THE SUFFRAGETTE MOVEMENT IN H.G. WELLS’S _ANN VERONICA_ AND MAY SINCLAIR’S _THE TREE OF HEAVEN_

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The Edwardian writer\(^1\) was writing for a steadily growing reading public, the majority of which were, however, still middle-class and the texts they read largely described the sort of life many were living in middle-class society. Novels dealing with society, social problems and situations – what is often called the “social novel” – were the dominant form. This kind of text varies from the family saga, offering the depiction of a large number of characters over a period of time, to the portrayal of only a very short span of the character’s life. Many writers of the period would, in fact, make use of the novel to enlighten the public about contemporary life, and for this purpose the amplitude of form was useful. 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 [Smith 2004: 9-10].

Both H.G. Wells (1866-1946) and May Sinclair (1863-1946) were absorbed by the need to break with Victorian values and traditions and they wrote novels that

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\(^1\) Edwardian period – the literary period between the death of Queen Victoria (1901) and the beginning of World War I (1914). It is named for King Edward VII, who reigned from 1901 to 1910.
were modern in their subject matter, their attitudes and their morality. Like Wells, Sinclair was interested in exploring the marital relations in fiction. In particular, in their Edwardian novels they were concerned with the most controversial issues associated with women and feminism: they wrote about female sexuality, the marriage problem, pregnancy, contraception, and adultery. Wells praised the modern novel as “the only medium through which we can discuss the great majority of the problems which are being raised […] by our contemporary social development.” It was the content of his fiction that mattered to Wells, and he emulated “the lax freedom of form, the rambling discursiveness, the right to roam” of early English novels in order to express his ideas to the fullest [Wells 1914: 148, 138].

Among Wells’s many interests in the early twentieth century was the woman question. many of his contemporaries, with perhaps the exception of Rebecca West and one or two others, considered him to have feminist sympathies [West 1917: 346-348]. He certainly saw himself as a spokesman for women’s rights. Ward Clark commented that Wells “has stated his problem, the problem of the young woman of today, in the most masterly fashion.” Clark was sure that when one of Wells’s heroines “voices her inmost beliefs one hears not the observations of a man on the woman question, but the authentic note of the modern woman who, striking out in blind protest against she knows not what, has given a new meaning of the word feminism” [Clark 1914: 554-557].

In The New Machiavelli Wells declared:

I confess myself altogether feminist. I have no doubts in the matter. I want this coddling and browbeating of women to cease. I want to see women come in, free and fearless, to a full participation in the collective purpose of mankind. Women, I am convinced, are as fine as men; they can be as wise as men; they are capable of far greater devotion than men. I want to see them citizens, with a marriage law framed primarily for them and for their protection and the good of the race, and not for men’s satisfactions. [Wells 1998: 326]

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 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].
They wanted to remain generally where they were and what they were, but to have it conceded that they were infinitely brighter and better and finer than men, […]. That feminism had anything to do with sexual health and happiness, was repudiated by these ladies with flushed indignation so soon as the suggestion was made plain to them. […] They were not thinking of it. They were good pure women rightly struggling for a Vote, and that was all they wanted. The Vote was to be their instrument of dominance. They concentrated all the energy of their growing movement upon that claim. The new Feminist Movement had no more use for me therefore than the Labour Socialists. To both these organizations I was an *enfant terrible* and not to be talked about. [Wells 1967: 406-407]

Having sympathies with insurgent womanhood, Wells early came forward as an advocate of feminine emancipation. In *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934) Wells summed up his views on the feminist movement from a historical perspective, describing it as “giving up its bloomers and becoming smart, energetic and ambitious” [Wells 1967: 406]. Knowing that feminism was coming into maturity he had actively supported the campaign for financial and political independence for women. Wells saw it as a fulfilment of his early visions of the future of mankind, “here at last advancing upon me was that great-hearted free companionship of noble women of which I had dreamed from my earliest years” [Wells 1967: 406].

Although H.G. Wells presents the core feminist issues in *Ann Veronica* (1909), he 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 “pantechnicon” 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. 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”.

