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FEMALE FRAILTY IN NOVELS BY BERYL BAINBRIDGE

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Introduction

This work aims to analyse the female characters appearing in some of the novels by Beryl Bainbridge, and in particular their condition of frailty and subordination to men. In fact, they generally lead troubled lives, mainly revolving around a man or, in some cases, around the absence of a man. All of them feel reality does not suit them, because it proves to be very different from what they expected and what they think they deserve; moreover, they have often to cope with men refusing to take up the role they were given in their lives, were they fathers, lovers, husbands or friends.

In Bainbridge's novels, the confrontation between the sexes often takes place in the shape of sexual relationships, generally unsatisfactory or platonic, existing only in the mind of one of the characters. Moreover, sexual behaviour is in her work at the basis of social life, since social acceptability comes also from a proper sexual behaviour; nonetheless there is not any example of a "normal" sexual life, each character presenting its own sexual perversions and problems. It is important to acknowledge that the importance of sexuality into the lives of the individuals is often underlined in these works making raids into the mind of both side characters and the main protagonists of the novel. In this way Bainbridge gives us a picture of a society whose members have to hide their own nature in order to fit within the way they are required to be. However, within their closest social interactions their nature emerges, causing pain and conflict within themselves and with the others.

Beryl Bainbridge has often declared that her novels were widely autobiographical, "When I write a novel I'm writing about my own life; I'm writing a biography almost, always. And to make it look like a novel I either have a murder or a death at the

end.”¹ For this reason it will be necessary to give a brief account of her life and views as an opening chapter, as an introduction to her work; it will give the key for a deeper understanding of her works, and it will explain the reason for the recurrent themes, names and situations that speckle her works. However, interpreting her novels as autobiographical would be too limited a reading, considering the complexity of the world she re-creates in them.

Bainbridge's novels were widely appreciated by their audience, but very little scholarly production has seen the light in England and America. Elisabeth Wennö in *Ironic Formula in Novels of Beryl Bainbridge* (1993) has pointed out the problem and her work precisely aims at overcoming the obstacle of Bainbridge's apparent simplicity of writing style. She concentrates upon the writer's use of irony at multiple levels; analysing some of her novels she points out how the use of satire and irony helps the writer underline the autonomy of the individual, together with its dependence on society to give a meaning to reality. Moreover, Wennö asserts that irony in Bainbridge makes the reader perceive reality as the result of the construction of a myth, thus introducing him to the importance of myths in the social life. The novels she analyses are *The Dressmaker*, *Young Adolf*, *Sweet William*, *Harriet Said...*, *The Bottle Factory Outing* and *Injury Time*. Thanks to them, Wennö can study Bainbridge's irony in the messages she conveys to the reader, namely the irrationality of our existence, the impossibility for the harmony we aim at, and the fact that personal fulfilment is ultimately unattainable. Her work opened the way to the Italian Nicoletta Brazzelli who, in *Murders, Mysteries, Names* (2009), takes into account Bainbridge as a writer of historical fiction. Brazzelli points out that her choice of

¹ “On writing: authors reveal their craft.” *The Guardian*, 26 March 2011.
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/mar/26/authors-secrets-writing?INTCMP=SRCH#history-link-box>>

historical moments was based on their “national relevance,”² but the way of dealing with them is not nationalistic or heroic, as the writer appears to be more concentrated on the ambiguity of the protagonists. Moreover, even though some of the books are characterized by the absence of female characters – except in the mind of men – women become part of history, and are even the real spring for the events to take place. Indeed, according to Brazzelli, men have lost the meaning of things and their grip on reality, and they have left rebelling women without a paternal authority to govern them. In a world that has become too chaotic to be understood, women seek love and an impossible stability. Brazzelli maintains that through parody Bainbridge manages to manipulate history, to give the readers a new perspective on things, a female and original one, which does not claim to be true, and proclaims its partiality. There is another scholarly work on Beryl Bainbridge, *Understanding Beryl Bainbridge* (2008), by Brett Joseph Grubisic. It aims to give a general introduction to Bainbridge's work, thus it does not discuss any theme in particular; it summarizes and briefly analyses all her novels from *Harriet said* to *According to Queeney*; *The Girl in Polka-dot Dress* was published in 2011, that is only after Grubisic's work.

David Punter in *The Hidden Script* (1985) devotes a chapter to Beryl Bainbridge, and, although partial, his analysis is very deep. He starts from noticing that her fiction is not based upon extraordinary events, but on daily life, so what she depicts as disasters are nothing more than happenings; those same happenings that have as a consequence our insecurities and personalities, which drive us to our daily afflictions. In particular, according to Punter, Bainbridge makes the reader remember the shame felt at what he defines as “being known”. Being known means to be judged for what we lack, for our own faults, and it is a practice commonly experienced during

² Brazzelli, Nicoletta. *Murders, Mysteries, Names*. (Roma : Aracne, 2009) 10.

adolescence, and in general by women. Bainbridge's merit would be that of making the reader live the experience again, thus creating in him a remorse for having, at least once in his life, been part of with the problem; this way, the reader feels he has contributed to transmit a sense of mutual fear in the genders. Punter argues that the violent acts perpetrated by women in Bainbridge's novels are "the inverted reaction of what a masculine culture has visited upon women, and are not male desires in the end fulfillable only through violence, of one kind or another?"³ Bainbridge is more interested in the act of rebellion than she is in the rebel, a proof of this is given by the fact that not all acts of rebellion have a positive outcome for the rebel. The act of rebellion clearly coincides with the emerging of difference, mainly during a ritual. What we do to carry out that ritual is to hide and ignore all the differences, all the voices rising against its accomplishment. However, of the many acts of rebellion, just one manages to have success, while all the others are doomed to failure. What remains is a peaceful life in which rebellion has been put down by the conflict, but it has caused great fear in us, as we feel we are guilty. In fact, in Bainbridge, the past is always present within each individual, it merely hides behind our routine, but the moment comes when we start perceiving this and all the revolts it contains. Thus we realise that our peacefulness is merely an illusion. Punter then finds evidence of what he has theorized in samples from *Harriet Said...*, *The Dressmaker*, *The Bottle Factory Outing*, *Sweet William*, *A Quiet Life*, *Injury Time*, and *Young Adolf*. Punter points out that in these novels what the main characters try to do is to build their own identity, depriving it of the conflicts they have experienced, and in the hope that the others will not manage to perceive what there is under the mask of their identity. However, what happens between the genders is that, through observation, males fix

³ Punter, David. *The Hidden Script*. (London : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985) 60.

females in an image as if they were objects apt to remain always identical to themselves. “Principally, says Bainbridge, this is what men do to women, partly by regarding them as sexual objects and founding an entire culture on a 'gaze' as an instrument of control.”⁴

Punter's conclusion is indeed my starting-point, in fact my dissertation will discuss objectification and femininity as Freud, his followers and his feminist opponents, theorized them to then trace them within Bainbridge's fiction. Even if Beryl Bainbridge did not believe in psychoanalysis and did not agree with the feminists, their argumentations on female sexuality are a key to analyse her work, since they dialogue with her novels that give life to – and an extensive description of – the psychologies aforementioned theories tried to analyse.

My dissertation will then deal with a selection of novels but, unlike Wennö and Brazzelli, I will include both her first novels and the historical ones, so that to take into consideration the evolution of female characters through her whole production. Moreover, dealing with all her novels would allow only a superficial approach to the characters, whose many-sided personalities are only revealed through a deep analysis, which should consider different situations.

⁴ *Ibid.* 76.

Beryl Bainbridge: life and works



Fig. 1. Adrian Dennis, *Beryl Bainbridge at home with one of her paintings*. Retrieved 15 May 2011 from *The Observer* website: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/may/15/beryl-bainbridge-paintings-kate-kellaway>

Beryl Bainbridge was born in 1934 in Liverpool, where she spent her youth. Her father was a self-made man but he had gone bankrupt before Beryl's birth. He had married an upper-class woman who, after his bankruptcy, started getting hold of the situation and taking charge of the purse string. Despite their economic difficulties, they managed to send their daughter to the Merchant Tailors' School, from which she was expelled when she was 14 because of a dirty limerick that was found in her pocket. Moreover, they made her attend elocution and tap-dancing lessons. Their family life, however, was not easy to tolerate, because of the frequent quarrels Bainbridge's parents had.

My mother had married my father when he was a rich businessman and they could afford a big house and a maid. Then a year later it had all gone, and she felt cheated. My father had terrifying rages, never hitting anybody physically—never—but verbally atrocious. He was schizophrenic; normally a charming and lovely man, he became a monster when the rages came. (...) The rages would last two to three days and be followed by three months of sulking, during which I had to ask for money every Saturday morning to buy food. We used to put his food in a bowl at night and leave it outside his door, like an animal.⁵

More than once she declared that it was to exorcize her familial environment that she started writing, when she was a schoolgirl. She wrote her first accomplished novel, *The Filthy Lucre*, when she was fourteen, and it was published in 1986 by Duckworth. After being expelled from school, she was supported by her mother in taking up a career in the theatre, and her father managed to get her a job as an assistant stage manager at the Liverpool Repertory Theatre. She then worked at the Playhouse Theatre, where she met Aussie Davies, who became her husband in 1954. She gave him two children, and they settled in Liverpool, but their marriage ended less than

⁵ Guppy, Shusha. "Beryl Bainbridge: The Art of Fiction CLXIV", Paris Review 157 (Winter 2000). <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/561/the-art-of-fiction-no-164-beryl-bainbridge>>

three years later. However, he was very supportive with her and their family, and when Bainbridge decided to leave Liverpool for London to give her children a better education, Davies bought a house in Camden, and he installed on the basement and left the second floor to her and their children. Bainbridge recalls the times of their marriage, when he was “always encouraging me to go back on stage, to fulfil myself, so that I would get off his back. All I wanted was to have his babies.”⁶ After the end of their relationship, Bainbridge had a daughter from Alan Sharp, a screenwriter, but the two broke up shortly later, and Davies recognized the child as his own.

In her married days she wrote her first adult-days novel, *Harriet Said*. Written in the early Sixties, it remained unpublished until 1972, because it was considered too outrageous and shocking to be published.

One of the editors that refused the manuscript remarked: “Your writing shows considerable promise, but what repulsive little creatures you have made the two central characters, repulsive almost beyond belief.”⁷

The first novel she managed to have published was *Weekend With Claude* in 1967 released by a division of Hutchinson Publishers called New Authors Limited, however, they published only first books, so when she gave to editors *Another Part of the Wood*, she passed to Hutchinson Publishers. She was disappointed because she “thought I’d walk down the street and everybody would know I had written a book. But nobody took any notice of these two novels, and I stopped writing. I felt uneasy for about three years.”⁸

However, one day Anna Haycraft, mother of a friend of her son's, recognized her voice on the phone. She was Colin Haycraft's wife, and her husband was editor at

⁶ “Dame Beryl Bainbridge”. *The Telegraph*, 2 July 2010.
<<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/culture-obituaries/film-obituaries/7868008/Dame-Beryl-Bainbridge.html>> (accessed 5 December 2011).

⁷ Bainbridge, Beryl. *Harriet Said*. (New York: Braziller, 1973).

⁸ Guppy, Shusha. *op.cit.*

Duckworth, a publishing house only interested in academic works. They nonetheless decided to publish Bainbridge's *Harriet Said* in 1972, and they gave her a job; she had to wrap up her own books. Colin Haycraft was a peculiar editor, not being interested in selling a huge amount of copies; Bainbridge's works were extremely successful according to the critics, but, as there were never more than 3,000 copies printed, her books never became best sellers. However, they sold a lot when their paperback version reached the bookstores. Bainbridge remained faithful to Duckworth for twenty-five years, clearly not because of her salary. She loved working with them, even though that meant writing for newspapers and theatre in order to get her living. She had in particular a weekly column in the *Evening Standard* and she reviewed theatre in the *Oldie* magazine; her articles were collected and published under the titles *Something Happened Yesterday* (1993) and *Front Row: Evenings at the Theatre* (2005).

Colin was also very good for novelists, being academic and rigorous about clarity. He trained his writers. And Anna would say 'Stick to what you know, to your own life', which was what at the time I was interested in anyway, except that there had to be a plot.⁸

Her experience with the Haycrafts is evident in her first novels, which are based on her own life or on the life of the people she knew. *The Bottle Factory Outing* (1974), for instance, is partly based on her own work experience in a bottle factory, while *The Dressmaker* (1973) was inspired by the lives of her two paternal aunts.

Writing was her way to give a meaning to her life, and to give expression to her frustrations and pain; it was her psychiatric therapy. "If it had not been for writing, I'd have ended up a total neurotic."⁹ For this reason her early novels are mainly

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Barber, Lynn. "Beryl's Perils". *The Observer*, 19 August 2001.
<http://observer.guardian.co.uk/life/story0,,538841,00.html> (accessed 5 December 2011).

autobiographical, often set in Liverpool, Formby, or in other places connected with her childhood.

The Dressmaker (1973) and *The Bottle Factory Outing* (1974) were shortlisted for the Booker Prize, but none of them was successful. In 1977, being herself a member of the jury, Bainbridge retired her novel *Injury Time* from the competition, even though it won the Whitbread Prize. Bainbridge became thus known for her coming second in the competition, a reputation that was strengthened when *An Awfully Big Adventure* (1989), *Every Man For Himself* (1996) and *Master Georgie* (1998) were also shortlisted but none of them succeeded in getting the Booker.

Every Man To Himself and *Master Georgie* were deeply different from her previous production, because they did not deal with Bainbridge's personal past, but rather with the past of England itself, as the former was set during the sinking of the Titanic, while the latter was set during the Crimean War. She had published her first historical fiction in 1991, it was entitled *The Birthday Boys*, and it had the form of a collection of scraps from the diaries of those participating in Scott's second expedition to the South Pole. Bainbridge explained the reason for such a deep thematic change

I had used up all my personal past. I think because I had spent all my time writing I hadn't really lived. That's when I went back to history. It was a deliberate move. Both Watson's Apology and Young Adolf had historical elements but they were also personal. Even in *The Birthday Boys* I was still playing around with my father's character, really.¹⁰

It is worth noticing that she managed to change only after Colin Haycraft's death, since she admitted she could not start writing historical fiction while he was alive “because he was so learned and clever. I was conscious that I had to do something

¹⁰ Wroe, Nicholas. “Filling the Gaps”. *The Guardian*; 1 June 2002. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2002/jun/01/fiction.berylbainbridge> (accessed 15 December 2011).

else, as I had used up everything I knew about my own life. So I went off to write novels based on historical facts.”¹¹

The last novel she published, *According To Queeney*, was again a historical novel, and it gave a partly imaginary account of the final years of Samuel Johnson's life. Such a topic can be considered to be a tribute to Colin Haycraft since “Colin was nuts about Dr Johnson. And for almost 26 years I used to go round to Duckworth for dinners and luncheons and it was almost as if Dr Johnson was there - he was for ever in the conversation.”¹²

The novel is not, however, a celebration of Johnson's wit, Bainbridge rather appears to be interested in analysing his psychology and his behaviour within a small social group, an attitude that remained unchanged through her whole production.

She thought that the reason for her interest in the past was to seek into her childhood and in the relationship between her parents “All my parents' bright days had ended before I was born. They faced backwards. In doing so they created in me so strong a nostalgia for the time gone that I have never been able to appreciate the present or look to the future.”¹³

However, Bainbridge's past appears rather obscure, and in interviews she gave different versions of the same anecdote, for instance her role on the episode of the dirty limerick that caused her expulsion from school remains rather obscure. Indeed, she thought that what the individual remembers as a precise memory is so distorted in his mind that it could be compared to fiction, hence opposed to reality. When asked the reason why she chose the form of fiction, instead of memoir, to narrate the

¹¹ Guppy, Shusha. *op.cit.*

¹² Barber, Lynn. *op.cit.*

¹³ Bainbridge, Beryl. *English Journey, or The Road to Milton Keynes*. (London: Duckworth, 1984).

story of his family, Bainbridge answered "Because what we remember is probably fiction anyway."¹⁴

When she died of lung cancer in 2010, Beryl Bainbridge was a Dame of the British Empire; she had been appointed in 2000. She was remembered by friends, man of letters, and journalists, who described her as a lovely eccentric. The reason for this label might reside in the stuffed buffalo she kept in her hallway, or in her spending the Booker judging sessions laying on the floor because she was more comfortable, or in her fondness for whiskey and cigarettes. However, she argued, she was not an eccentric, since

What they don't realise when they say I'm a bit eccentric - and it's the only time I get hot under the collar - is the discipline needed to get something done and get it done properly - and in the early days bringing up a family as well. What you do need is enormous discipline - eccentricity doesn't count for a flipping thing.¹⁵

However, her public persona could have negatively affected her reputation among scholars, as proven by the fact that there exists almost no literature on her work. Helen Meyers, in her *Femicidal Fears*¹⁶, claimed that in the USA such an attitude towards her work may find its causes in the existence of national writers dealing with the same topics, while scholars tended to look overseas only to find works that appeared to be engaged with debates on gender and sexuality, while Bainbridge had a "profound scepticism about heterosexual romance and the nuclear family."¹⁷ Moreover Bainbridge was something like an anti-feminist, her mother had always told her that men were generally to be considered better than women, even though her

¹⁴ Guppy, Shusha. *op.cit.*

¹⁵ Barber, Lynn. *op.cit.*

¹⁶ Meyers, Helene. *Femicidal Fears: Narratives of the Female Gothic Experience*. (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001) 16.

¹⁷ Wroe, Nicholas. *op.cit.*

mother deemed herself more valuable than any man. Bainbridge forged her own opinion on her life experiences, and declared

I've never been drawn to the feminist movement. I was brought up to believe that men had little to do with the home or children—except to bring in the money. I've never been put down by a man, unless I deserved it, and have never felt inferior. It seems to me that a mutually beneficial relationship between a man and woman requires the man to be dominant. A sensible woman will allow the man to think he is the most important partner.¹⁸

Sexuality appears nonetheless to be a central element of her work, because it is the place where men and women meet and part from one another.

It is worth noticing how sexuality, a central theme of her prose, becomes marginal in her paintings. In fact, she was a painter as well, and dedicated at least one painting to each novel she accomplished. Her son and daughters are trying to arrange an exhibition of her works, a collection of which has been highlighted by BBC News on May 2011.¹⁹

¹⁸ Guppy, Shusha. *op.cit.*

¹⁹ Kate Kellaway. "The Secret Art of Beryl Bainbridge". *The Observer*, 15 May 2011. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/may/15/beryl-bainbridge-paintings-kate-kellaway?INTCMP=ILCNERRXT3487> (accessed 13 December 2011).

Objectification, frailty, and sexuality

Objectification is the practice of degrading a person to the status of a mere object; this term is nowadays used, generally with a pejorative connotation, to indicate a way of speaking that is considered morally or socially deplorable, usually concerning the sexual realm. Martha Nussbaum observed that objectification takes place whenever one of the following seven factors is present: instrumentality, denial of authority, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership and denial of subjectivity.²⁰ She also demonstrated the existence of different “degrees” of objectification, some of which are conceived as perfectly normal, and that objectifying a woman is welcome in certain contexts while it turns out to be deplorable in others.

Sexual objectification, in particular was theorized for the first time by Immanuel Kant, who supposed it is part of the sexuality of both men and women. He postulated that reification was one of the mechanisms through which sexual desire worked, in order to obtain the fulfilment of the subject's desire. Kant claimed that sexual pleasure arouses sensations in the individual so powerful that they cast out any other thought from the subject's mind, respect for humanity included. The only way to escape objectification, for Kant, is marriage, an institution that would protect, at least outside the moment of the intercourse itself, the mutual respect of the couple, which would in that case be legally sanctioned – thus perceived to be powerful and durable by the subject.

Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, two feminist scholars questioned Kant's theorization, because they did not believe objectification to be inherent in sexual desire, but rather a product of a socio-cultural construction. They explained how, as a reflection of the hierarchization present in each domain of life, men learn to connect

²⁰ Nussbaum, M. “*Objectification*”. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*. Fall 1995.
<<http://www.mit.edu/shaslang/mprg/nussbaumO.pdf>> (accessed 30 November 2011).

their pleasure to domination and subjugation, and as a consequence women are taught to link their sexual pleasure to being dominated and subjugated. Nussbaum embraced their thought, even though she conceded that, in a relationship between two adult individuals, objectification can be not only acceptable but also enjoyable when it takes the form of mutual care.

In 1997 these theories were taken into account by the psychologists Barbara Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts to investigate the consequences on women of their being constantly sexually objectified.²¹ The two scholars pointed out that even though not all men objectify women, almost all women reported to have been victims of an objectifying gaze; there would be three main occasions in which women are target of objectification: during their social life, in the portrait of social interactions in the visual media, and within American culture, which is imbued with sexualisation of body parts because of the influence of visual media, a culture that became then international, the USA being the greatest world power.

As a matter of fact different scientific domains have investigated the objectification of women, the evolutionists for instance, who attributed the practice of objectifying the female bodies to the habit of evaluating their reproductive value. The large number of theories about reification of women signals however that the existence of such a practice is no more brought into question. What is being investigated are the consequences of it into female attitude to life, as objectification is now partly held responsible for some of the psychological differences between men and women.

Roberts and Fredrickson argue that sexual objectification has a consequence on women's lives because "This perspective on self can lead to habitual body monitoring, which, in turn, can increase women's opportunities for shame and

²¹ Fredrickson, B. L. and Roberts, T.-A. "Objectification Theory". *Psychology of Women Quarterly*. June 1997. <<http://www.sanchezlab.com/pdfs/FredricksonRoberts.pdf>> (accessed 15 December 2011).

anxiety, reduce opportunities for peak motivational states, and diminish awareness of internal bodily states.”²²

Shame is experienced when the self is compared to a cultural idea that has been interiorized, and it is not up to the mark. Experiments held in different years²³ attested that women experience shame more than men. Roberts and Fredrickson find an explanation for it in the fact that the portrait of the ideal woman is so unrealistic that it is nearly impossible to attain, so women, whose bodies are continually compared with so high a standard, feel shame and try to escape it through physical exercise, beauty treatments, diet and, sometimes, plastic surgery and eating disorders.

Women are also victims of a stronger feeling of anxiety than men, as Keelan, Dion and Dion have demonstrated.²⁴ Their study showed that the primary source of anxiety is women's body and its appearance, since women in social contexts are frequently worried about looking beautiful and appealing, because of the connection that is drawn between female beauty and power. However, Fredrickson and Roberts report that a study carried out by Beneke²⁵ within a group of rapists highlighted that some of them had raped attractive women because they considered them threatening for their own self, and that greater blame was attributed to more attractive victims than to less attractive ones. Researchers found out that because of the attention they pay to their own body, women prove to have a waving concentration

²² Ibid. 173.

²³ Fredrickson and Roberts in particular quote H.B. Lewis, *Shame and Guilt in Neurosis*. 1971. New York: International University Press. Silberstein, L.R., Striegel-Moore, R. & Rodin, J. 1987. *Feeling Fat: A Woman's shame*. In H.B. Lewis (ed) *The Role of Shame in Symptom Formation*. 89-108. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum. Stapley, J.C., & Haviland, J.M. “*Beyond Depression: Gender Differences in Normal Adolescents' Emotional Experiences*”. *Sex Roles*, 20, March 1989 295-308. <<http://www.springerlink.com/content/0360-0025/20/5-6/>>

²⁴ Keelan, J.P, Dion, K.K., & Dion K.L. “*Correlates of appearance anxiety in late adolescence and early adulthood among young women*”. *Journal of adolescence*. June 1992. 193-205.

²⁵ Beneke, T. *Men on Rape*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982).

when asked to perform a difficult task, and their attention usually diverts when they are made aware of their body – through a camera or a mirror, for instance. Moreover, despite their constant monitoring their “external” body, women have difficulties in detecting the signals from their “internal” one, and, for instance, they cannot be as successful as men in determining their heartbeat; this has a consequence on sexual life since it appears that in female sexuality “contextual stimuli appear to be more reliably related to women's feelings of sexual excitement [than physical ones].”²⁶

Fredrickson and Roberts underlined that sexual dysfunctions and dissatisfactions in heterosexual couples are lamented more often by women than by men, however, a uniquely psychological explanation appears to be insufficient to define the phenomenon. The analysis carried out by Keelan, Dion and Dion on girls at their first sexual experiences brought into light that women are usually expected to be passive, up to the point that they avoid sexual initiative, and they mainly focus on their male partner fearing otherwise to appear selfish.

Even Freud thought objectification to be an inherently male mechanism, and he observed its action into psychically impotent men, those individuals that despite a strong psychic drive to complete a sexual act, cannot manage to take it into practice because of a dysfunction of the sexual organs; the impossibility to attain pleasure is however present only when the sexual object is a certain individual, while it ceases when a different object is involved.²⁷

Freud attributes this dysfunction to an inhibition of the development of the libido during infancy, in particular to a fixation for the mother or the sister, which has not been overcome completely. He theorized that, to attain a normal attitude to love, two currents have to combine: the sensual and the affectionate one. The latter is the

²⁶ Fredrickson, B. L. and Roberts, T.-A. *op.cit.*

²⁷ Freud, Sigmund. *Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis: Leonardo da Vinci and Other Works.* (London: The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1978. Vol. 11).

oldest one, whose development takes place during the early years of the child's life, and it is directed towards all those people that take care of the baby, generally his mother, his sisters and other family members. These are the primary objects of the object-choice made by the infant, which is attached to the satisfaction of the functions that the body needs to fulfil in order to preserve life. The affectionate current is erotic, but always diverted from its sexual aim, while with puberty this current starts being flanked by the sensual current, also erotic, which collides with the barrier against incest that the society has in the meantime erected. Consequently the boy attaches the sensual current to different objects, which are not incestuous, but they may nonetheless be modelled upon infantile objects, and drive unto them the affectionate current that previously belonged to his family. Then, "the greatest intensity of sensual passion will bring with it the highest psychical valuation of the object—this being the normal over-valuation of the sexual object on the part of a man."²⁸

Freud states that the development of the libido from this moment on depends on two factors: the amount of the frustration that reality opposes to the object-choice and the attraction that the infantile objects still produce on the boy, which depends on the erotic charge they had during childhood. If these two factors are very strong, they may create a fixation of the libido that remains attached to the unconscious incestuous fantasies, thus resulting in complete impotence. In other cases, the fixation on the incestuous objects can be given a partial release, provided that the affectionate current is not involved on the object-choice; thus these men "seek objects which they do not need to love, in order to keep their sensuality away from the objects they love."²⁹

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.* 181.

Men usually protect from this disturbance using psychological debasement of the sexual object, debasement being another word for objectification. Freud then explains how this disturbance is more common than people may think in fact

There are only a very few educated people in whom the two currents of affection and sensuality have become properly fused; the man almost always feels his respect for the woman acting as a restriction on his sexual activity, and only develops full potency when he is with a debased sexual object; and this in its turn is partly caused by the entrance of perverse components into his sexual aims, which he does not venture to satisfy with a woman he respects. He is assured of complete sexual pleasure only when he can devote himself unreservedly to obtaining satisfaction, which with his well-brought-up wife, for instance, he does not dare to do.³⁰

Freud believes that the origin of an unfavourable opinion of sexuality may be found in the frustration of the sensual current during youth, when its satisfaction was prohibited even if it was directed to someone outside the family. A similar effect of education could be seen on female attitude towards sexuality, even though, in Freud's view, women do not need to debase their sexual object, since they do not overvalue their object as men do; however, they appear to be unable to split sensual activity from prohibition. As a proof Freud underlines how some women are completely faithful to their lover, something that they clearly are not to their husband. Nowadays it may be objected to this the fact that in Freud's time women were not free to choose their husband, while they could choose their lover, so that faithfulness was easier and even more plausible than faithfulness to someone who had been imposed onto them.

Freud theorizes that the different approaches of men and women to sexuality is to ascribe in part to education, since when sexual development is attained by a girl, she

³⁰ *Ibid.* 183.

has to wait for her marriage to begin sexual activity, while men generally become sexually active earlier. This stress on education would be in tune with the feminist theories of the following years, nonetheless feminism challenged Freud's theories because of their alleged chauvinism.

Psychoanalysis was born with the publication of *Studies on Hysteria* in 1895, co-authored by Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer. The work reported the case story of Anna O., a woman affected by a strange aphasia, as she wasn't unable to express herself only when she used her mother tongue, while she could easily speak in French, Italian and English. To heal her disease Joseph Breuer started visiting his patient every day and he allowed her to talk freely to him. This gave Freud the basis for the method he himself called "the talking cure", but was also, according to the feminists, the signal of the first gender-based hierarchization in the psychoanalytical theory. They thought that it appeared as if the woman talked, while the male doctor gave her the key to interpret her own thoughts, since he could understand them better than herself. However, Freud's method was indeed successful, up to the point that many female patients of Doctor Freud, once healed, became psychoanalysts themselves. Some of them remained faithful to Freudian view, while others introduced some modifications to his theory, in particular to those connected to feminine development.

Freudian theory suggests that the phases of sexual development are the same for boys and girls, and the act of masturbation in the pre-Oedipal phases is carried out identically by both sexes, the ones stimulating their penis, the other their clitoris. Clitoris is the penis-equivalent, a sort of truncated penis, and in the first phases of development "the little girl is a little man."³¹ The rising of "femininity" would thus come

³¹ Irigaray, Luce. *The Sex Which Is Not One*. (Ithaca N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985) 34.

later on, and it would depend on a greater repression of the girls' sexual instincts than of the boys' ones; as a matter of fact it would be so effective to transform sexual "activity" into sexual "passivity". Freud also implies that the girl's love for her mother is due to a sexual (and masculine) desire that she is obliged to abandon, and which causes hatred towards the mother when the girl discovers to have a castrated penis. Unlike the boy, who abandons the Oedipal phase renouncing masturbation and to the incestuous thoughts addressed to his mother fearing to be castrated by his father, the girl discovers that her "penis" is much smaller than a boy's one. In Freud's narration, she thus thinks that her penis has been already amputated, and she has to reconcile herself with the fact that she has not a valuable phallic organ. She nevertheless hopes that sooner or later she will find a penis of her own, and she comes to believe that she can obtain one by her father, to whom she addresses her love, entering into the Oedipus complex. This phase is long-lasting in girls' development, and it is overcome by several frustrations in the girls' confrontation with their father, on whom the infant depends. The girl has to change her sexuality from active to passive, transferring her erogenous zone from the clitoris to the vagina, a shelter for the penis. Freud stressed in *Femininity* how the development of the little boy is far more linear than the girl's one, not only in infancy, but also during adolescence and up to manhood. The desire to have a penis is later substituted for the desire to have a child, which Freud thought to be fulfilled only if the newborn turns up to be a boy, who can give the woman the penis she has longed for. As a mother of a boy, the woman will "transfer to her son all the ambition which she has been obliged to suppress in herself."³²

³² Freud, Sigmund. *New Introductory, Lectures on Psycho-Analysis and Other Works*. (London : The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1978. Vol. 22) 133.

Freud himself defined women as the dark continent of psychoanalysis, and admitted that he had not managed to fully investigate female sexual development, because social impositions could have modified female sexuality through prejudice. Despite affirming so, Freud fell into the “social trap” and theorized that libido is essentially male, and that women do not have one of their own, but turn the male one into passivity.

Freudian theories of femininity have been widely reconsidered and corrected, not only by feminists, but also by his own disciples. Karen Horney, for instance claimed that the little girl actually knows her vagina, and that she does not detach from her mother because the latter lacked a penis, but rather because of their rivalry in the love of the father. The little girl, if she reaches this stage, desires a penis of her own because she lacks the possibility of being penetrated by her father; this implies that the girl knows her vagina, but she would have “denied” it, fearing vagina because of its connection to blood and pain. Horney also tried to analyse female sexuality in relation to the socio-cultural phenomena that could have determined its characteristics, going so far as to say that penis envy was the translation of women's anger for being deprived of the advantages that men could enjoy. This same theory was sustained by Melanie Klein, who investigated children's psychology, and came up with a new theory of female development. She argued that the Oedipal phase started with the oral phase, and that the girl, being frustrated in her desire to orally incorporate her father's penis, took revenge on the bad breast of her mother. Moreover she thought that the shift of pleasure from vagina to the clitoris would happen because of the girl's fear that her mother could damage her reproductive organs to take her away from her father. To avoid her mother's revenge, and also

because the penis is seen as both desired and dangerous, the little girl would take a masculine position.

Ernest Jones tried to reconcile such theories with Freudian point of view, distinguishing castration, or fear of losing genitals, and consequently losing pleasure, from aphanisis, or permanent loss of pleasure; he implied that the little girl renounced to her femininity because of the fear of aphanisis rather than for the fear of castration. Saying this he contradicts Freud's assumption "the little girl is a little boy,"³³ affirming that the little girl is a woman, before going through masculinisation. Moreover, he gives a multiple interpretation of the penis envy, which for him could hide the desire of incorporating a penis to transform it into a child, or of having sexual pleasure from him during an intercourse or else of having it as a substitute for the clitoris.

After scientific discoveries had made clear that the difference between men and women depended on a different genetic code and on the production of hormones, Jaques Lacan reopened the discussion on female sexuality. He criticized what had been opposed to Freud's theory concerning the castration complex and substituted the term "penis" with the concept of "phallus", which is the signifier of desire. The child draws away from the mother and turns towards the possessor of the phallus, which makes him desired by the mother. As a matter of fact Lacan does not question the existence of the "penis envy", but his theory will give way to a further elaboration and questioning of it.

As Irigaray argued, however, all the theories on female sexuality are moulded on Freudian theory about its male counterpart. She observed for instance that all of them deny the existence of a multiplicity of erogenous zones in female sexuality and they concentrate on one. A further criticism could be made on the feminists, because

³³ Irigaray, Luce. *op.cit.*

not all of them have taken into consideration the socio-cultural bonds to which women are strongly linked from early childhood, and they also appear to have failed putting themselves in the shoes of the people living at the beginning of the century, somehow expecting an excessive open-mindedness from Freud. Indeed, he proved to be very liberal by his talking about sexuality with his female patients in the first two decades of the twentieth century, when only a few activists of the “sex reform” movement dared to speak about female sexuality in terms of pleasure and not only for reproduction. In this choice he had been even more liberal than the American feminist Margaret Sanger, when she opened the first birth-control clinic, hired an entirely female staff, not to embarrass her patients.

The movements for sexual revolution began to appear in Europe and America at the beginning of the twentieth century, and they asked for sexual emancipation and birth control via contraceptives, since abortion was illegal and very dangerous for those women who performed it. In the meantime many governments, fearing birth-rate stagnation, gave contributions to abandoned mothers to take care of their children, so, through the agency of both the governments and the sex revolutionists, people were vastly informed about sex and sexual pleasure.

In 1930 T.H. Van De Velde explained in detail to husbands how to sexually satisfy their brides, instead of lamenting their alleged frigidity, since

This full equivalence and mutuality obtain in Ideal Marriage, even though the man is the transmitter and the woman the receiver. Even though he is certainly, and must be, essentially active, she is quite as certainly not the purely passive instrument which she has been so long considered, and still is considered, far too often.³⁴

³⁴ Van De Velde, Theodoor Hendrik “*New Male Responsibilities*”. In Nye, R.A. (ed.), *Sexuality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. 339.

During the Seventies feminists criticized their predecessors' approach to sexuality, since they still left sexual initiative to men, who often used their penises as weapons in a violent struggle for possession, thus degrading women. Germaine Geer thought that, in order to gain equality to men

(...) women must humanize the penis, take the steel out of it and make it of flesh again. What most 'liberated' women do is to taunt the penis for its misrepresentation of itself, mock men for their overestimation of their virility, instead of seeing how the mistake originated and what effects it has had upon themselves. Men are tired of having all the responsibility for sex. ³⁵

Geer suggested that feminists had to stop their struggle against men, in order to cooperate with them to build a new system in which female oppression would be overcome.

Nowadays, we can say that sexual revolution was successful on many aspects, from birth control to male parental leave; however, in 1990 and 1993 respectively, Sheila Jeffereys and Linda Grant argued that women perceived sexual revolution to have once again advantaged men. Jeffereys points out that, after the sexual revolution, all women are expected to be sex experts, and that from that moment on, spinsters have disappeared, since they are now regarded as lesbians or sexually active single women.

As a matter of fact sex reform and feminism failed their project of building a different society, and their failure is blatantly demonstrated by the researches on objectification quoted above. Appearance has moreover gained a greater and greater importance in our society, which has not been defined 'the society of appearance' by accident. Some of the problems that were at first considered to be feminine are now

³⁵ Greer Germaine. "Women's Sexual Liberation". In Nye, R.A. (ed.), *Sexuality*. Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1999. 334-335.

entering the domain of masculinity, to name but two anorexia and bulimia, and this is one of the proofs that the mechanism of objectification is becoming active in female sexuality as well. Female sexuality has certainly changed over time, or at least, it has conformed itself to the masculine – and dominant – one.

Many think sexuality to be instinctual and rooted in human nature, however sexual revolution has demonstrated its strong link to the socio-cultural context in which it finds expression; indeed an objectifying sexuality seems appropriate for the society of appearance. For this reason troubled sexuality is perfectly in accordance with Bainbridge's portrait of her female characters, and not only for those living during war-time; their sexual lives mirror their realities, and all of them must cope with difficult conditions of life, radically different from what they had dreamt them to be.

Novels

In this section a selection of Bainbridge's novels will be considered and their female characters in particular will be scrutinized, not only in their peculiar characteristics but also considering the environment they are in and their personal past.

The choice of the novels to investigate was not based on literary value but only on the variety of female characters they presented, and on the different roles women had in the plot and within the group of people portrayed in the novel. This is the reason for the exclusion of *The Birthday Boys*, which presents predominantly male characters, while women are important only for their absence or for their being objects of male desire; moreover, while *The Dressmaker* was included in the analysis, *The Bottle Factory Outing* was left out because Brenda and Freda are respectively comparable to Nellie and Margo.

The order chosen for the dealing depends on the chronological order of appearance of the novel, so that the process of Bainbridge's female characterization can be followed in its evolution from the early works up to the mature ones. However, as far as her first novels are concerned, the choice fell upon *Another Part of the Wood* (1968).

Another Part of the Wood



Fig. 2. Beryl Bainbridge, *Napoleon When Young*;
photograph by the painter. Retrieved 15 May 2011
from *The Observer* website:
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/gallery/2011/may/15/beryl-bainbridge-art/?picture=374593012&index=0>>

The novel appeared in 1968 for Hutchinson Publishers, but a revised edition was published in 1979 by Duckworth to give Bainbridge a break from her writing production. As Lynn Barber pointed out, the process of revision mainly consisted of suppressing adjectives and making the prose more straightforward.³⁶

The scene is set somewhere in Whales, in the “Nant MacFarley Camp”, a camp consisting of wooden huts built to connect to nature those people who, living in the city, had lost contact with the wildlife. The owners' son, George, has invited his friend Joseph there to spend a weekend with him in the hope of having some interesting philosophical chats with him. However, Joseph does not come alone, since he takes the liberty of bringing with him his son Roland, his girlfriend Dotty and a disturbed boy, Kidney; moreover, he has unwittingly invited Lionel and his wife May to join the party.

