

Ann Veronica

H.G. Wells

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This is a very didactic novel, in the sense that its meaning is very explicitly spelled out, as Wells has a clear message. In this sense it can hardly count as literature, at least not in the purer sense. But Wells was never an artist practicing *art pour l'art*, he always had a mission and hence a specific application in mind, in this case the unfortunate position of women in society. Wells was an avowed feminist, which some may find ironic given his reputation as a womanizer (and male chauvinist one may be tempted to add). But Wells always claimed that his affairs were conducted on equal terms, whenever he got a woman, a woman got a man. The feminists of a hundred years ago were not that different from those of today, except that they had some more specific issues than in modern time, such as the vote, to focus on, hence the identification of feminism with suffragettes. They tended also to be more radical, at least in a physical sense, as testified by their confrontations with the police during their most belligerent manifestations. Although on general principles sympathetic he had no patience for the extreme forms, those who professed to hate men. And this is of course hardly surprising.

So here we have Ann Veronica, the youngest daughter of a widowed solicitor mostly interested in his hobby of microscopic petrography. He is at a loss how to relate to her except as a sweet doll and expect nothing of her except that she makes no troubles or deviates from his ideas of what is proper for her to do in order to remain his doll. The first crisis occurs when she wants to attend some New Year Party with some slightly bohemian friends, of whom he does not wholeheartedly approve, sensitive as he is to social divisions and decorum, and a party involving a masked ball, of which does not approve of at all. He forbids her to attend and does expect as the social tradition informs him, that he will be obeyed, after all he is the man and the father. Ann Veronica does not want to obey and tries to sneak out but is caught in the act and physically restrained by her father. This is of course very humiliating to her and she decides to leave home and try it out in London.

The London adventure strikes her father as preposterous, as it actually is if you look at it rationally and unsentimentally, and he commands her to return. He has an ally in his sister, who subscribes to the same constrained views, but after all she is a woman, and her natural kindness and affection for her niece trumps her principles and she tries her best surreptitiously to help her out in some small ways, anything beyond that she is unable to do, after all she is a woman, and thus her freedom of action is severely constricted.

Now our heroine is at a loss, her attempts to find gainful employment meet with scant success, but to her relief she has struck up a friendship with an older man by name of Ramage, a fellow commuter of her father, and she is both excited by the interest he takes in her and reassured by his concern. He offers to lend her money, what she instinctively turns down, but when he assures her that it will be a regular loan at some modest interest, she overcomes her initial compunctions, and after all she sorely needs the money. By virtue of that loan she can resume her interrupted studies as a biology student. Her older friend

take her out regularly to dinner and she enjoys those luxuries she otherwise would never be able to afford. But she is naive in the ways of the world and she is up for an unpleasant surprise. During an impromptu visit to the opera watching a performance of Tristan and Isolde, her friend suddenly expresses his romantic interest in her and tries to kiss her. She recoils in horror and disgust. She pleads with him to calm down and not bring it up now, the time and place being the most inappropriate possible. He does constrain himself with some difficulty and he invites her to have dinner with him at some later date and talks things over, what she readily (and innocently) agrees to.

Dinner turns out to be at a private room and when they are done with the eating and the small talk he locks the door in order not to be disturbed anymore by the staff and expresses his passionate love for her. As she once again repulses his advances he gets furious and speaks about having been misled by her and led down the garden path. Did she not understand what it was all about, that sum of money was not really a loan, and she was led to understand that it was not a gift either, nor were all the dinners, to which she had been treated, to be considered as gifts. She had been in effect a kept woman and it was time she paid up! Thus this mixture of ostensible passion for her, his professed worship and his right to possess her. A renewed attempt is being made which requires strong physical resistance on her part necessitating hurting him seriously. A wine glass is being smashed on the floor, which alerts the staff outside, and she threatens to smash more. Thus she is able to extricate herself from the situation, which in essence is to be considered an attempted rape.