This is the social background from which the fictitious twenty-one-year-old Ann Veronica Stanley emerges, against which she makes her choices. Ann Veronica’s involvement with the suffrage movement is central to Wells’s project. Wells uses this character to present his views on suffrage which had already been presented
elsewhere, as well as expanded later in other texts. Ann Veronica’s participation in the suffrage movement expresses the development of his female protagonist into an understanding of the world as being a place of compromise and complexity that cannot be resolved purely by getting the Vote, in keeping with the views he expresses in Experiment in Autobiography.

In Wells’s *Ann Veronica*, the protagonist becomes involved in the suffragette movement, the Fabian Society, and spends a term in prison.

Wells was a prominent member of the Fabian Society between 1903 and 1908. In 1906 he read a paper to the society called “Socialism and the Middle Classes” (later published as “Socialism and the Family”), which inaugurated a struggle with G.B. Shaw and the Webbs\(^2\) over the issue of sex and socialism. He wanted the society to make a clear statement on how it regarded women and the family, but his efforts to push it into a more progressive direction failed. After a public clash with the Webbs he resigned in 1908. The quarrel with the Fabians shows how advanced Wells was when it came to socio-sexual problems.

Ann Veronica is an intelligent young woman who goes to the local women’s college because her father disapproves of the effect that universities have on young women. She rebels over her father’s refusal to allow her to go to a fancy dress ball, leaves home, and takes a room in London. She is taken to a meeting of the Fabian Society, and observes from “the back seats of the gallery at Essex Hall”

> the giant leaders of the Fabian Society who are re-making the world: Bernard Shaw and Toomer and Doctor Tumpany and Wilkins the author, all displayed upon a platform. The place was crowded, and the people about her were almost equally made up of very good-looking and enthusiastic young people and a great variety of Goopes-like types. [Wells 2005: 116-117]

The Goopes in *Ann Veronica* are earnest Fabians. They “were childless and servantless”. Mr. Goopes was “a mathematical tutor and visited schools,” and Mrs. Groopes wrote “a weekly column in New Ideas upon vegetarian cookery, vivisection, degeneration, the lactic secretion, appendicitis, and the Higher Thought generally, and assisted in the management of a fruit shop in the Tottenham Court Road” [Wells 2005: 112]. Afterwards Ann Veronica attends a very much larger and more enthusiastic gathering, “a meeting of the advanced section of the woman movement in Caxton Hall,” where the same note of vast changes in progress sounded; and she went to “a soiree of the Dress Reform Association and visited a Food Reform Exhibition” [Wells 2005: 117], and other meetings until she is aware that

> not so much to a system of ideas as to a big diffused impulse toward change, to a great discontent with and criticism of life as it is lived, to a clamorous confusion of ideas for reconstruction – reconstruction of the methods of business, of economic development, of the rules of property, of the status of children, of the clothing and feeding and teaching of every one. [Wells 2005: 117]

\(^2\) Sidney and Beatrice Webb – English Socialist economists, early members of the Fabian Society, and co-founders of the London School of Economics and Political Science.
The eponymous heroine 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 Mininver. 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.

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. 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.

Ann Veronica revolts against paternal domination. In so doing, she fights against artificial restraints, and helps 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, she turns 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]. She regards the Vote as only one point in a wide programme for the elevation of her sex. Ann Veronica has no clear conception of the new position of women in society, but is much disappointed to find that the prominent suffragettes have in reality no grasp of the profound changes that are taking places in the relationship between the sexes, nor of how little the Vote itself means. She is equally disappointed as Wells was. The suffragettes appear to him 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. Kitty Brett in Ann Veronica says: “Freedom! Citizenship! And the way to that – the way to everything – is the Vote” [Wells 2005: 187]. For her the “Vote is the symbol of everything” [Wells 2005: 187]. Kitty naively believes that when “women get justice […] there will be no sex antagonism. None at all” [Wells 2005: 187]. She tries to convince Ann Veronica that there “is a new life, different from the old life of dependence, possible. If only we are not divided. If only we work together. This is the one movement that brings women of different classes together for a common purpose” [Wells 2005: 187]. Actually, Wells, similarly to Ann Veronica, regarded the suffragettes’ campaign as one of violence and malicious mischief.