Once there, it is clear that there are tensions within the members of the group, and that no one can figure out the reason why they are all there, or fathom how they will spend their time in the woods. Actually, there happens nothing in particular, even though a constant tension affects the reader, who waits for an upcoming tragedy. In fact, life in the countryside turns out to be stressful for those who are not used to living in it, and physically dangerous for the countrymen Willie and Balfour, who usually help the MacFarleys to keep their estate; Willie is taken by a sudden seizure while attempting to put out a fire, while Balfour is stung by several wasp whose nest he had accidentally violated. The tragedy, announced by Kidney telling Roland about the story of King Lear, does not materialize until the very end, when Roland dies because he has swallowed a great amount of Kidney's pills.

³⁶ Barber, Lynn. *Introduction*, in Bainbridge, B. *Another Part of the Wood*. (London: Penguin, 2010) vi.

The novel as a whole is, however, just the portrait of a group of people between whom communication has failed or even has never existed. Even those who share the same gender cannot well understand each other, and appear rather too absorbed into their own business.

The main female characters present in the novel are three, Dotty, May and Roland's mother. Except for the fact that all of them had unhappy love experience with a man, the three women do not have much in common and their personalities and their reactions differ radically. The first distinction among them is the fact that two of them are actually present in the camp while the events take place, while Roland's mother is absent from the action, and we know her thoughts just because they are imagined, recalled and reported by others.

On the contrary May and Dotty are present, and for this reason their description is more detailed, partly because we manage to enter their minds through the particular use Bainbridge does of the narrator, which is sometimes external and sometimes internal, and which continuously shifts its point of view, entering the thoughts of all the different characters of the novel. Even though this technique should let the reader empathize with the characters, their faults and their meanness prevent us from identifying entirely with one of them; in this way the reader is brought to judge the characters of the novel as sub-ordinary people, unworthy of having a role in a novel and even in an extraordinary event.

Indeed, Dotty will not be present at Roland's death, however her absence does not make her less guilty than the others, since she had understood that Joseph was unreliable as a father and that he did not pay enough attention to his son, nonetheless she had gone away from MacFarleys' camp leaving him alone.

Dotty is described at first by Balfour, who qualifies her as “a fair-haired girl”, thus bringing along the stereotype on blondes but also giving us the impression that there would not be anything else to say about her, as if the fairness of her complexion would affect her personality, which does not seem to be remarkable in any way. However, we later understand that the first, defective, description may be caused by Balfour's shyness, considering that he is “too shy to look at the girl.”³⁷ We are almost immediately made aware of the fact that Dotty and Joseph live together and that there are problems between the two, and that every sentence uttered by one of them has the potentiality of hurting the other, deliberately or by mistake.

The girl knows from the very beginning what is going to happen between Joseph and her, and talking about Kidney she explains to George and Balfour how she thinks Joseph is, even though she is unable to tell it to her boyfriend, and probably also to herself.

'But Joseph always makes the same mistake, every single time. He bought Kidney a book of poems by Donne, with a silly message inside – To My Friend. It was supposed to be meaningful and it meant sweet fanny-all really.' Her voice was uneven, but her face was turned from Balfour and George and it was difficult to tell if it contained anger or grief. ' I mean, he's bought the same book for so many people at one time or another, with the appropriate description inside – To My Friend, or My Wife or My Love – and it's a shame really because they're nice and you can't even look at them after Joseph has finished with you. Every gesture he makes is just a monotonous repeat of a gesture he's made somewhere else. You see, Kidney really thought Joseph was interested in him. Really thought he cared.' She stopped talking She wasn't thinking of Kidney at all.³⁸

³⁷ Bainbridge, Beryl. *Another Part of the Wood*. (London: Penguin, 2010) 3.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 14.

She is unable to react to the situation she is in, yet she cannot leave Joseph, maybe because she really feels she loves him or maybe because she does not have anywhere else to go. As a matter of fact Dotty depends on Joseph, because he is the only thing she has got, even economically since she does not work and she has left her parents long ago. She sometimes sees herself through Joseph's eyes, and often obliterates her own personality in order to fit the opinion he has of her; she herself observes so when she is alone with the sick Balfour. "She was thinking how Joseph had influenced her, how through him she found sickness distasteful, or thought she did."³⁹

Despite her attitude, sickness is strongly connected to her presence, being there both when Willie and when Balfour have their seizures; despite not knowing exactly what to do, she seeks to give support and be helpful to them, but she fails to be effective. The episode shows another of her features, since when she does not know what to do, she actually does something, while when she would be able to do something, she chooses not to act, except when she kisses Balfour and when she finally makes up her mind and runs off. However, both decisions have no consequence on reality or on others' attitude towards her. Dotty's inability to act becomes a positive aspect of her behaviour when she succeeds in avoiding to do everything that could irritate her boyfriend, namely eating, combing her hair in the kitchen and entering a room as he is going out of it. Unfortunately the positivity of her attitude is confined to a short-term result, while at length it is self-damaging and it compels her to mutilate her personality in order to fit Joseph's idea of companionship. In order to preserve their relationship, she chooses not tell him how stupid she judges his obsession with

³⁹ *Ibid.* 117.

dreams and the unconscious, supposing it to be just another evidence of his own hypocrisy.

She didn't know why he persisted in being so interested in his dreams. It didn't seem to help him much to know what they meant. Sometimes she felt it would be more valuable to him if he wrote down what he did in his waking hours.⁴⁰

She implicitly accuses Joseph of not paying attention to the others, as if he was the only man on earth, but she cannot say it openly to him, not even when little Roland is involved. She feels that if Joseph gave his son the attention and the love he deserves, she would automatically be excluded from his life. For instance, when Roland protests because he has to sleep in the barn alone with Kidney, Dotty too thinks that the boy is too young to sleep so far from his father, nonetheless she keeps her opinion to herself because she fears that Joseph would realize that it was Dotty herself who was big enough to sleep alone in the barn and far from him.

However, after making the decision of running away, she humbly stand up to her man who is being blamed for letting his son and Kidney go to climb the mountain on their own.

'You don't know what you are talking about,' he told her [May] sharply. 'I'll just walk over to the road and look for them.' He glanced at Dotty, but she wouldn't look at him.

She blamed him too.⁴¹

She finally decides to refuse what Joseph offers her, she rejects the life he forces her to lead, even though her decision seems to be uncertain and both the other characters and the reader expect her to come back in a few hours. Roland's death overshadows her absence and its deeper mourning substitute the feeling of her absence. Significantly, her name is last mentioned by Joseph just before Balfour's discovery of Roland's corpse, "He might even bring the boy inside to sleep in his bad

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 87.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 144.

if old Dot-Dot failed to return,"⁴² signals how unimportant the girl is for Joseph, and however her destiny is matched with the child's one, as both of them have slid away from the man's control during the clumsy attempt to attract his attention. For this reason she can be said to be the other victim of the novel, even though her physical survival prevents us from achieving the pathos of her sacrifice. Moreover, the blank space which separates in the text Joseph's last consideration on Dotty and Roland's death highlights the difference between them, namely the fact that she is able to save her life after all and to escape Joseph's negative influence on her.

Dotty's only female companion, May, despite her apparent strength, fails her rebellion against her husband and remains with him until the end of the novel. Like Dotty she too lives off her husband, and would not know how to earn her living without him. Unlike her younger friend, May is aware of her situation and her preferences,

She let herself remember all the men who had found her attractive. Some of them. It was strange how good and solid ones evoked no response in her, no feeling of being a woman. All those dreary kindly men, ending with Lionel, wanting to give her security and a nice home – while the other kind, the unstable ruthless ones, who treated her like a whore, slapping her bottom and flinging her on to the bed at the first opportunity, exerted such power over her.⁴³

In order to have both security and ruthlessness, she keeps on provoking her husband, she teases him and tries to make him jealous by flirting with other men. What she particularly lacks in her marriage is a sexual relationship between her husband and her, since Lionel has never made love to her, he only tells her dirty stories when they are to bed. She feels that sexuality would be the place where Lionel's kindness would meet her need for ruthlessness and objectification; for this reason she aggravates and intensifies her attacks on her husband, at first confessing

⁴² *Ibid.* 164.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 119.

him to have deceived him, and then throwing his charm-coin into a wasp nest. Only after learning what she had done to his coin – thus to him, he changes his behaviour towards her, he puts some distance between them and he treats her with stiffness.

Moreover, what May most longs for is the privilege of being given a name, which contrasts with her desire of being objectified in bed. Ironically, when Lionel for the first time calls her “May”, and not just “sweetheart” is when he has grown completely detached from her. Her want for a name can be obtained only through Lionel's disaffection for his wife, not through her partial objectification but through her total humanisation. “Shut up your trap, May.’ He shook her a little, unplayfully, before releasing her.”⁴⁴ May, even though she does not know the reason for his transformation, have succeeded in turning her husband in a ruder man, but Roland's death intervenes before she can test how their sexual life has been affected by the change.

When she first appears into the camp, May is described through her clothing, so that it is clear from the very beginning how important appearance is for her. “May giggled and stepped out of the Mini in her new pink trews and her gingham shirt, a white silk handkerchief tied casually about her neck.”⁴⁵ Balfour is a bit scared of her, since she is identical to the women he dreamt of during his puberty. May is strongly sexually connoted, she is a man-eater whose main worry throughout the day is to be perfectly dressed and made-up to seduce.

Despite her seeming lightheartedness, she is extremely rational when she analyses the relations between the various members of the group, for instance she deems Dotty a fool because she sees how impossible to bear Joseph is.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 162.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 47.

However, from the very beginning of the novel, May is connected to Joseph, who does the first description of her: “‘She's a blonde’, said Joseph,”⁴⁶ and he first greets her and then Lionel when they enter MacFarleys' Camp. Both of them have a strong personality, they abuse their partner with cruelty, and both feel confident about the durability of their relationships; in addition, despite feeling stuck in situation in which they do not want to be, they let it going on without doing the only thing that would definitely put an end to it. Under this aspect, May changes during the course of the novel, since she embitters her attacks on Lionel and manage to have a reaction on his part, while Joseph leaves the decision in Dotty's hands.

May openly criticizes Joseph for the way he treats Roland, and if her concern appears to be for the boy, his replies are stubborn, as if their dispute was the way to establish the ruler of the camp. However, the woman do not take pains to see if something has happened to the boy and she simply discards her doubts as if they were none of her business, and each time Joseph is proven wrong – and a bad father, she feels some sort of victory, regardless of the possible consequences on the boy of what had happened.

Despite some similarities, May and Dotty are very different one from the other, and their unlikeness is particularly evident on the way in which they interact with the other men in the camp. While Dotty tries to go along with all of them and tries to help them out when they need it, May contemns them for their physical or psychological deformity. Lionel is obsessed with the war, has financial problems, and considers his wife a perfectly innocent girl unable to survive without his continual help. Moreover, he keeps inventing his own past, giving each time a different reason for the coin dangling from his neck. Dotty immediately thinks him to be nice, just not to be a good

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 24.

match for restless May. Joseph, on the other hand, is too selfish and irresponsible to be positively judged. If on the surface he is friendly and caring with everyone, suffices it to hear him speaking about Kidney to understand how little he does understand about other people. His behaviour is clear from the very beginning, when he comes to the camp with five unexpected guests, welcomed by George with a slight disappointment since he expected to be alone with Joseph. However, the host never expresses his dissatisfaction, thus proving his mild temper. George is a tall and strong man – May defines him a giant, nonetheless he is humble and shy, and he almost never speaks with the others. When he does, he rants about the Jews and their extermination, as if reality did not matter at all after what had happened to them. He is also very maternal with Willie and Balfour, and when they fall ill he takes care of them and he knows exactly how to do it, but he is unable to communicate with them in any other way, and their contacts are entirely dependent upon maintenance duties of the camp.

The two villagers, on the other hand, cannot stand up to standards as men because of their physical frailty, which interferes with their social lives. In addition, they feel the gap between the Londoners and themselves to be insurmountable, even though they cannot figure out the reason why. Balfour's final epiphany demonstrates his renunciation to enter the group, "He was quite untouched, it wasn't his loss."⁴⁷, and his detachment from those people he once thought to be superior to him.

Throughout the novel, then, there is the evocation of an absent character, Roland's mother, who is not given a name, and yet she accompanies the plot from the very beginning to the end. She is first recalled by Joseph, who still calls her "wife", while he thinks of the advice she gave him as for his behaviour with Roland. But she also

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 164.

gives a precise account of his personality and she explains the reason why he cannot love anyone except himself.

He wasn't sure if he was unable to love because he had no tenderness for himself or because he felt himself to be perfect and out of reach of compassion. His ex-wife said it was because he was a selfish bastard, but that was the same thing. She talked a lot of words about love entering and making one grow and how his particular soul was too small to allow anybody entrance.⁴⁸

Her harsh words are still remembered by Joseph, and proclaim probably the only accomplished act of communication within the whole novel. Roland's mother is really the sole character who is able to achieve a complete communication with someone else, as a matter of fact she manages not only to speak to Joseph, but also to her son Roland. The child thinks of her every time he feels abandoned by his father, for instance when he comes to know about the arrangements for the night. Moreover, before taking Kidney's pills, he recalls that her mother had told him never to swallow her pills because it was dangerous; unfortunately the boy decides that Kidney's pills, unlike his mother's, are not dangerous. His death occurs precisely because of this error of communication between him and his mother, even though she cannot be held responsible for what have happened; rather, her presence would have been the only thing that could prevent the catastrophe. Her character, seemingly perfect because of her communication skills, has nonetheless the crucial fault of not being there to prevent her son's death.

Apparently in *Another Part of the Wood* female characters play a key role within the group as well as within the novel itself, since they are the catalyst of all conflict but, at the same time, the potential solvers of many problems, mainly those concerning their love relationship.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 10.

Despite that, the reader feels unsympathetic to May and Dotty because of their personalities full of imperfections; Dotty being weak, and May being too mean with her husband – and too picky with friendships.

Conversely, Roland's mother is appreciated for her strong temper and her care for her child, and despite her absence she leaves a strong mark on the novel; she is also Bainbridge's suggestion of the possible existence, outside the novel, of a strong and caring woman whose independent life would be an example for May and Dotty.

The Dressmaker



Fig. 3. Beryl Bainbridge, *Leah*; photograph by the painter. Retrieved 15 May 2011 from *The Observer* website:
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/gallery/2011/may/15/beryl-bainbridge-art/?picture=374593010&index=1>>

The Dressmaker was published in 1973 by Duckworth, and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. It is a circular novel, beginning with chapter 0 which is an anticipation of the end, and even though Bainbridge does not reveal straightaway what is going to happen, the reader knows that something bad has happened.

The plot revolves around the love-story between Rita, a motherless seventeen-year-old girl, and Ira, an American soldier servicing in Liverpool. They meet at a party held by Valerie, Rita's neighbour, who is happily engaged to another American soldier, Chuck. However, Rita does not tell anyone about her affair, because she fears her two aunts, Nellie and Marge, would not understand and would try to part the two lovers. Indeed, she has reasons to believe it, since while Marge is jealous of her relationship, Nellie feels compelled to put an end to it to avoid people gossiping. Rita's father, whom she significantly calls Uncle Jack, on the contrary helps his daughter to overcome her anger when Ira, introduced for the first time to her family, seems to be flirting with Marge. Unfortunately, he is terribly wrong, since Ira from that day on will never meet Rita again, but he will knock at Marge's door twice and at the end make love to her in the front room. Nellie catches them in the act and falls into an outburst of anger when the American involuntarily scratches her mother's furniture, which she keeps in that room as if it was a relic; so, she stabs the man with her scissors, killing him. Then, she crafts a bag in which she and her sister hide the corpse, and Jack takes it into the nearest river.

The main feature of the relationships described in the novel is that they represent different kinds of love, ranging from carnal love to filial one. As a matter of fact, bodily love is represented by Marge, who has had different partners in her life and who had been married for a short lapse of time. For this reason, unlike her sister she is experienced as far as love and sexuality are concerned; moreover she had different

partners after the death of her husband, and all of them were disapproved of by her sister. Marge in fact had not only love stories with different men, but also mere sexual relationships in which she had voluntarily engaged not minding for their duration expectancy. For instance, when Nellie, Rita and her were on holiday in Dublin, she started going out with a man from Birmingham even though she knew the story would be over with the end of their sojourn in the Irish town.

Something similar has happened between her and the director of the dairy factory she worked in. She had a relationship with Mr Aveyard, but Nellie and Jack strongly opposed it. Marge tried to fight for her love, but when she told her lover that she would have to run away from home in order to protect their relationship, he had proved to be unwilling to live with her.

“In the end she was grateful for Jack's interference, though she would never give him the satisfaction of knowing. When she had turned to Mr Aveyard in tears, telling him Jack had said she had to give him up, he had stood like a statue in the little office behind the dairy, as if he didn't know that he should say, 'Come to me, you stay by me, Margo.’”⁴⁹ Mr Aveyard is inadequate for Marge, he does not love her enough to live with her, thus he cannot substitute Nellie's role in her life; after all, her sister is still the most important person in her life, together with Rita, their surrogate daughter. Marge's stronger relationship, however, appears to be the one with her husband, even though she could enjoy it only for a few months before he died of influenza. Marge recalls him as soon as she finds by chance his penknife on the sofa. “She held it in her hand and remembered him peeling an apple for her, long ago on a Sunday afternoon in Newsham Park. It had made her laugh the precise way he loosened the green skin, round and round till it dangled to his lap, exposing the white fruit, the

⁴⁹ Bainbridge, Beryl. *The Dressmaker*. (London: Abacus, 2010) 115.

blade of his knife glistening with juice.”⁵⁰ The metaphor, as Wennö pointed out, is a fairly clear sexual image of a man undressing a woman, even though Bickerton did not prove an equal expertise in lovemaking.

In her mind a picture of George Bickerton undoing the buttons of his jacket, the drooping moustache painted on the boy's face, the unsure arms encircling her; the way his body trembled, the fear she felt, the stranger she was to her own flesh. She didn't know what to do, and neither did he. Never been talked to, never read any books, never known what it was to take off her clothes without turning away. A mist of ignorance, of guilty fumbings; it didn't matter about the church and that they were allowed to be in bed together. Nellie was in the next room, the blankets over her head. There was no excitement, no joy. It was the doctor tapping her chest, it was an illness.⁵¹

We do not know if that was the only time they had intercourse, but we do know that Marge had a dirty book in her drawer, and probably she had bought it in order to remedy to that first clumsy attempt. That book, found and taken by Rita, appears to particularly interest Ira, who in the end manages to get what he wants from her. However, the position in which they are caught by Nellie, suggest an unhappy and hasty sexual act, seeing that the woman had barely taken off her stockings. Marge thinks that sex is not about pleasure, but about knowledge, as the metaphor of the apple suggests, it reveals the very essence of people. This attitude towards sexuality reveals another trait of Marge's personality, which is her curiosity. She wants to understand the very essence of things, and she is in deep contrast with her sister Nellie, who wants to conceal things, to make them look like what they are not. In fact, she is worried about what their neighbours think, and she has made a job out of her

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 171.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 99.

attitude. Wennö noticed how, as a dressmaker, Nellie covers not only the inner part of people, but she helps them concealing their bodily defects.⁵²

Yet Marge too proves to mind appearance as far as conquering a man is concerned, since she helps Rita dressing up for her date with Ira in the cinema; she gives her a nice dress and she also gives her some fake jewellery to wear. But the most significant thing she does is to give her advice about the best way to keep a relationship. "Now look here, our Rita,' putting her heart into it, as if there was one more chance, the very last chance. 'You got to be decent, you got to have respect, but if you love him you have to give.'"⁵³ Her tactics, though, have not carried her as far as she thought since she still lives with her sister and has no further opportunity than occasional sexual intercourse.

