women illustrates how circumstance and chance combined with social institutions, of which marriage is but one example, make unhappiness the common state. But Gissing would also have the reader realize that human beings create their own misfortunes. By living by ideals and failing to realize that "so much in life is compromise" (p. 120), the Widdowsons, the Numms, and the Barfoots compound their own misery.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>George Gissing, The Nether World, ed. Walter Allen (New York: Dutton, 1973), p. 392.

<sup>2</sup>"Introduction," The Nether World, p. ix.

<sup>3</sup>Nether World, p. 392.

<sup>4</sup>George Gissing, The Odd Women (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), p. 135: hereafter all references to this text will be included parenthetically within the text of the paper.

<sup>5</sup>John Henry Raleigh, "Victorian Morals and the Modern Novel," in The Victorian Novel: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. Ian Watt (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 463.

<sup>6</sup>Alfred Tennyson, The Princess: A Medley in The Poetical Works of Alfred Tennyson (Chicago: National Library Association, 1887), pp. 379-380.

<sup>7</sup>Richard D. Altick, Victorian People and Ideas (New York: Norton, 1973), p. 53.

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