The characters who believe in, think much of, or stand for, the particular things Wells hated are portrayed as comic or foolish, and all his fools and extreme types appear as transmitters and defenders of convention and tradition. Theirs is a cultural heritage he was incapable of appreciating and which he despised.

For May Sinclair, the Woman Suffrage Movement was an idea that shaped her life, or at least the culture that produced her. She was an extremely successful novelist in the pre-war years and 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. In 1912 Sinclair became one of twelve vice-presidents of the WWSL. 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 2004: 100]. 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.

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 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 relation-
ships within it, the sense of security and emotional richness” [Zegger 1976: 91]. The “tree of heaven” in the spacious garden of the Harrisons is a symbol of the family’s security and of an almost divine grace that seems to favour its members, since the social problems of the time touch their lives so “peripherally that they hardly seem to exist” [Zegger 1976: 88]. Products of the perfect Victorian family, the Harrisons are lured by the currents, but are ultimately held safe by the force of the family home with its “tree of Heaven” in the garden. Their Englishness also helps them to resist temptations. Only the current of war proves destructive, as both Nicolas and Michael are killed in the fighting. Dorothea is also affected by the First World War.

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, like Wells, is sceptical about the militant suffragism. 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. Like Wells’s Ann Veronica, Dorothea is also imprisoned during a demonstration. She explains: “It wasn’t a bad fight [...] twenty-one women to I don’t know how many policemen. [...] The fight was only the first part of the adventure. The wonderful thing was what happened afterwards” [Sinclair 1918: 219]. In prison Dorothea heard awful things about it, about the dirt, but there
was no dirt in her cell, and “after the crowds of women, after the meetings and the speeches, the endless talking and the boredom, that cell was like heaven” [Sinclair 1918: 219]

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. I knew you wouldn’t care for me after what I’d done – you must really listen to this, Frank – I knew you couldn’t and wouldn’t marry me; and it somehow didn’t matter. 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.

I sort of saw the redeemed of the Lord. They were men, as well as women, Frank. And they were all free. They were all free because they were redeemed. And the funny thing was that you were part of it. You were mixed up in the whole queer, tremendous business. Everything was ended. And everything was begun; so that I knew you understood even when you didn’t understand. [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: 227].

With the advent of the First World War, the needs of the country in wartime supersede the needs of woman, and Dorothea throws herself into the supervision of Belgian refugees. 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.
The suffragette movement in H.G. Wells’s *Ann Veronica* and May Sinclair’s...

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 pac-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.

Dorothea has the freedom of spirit to choose her own path. She can choose to reject the suffrage movement and choose to return to Drayton when the war breaks out. The roots of the rejection lie in that earlier time, that fear of the “collective soul” rather than in anti-feminist sentiment. But it is the same freedom of choice that leads her to adopt an appropriate patriotic role once the war breaks out and to see the war as a means of protecting that freedom. It is for freedom’s sake, for the morale of the soldiers who must fight for that freedom, that she agrees not to go to Belgium as Frank is about to leave for the front. For Dorothea, and perhaps for Sinclair, too – the war is about the very freedom of the individual that shapes her life.

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. The enormous crowd of drunk, beast-like, inspired people in London waiting for the declaration of war is something to be feared, and it stifles Dorothea, Michael and their party as they become absorbed into it. Sinclair’s individualist heroine turns instead to the patriotic, patriarchal conventions which will support the war effort of men for the greater good of humanity.

*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.
Both Dorothea Harrison and Ann Veronica revolt against paternal domination. 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 Dorothea and Ann Veronica, the question is much more complicated than that of “equal citizenship of men and women” [Wells 2005: 185]. 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 places 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.

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Summary

The suffragette movement in H.G. Wells’s Ann Veronica and May Sinclair’s The Tree of Heaven

In H.G. Wells’s Ann Veronica (1909), the eponymous heroine embraces new womanhood and a range of feminisms in her search for life. Ann Veronica attends suffrage and other radical meetings in London once she has left her father and home in order to “live”. She is arrested during a raid on the House of Commons, 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.

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. Dorothea is fascinated with suffragism and feminism, yet, like Sinclair herself, she also fears it. She approves of the idea, but is sceptical about the militant suffragism.

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 places in the relationship between the sexes, nor of how little the Vote itself means. They are equally disappointed as Wells and Sinclair were.

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