Marge wants to be a teacher for her niece, she wants to void that Nellie's narrow-minded ideas have the same impact on Rita as they have had on her own. She wants the girl to be happy and married to someone, she loathes her spinsterhood and she really does not want to be responsible for her future unhappiness. Still, she is jealous of the young girl's apparent success with the American, she does not want Rita to be given the opportunity she herself had to sacrifice for Rita's sake. The reader is driven to suspect that it was jealousy alone, and not her fear for responsibility that made the woman report Rita's love affair to her sister.

Despite all that has previously been said, Marge does not seduce Ira on purpose, she just could not help behaving in that way seeing that the man had set eyes on her. Moreover, she had understood at first sight the kind of man he was, and he knew he wasn't the right man for Rita to have a story with.

⁵² Wennö, Elisabeth. *Ironic Formula in the Novels of Beryl Bainbridge*. (Acta Universitas Gothoburgensis: Göteborg, 1993) 100.

⁵³ *The Dressmaker* 99.

Margo knew him as soon as she saw him. It wasn't just fancy. She couldn't claim really to know men – she wasn't sophisticated like Valerie Mander. But as soon as she saw the boy's eyes, blue and incurious, she knew what sort of man he was. For he was a man, for all his lanky limbs and the smooth cheeks he obviously didn't shave. (...) He was empty inside, he used no charm, he wasn't out to please; he passed his hand over the pale stubble of his hair and sat where he was placed. Nothing touched him: unlike Marge he had been washed clean of apology and subterfuge – he was wholly himself. (...) After a time his callousness excited her. (...) She wanted him to know that she saw through him, she wanted him to notice her.⁵⁴

Marge's desire is aroused by his callousness, she wants to have sex with his rudeness, she wants to be the object through which he obtains the pleasure he cannot meet outside sexuality. She probably wants also to suffer for his behaviour, she wants to be as moody as Rita has been ever since she has met him.

Rita, in fact, has been emotionally unstable from the beginning of the relationship because her ideal of romantic love violently clashed with Ira's behaviour. She would like him to tell her sweet words, to give her sweet kisses in the woods, while he tells her she seems a “drowned rat” and he tries to touch her breasts. He also attempts to make her masturbate him in the dark of a movie theatre, but at the very end she removes her hand in disgust, despite her decision to try to follow her aunt Marge's advice; Nellie's influence on her proved to be stronger than anything else.

Rita's story gives also Bainbridge the opportunity to scrutinize a love story at its beginnings from the point of view of a young woman. The reader assists to the flowing of her mind from excitement to despair, aroused by one single word uttered wrongly or by an action he failed to do. Moreover, Rita is proud of her conquest, and would like everyone except her own family to see her trophy, the young stranger that she carries with her. Nonetheless the reader has the impression that the affair is

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 131-132.

strongly unbalanced as far as feelings are concerned, since it appears clear that the soldier does not care that much for the girl or for having a relationship with her. The contrast is later brought to limelight when he meets Marge with whom he strongly wants to have an intercourse. Rita speaks about love as something unpleasant, and she cannot figure out why society gives so much importance to it, but she realizes she cannot live without it, once she has known it. "She had filled her mind during the week with so many variations, ways of finding him, reconciliations, scenes of the future, that now she was empty. There were no pictures left in her head – just a voice very small and demanding, crying for him to come back."⁵⁵ Her loss is also underlined by her neighbour Valerie's success, because she understands that she has lost him forever shortly before Valerie last fitting of her engagement dress. The older girl had a relationship with another American soldier, Chuck, but their love story was far different from Rita's one. In fact, he often went to her house, carrying a huge amount of precious goods with him, such as whiskey and jewels and even a fridge that came all the way from America. The two had an untroubled love story, whose natural end appeared to be betrothal and marriage, ending with the girl probably going to America and live a comfortable life, with a house, some children and a fridge. Valerie on her part really wants Rita to obtain the same things that she had managed to get, but she is unable to overcome the girl's resistance to her familiarity. The girl has also some influence on Nellie, and she tries to exploit it to let Rita live a little bit more light-heartedly than she was used to in the old house with the two spinsters. However, Rita is taciturn and she does not confide anything to Valerie, because "It wasn't that she felt herself to be inferior, it was more that the overwhelming ripeness and confidence of the older girl caused her acute embarrassment."⁵⁶

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 170.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 9.

The different attitude to life of the two girls is than reflected on the different outcome of their two love stories, the one leading to a marriage while the other ending with Rita's aunt having an intercourse with her boyfriend.

This introduces another important issue of the book, the third kind of love that Bainbridge deals with in the book, which is the love that links different members of the same family, parental and fraternal love.

Rita can be assumed to be the daughter of four people, her real mother, of whom she has no souvenir, her father Jack, and her two aunts Nellie and Marge.

Her mother has no real role in her life, she is almost never evoked in Rita's presence, and it comes as a shock to her father when she tells Marge that the pearl necklace she is wearing belonged to her mother. Indeed, her father 's role in her life is somehow marginal, and she shows it openly by always calling him "Uncle Jack". She does not reproach him to have abandoned her to his sisters, but she does not understand his claim to have a more important role in her life now that she has grown up. Indeed, despite his endeavours to grow intimate with the girl, he cannot stand to have a talk with her, he does not want to explain to her things that he believes she could not understand. For instance "It was ridiculous what he was trying to do. She wasn't of an age. She wouldn't understand love was mostly habit later on and escape at the beginning."⁵⁷ So, he prefers letting time do its job, and making the girl experience love without his guidance. Moreover, during his talk with the girl he discovers that what he says to the girl really corresponds to what he thinks, even though he realises it only while he is saying them, in particular that Marge is a remarkable person and that Rita somehow resembles her because she always wants to know the reason lying behind rules and prohibitions. Rita had put those questions

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 149.

to her aunts, since him, as a father, had chosen to avoid them; if his wife would have been alive it would have been her who would have accomplished such a task. Rita had put those questions to her aunts, since him, as a father, had chosen to avoid them; if his wife would have been alive it would have been her who would have accomplished such a task. Jack, an absent father, would have been equally absent in his daughter's life even if he would have lived under the same roof as her, because his absence was due more to his ignorance about fatherhood rather than about his widowerhood and grief.

Rita had however two different parental figures in her two aunts, whose remarkable differences have probably helped her not to grow completely identical to Nellie, whose role appears to be that of the adoptive mother. Nellie has always been very close to her niece, she has taught her how to behave and to distinguish what is right from what is wrong. Indeed, her division is rather neat and she gives no room to shading and mitigating circumstances; her niece turns her thought to her when she has to evaluate how she should behave in a certain situation, because what Nellie does is precisely the right thing to do, she would always choose the solution causing the least harm.

For instance, when she fails buying Marge her cigarettes, she feels anger going to her head, but even though the reader would expect her to have a strong reaction and to shout at the saleslady, she calmly goes out of the shop without purchasing her goods. Anger is at the same time a signal of her unbalance, since a trivial fact gives rise to a disproportioned amount of rage that affects her ability to express herself and makes her formulate violent thoughts. It is an access of rage that drives her to commit murder, even though immediately after she is perfectly clear-minded about what to do with the body and how to avoid rumours. In fact, Nellie's main worry is the

neighbours gossiping as she fears the opinion of the others would drive them to disrespect her. Thus, her main concern is not to solve the problems affecting her family but to make them invisible to the observers, problems are better hidden under the carpet than solved after having caused public humiliation.

Nellie is happy when she understands that Ira and Rita have broken up without her intervention, and she makes clear that, in spite of not having opposed their relationship straightaway, she would have forced Rita to leave the American as soon as their relationship would have become serious enough to threaten her daily routine.

The revelation does not come as a shock to the reader, because Nellie had commented on the boy on their first meeting “Nellie thought he was a nice boy: remote and shy perhaps, but that was better than him being brash as she had feared, flinging his weight about and playing the conqueror. (...) It would be easy to steer Rita from him. He wasn't a threat to Mother's furniture [my ellipsis].”⁵⁸

Ira did not appear to be capable of causing any trouble to their family nor to Mother's furniture, so the reason why Nellie does not want him to be with her niece must be another one. Unlike Marge, she is not jealous of Rita's love story, as she's not interested in romance at all; rather, she does not want to detach herself from her niece. However, it is not an excess of love that provokes such a reaction in her, it appears that Nellie wants Rita to remain with her because she fears any change in her daily life, she does not want her routine to be spoiled until her death.

Her sister Marge, on the contrary, is jealous of her niece, she does not want Rita to have what was denied to her under the pretext of Rita's happiness. As a matter of fact she initially had been excited for her involvement in the girl's relationship, as she gave her advice and even helped her choosing the best outfit for her date, but shortly

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 134.

after she feels compelled to go and tell her brother and sister about Rita's secret. She decides it because she feels overwhelmed by the responsibility she has taken in giving her a piece of advice which she knows would be disapproved of by her sister. Somehow she seems to know that, once revealed to Nellie, the love affair would find an abrupt end, thus bringing her own interference futile. Moreover, she appears totally selfish, since she shrieks her responsibilities not for Rita's sake but for her own. However, after meeting Ira, Marge decides that she wants him for herself, partly because "He's no good"⁵⁹ for little Rita.

Within the couple of sisters-mothers, she represents the male part, in fact like Jack she does not want to be responsible for Rita's happiness nor for her unhappiness, and when she tries to meddle with the girl's life, she feels clumsy and wrong. Apart from her selfishness, Marge is also masculine in the way she sits, with her legs wide open, and in the way she dresses, for instance the sarong she has forged out of the precious fabric she was given by her Dutch lover. Her attitude towards love and sex also belonged mainly to men in those days, Marge not only owns dirty books, but she also makes love because she enjoys it, not because she wants to have a relationship with her sexual partner.

Despite Marge's manly manners, Nellie is the one who takes up the role of the decision-maker, she is the strongest and most stubborn member of the parental triad. She rules over her family as a ruler on his subjects, and the reason for her bossy behaviour is that she can make instant decisions which appear to have the best outcome possible in every situation. As a matter of fact when Ira is caught in the front room, Nellie commits the murder with her scissors, but while Marge is panic-stricken and does not know what to do, the older woman has already devised a plan to take

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 133.

the corpse away. Marge, on the contrary, honours the body by slipping the pearl necklace Ira had given her into his “coffin-bag”, to give herself impression that he deserved an honourable burial.

Nonetheless, Rita thinks that Nellie is a good and placid woman without secrets to hide, while Marge is a bad lot, lustful and selfish, and for this reason she feels offended when Jack compares her and her “wicked” aunt. In actual fact, Rita is not interested in emulating neither of her aunts, and she does not seem to have the same morbid attachment that the two have for her. Being young, she desires to go away from home as soon as she can, and Ira in her view is the one who can give her such an opportunity.

Despite what she says during a quarrel with her father, she does not judge him guilty of having abandoned her to his sisters, since she believes her situation to be perfectly normal and necessary. What she deems avoidable is the intimate conversation Jack tries to have with her, because they are so unusual for him and herself that all she can say about them is that her father “has gone barmy.”⁶⁰

The link between father and daughter is merely dependant on blood and the money he provides for her living, even though she would avoid even that material connection to the man that comes every weekend to visit his sisters and her.

On the contrary Nellie has developed an obsessive relation with the old furniture that belonged to her mother, the only symbol of her presence that was present in the house. It is her way to keep her mother alive, and to give her back the care she had had in bringing up her children. Childless Nellie had given all her love and attention to her dying mother first, and later on to her furniture, and she had established such a relationship with it that she considers every damage which could be caused to it as

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 143.

severe as if it had be done to a human being. “The blast from a bomb dropped in Priory Road had knocked it [a mirror] off the wall, killing twelve people, including Mrs Eccles's fancy man at the corner shop, and cracked Mother's mirror.”⁶¹

When her mother had died the woman had taken all the old furniture into the front room, to create there a sanctuary to her memory, and since then she had taken charge of periodically moisten it with vinegar to preserve it. The link with old furniture is the only strong affective connection she can have, up to the point that the scratching of a piece of it arouses in her the murderous instinct that will kill the American. When she had caught him with Marge, she had not thought for a moment to her niece, but to the damage he had caused to her furniture without even noticing. She protects the front room as a mother would do with her newborn child, but she is incapable of doing the same neither with her adoptive daughter, nor with her brother and sister. Indeed, in those relationships Nellie is thought to be always superior to the others, although she keeps the thought to herself. For instance, she ridicules Jack because of his fear of blood when his delivery boy got hurt with a knife, and later on she provides a bag to contain Ira's body because her brother is too “squeamish”.

It is from her alleged superiority that Nellie has decided to interfere with Marge's sentimental life, in order to make her act honourably like their mother would have done. Nellie has decided to take up the role of the mother with her own brothers, thus avoiding becoming a mother herself, without needing a man.

Although Nellie does never show any interest in men, her relationship with the dying George Bickerton, Marge's husband, cut his wife out of his last moments, leaving her with a strange sense of having been betrayed and, at the same time, being guilty of

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 1-2.

having abandoned him. "‘You wouldn’t let me see him,’ wailed Margo, her eyes glittering, remembering George Bickerton dying upstairs."⁶²

Such recriminations bring Nellie in a fit of anger, when reality takes her by surprise, but even under such circumstances she manages to react to prevent any changing to happen in her life. She does that both when Marge starts the relationship with her boss at the dairy factory and with Ira. Nellie is so attached to her routine that she commits murder in order to re-establish the normal course of her life. For this reason we can say that the circularity of the novel is subordinate to Nellie’s will, since it gives the reader the impression that, whatever happens, the life of the three women will undergo only a little and temporary change.

⁶² *Ibid.* 72.

Injury Time



Fig. 4. Beryl Bainbridge, *Owl in Glass Case*; photograph by the painter. Retrieved 15 May 2011 from *The Observer* website: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/gallery/2011/may/15/beryl-bainbridge-art/?picture=374593014&index=2>

Published in 1977, *Injury Time* is a dark and witty farcical novel set in London, between the nasty walls of a house. Edward is a married man who has promised his mistress Binny to hold a dinner party at her house with a couple of friends, the Simpsons. Binny has insisted on meeting some good friends of her lover's, because she is tired of being only introduced to the people Edward met in the pub. However, she is very anxious about the dinner and about what her three children would do during the night she has forced them to spend elsewhere.

From the very beginning the meeting turns out to be a failure, as the Simpson arrive late, the dinner is overcooked and later it is interrupted by a drunk friend of Binny's, Alma, who will also vomit on the carpet. When Muriel is in the garden throwing in the garbage what Alma had messed up, a gang of bank robbers penetrates into the house and takes them hostage. Each individual has a different reaction to their captivity, but all of them grow more and more detached from the others, Muriel Simpson in particular barely speaks, except when she reveals to Binny that she had an extremely unhappy extra-marital affair one year before. During the morning of the second day of segregation, the robbers manage to be given a car to run away with; they get out of the house surrounded by their hostages, and they take Binny into the car with them to use her as a human shield. Suddenly seized by a loving impetus, Edward clings to the car door and swears that he will never leave his mistress, but his clutch proves to be too weak and he falls on the road surface.

The suspended conclusion leaves the reader asking himself whether Edward is dead, but the writer's choice makes clear that it is an unimportant detail, because his illicit relationship had already been put an end to previously.

In *Injury Time* Bainbridge experiments the effect of captivity on a group of people, whose individuals are differently linked one to another, but basically they have in

common loneliness and isolation within their social interactions. Under the threat of death, represented by the robbers, their already narrow environment shrinks further, becoming suffocating as well as potentially dangerous. These people are gathered together just because of the occasion, which has on its turn arisen by the caprice of a mistress desiring to pose as a wife, their having very little in common and the distance between each of them and the others is worsened by the difficulty of having become hostages.

George Simpson is in fact ashamed of his wife's reaction, as he expected something completely different from such an experience,

His wife sat a million miles from him, playing with a thread of cotton at the torn hem of her frock. He had always imagined that this sort of experience drew people closer together, made them nobler and more sensitive. He'd seen photographs of survivors of such dramas, and it had seemed to him that their eyes were tranquil with communal suffering.⁶³

As a matter of fact, despite what they try to show the others, the Simpsons already lead separate lives, George working all day and then going out with another woman, Marcia. Indeed his lover appears to be more important than his wife for him, as he goes out in the rain to phone her, leaving Muriel in Binny's living room with two people she has just met. Moreover, during their confinement Simpson's main worry is to let Marcia know that he has not telephoned her in the morning, as he had promised, because he was in danger, and not because he has forgotten. His extra-marital affair is still in its early days, for he admits he has not gone further than "some heavy petting in his car;"⁶⁴ his lover is an independent woman living with two men, and the reader has the impression that she is taking advantage of him and his wealth. Muriel herself believes her husband is unqualified for the role of unfaithful

⁶³ Bainbridge, Beryl. *Injury Time*. (London: Abacus, 2003) 191-192.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 97.

husband, and she cannot even suspect that his mysterious leaving Binny's house, under the pretext of bringing in the wine he had left in the car, could hide a telephone-call to another woman. On the other hand, George expresses his discomfort with Edward's dinner party, and he tries to mask his own bigotry attributing it to his wife, and in a clumsy attempt to make it appear true, he use the letters X, Y and Z to mark the main characters of the story. "It seems,' continued Simpson, 'that X was carrying on with Z. Had been for quite some time. Met him at a masonic do last year. Upshot of it was, X wanted the wife to lend out our spare room for the afternoon.'"⁶⁵ Edward, however, does not appear to understand the gist of the story, having completely lost track of the roles held by X, Y and Z; and when later on Edward manages to trace back the meaning of the story, he fails understanding Simpson's point. In fact

'The wife handled it rather cleverly, I thought,' said Simpson. 'She said they could have the room but would they please wash the sheets out afterwards, or leave the money on the table for laundering. And would they keep the window and door open.' (...) 'Took all the romance out of it,' cried Simpson with satisfaction. 'Exposed it for what it was. Put the kibosh on it, no two ways about it.'

'Goodness, yes,' said Edward, though it seemed to him, once they had come to some agreement about being spied upon, a small enough price to pay for a whole afternoon of love.⁶⁶

The different opinions of the two men let us understand how their attitude to love diverges; while Edward would accept to be spied upon in exchange of a whole afternoon of love, George would be embarrassed in case someone witnessed his love effusion; thus giving the reader the impression that there is something about his sexuality that he cannot accept, being somehow ashamed of it.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 31.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 31.

Indeed, George throughout the novel turns out to be easily disturbed by the habits and the actions of the others, be they criminals or prisoners. For instance, he loathes his wife's physical strength, which she had demonstrated when she had shifted a piano from one side of a room to another.

Thinking about the woman in the gang, being shot and still alive, he recalls his mother and aunts:

He recalled his mother who had taken to her bed every afternoon, prostrate from a fatiguing morning spent attending to the furniture with a feather duster. His aunts had been the same – fragile, languid. He thought of Marcia living with two men and Muriel quite capable of pushing the car single-handed round the block, when it was a cold morning and the engine wouldn't start. It was a generation of Amazons.⁶⁷

Having such an opinion, he is negatively surprised the reaction Muriel has to their captivity, which he thinks is only dictated by her weakness; indeed, Muriel acts as normally as she can, sleeping soundly on the couch and not interacting with anyone, neither with the robbers nor with her fellows.

She does not seem to be scared of the criminals, it only appears that she had decided not to fight them and, at the same time, not to gang up with Edward, Binny, Alma and George; she is completely listless to everything that is happening around her, and she does not interact with the surrounding world. Although her apathy coincides with the breaking-in of the robbers, it also appears to be connected with her mistaking the puppet in the pram for a real baby. As Wennö points out, one of the main themes of *Injury Time* is the impossibility of re-generation, of giving birth to new human beings. The symbol for it is the combination doll-pram, which is also connected to the money that is hidden within the pram – and under the doll. The idea Bainbridge gives way to is the desire for buying with money a new generation for a

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 126.

humanity that was left dry and sterile. For this reason, Muriel can be said to be reacting idly to the recognition of the clash between her desire for generating and her menopause, rather than to imprisonment and death threat. Muriel narrates one of the moments that came before realizing she could not generate new lives, and she appears very lively and dynamic; she also had a one-year extra-marital relationship with a man she had met at a first aid course. Telling Binny what had happened between her lover and her, she explains that they wanted a place where they could meet, and a widowed friend of hers had given them the possibility of using her house to meet during the afternoons. Muriel uses the letter X to censor her lover's name, thus connecting involuntarily her story to the one her husband had told Edward. Indeed, the end of the two stories seems to overlap, as Muriel had waited for her mysterious Mr X for a few hours, but he had never shown up, and he never contacted her again.

The reader immediately recognizes the strong similarity between Muriel's affair and her husband's convoluted story of spare rooms and lovers, however Bainbridge leaves him unable to draw any conclusion about them. Nonetheless, we suspect that Simpson himself had not completely made up his tale, rather, he could have taken his cue from his wife. What might have happened is that Muriel had asked for a room to whom she supposed to be a dear friend; however, her friend could have been in contact with George, maybe because she was his lover. George possibly asked her to talk to his wife's lover in order to make him desist from their project; he could have asked her to tell him to keep the door and window open, and Muriel's lover, as Edward, may have thought that in this way his wife could have easily found out that he was betraying her, and thus he had renounced to Muriel to preserve his marriage.

On the other hand, what we know from Bainbridge's narration is that Muriel's Mr X leaves her as soon as their meetings can take place easily and in a comfortable place, without the constant threat of being caught red-handed. Something similar seems to take place between Edward and Binny, because their main bond seems to be the daily difficulties they have to overcome. Grubisic underlined how “the relationship [with Binny] offers him [Edward] an escape from routine and his overwhelming sense of being the boring occupant of a life devoid of value.”⁶⁸ Edward needs to know his life is not boring and that other people will recognize him as an original man, someone who can cheat on his wife. Despite this, he keeps complaining within himself about the inconveniences of their illicit affair, because he thinks they have little time to spend together, as they cannot have sex before her children have gone to bed, and then he has to leave early not to make his wife suspicious. The hurry, the sensation of being always observed, the necessity of going to her home only by taxi trigger in him the idea of having a very colourful life, a life that anyone else would consider interesting. His need for excitement, however, collides violently with his interests — those in which he fails engaging Binny, which are gardening and collecting his past souvenirs. Edward has a real obsession for his roses, which he gardens with a care he does not use with his acquaintances; he loves the moment in which his wife tells him that he has grown very beautiful flowers, and that his peas are very good and, indeed, it was really cheaper growing them than buying them at the grocer's. Binny cannot find gardening interesting, but like Edward she dreams of an adventurous life, full of dinner parties and of all those things that would make her feel the protagonist of a romantic movie. Indeed, romanticism is completely absent from her love affair, even though she is always trying to have a

⁶⁸ Grubisic, Brett Joseph. *Understanding Beryl Bainbridge*. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2008) 95.

pretext to make a scene. For instance, she puts the phone down because she is not satisfied with Edward's way of saying "hello", expecting him to call back and apologize.

During the dinner, she scorns her lover because he keeps naming his wife Helen, and for this reason she is scolded off by her friend Alma, who thinks Binny worries a lot about Edward only when they are not together, while when they are in the same room she keeps getting angry with him.

During their imprisonment Binny hears Edward referring several times to his wife, not only because he knows that she would discover that he had cheated, but also because many of his souvenirs were connected with her.

Even before the dinner took place, she wondered, "Why couldn't he pretend that he longed to leave his wife, so that in return she could pretend she wished he would?"⁶⁹

Their relationship appears then to be based mainly on their need for evading their realities. Nonetheless, as an evasion, the love-story was proving to be unsuitable, as it was becoming a routine. For this reason Binny wished they had a row "and be moved to tears, and then they both might feel something, some emotion that would nudge them closer to one another."⁷⁰

Despite her wish, Binny fails to recognize she is in the middle of a strong emotion when the robbers take prisoners her hosts and her. As a matter of fact, she lives their imprisonment as if she was in a dream, not feeling really threatened. She sympathizes with the criminals, having an intimate talk with their leader, Ginger; he will later call her upstairs to rape her, even though she cannot realize what is happening to her. At first she thinks the robber will confide her his plans to get away from the house, and while she is going upstairs her main worry is what she will tell

⁶⁹ *Injury Time* 56.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* 56.

the other captive to prevent them blaming her for being Ginger's favourite. When he shows him the worn out divan bed, she does not understand thoroughly what he means to do, as she feels they have become too close to do such a thing; she even dares protesting, "Don't be silly,"⁷¹ but he starts holding her arm and pinches her. So, she decides to undress, but "'No,' he said sharply. 'I don't want you with nothing on. Only take your stockings off.'"⁷² Ginger clearly wants to use her as an object with which he can satisfy his drives without any implication, or he simply desires to act as the criminal he would like to be. Being bare of violence, in fact, the reader fails to recognize a rape in what is described by the narrator through Binny's thoughts. Indeed, the woman herself cannot realize what the man will do to her, or what he really wants from her.

At first Binny believes Ginger will strangle her, in which case she establishes she would hurt him with her knee and then run downstairs, but later she also tries to be cooperative.

'Do you want to feel my chest?' she said. She was showing him she was uninhibited and matter of fact about the business. He needn't worry that she would throw hysterics or start imagining that he was madly in love with her. She was a woman of the world.

'Keep quiet,' he said. 'I can't abide tits.'⁷³

The rudeness of the act is then amplified by the impression that the young man really loathes Binny's body for what makes her a woman, as her nakedness appals him as well as her bosom. Despite this, the woman seems to accept what he does to her, even if she understands it only after some time.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* 175.

⁷² *Ibid.* 175.

⁷³ *Ibid.* 176.

She supposed she was being raped. One huge tear gathered in her left eye and rolled down her cheek. She wasn't feeling hurt or humiliated – he didn't do anything dirty or unusual. He wasn't stubbing cigarettes out on her despised breasts or swinging from the chandelier, member pointed like a dagger. It was unreal, of no account. That's why she cried – though she wondered why it was just from one eye.⁷⁴

Binny blames Ginger not because of the act of raping her, but rather for not doing it in the usual way, retrieving action from it and thus making her account to others unreliable and unreal. She did not feel any emotion except disappointment at being deprived of what she wanted so desperately – some excitement or action in her boring life. Moreover, “She wasn't even young enough, she realised when Ginger rolled off her, to feel sorry for herself. It hadn't mattered that much. He was an ineffectual young man.”⁷⁵ Binny is not even given the possibility of self-pity, because of her age and because of her rapist's inability to fulfil his design. After their intercourse, Binny and Ginger, like a couple, start what should be an intimate talk, but they are unable to communicate anything one to another, Ginger rambling about his gang's crime and Binny trying to prove she is a good mother. Then, he sends her downstairs and orders her not to say anything of what had happened.

Indeed, Binny eventually reveals to Edward that she has been raped, and she takes his reaction as the ultimate proof she needed to decide ending their relationship. She is in fact trying to say her lover that the only woman within the gang of robbers was actually a man, and that after discovering it she was able to understand the reason why she had felt so strange when that same woman, at the bank, had looked at her. However unimportant the revelation can be, Binny expects Edward to listen to her, and maybe to tell her she is a smart woman, but he keeps on looking for some food to relieve his hunger without paying attention to her. So, Binny tells him what had

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 177.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 178.

happened to her in her bedroom, in order to see if she can establish again a communication line with him. However, he reacts to the revelation with a smile he cannot hide, probably not believing her. He understands she has told the truth just when she declares being indignant and revolted by his behaviour, and he also erroneously thinks it was Simpson who had perpetrated such an act on her. Edward is troubled by Binny's report, but still he does not manage to comfort her nor to apologize for his smile, he just recalls a moment of his youth, when his father had punished him for something the reader is not allowed to understand. Binny decides in that moment to end their relationship, but she understands the real reason for this just at the very end of the novel.

Finally, the robbers manage to have a car parked out of Binny's house, and using their hostages as a human shield, they get out of the house and into the car. In order to avoid being shot to death into the car, they also bring Binny with them as a travelling hostage. As soon as she becomes aware of her role, the woman reacts very calmly, thinking that she knew she would be chosen for it. In a way, it is the occasion for adventure and excitement that she has always sought after, and, for a moment, Edward gives it to her.

Edward was bending down and staring at her with his mouth open. The car began to move. She could see Edward's stomach as he ran beside the window – he was holding the handle of the door, preventing it from closing.⁷⁶

Binny's reaction, however, is a cut reply she keeps in her mind – “There's no room, she thought. He's too fat.”⁷⁷

Edward is overtly unsuitable for the role Binny would like him to play, and she has realized it when he has smiled at her account on her rape; thus he cannot give her

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 211.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 211.

what she strongly desires, he is the opposite of excitement and change. He just wants to stick at his routine made up of gardening and remembrances from his childhood.

However, he makes a desperate attempt to save Binny's life, and in so doing he manages to give her requirements.

Eyes full of reproach, Edward leaned towards Binny and stretched out his arm.

'I'll never leave you,' he cried.

The car gathered speed and swung round the corner by the garage. The four occupants of the back seat lurched sideways. The door opened.

Liar, thought Binny, as Edward fell away from the car.

A woman at a window screamed, like the blast of a whistle.⁷⁸

Unfortunately, he disappoints her, failing once again to meet her expectations, even if he has heroically fought for their relationship for the first time. However, it appears that his behaviour springs from the fact that he has by this time realized that his marriage has been irretrievably jeopardized. His heroism comes as a consequence of his failed marriage, what Edward would like to do is to keep Binny by his side, to substitute his wife with her, and to establish a new routine with her. She refuses it, and her refusal leads to his fall out of the car; the reader is not allowed to know if he is dead or if he has received severe injuries, nonetheless we are brought to think that a tragedy has taken place. Such an impression clashes violently with Binny's coldness in her reply, made of one single word that underlines the detachment she feels from her former lover. "Liar" qualifies Edward and, at the same time, signals a turning point in the woman's life; she will leave behind everything hurdling her pursuit of an exciting life bare of shame.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 212.

Indeed, shame is what Binny most frequently feels when she is confronted with the others, because she constantly feels inadequate. In fact, while she is preparing for the dinner party, she panics because she feels her house is too dirty, too poor for her hosts, and that her cooking will not satisfy them, being so unused to cook. Her hosts, actually, are quite appalled by the appearance of Binny's house, they find it to be neglected and filthy, the carpet stained with mud and the windows having no shutters. Muriel is puzzled by the presence of a ping-pong table in Binny's bedroom "She was scandalised at the presence of a ping-pong table, whose surface was ringed with the indentures of vanished cups of tea, in a room of such beautiful proportions. It was simply unbelievable."⁷⁹

Muriel herself links the squalor of the house to the absence of Binny's children, allegedly aware of their surroundings. As a matter of fact, Binny had taken pains to have all the three of them out before Edward came, and the ping-pong table had been bought precisely to make them happy within the house. Unfortunately, she could not bear having the children playing in her bedroom at any hour, so she had eventually forbidden them to use it. Binny cannot establish rules for her children to follow, thus demonstrating her inadequacy as a mother. Her children have forced her neighbours to put on wire netting to keep them away from their garden, and Binny cannot store food in her house because otherwise the children and their friends would take it away and consume it when they are not at home. Binny feels immensely ineffectual as a mother, she blames herself for letting her children out for the evening in order to enjoy a leisure evening, she complains her son might be dead in some subway station, just because she has left him going away on his own. Even so, when she is made aware of being the travelling hostage, she just hopes that her daughter

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 99.

Alison will remember to wash her teeth. Caring for someone else's hygiene is not the better display of maternal love, and yet it shows that under the threat of an imminent death she can solely think to her family, and that the bond that connects her to her children is the only thing that can survive any crisis.

Every Man for Himself



Fig. 5. Beryl Bainbridge, *Captain and Mrs Scott*, photograph by the painter. Retrieved 15 May 2011 from *The Observer* website: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/gallery/2011/may/15/beryl-bainbridge-art/?picture=374593006&index=5>

Every Man For Himself opens with a prologue bearing the date 15th April 1912, and it is set in a wrecking ship, obviously the Titanic. The narrator of the whole novel is Morgan, a young and wealthy man undertaking the sea voyage on the transatlantic to go back home in America. The day before boarding, a man dies in his arms and he gives him the photo of a Japanese woman hiding her face behind a fan, and he takes the chance to proclaim himself an exceptional man, having witnessed several strange happenings in his short life. Moreover, his origins too are different from those of the people belonging to his social class; he was an orphan adopted by a rich man because of an indirect relationship. On the first class of the boat, he meets those people he already knew, those people against whom he will later deliver a tirade.

'This place is chock-a-block with people who went to the same schools, the same universities, attended the same fencing classes, shared the same dancing masters, music teachers, Latin tutors, tennis coaches—' (...) 'One big unhappy family'[my ellipsis]⁸⁰

However, he spots also three people with whom he is not acquainted, a tall and attractive woman and two men. The woman is called Adele, she is an actress and an opera singer, and she is on the Titanic because she was invited there by her lover, a rich man who had failed to show up after the boat left Southampton. The two men are fat M. Rosenfelder, a rich tailor desiring to set up a career as a couturier in New York, and Scurra, a mysterious man who seems to know everybody on the boat, and who carries a scarred lip for which each of the passenger claims a different origin. Even though their meetings are occasional, Scurra becomes a fatherly figure for Morgan, and he corrects the youngster's too impractical and dreamy vision of life and love.

⁸⁰ Bainbridge, Beryl. *Every Man for Himself*. (London: Abacus, 1998) 62.

Apart from Adele, in the Titanic Morgan has little contact with women, despite the presence on the ship of Wallis and Ida Ellery, and their friend Molly Dodge. The three girls, despite their friendship with the group of young man, are rarely present in their meetings, they merely meet during lunch and dinner and sometimes at the bar after dinner to play cards and drink. The most remarkable of the girls is Wallis, whose intriguing personality is explicit.

We were all madly in love with Wallis, who was as clever as Sissy and absolutely unobtainable. In Wallis's company it was impossible not to stare, and dangerous, for if she caught you and was in the mood to look back her gaze was so level and her expression so mocking it could turn one to stone. (...) No one ever dared to flirt with Wallis. Dancing with her was like holding cut glass; Hopper got it about right when he complained she made him feel he left finger marks.⁸¹

Morgan's impression of Wallis appears to the reader rather wrong, as her alleged frailty conflicts with the description of her glances that can turn men into stone, and with the cleverness she is said to show. For this reason, Morgan's crush on her seems from the beginning based on false assumptions and on excessive idealization. Indeed, Wallis's behaviour is far different from what we should expect from a fragile woman, because of the outright way in which she speaks to Morgan, asking him whether he knows the strange man with the scarred lip. Morgan unfortunately does not understand what she is speaking about and his answers are evasive and not to the point. She nevertheless manages to come to know the target of her desire, as Morgan spots her leaving the foyer on the arm of Scurra. Morgan, unable to understand what has happened between his friend and the woman he loves, keeps fostering his passion, confessing it to his new friend with the damaged lip. As a matter of fact, even his circle of friends realizes very soon that Morgan has

⁸¹ *Ibid.* 34.

an inclination for the girl, and they try to discourage him “We all know what she's like, Morgan. The girl has ice in her veins. I doubt if any man could melt her not even a husband.”⁸² Like Morgan, his young and wealthy friends do not understand much of women, love and sexuality.

Most of our time was spent thinking what we might do with women if only we had the chance. There were houses we could go to, of course, but with girls of our on set there was never the slightest opportunity of trying out even a little of what we'd learnt, which rendered us incapable of behaving naturally in their company. In our best moments, mercifully dominant, we thought of them as sisters or mothers and treated them accordingly; in our worst they were always whores, white and compliant though we did such unworthy speculations behind a general attitude of soppy regard. It helped to know that our elders seemed to have got the hang of it, yet often I wondered where love showed up.⁸³

Ginsberg, while dining in front of the girls, explains that there are “only two overwhelming instincts, hunger and the sexual desire.(...) Hunger (...) is easily satisfied, but the other...”⁸⁴

These upper-class young men discuss sexuality at the dinner table, and in front of their female friends, but thus doing they show their ignorance and inexperience to those whom they should be willing to conquer. On the contrary, Morgan's young butler on the ship, Riley, recounts his experience as a ballroom dancer at the hotel Savoy, he was there to dance with unaccompanied ladies. “One in particular,’ he boasted 'took a fancy to me. She used to collect me in her carriage and we'd spank

⁸² *Ibid.* 78.

⁸³ *Ibid.* 36.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* 35.

along to the Park and take a wee drop of gin under the trees. Mind, I never took advantage... I left that to her.”⁸⁵

The valet mines Morgan's idealized image of women, and in particular of wealthy women, but his assertions fail influencing his view because they come from someone he holds as inferior to himself; he could have also thought that the lady had simply wanted to rejoice of a night of passion and evasion, like many wealthy men, both in the ship and out of it, were doing thanks to their young and socially inferior mistresses. Moreover, as he does not know who the above-mentioned lady was, it seems he cannot fully understand to what extent the butler's story disproves his attitude towards the opposite sex. Only Scurra manages to introduce him into women's sexual life, and he will do it in the worst of manners, that is seducing Wallis without engaging in a proper love-story with her. Obviously Scurra does not woo the young woman with the aim of hurting Morgan, and proof of it is given by the fact that they hide their liaison from everyone. The reason why Morgan comes to know about it is because he had intruded into Wallis's room to leave there a love message directed to her, and while he is locating the best place to put it, Wallis and Scurra enter the room and start having an intercourse.

It wasn't the words themselves that shocked me – *I want your lovely prick*, nor his reply – *Show me your lovely cunt*, but the context in which they were used. Such expressions belonged to anger, mockery, contempt; how foul they sounded when linked to the making of love.⁸⁶

The young and inexperienced man is appalled by the animality of the act, nonetheless he is unable to stop watching them, and he is unwillingly turned into a voyeur “I shamelessly pressed myself against the jamb of the door and timed my

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 48.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 140.

groans with theirs. It was over for me quicker than for them, and I was left, a blind voyeur, scrabbling for memories to blot out the continuing din of their beastly coupling.”⁸⁷ In order to forget what he is witnessing, Morgan recalls memories of his childhood, but something of what he hears enter his head at times, in particular Wallis “Tie me” and Scurra's “Not so fast”.

Thanks to the love-making scene the reader has finally the neat perception of Wallis's personality, violently clashing with the idea all her male friends have of her; she is a woman who knows what she wants from men, and whose attitude towards sexuality is incredibly liberal and apparently detached from the romantic ideal of sentimental relationship and marriage. Indeed, she had previously tried to express her view to Morgan himself, but he had probably failed to understand, feeling his stepsister's honour was offended.

'If I've been avoiding you,' I lied, 'it's because I have a lot on my mind. My future... that sort of thing. It's different for you girls.'

'Different, certainly,' she replied, 'yet no less hard. Not unless, like Sissy, one falls into marriage.’⁸⁸

Wallis open-mindedness, despite being the main feature distinguishing her from the other girls on the ship, always fails to be recognized and appreciated, even from women who apparently share her same matter-of fact attitude about love. “Serves her right,’ she crowed. 'I've never understood what you boys see in her. She's flat-chested and she's a prude.’”⁸⁹ The woman telling this is Kitty Webb, who admits frankly that it is “much better being the mistress of a rich man than a poor one” and, at Morgan's “Unless it was true love.”, she retorts ““There's nothing true about love.’

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 140-141.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 134.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* 159.

(...) 'Take my word for it, Morgan, there wouldn't be any joy in it, not after the first flush...'”⁹⁰

Having a glimpse on Wallis's real personality and behaviour takes away from Morgan any interest in the girl, she cannot attract him any more, partly because her inaccessibility is now patent to his eyes; he cannot stand up to her standards as a man. He would like to bliss the union of the new couple, but when he asks Scurra if he loves Wallis, the older man answers “'Love?’ he barked 'Good heavens! Love is what women feel.’”⁹¹ Scurra is proven right when the ship wrecks because Wallis refuses to be boarded on a lifeboat unless Scurra talks to her. Morgan pleaded him to pretend, but Scurra retorted “'And what if she should survive? (...)No doubt I would then be faced with a breach of promise case.’[my ellipsis]”⁹² Nevertheless, Scurra accepts to go and talk to his lover, escorted by Morgan who keeps at a distance to allow them a little privacy; he does not know what Scurra says to Wallis, but he perceives her trying to slap his face, thus he infers Scurra has chosen not to pretend, but to remain faithful to his principles.

Bainbridge was asked about the novel's general attitude to love, an example of which, after all, does not seem to exist in the whole novel; she pointed out that, indeed, there is one, provided by Mr and Mrs Straus, a couple of elderly people who decide to die together on the ship, watching people trying to save their lives. Their story was told by several surviving passengers who saw them waiting for everything to come to an end sitting on the deckchairs. Bainbridge pointed also out how their age could have influenced their heroic and romantic decision, and how, all other people in the novel were performing what the title disclosed; *Every Man for Himself*.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* 159.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* 158.

⁹² *Ibid.* 201.

Indeed, there is a couple, although not united by sexual attraction, which will share a common fate, they will die together, even if it will happen more because of chance than because of a communal decision. They are Adele and Rosenfelder, the opera singer and the tailor, those people who are not part of the upper class; both of them are looking for success and a happier life in the USA. Both known to Scurra, they had met before the departure because of Rosenfelder's wish to know the statuesque woman who was boarding with a third-class ticket. She is an opera singer and actress who had planned the voyage with her lover, but, in order to avoid suspicion, he would board later than her, and in a first-class cabin, where they would meet. Unfortunately, the man does not show up, and Adele tries to commit suicide throwing herself out of the boat; she is rescued by Morgan and Scurra, with much relief for Rosenfelder, who has a project for the girl. In fact, having found the perfect body for wearing the most beautiful of his creations, the dressmaker wants her collaboration both on the ship and once set foot on American land.

'She rose like a tree,' he cried. 'An English oak. It [the dress] could have been made for her.'

I said 'I thought it was desire you felt'

'And so it was,' he insisted. 'The desire to see my dress on a creature of flesh and blood.'⁹³

Morgan intervenes and introduces Rosenfelder to some people in the fashion business, and Scurra tries to persuade Adele to wear the dress. At first he is not successful, but he eventually manages to organize a soirée during which Adele, dressed in her own clothes, can sing a passage from the *Madame Butterfly*, and, the following day, she will go in the dining room dressed in Rosenfelder's creation. Adele's interpretation of Cio-Cio-San moves the hall and even Morgan, who had

⁹³ *Ibid.* 54.

frequently seen that opera in different cities of the world, but he had never been as moved as he is on the ship.

It wasn't just her voice that moved me, though that was pure and thrilling enough in tone, nor the contrast between the chill and doeful mask of her face and the burning intensity she brought to the hackneyed words, but rather the realisation that she had indeed been prepared to die for love.⁹⁴

Indeed, Cio-Cio-San did not die for love alone, she died because of the disillusion she received from love, because of receiving the proof that the man she loved was unworthy of it. Adele, similarly, wanted to commit suicide because her lover, for whom she had decided to emigrate, has disillusioned her by means of not boarding on the Titanic. Her performance moved the audience up to the point that, when she look at an imaginary door behind them, they all turn around to see if Pinkerton has unexpectedly arrived; and she could do it because her feelings were the same as the ones *Madame Butterfly* described. However, the emotion she has caused in the audience is doomed to vanish as soon as the lights are turned on, it does not encourage any reflection on love nor on abandonment.

After the performance, Morgan takes from his pocket the picture that was given to him by the man dying on the pavement, the one portraying the Japanese woman whose dress resembles Adele's costume. When the singer sees it, she faints, but then, once recovered, she starts inquiring after it.

Adele was smiling, As I sat down beside her she cried out, 'Thank you, thank you, my dear friend;' seizing my hand she kissed it. She begged to hear the whole story again, and interrupted constantly.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* 121.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.* 125.

Morgan is puzzled by her reaction, and shortly after she has left the room, he asks Scurra if he can fathom the reasons lying behind such behaviour on her part.

'You don't understand women,' he said, which was true enough. 'Given the choice, desertion or bereavement, a woman will pick the latter every time. A sensible enough preference, don't you agree? At least she knows where he is.'⁹⁶

Adele is relieved at the news of her lover's death, because being abandoned because death has come is preferable to being voluntarily abandoned by someone for whom we are ready to leave everything behind. In fact, facing abandonment had made Adele meditate upon her own unworthiness and personal faults. Moreover, she had to put into discussion the basis of a love story in which she strongly believed, and whose importance for her partner had proven to be lesser than the one of his marriage.

Despite this, Adele's appeal seemed to reside mainly in her sad eyes, in fact, when she makes her appearance in the dining room dressed in Rosenfelder's dress, she is judged vulgar by Hopper; "Nor could he think what we saw in Adele. She was pretty enough, but far too tall for a woman."⁹⁷ Wallis answers Hopper back, accusing him of being simply too short to be with such a woman, thus allowing the reader to see how the young man despises the singer because of her tallness just because he feels inferior to her, he is scared by her statuesque figure, as if it revealed something of her personality as well.

Adele and Rosenfelder from that moment on will never be parted again, as the Titanic will hit the iceberg that same night; she will try to enter the lifeboat, but the

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* 125.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* 162.

crowd will push her back. They will die one beside the other, Adele still wearing his dress; at the end, she will not abandon him, as her lover did not do with her.

Morgan and Adele, though, have something in common; they do not exactly belong to the world of those wealthy people, they have rather entered it by chance. Adela because of her body – and her lover – Morgan because of his blood-tie with one of Mr Morgan's wives. Besides, they are both liked to a picture – Adele to a photograph, and Morgan to a portrait of his mother, painted by Cézanne. “The girl's eyes were less searching than when gazing from the wall of the corridor at Princess Gate. Nor did she seem as pretty, her nose a shade too tilted, her jaw-line a little too heavy. I looked for a likeness in my own face in the glass, and found none.”⁹⁸ Keeping the picture is for Morgan a way to establish a contact between himself and his origins, of which he does not know anything for sure. He just knows that his father had left two months before his birth, while his mother had passed away three years later. He also remembers having taken a journey through the Atlantic Ocean to be delivered to his aunt and uncle, and his aunt had revealed him he had travelled in the third-class compartment, taken care of by a nurse.

Entering by chance Morgan's cabin, Scurra is astonished at finding that picture into Morgan's cabin. He was in the painter's atelier with an art dealer who bought three pictures, including the one that he was now watching on board of the Titanic. Knowing whom the girl was, Scurra had suggested the art dealer to contact Morgan's uncle to sell him the picture. When Scurra tells him all he knows, Morgan appears shocked, but it is not for the little information about his mother that the man is revealing him, but rather because he sees in Scurra a potential father.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* 17.

I had never thought of my father, never heard him described, never known anyone who had spoken with him, not even my uncle. My mother and he had met in London, she had eloped to Paris with him, they had begotten me and two months before I was born he vanished from the picture. It was my mother who came into my dreams and that only as someone I cried out for when the old woman made those terrible noises and the yellow bile jerked on to my cheek.⁹⁹

Morgan, on their first meeting, had the impression he had seen Scurra on a previous occasion, and for this reason he suspects that he is his father. His obsession for finding out his father's identity, and if he is still alive, drives him to a wrong conclusion. Nonetheless, it is significant to notice how it is so important to him to find out a paternal figure, while understanding how his mother was is irrelevant to him. Indeed, he had a surrogate mother in her aunt, but his life seems to be lacking male parental figures.

Scurra reveals him that they had actually met before, as Scurra had taken him out of the orphanage to send him to America. Morgan and his mother were living next to an old and rich woman – Miss Barrow, in a squalid apartment.

Miss Barrow had taken a particular fancy to you and when your mother died of influenza, one week after your third birthday, she took you in, neither the landlord nor the authorities raising any objection. (...)

During her last days [Miss Barrows] she suffered from continuous vomiting and diarrhoea, her one comfort derived from the closeness of the child she insisted on keeping beside her in the bed.¹⁰⁰

Morgan is shocked by Scurra's revelation, and he feels offended because the man had been inclement with his infant self, as “It wouldn't have cost him much to invent a

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* 109.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* 111.

gleam of intelligence in the baby-blue eyes beneath the shaven scalp.”¹⁰¹ Morgan's quest for his father shows somehow an injustice he does in not taking into account all the women that has been important in his life. Without his mother and Miss Barrow he probably would not have survived, and without his aunt sending Scurra to enquire for his origins, he would have lived in an orphanage all his childhood.

Morgan's mother, although dead, is however present, thanks to her picture, throughout the whole novel, as if her ghost haunted her son's life. The same thing happens for the ship, which is traditionally indicated with the pronoun “she”. And, like Morgan's mother, she is wounded by a man and is driven to death because of his errors; moreover, the dying Titanic leaves Morgan alive, as his mother had done before. In fact, the error of ignoring the ice warnings was made by Capitan Smith because of the hurry of arriving to New York on time, and maybe the same hurry had caused Morgan's father to run away with his mother.

Another similarity between the Titanic and women is the fact that, indeed, the women on board can perceive ill omens at the beginning of the voyage. For instance when they see a man coming out from a funnel, black because of the soot, they take it for an image of the devil. Despite this, women do not understand the danger they are in when the ship is sinking; while the first and the second lifeboats are put to sea, they do not want to enter them. Men, however, if they realize that they are in danger, they do not know what to do, and prefer to deny reality and stay in the smoking-room to play cards. They are impotent and they cannot face nor disaster nor imminent death, and are incapable of dominating the ship.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* 113.

According to Queeney

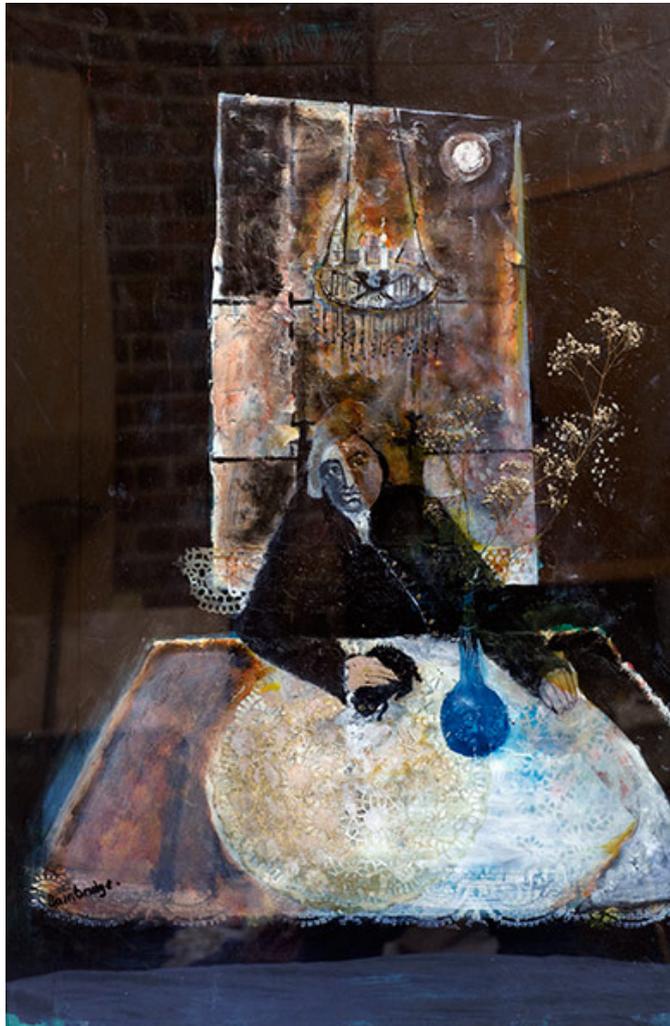


Fig. 6. Beryl Bainbridge, *Samuel Johnson in Albert Street, Camden Town, with his cat, Hodge*; photograph by the painter. Retrieved 15 May 2011 from *The Observer* website: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/gallery/2011/may/15/beryl-bainbridge-art/?picture=374593018&index=4>

According to Queeney revolves around the historical figure of Samuel Johnson, the eminent literary critic and author of the Dictionary. In particular, the novel focuses upon the relationship between him and the Thrale family, which was so close to him to have a spare room in which he could find refuge every time he wished. Moreover, he was taken as a teacher for their children, namely for the eldest and apparently smartest one, who was nicknamed Queeney. The narration is episodic, but each happening is put in chronological order and introduced by – and named after, an entry from Johnson's dictionary a date: crisis 1765, reintegrate 1766, sweetening 1772-3, yesterday 1774, revolution 1775, disaster 1776-7 and dissolution 1780-4. Such chapters are enclosed between a prologue and an epilogue, both dated 1784, and they are alternated by letters signed H.M. Thrale, that is Queeney herself.

We are introduced “in medias res”, after Johnson has attended his first dinner held by the Thrales. Once home, he professes himself indignant because of the dinner, but he cannot help defining Mrs Thrale “unusual”; he gives no further explanation to Mrs Williams, but he would like to tell that “Mrs Thrale had sparkling eyes, narrow shoulders, penetrating wit, scholarship of a female kind, a favourable interest in himself and a leakage of milk from her right breast.”¹⁰² From this first description we understand that Johnson has an interest in the woman, albeit she is married and pregnant. However, the Thrales keep inviting him to their house, and they even let him sleep there when he is too tired to get home on his own, even though Johnson understands that having him there is way of attracting other people to their dinner parties. For this reason his indulging into sensual thoughts concerning Mrs Thrale gradually drive him into madness.

This near somnolent state – he was staring fixedly at the coarse hairs of his wig flung down into the window recess – was shortly followed by physical stirrings of an

¹⁰² Bainbridge, Beryl. *According to Queeney*. (London: Abacus, 2002) 6.

unmistakable nature. By a supreme effort of will he fought off his torpor, striking his forehead repeatedly with his fist to beat away a loathsome descent into sensuality.¹⁰³ Johnson feels depressed and starts acting foolishly, he retires in his room and refuses to go out, spending much of his time praying to avoid damnation. Mr Thrale, after visiting him and finding him in a pitiful state, offers him hospitality in his house at Streatham Park. Johnson accepts his proposal, and he becomes part of the family. Thanks to his proximity to Mrs Thrale, he does not suffer from depression any more, even though friendship is all he can get from her, despite the many rumours suggesting the opposite. Mrs Thrale's mother, Mrs Salusbury, feels jealousy towards the man of letters, as she finds too much importance is given to his opinions, and because of his constant presence within the house. At the same time, Mrs Thrale suspects that Johnson's ill treatment of Mrs Salusbury too was to attribute to jealousy. "He needed her undivided attention, seeing he was beset by demons and had not the advantage of a mother's love of the sort she herself has known."¹⁰⁴ Mrs Thrale considers Johnson as an unfortunate child looking for motherly love, even if he displays in many ways his feelings for her. "He touched her cheek with his finger, as though ready to impale an unspilt tear, and gaze at her so fondly and with such a compassion that she trembled."¹⁰⁵ Johnson being a man so difficult to put up with, he and Mrs Thrale have several quarrels among trivial subject, mainly dictated by her losing patience at his continuous demand for attention, and every time it is Dr Johnson the one who makes the first step to restore peace, because of his incapability of living happily without her. On one particular occasion, he writes her a letter suggesting that she should establish a routine to his life in order to prevent him from monopolizing her time.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* 10.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.* 31.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* 46.

It would be more befitting a *mistress* if she herself took the initiative and spared him the necessity of constraining himself. He would keep to his chamber...she had only to turn the key in the lock twice a day. (...) He concluded with the hope that she would continue to keep him *in that slavery you know so well how to make happy*.¹⁰⁶[my ellipsis, original italic]

Again, her reaction is to feel anger at first, and then pity because those were the words of a miserable man, or, "(...) a spoilt child was nearer the mark." [my ellipsis]¹⁰⁷

Later on, they physically struggle for the possession of the lock, Johnson trying to persuade Mrs Thrale to use it, and she wanting to throw it away. It is the closest physical contact they have had until that moment.

Johnson, however, does not leave his love and happiness behind, and after a journey to Scotland with Mr Boswell, he dares speaking of sexuality in her presence, under the pretext of explaining John Hunter's discoveries.

'A man, according to Hunter, has an appetite to enjoy all women; but if the mind has formed itself to any particular woman, the appetite or enjoyment can be suspended until —' here, he caught Mrs Thrale's reproving glance and broke off in mid-sentence.¹⁰⁸

He is trying to explain to her what he feels for her and he is implicitly telling her that since he has met her he has never had sexual intercourse with anybody else, for he could not do so even if he wanted to. Her glance, however, seems to be one of those she uses with her children when they are speaking improperly or behaving unkindly with their guests. Even though she clearly feels affection for the poet, it is a kind of affection that cuts out sexuality, it is rather a maternal feeling for someone who is so uncommon that his intelligence and aptitude to sympathy make the other forget his behaviour.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.* 85.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.* 86.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.* 95.

Mrs Thrale, on the other hand is not totally coherent with her view of the man, in fact, when she meets the daughter of Johnson's dead wife, she tries to imagine the mother from the appearance and personality of the daughter, feeling disappointed when Johnson reveals her that the daughter is very different from the mother under every aspect. When she comes to know that Johnson was a womanizer during his youth and adulthood, Mrs Thrale feels troubled, she feels something which reminds her of jealousy; indeed, she may be feeling that her own value was somehow diminished by the poet's behaviour in life. If he was used to fall in love with women besides his being married, then his love for her was not an exception to the rule, it was merely the proceeding of his former habits, even though this time the prohibition was given by her married state instead of his own. Mrs Thrale, in spite of eluding any physical contact with her admirer, would like him to woo her, and she feels offended every time his opinions are not up to her standards. For instance

Thrale asked him if he considered a pretty woman to be superior to one of a studious disposition, to which he answered in the affirmative. 'Sir,' he said, 'a pretty woman may be foolish; a pretty woman may be wicked; a pretty woman may not like me, but beauty of itself is very estimable.' At this Mrs Thrale spurred her horse forward and waited further off. She did not think herself pretty, nor ever had.¹⁰⁹

Her attitude towards Johnson, however, changes completely when she makes acquaintance with Mr Piozzi, an Italian opera singer who starts wooing her as soon as he sees her. In the meantime, Mr Thrale had been very ill, both because of a venereal disease and because of eating far too much. He dies suddenly, and Johnson, besides his severe grief, starts wondering at marrying Mrs Thrale. But she has something else in her mind, because her growing love for Mr Piozzi has overshadowed her affection for the poet, who is becoming more and more a burden

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.* 129.

for her to carry. In order to make him understand he is no more welcomed in her house, she moves to Bath and after telling him that there will always be a spare room for him in her new house, she fails inviting him. He goes back to London, and there dies, after hearing news from Mrs Thrale, who has abandoned her children to go to Italy and has married Mr Piozzi.

Johnson, however, has also left behind him a broken heart, namely Mrs Desmoulin's one. She is his housekeeper, indeed she was his wife's one, and she has been hopelessly in love with him since his marriage has begun. She remembers how Johnson's wife, who was twenty years older than him, and who had been married before, in order to avoid having sex with him, had asked Mrs Desmoulin to tell him that she was unwell and that she had to sleep with her housekeeper. Johnson had understood that she was not sick, and invited Mrs Desmoulin to his bed to make him company during the night.

But then, at the very moment when, in spite of God's teachings, she would have welcomed a final assault, he had thrust her from him and bid her to quit the room. A moral man, she had then thought, and revered him for it, but now – now that it was too late – she was not so sure. Perhaps a cowardly man was nearer the truth.¹¹⁰

That night will stay in her mind forever, coming back to her every time she fantasizes on love and on the men she has been living with for so many years. In her dreams she lives again that moment and its imaginary prosecution, of which he had deprived her then. During a discussion, Johnson recalls the story of a man who claimed having heard the voice of his brother who lived in America and, some days afterwards, he had received the news of his brother's death. As a reaction, Mrs Desmoulin cannot help thinking, "When I am alone and dying, Sam shall hear my

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.* 184.

voice calling his name and weep at the sound of it.”¹¹¹ Despite sharing the experience of unrequited love with her, Johnson cannot perceive he is loved by someone he rejects, unlike Mrs Thrale he does not even know that a woman loves him in spite of his indifference towards her. Indeed, if Mrs Thrale at least appreciates him as a confidant, an educator for her children, and a friend, Johnson ignores completely the woman who has been nearest to him for his whole life.

According to Queeney is, however, more than a story of unrequited love, and it is hardly possible to decide whether there is Mr Johnson or Mrs Thrale at the centre of the novel, indeed it seems that the two of them form an indissoluble couple around which the novel pivots. Mrs Thrale, loved by Johnson and loving Mr Piozzi, is also a woman married to a man she does not love, and from whom she is not loved, and yet she gives him ten children and she never cheated on him until his miserable death. As a woman, Mrs Thrale feels she is lacking a crucial experience in her life, because she has never loved someone, as her mother had done.

Her mother, who lived on a diet of vegetables and water and could not be accused of emotions disturbed by either spirits or meat, often referred to the dead Mr Salusbury as a 'monster she had been fond of to distraction'. At such times Mrs Thrale, observing the light of passion in her mother's eyes, felt envy.¹¹²

Mrs Thrale considers her husband to be a good man whom she has learnt to like but she cannot love, and to her the mildness of her feeling for him is something unnatural in the relationships between men and women. His opinion on the matter is not overtly presented, but his acceptance of Mr Johnson in his house and as a mentor for his children shows how he himself has become reconciled with his wife's disaffection for him.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.* 219.

¹¹² *Ibid.* 26.

Despite this, both of them appear to take pleasure in embarrassing the other in front of their guests during dinners. For instance, during a game consisting in comparing each of those present to a flower, Mr Thrale likened Mrs Jackson to a rare orchid, and his wife to a rose dog. As a reaction, however, Mrs Thrale smiles. Nonetheless, her reaction is different when her husband falls foolishly in love with a young and silly lady called Miss Sophy Streatfield.

Mrs Thrale was sitting at her usual place at the table when Mr Thrale shouted out to her that she must change place with Sophy, for 'she has a sore throat and may be injured by sitting so near the door.' Instantly, Miss Streatfield rose from her chair, at which Mrs Thrale cried out, 'Perhaps it will not be long before the lady is head of your table' and burst into noisy tears.¹¹³

In the same way, during another dinner, Mrs Thrale cries out "We must accustom ourselves to knowing that men are fickle and have an appetite for all women. For myself, I do not mind, for I do not love any man."¹¹⁴

Curiously, she utters the sentence as soon as her husband begins to touch with his hand the leg of a female guest. Thus, she demonstrates she is jealous, even though her feeling does not come from love for her husband, rather from the braking of social conventions. In fact, she only gets angry for his behaviour when they are having social interactions with people of their same social class; she apparently fears the other's judgement and gossiping, as well as of being deprived of her authority as a lady of the house. As a vengeance, she keeps reminding him and the others the failure of his brewery company; she often underlines how his choices were disastrous and his research for a new recipe containing different cereals is labelled as "absurd". Moreover, she often mingles in his business by discussing with his partner without him being present, and she humiliates him with her puns. His

¹¹³ *Ibid.* 210.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.* 121.

bankruptcy is again, in her view, a threat to her own social position, which she has conquered through the acceptance of a marriage deprived of love.

She watched the scarlet streaks flooding the darkening sky and thought of other things: (...) of the anniversary of her wedding some two days past and of Henry presenting her with flowers and stammering she had been a good wife to him. That she had never been in love was not a great deprivation, for what one had never known was scarcely to be fretted over.[my ellipsis]¹¹⁵

Mrs Thrale only starts worrying about her husband's sexual behaviour when he contracts a venereal disease that causes him to have a swollen testicle and loose his teeth. In fact, even though they do not love each other, the Thrales continue with their conjugal sexual life, although unsatisfactorily.

The weight of her husband's shoulder pinning her to the mattress, she punched him. The blow was ill judged; waking, Thrale rolled on top of her. His thrustings afforded him little relief and much exertion. He uttered not a word and neither did she, and when the unsatisfactory business was over she toppled him roughly from her.¹¹⁶

Mrs Thrale does not feel she lacks something, lacking sexual satisfaction; sex is to her only a way to procreate, to bring in this world her children. In the course of the novel, in fact, she gives birth to ten babies, most of which unhealthy. Queeney is her first child, but her motherhood is immediately put into discussion by the girl's preference for her Nurse.

When Mrs Thrale goes towards her baby to take her into her hands, "Face flushed with resolve, Queeney stared defiantly and tightened her grip about Nurse's neck."¹¹⁷

Her mother is extremely angry with her, and she would have harmed the child if Mr Langton had not been present, ready to place a judgement upon her and then telling it to the whole society.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.* 158.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.* 125.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.* 29.

Mrs Thrale and her daughter Queeney are indeed very close one another, even if the girl seems to blame the mother because she overtly shows that she value Dr Johnson more than her husband, and she is ready to forgive the poet's caprices but not those of Mr Thrale.

Indeed, Mrs Thrale is a mother who worries a lot for her children, and her instinct helps her saving Queeney's life when she is suffocating with a button, and she seems to know at their birth that the sickly babies she has delivered are doomed to die soon after their birth. She sees vacuity in her son's Ralph eyes, and has a bad omen regarding her only surviving male child Harry. In fact, when she is in a church in Paris, she has the impression that the statue of a woman carrying a baby is an omen to her, which wants to forewarn her of Harry's death. Johnson tries to comfort her, and he tells her that, as the chapel was dedicated to the saint who protected children, but she is not completely persuaded of it. When she goes back to London, her son is healthy, but shortly after she has again a premonition of his imminent death, so she fears he has perished going to the Opera House. But again she is wrong, for her son comes back safe and sound, reporting that there had been fights between cast members, the orchestra and then the audience too was involved in it. The following day, Queeney falls ill, and Mrs Thrale thinks to have misinterpreted the message the saint had tried to convey her; but then Harry catches the same illness as Queeney, and while she survives, he succumbs, taking away with him the hopes of the family.

As far as motherhood is concerned, Mrs Thrale has undoubtedly a preference for her eldest daughter, Queeney, who becomes also the pretext to have Mr Johnson living with her. In fact, suspecting the girl to be more intelligent than her brothers and sisters, she is given Johnson as a mentor, and later on Mr Baretti is hired to teach her Latin and Italian, so that she could become as cultured as boy would have the possibility to

be. Nonetheless, her attitude is so changeable that Queeney thus describes her. “Found, she would be lectured on insolence, then kissed, then, like as not, slapped. Mamma was contrary in all things. Sometimes Mr Johnson held it was because she had so many things to worry about, at others that she had not enough to occupy her.”¹¹⁸ Johnson seems to see through the reasons for her attitude, in fact Mrs Thrale, having nothing to do has basically to spend her days worrying over trivial things and false worries. Moreover, occupying her mind with worries concerning the education of her children or Mr Johnson's literary production was indeed a way to stop thinking of her life wasted between giving birth to sick children and an unsatisfactory marriage. “Mrs Thrale, worn down by the birth of yet another sickly daughter and the death of Ralph, allowed herself to be swept along by events. She inclined towards Johnson's view that anything was better than vacuity.”¹¹⁹ Her admission comes quite late, as the reader as long since understood that Mrs Thrale's reaction to the vacuity of her life is to fill it with anything, including Mr Johnson's attentions to her. Queeney seems to understand that her mother needs Mr Johnson to woo her in order to live happily and quietly. However, after her brother's death, she starts blaming her mother for the downfall of her father, partly because it coincided with her crush upon Mr Piozzi. When she accuses Mrs Thrale of having fallen in love with him, her mother reacts stuttering in her thoughts “I have h...harmed Queeney in some way, she thought, not least in loving her too much... and must p...pay for it.”¹²⁰ What Queeney blames her mother for, is of having abandoned her father and their children in a moment in which she was most needed. Mrs Thrale, trying to mend the separation her daughter felt, started making her aware of her plans and her feelings for Mr Piozzi; the girl however could not appreciate her projects, because they

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.* 55.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.* 136.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.* 207.

involved the abandonment of all her daughter and her escape to Italy, in fact the girls' tutor threatened her to take away their annual remuneration in case of expatriation of Mr Trale's daughters. But Mrs Thrale, after so many years of self-sacrifice, thought that it was her last occasion of being in love with someone, and she abandoned her daughters and went to Italy where she became Mrs Piozzi. When Johnson wrote her an angry letter "She wrote back, rebuking him for failing to acknowledge that she was in search of happiness, a pursuit which he once had considered laudable."¹²¹

¹²¹ *Ibid.* 235.

The Girl in the Polka-dot Dress



Fig. 7. Beryl Bainbridge, *Rudi, Aaron and Jojo*;
photograph by the painter. Retrieved 15 May 2011
from *The Observer* website:
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/gallery/2011/may/15/beryl-bainbridge-art/?picture=374593016&index=3>>

The Girl in the Polka-dot Dress was Bainbridge's last novel. Unfortunately she died before finishing it, but her editor and friend Brendan King has prepared it for publication thanks to the directions she had given before her death. Unusually for Bainbridge, the novel is set in the United States, and it can be set into the on-the-road tradition. In fact an English woman, Rose, undertakes a journey through America with a man she hardly knows, Harold Grasse, to find someone they both want to meet again. Having nothing in common, they are forced to stay together by the circumstances, but they do not like each other, and friendship appears to be impossible. The man they are looking for is mysterious Mr Wheeler, who has met Rose when she was just a child. He seems to be involved in some political intrigues and bombings, but the only one who seems to know that is Harold, but he appears to be rather concentrated on Wheeler's private life. Rose tells him that she wants to meet Wheeler because he had saved her life when she was sinking into depression, but she has not the faintest idea why Harold has to meet the man. Her American travelling companion has been evasive from the beginning, and he has lead her to believe that he is taking her to Wheeler on account of his kindness, while what he really has planned to do is to kill the man who had seduced his wife and made her commit suicide. In looking for Mr Wheeler, the two rambles into a camper, visiting Harold's friends and acquaintances, and gradually they get to know each other a bit. Harold is a wealthy middle-aged man who lives alone in a squalid house, he lives on the investments that one of his mother's boyfriends had left to him in his will, although he had studied psychology. He had met Rose in England, because she was a friend of his friends', but he had kept in contact with her only because he had seen a picture of Wheeler in her house. From that moment on he had probably planned to kill the man, because he thought that she was the key to find where Wheeler hid. So, he has paid Rose's flight to America, even though it is clear from the very beginning that they will not be able to get along one with the other. Conversely Rose is uneducated and

she lives a poor life in England, but the reader is not allowed to know much of her present. In fact, she prefers talking about her past, of what happened to her during her childhood, because she feels it is this that distinguishes her from the others. She is considered to be odd and a bit childish, and when she talks everyone keeps asking Harold if she has the age one would think when he sees her or half of it.

Though not unintelligent she was far from educated. Some things, ordinary things like the workings of Wall Street and the aims of political groups, were foreigner to her, which made it all the more puzzling why Wheeler had become attached to her. But then, Wheeler was a womaniser, while he, Harold Grasse, was considered shy.¹²²

From her first description, Rose seems to be unexceptional, and not at all different from the other women, but then, after Harold has spent some time with her, he finds her unbearable. Indeed, it appears clearly from the beginning that the two have troubles in communicating, what Harold proudly defines a “camper” is a “van” for Rose, and while she just wants to sleep, he offers her food. He often speaks about politicians and of what he thinks it is going to happen after Martin Luther King's killing, while Rose does not even know who King is, nor who his opponents are. Harold addresses her abruptly when she sings a song with the word “nigger” in it, a song she has learnt from a black man.

'For God's sake,' he hissed 'there are riots all over the States at the moment, mostly on account of prejudiced people like you. You can't use that word.'

'I'm sorry,' she faltered, looking genuinely upset, 'I just thought it was an interesting song written by slaves. They used the word niggers...'¹²³

However, between them communication is impossible also because of Harold's attitude towards her. In fact, even though she tries to establish a contact, he simply does not listen to her, and if he does he does not believe what she says. For this reason the people they meet are so important, because in this way they can have

¹²² Bainbridge, Beryl. *The Girl in the Polka-dot Dress*. (Little Brown: London, 2011) 2.

¹²³ *Ibid.* 145.

some information about each other revealed. Actually, Rose being so talkative, Harold does not need other people to gather information about her, but she undoubtedly has to gain knowledge of him from others. For instance, she does not know Harold had been married, or that his wife had committed suicide;

The wife, who was called Dollie, had fallen for another man. She had left Harold to be with him, but after twelve months he'd grown tired of her. She was an intelligent woman and should have known what she was getting herself into. 'It wasn't the first time she'd strayed,' Mirabella said, eyes glittering. 'She had a fling with Shaefer, but that was only sex.

'Did Harold find out?'

'God, no. He thinks the world of Jesse. Anyway, Dollie came back to Wanakena and drowned in the lake beyond the trees.'¹²⁴

Harold says he wants to kill Wheeler because he thinks he has to revenge his wife's death, but indeed his reaction seems rather to be the one of an angry and betrayed husband. In fact his marriage was indeed not one of the happiest. Apart from the sexual encounters between his wife and his best friend, of which he does not know anything, Harold keeps thinking about some unhappy moments with his wife. For instance, when he attempted to have sex with her and she had first refused and then, after having given him the illusion she would accept, she had hit his testicles with a knee to make him stop. On that occasion she had told him that it was due to the cat that was in their hotel room, but it seemed rather implausible an excuse, even to him. Harold seems to remember only the times in which his wife had rejected him, there are no happy moments with her in the images he evokes. Possibly there had not been many, or, else, what is important to him is the fact that his wife has made him feel abandoned many times; it is as if her memory was tied together with such a feeling, which is apparently stronger than love. Moreover, during the journey, he recalls other past events as well, and they are all connected with his mother, and

¹²⁴ *Ibid.* 77.

with the way in which she had put him aside to see men, some of which had later become her boyfriends. Harold is not angry with those men, but he cannot forget his mother for the feelings she had aroused in him in those times.

Harold thus appears to be a bit of a misogynist, in spite of his liberal ideas when politics are concerned. As a matter of fact he is unable to find friendship in women, neither in Mirabella nor in George Shaefer, and he prefers Jesse to them, probably because he ignores about his flirt with his wife. For the same reason he cannot stand Rose, he is very hostile to her, and he does not acknowledge her efforts to make him feel comfortable in her presence. The problem with Harold seems to be that he does not actually *like* the women with whom he comes into contact. In fact he had told a girl, probably his wife, that, even if she loved him, "love was not the problem. Love dropped out of the sky, unsought, unearned. He loved his mother. It was liking somebody that was difficult."¹²⁵

Obviously, Harold does not like Rose. Indeed, she is one of a kind, nonetheless she is cheerful with everybody she meets and she tries to participate to conversations even if she does not really know anything about the topic they are dealing with. Her connection to Mr Wheeler is so strong that she has travelled to America in the hope of finding him, and somehow he reciprocates her, as he leaves letters for her reporting the addresses where he can be found. But then, he is never there, deluding her expectations and the excitement that follows them. The relationship between them is not clear, though the reader is aware that they have met when she was a girl and that she does not see him as a father. He had helped her when she was in trouble, and he had managed to do it simply speaking with her. Despite that, her desire for making a good impression on him, and her hint to him kissing her, make the reader suspect that they had an affair. Rose's reticence at defining their relationship clashes violently with her way of dealing with sexuality, at least in her

¹²⁵ *Ibid.* 44.

thoughts. In fact, she quite openly narrates into her head what had once happened to her in London.

Once, a man had brought her drinks in a pub in South Kensington and then taken her to his room near the Brompton Oratory. It was a posh area, so she didn't think anything could go wrong. After all, it was only the dispossessed that needed to exert power. The man had forced her onto his bed, knocking a tooth out in his struggle to hold her down. Bloody-mouthed, she had said she'd do whatever he wanted if he'd just let her use the toilet first. As she fled down the stairs he'd emptied a cup of water over the landing banisters, and she'd fancied he was weeing on her.¹²⁶

Rose, apparently so naïve, has in fact known the most awful side of sex, and men. Nonetheless she does not feel shame for what had happened, she simply makes a list of the facts, and she even admits what, in the wave of emotion, she had fancied about the water. Throughout the novel Rose freely talks about sexuality, yet it is never mentioned as something positive or beneficial, its role is not to give pleasure, but neither it is only referred to as something which makes people suffer. Rose is at first appalled at the idea of sleeping in the same bed as Harold, not only because she fears sex would be the payment required to her for Harold's expenses, but also because she feels ill at ease in his presence. However, later on, she would welcome a sexual intercourse in exchange for the money he has spent for her, thus she would feel less guilty and she could also feel freer to act as she wishes. When he knocks at her door trying to wear a condom, Rose does not stop him. "The ease with which he entered her probably made him think she was aroused. He wasn't to know that she was one of those females whose bodies were ready for penetration even when their minds were closed. It was over in seconds. He left almost immediately."¹²⁷ The following morning Rose manages to talk to Harold without feeling that she owes him something, she feels free from his power, while he thinks he has almost raped her,

¹²⁶ *Ibid.* 14.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.* 139.

and he cannot face her, nor talk to her without brusqueness. Harold's behaviour can be justified by his sense of guilt, and it does not give additional information on his interior life. On the contrary, Rose's reaction is a proof of her attitude towards sexuality; it is for her something that can be exchanged between men and women as a merchandise, or money. She does not lament her dissatisfaction with the intercourse, nor she accuses Harold of having been rude to her, she simply feels satisfied at having found a way to repay him. She is not judgemental about the specific means chosen to obtain a form of payment, she simply decides that she can afford giving him what he wants. In fact, she could have fought against him, or at least she could have denied her body to him; but Harold does not think she could have. In his opinion, Rose should have been at his disposal, he does not ask himself the reason why she has not turned him down like his wife had done so many times. He could have thought that "women were programmed to show sympathy, not rationally, merely from need,"¹²⁸ so her concession to him was merely dictated by nature, as if women could not act differently from the way he thinks their nature is.

Bainbridge gives the reader an insight on Rose's sexuality in different stages, exploiting the many men she meets during her journey through the United States. In fact, it seems that her apparent ingenuousness makes her a prey for every men, of all social extraction and political beliefs. A man put his hand on her breast while speaking to her, gently driving her into the wood and drawing her away from the party they are taking part into. When she struggles out of his grasp, she finds herself face to face with a man with a patch on one eye that claims that he would like to get to know her better. Albeit impressed with his way of defining sex, she refuses, on account of an imaginary husband who could get cross. According to what her mother had taught her, she thinks that refusing an invitation is impolite, but many experiences demonstrated her that politeness and sex are often in conflict one with

¹²⁸ *Ibid.* 69.

the other, as some unpleasant situations had taken place when she, out of politeness, had agreed to follow a man. Thus, what we can derive is that for Rose sexuality is simply one of the possible social interactions that a man and a woman can have when facing one another. She does not think that sex is better or worse than other ways of socializing, it is simply one of the possibilities that humans have when interacting. Rose does not tell if she prefers a ruder approach, such as that of the man who put his hands on her breasts, or the flirtatious one perpetrated by Mr Silver, the man introduced to her by Harold's new acquaintance, Mr Fury. She actually does know how to cope with men, and how to avoid intercourses she does not want to be involved in.

However, she also reminds a time when sex had followed love, when she was a teenager.

Drawn to the sight, she had approached and stopped; she had noticed a shadowy couple locked in an embrace. The image was romantic. She hoped their hearts beat in tune. She herself, in all her years of sexual encounters, had known true love but once. 'A dirty union between underage fornicators,' Mother had labelled it, which was why it was necessary for the resulting infant to be given away.¹²⁹

The only outcome of that love was unhappiness and suffering, in fact, albeit many years has passed between Rose's pregnancy and her trip to America, still she is unable do sustain the view of mothers when they are with their babies. Rose wanted to have something to remind her of the unique love in her life, but she could not. It came as a trauma to her, and somehow Bainbridge lets the reader suspect that her wish to find Wheeler has something to do with the baby. The phrase Rose's mother has used to express the union indicates that Wheeler was not the father of the baby, as he was already a man when he and Rose had met. She could possibly want to ask Wheeler to trace her child, but she could also want him simply to help her

¹²⁹ *Ibid.* 138.

forgetting her baby and go on with her life, as he had once helped her out of depression.

However, if Rose cannot express sympathy for those mothers she sees cuddling their babies, she does feel sympathy for all the other women they meet in America. For instance, Harold and she help a woman who is hitchhiking when the man who had picked her up had attacked her. So, the woman had hit him with a knife and run away. Then, Harold, who had descended from the camper for stretching his legs, hears the man drawing the last breath, and he goes back in the camper. There, he finds Rose talking to the woman. Rose briefly tells him her story and then they take the woman on board and carry her to visit her brother. In the camper, it is Rose who narrates the story of the woman, who needs to see her brother to borrow money from him, and who does not want to tell anyone about the aggression because no one would believe her. When they leave the girl, she hugs Rose and thanks her, as if Harold did not exist. The episode is an interesting example of how for Rose it is easy to go on with the other women, because she understands them, or at least she tries to show she sympathizes with them. She does the same thing with Philopsona Fury's mother, whose don-in law they had met in a campsite two days before, and who offers them hospitality to put them into contact with Mr Silver, who can give them a pass to access the convention in Dallas which Mr Wheeler is supposed to take part in. The old woman immediately starts talking with Rose, informing her that Rose was the name of the woman in Babylon. She rambles at length about her father and family, and about some unpleasant event in her past. Her daughter is quite strange, she uses a very bad language and at first Rose would say she leads a happy life. The fact that she cannot live in L.A. because she is not considered to be a good wife for a lawyer – what Mr Fury does as a job, appears not to bother her, possibly because she thinks that she is kept in the farm in Santa Ana because of her mother's nervous breakdown. However, after a horse ride, Rose goes back to the farm and

sees Philopsona crying, sat on the ground and in front of Mr Silver. He explains her that the woman had been taking a drug which was first produced to be used during wars; she had taken it because she had been told it helped reducing stress on those who had suffered from childhood suffering. Rose has not managed to talk to the woman directly, but she is strongly impressed by what had happened to her; unfortunately Harold does not give her any further explication.

He kept the radio switched on to discourage Rose from chatting, without success. He had never met anyone so indifferent to nature. Blind to the pale blossoms of the paradise trees, the sugar-white sands edging the glitter of the ocean, she fiddled with her top lip, her hair, the contents of her pockets, and gibbered mindlessly on about some medicine that had been used to combat foul language in the Vietnam. She meant drugs, of course, in particular the lysergic acid which had affected the Philopsona woman.¹³⁰

Rose causes also jealousy in a woman, Mirabella, a friend of Harold's. Indeed, at first she is very kind with Rose, telling her about all the women that had lived in her house before she entered it. "When she spoke she sounded very confident, bossy, rather like Mrs Shaefer. Rose thought it was because American women weren't shy of appearing superior of men."¹³¹ Then Mirabella tries to make Rose reveal her secrets to her, but in the end it is Mirabella that tells Rose the secret of Harold's wife. Then, she lets Rose go out of the house in spite of Harold's orders. The reason why he did not want her to go out of the house was the presence of wild grizzly bears, thus Mirabella turns out to have tried to do harm to Rose. The reason for this is the fact that Mirabella's partner, Gerhardt Kelmann, who was about to come there, was unfaithful and flirtatious. The woman probably wanted to be spared of the view of him flirting with another woman. Rose justifies the woman, thinking that her behaviour was probably due to a wish for excitement, as in the forest nothing interesting could

¹³⁰ *Ibid.* 169.

¹³¹ *Ibid.* 72.

happen; she also takes the blame on herself and she tells Harold that Mirabella had warned her, but she had decided to go out anyway. When Gerhardt comes home, he keeps rubbing his leg on Rose's one under the table, the next day he takes her to visit an Indian reservation, and Harold has to face Mirabella's crisis. When Harold tries to make Rose notice that she should not have gone away alone with another woman's man, she answers that Mirabella's misery was not due to Gerhardt's unfaithfulness, as it came from some time before him. However, as soon as Rose and Harold are back from their talk,

Kelmann had gone away when they returned to the house. Mirabella was holding a towel to her lips. It was the same one Harold had used on his torn arms. She said that Kelmann had punched her before he left. She was quite calm and although her cheeks were flushed, her mouth didn't appear swollen. She kissed Rose goodbye and said she was sorry to see her leave. As they bumped from the narrow path onto the highway, Kelmann's car approached from the opposite direction. 'Harold, stop...'

Rose cried, but he didn't. He had enough problems of his own.¹³²

Rose shows sympathy with Mirabella, despite the fact that the latter had attempted to put an end to her life for jealousy. On the contrary, Harold does not stop the camper, he probably believes he cannot handle the situation; in fact, when he is in a bank with Rose and she is taken as a hostage from a robber, Rose keeps calm, while he wet himself.

Rose, the woman who can understand the others and is willing to help them, finally manages to get what she has come for, because Harold and her enter the hall of the hotel in Dallas where Mr Wheeler is following John Kennedy's political campaign. Unfortunately, Bainbridge does not tell us if she talks to Wheeler or not, because all we know is that there is a shot and John Kennedy is brought to death.

The Girl in the Polka-dot Dress, however, was left unfinished at Bainbridge's death, for this reason the conclusion may sound so suspended. Otherwise, the writer could

¹³² *Ibid.* 89.

have done it on purpose, not wanting to give a more detailed account of Rose's relationship with Wheeler. However, it is typical of Bainbridge leaving some parts of both the plot and the characters, suspended and obscure. The heroine of the novel is more than simply sketched, she is fully portrayed in her main characteristics: naivety, sympathy, matter-of-factness, and free sexuality.

Conclusions

In Beryl Bainbridge's novels women are usually portrayed as victims, of either society or a man. In fact, as in her novels women are often presented in their traditional roles: wives, mothers, daughters, spinsters or lovers. Women are pinned to their roles by their acquaintances as well as by their men, brothers and fathers, and they cannot get rid of the part they have been cast in. Mrs Thrale, for instance, is always perceived as a mother, both by her husband and by society, thus her rebellion comes as a scandal to everyone she knows: abandoning her children means to leave society as a whole, because her role in it cannot be recognized any more; she becomes an outsider. In the same way, Rita in *The Dressmaker* is considered to be Nellie's daughter, and thus her father comes to be called Uncle Jack, to adapt their exceptionality to the simplified world of society. The roles women are given force them to conform to written and unwritten rules that compel them to hide their own nature in order to find the approval they naturally desire. Bainbridge novels, however, begin in the moment when women's inner selves start harbouring a desire for rebellion. Dotty and May enter the scene when their problems with their men are starting to drive them towards madness; Dotty refuses to eat because she fears Joseph would reproach her for consuming the food he bought with his money, while May tries everything she can to make Lionel angry. At such a point, rebellion appears to be an unavoidable outcome of the events, but not all characters manage to succeed in their insubordination. Morgan's nameless mother namely, whose flight to France with her lover has caused her to become a lonely and poor mother, and to be buried in a mass grave when she died of influenza. Nonetheless, there also are examples of successful rebellions such as the one perpetrated by Binny, who is compelled to leave her lover and her children behind, and ultimately denies her cooperation in Edward's attempt to save her or, at least to stay by her side when her life is threatened of death by the gang of robbers.

In Bainbridge's work there is an evolution in the outcome of the acts of rebellion perpetrated by female characters. In fact, Dotty's insubordination was merely a flight from her unhappiness, she is not really looking for anything when she flees, and she simply rebels for rebellion's sake. Then, in *The Dressmaker*, Marge and Rita both try to rise up against Nellie's plans but both of them fail because of Nellie's decision and strength; on her part, Nellie does not revolt against anything, as all she wants to do is to prevent her life from changing. However, Rita's young age leaves the door open to the reader to imagine further threats for Nellie's plan of life. Binny, like Rita, decides to stand up to the way in which her life has ended up after having got out of her hand. Besides, her riot seems rather to represent liberation from something the society did not really approve of – she was the “other woman” of a married man. She challenges male power, but it could happen only thanks to a gang of robbers, all of them males and embodying the characteristics of male power. Thus, her victory seems to be a tiny achievement that will not make the difference in her life, if she will ever survive her being an hostage. *Every Man for Himself* goes a little further as Wallis manages to forget Scurra to save her life, even though it could happen only thanks to his intervention and his little chat with her. Mrs Thrale, on her part, rebels to male authority and to society at the same time, as she puts her friend Samuel Johnson and her children aside to reach her own happiness. Her cruelty is equalled to that of a man leaving his family behind, but she appears to be guiltier because of her womanhood.

However, the clash Bainbridge's characters have with society is often triggered by another conflict, the one between reality and their desires. In fact, being part of society, they paint in their mind the picture of the life society promise them, and as that picture is constantly compared to a reality, which is not up to standard, they feel that they have been deprived of happiness. Margo and Nellie in *The Dressmaker* are both victims of the state of things, having to grow up a child who is not theirs, and

what they do is to try to keep someone at their side in order to share misery, as they would have done with happiness. Unfortunately, Nellie's necessity for sharing prevents Margo not only to find happiness, but also to seek it; thus, their own misery, albeit shared, is doubled by the conflicts between the two sisters. Still, it is important to underline that they have the possibility of being two, while the other characters of Bainbridge's production cannot be but alone.

The only other occasion for sharing is thought to be sexual intercourse, which is considered to be the confrontation ground between the sexes. However being men and women incapable of communicating one to the other using words, it seems to be improbable that they reach a satisfying exchange during intercourse. In fact, during sex, the pursuit of personal pleasure makes selfishness reach the highest degree. As a matter of fact, when feelings are present, such as in marriages and love affairs, sex is presented as unsatisfactory or completely absent. Proof of this are Dotty and May, the former having quit sex with Joseph for a long time, the latter having never known sex with her own husband. Nonetheless, having sex with strangers does not make any difference in Bainbridge's novels, partly because it often takes the form of rape. Indeed, even rape proves to be "unsatisfactory" as the victim imagined it had to involve a certain amount of violence which is absent and that takes her as a surprise, making her feel she is having an unwanted intercourse which is no different from the usual ones. As far as occasional sex is concerned, we are only offered a glimpse of it by Margo and Ira, but they are interrupted before they can reach pleasure. Thus, even if it offered the potentiality for pleasure, its tragic interruption prevents any possibility on speculating, what has happened has again taken away the possibility of communication between the sexes, which appears to be completely impossible and unattainable in Bainbridge's novels.

There is, however, a male message that women are able to understand, and it takes place precisely in the domain of sexuality. Objectification of women is a practice

whose existence has been theorized by Kant and, later, Freud. Nowadays, its existence is not brought to question any more, even though its origins are still unknown; it seems to be part of male sexuality, but it is uncertain whether it has arisen naturally or “naturally”; in fact, as society has been for long time dominated by male assumptions, many argue that objectification is simply the outcome of such a domination. In Bainbridge's novels it is through an objectifying gaze that men make women understand that they want to have sex with them, even though they are not always willing to do it. However, most of the women in the novels I have considered are not outraged by objectifying glances, rather they are bewildered at their impossibility of separating their being mothers by their being sexual partners. Male impotency seems to enter the scene as soon as their woman cannot be perceived simply as an object for pleasure any more. Freud had indeed theorized that in some male individuals the incapability of disjoining the sensual and the affectionate component of their sexual desire caused them impotency with the people they loved, but they did not have any problem when they had intercourse with a woman of a lower status than theirs; a whore or a lover. Wallis is considered to be unattainable by her friends, thus they do not even try to woo her, while Scurra, seeing her as a mere sexual partner, can get pleasure from her and he seems also to give pleasure to her in exchange. In Bainbridge's novels, Scurra is the only male character that appears to understand women as well as men, and whose acquaintance does not directly harm his woman; Wallis in fact enters the lifeboat because of what he tells her, thus regaining her matter-of-fact attitude towards life. What is important to notice is that Bainbridge depicts in Scurra a man who does not want to dominate his partner, he recognizes her as different from him, but hierarchically equal. In fact, what makes the relationship between the sexes problematic is male want for domination on their partner. Men are inadequate, they cannot take the leading bar of the relationship or of the family, and thus they feel unmanned by women's attempts

to take control of the situation. In order to vent their frustration, men perpetrate violence on those women to whom they fail feeling superior. Violence on women takes the forms of psychological and physical violence. Physical violence is represented for instance by Mirabella, who is beaten by her partner when she quarrels with him because of his unfaithfulness, but also by Rose, who was hit on her mouth when she had tried to refuse sex with a violent man she had met in a pub. Indeed, violence also appears in the shape of rape, when it is connected to domination. In fact when a man wants to assert his role as a dominator in a couple, he rapes the woman, whose submission is thus considered to be established. Binny is an example for this, as she is raped as soon as Ginger starts talking to her, to disclose his feelings and his plan to her. By raping the woman he feels that he can have back his rightful role of ruling individual. However, men prove to be not even able to accomplish a "proper" rape, as they do so without violence and real coercion. Women thus feel puzzled, and they do not know how to react. In fact, it would be easier for them to turn a man down if he was violent, but women do not feel real victims when rape comes in a "gentle" form. They are thus denied their role of victims, as they are denied of sexual activeness during common sexual acts, coherently with their alleged passivity in the domain of sexuality. Other kinds of violence are nonetheless used upon women in Bainbridge's novels, if not physical, at least psychological. To assert their superiority, men frustrate women making them feel unworthy of them. Joseph, for instance keeps underlining Dotty's food income, while Harold keeps choosing as a subject for conversation American socio-political topics, of which Rose does not know anything. Nonetheless some women react to such attacks by challenging men through words and actions, but they can never reach their target. In fact, May manages only frustrate more bitterly Lionel, Muriel is left waiting in an empty house by her lover, Mrs Thrall has to wait until her husband's death and then to choose between love and her children. Women have to face men

and their violence and, at the same time, they have to fight against the stereotypes they have been pinned into by society.

Bainbridge, like the feminists, believes that there is nothing in common between men and women as far as sexuality is concerned, and she appears to believe that their way of attaining sexual maturity is different for men and women. However both genders seek pleasure, and they believe that is the only thing that they can get one from the other. Despite this, pleasure is denied to women because of the stereotype they are fixed in from society. Bainbridge was not a feminist, though, and what she affirms in her novels is the equality between the sexes, men and women are to her equally selfish when they look for pleasure; moreover, the differences between individuals are the same within both sexes. Those differences are in fact simply the consequence of one's past experiences and of the way one has been brought up.

In particular what Bainbridge stresses about the past of her heroines, she highlights the relationship their mother had with their father. The fatherly figure is portrayed as declining, and its importance within the family seems to be marginal. Men during a moment of crisis let life overpower them, and they cannot face it. They feel responsibility weigh upon them, they feel compelled to do something to change their present life, but they do not know the way to sort things out. Edward and Simpson in *Injury time* are an example of the inefficiency of male initiative in moment of crisis. Their women, on the contrary, are able to make tough decisions when they are under pressure, thus they manage, for instance, to survive the tragedy of the Titanic shipwreck. However, the toughest decision is made by Mrs Thrale, who was torn between her children and the quest for happiness; she chooses to leave everything behind, albeit this means that she has to go against society and the judgement of the others. Mrs Thrale's rebellion brings her to happiness, but she does indeed a great harm to her children, her happiness is meant to be a tragedy for them.

To conclude, Bainbridge's female characters can indeed be considered frail, their conditions depending upon men and society. Men in particular use violence against women in order to mask their own "nonentity-ness" and to assert their own superiority. They prove in fact to be unable to face a woman that they consider equal to themselves, and they need to find a way to degrade her both in everyday life and within sexuality. To escape such a treatment, women try to rebel against both men and society, but they often fail, and their status of women who seek pleasure and self-realization continues to be ignored and loathed. Even when a woman succeeds in her rebellion, the act of a single individual does not have an effect on society as a whole, so each woman has to undertake her private subversion to change her own life, but she cannot hope things to change positively for others than herself. On the whole, however, women are portrayed as stronger than men, because at least they try to fight for recognition in a moment when the male figure is in decline and cannot fulfil women's necessities any more. However, as far as the relationships between the sexes – and in general between individuals – are concerned, human beings for Bainbridge appear basically to be selfish, thus they pursue their own pleasure and they do not care about the others', rather, they take pleasure in harming the other in order to get to power.

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