Now this story complies very neatly on the issue of sexual harassment and the recent Metoo movement. What is at stake here is not only the actual physical invasion but the assumption that this is the prerogative of the male. If a man blesses you with his attention and desire, he has a right to exercise the latter and the woman the obligation to accept. There is but one mind involved and but one will, the woman is only the object of desire and ultimately exists only as such. If you fall in love with a house you really have a right to possess it. That makes sense in a way, but houses are not people, they have no emotions on their own. Much can be conceived as love objects, but with the exception of other minds, they can all be fitted into a personal solipsistic universe. When love objects are other people with minds of their own, the matter becomes complicated and the source for most of extant literature. And love, the mystery of love, was what Ann Veronica is all about, as a character in a novel, as well the theme of the novel as a whole.

Who is she really in love with? Because she already has an object. The passions of a young woman emerging from her adolescence, are like swarms of male insects desperately looking for an object to mate with. Inevitable they hone in, and in her case it is the instructor who awakens her amorous sympathies. A man some ten years older than her and more, and in addition rumored to be already married but living separated from his wife. They have a common focus, the study of biology, which keep them on parallel tracks to a closer and closer intimacy without they necessarily being aware of it, let alone to feel the need (and courage) to explicitly express it. Then she has also attracted the attention of a certain Manning who is set to marry her. Unlike the former case of Ramage, he does in no way attract intrigue her, she finding him with his obtrusive earnestness and mild socialist ideas in the Russonian manner, wooden and boring. Manning is a kind fellow

though, with none of the pretensions of a Ramage, and maybe if she needs protection in the world he may be a very solid and convenient choice, is not this the way things work out in real life? Her aunt would surely approve and her father would be reassured.

So after the disaster with Ramage, she is seized with a desperate desire to join the feminist movement, in particular its extreme wing. She is summoned to a demonstration into the every building of Parliament to demand the vote in the most direct and aggressive manner, being surreptitiously delivered there in vans, like in so many Trojan horses. Predictably she is seized by the police and a grandfatherly one, sensing her youth and innocence, allows her the opportunity to run away, which she does not avail herself of. She is thus arrested taken to court and sentenced to a month or so in prison which turns out to be an awful experience. After that she feels beaten and like the prodigal daughter returns to her home. She accept the offer of an engagement with Manning and continues her studies at the lab. Her instructor when seeing the fancy engagement ring becomes very upset in the privacy of his office without maybe fully realizing why. After some time she cannot keep up with her pretense, breaks off the engagement to the utter surprise of her fiance and runs off to her instructor and declares her love to him. He eventually, after a few tokens of remonstrations, backs down and and accepts, and together, burning all bridges, they elope to Switzerland where they have a blissful honeymoon up among the meadows, the wild sublime scenery allowing them plenty of metaphysical fancies. It is all pretty well described by Wells actually giving you a sense of the landscape and the exultation of their freedom and happiness. Finally an epilogue, somewhat sentimental I would say, is glued on in which there is a reconciliation with her father and aunt. All is well which ends well.

Now the story is, as initially remarked, is very didactic, meaning very transparent and as a reader you are never in doubt what to feel and think. There really are no memorable characters which stick in your mind. When the novel was published it was different, it caused an uproar, and as it was then a contemporary one and people could speculate who each character in the novel really corresponded to in real life. In other words a *roman de cief*. The heroine is supposed to be modeled on Amber Reeves, a brilliant student barely out of her teens when she notoriously eloped with Wells ending in the birth of a child and a more or less forced married off to an admirer (Manning?). The instructor bears some likeness to Wells himself (does this imply that Reeves took the initiative?) by abandoning a biological career for a literary one. This game of identifying the real models behind the characters is much less exciting to modern readers, and it is remarked that only novels which have more than just topical interest have a chance of turning into classics. Whether *Ann Veronica* is a classics is another question, unlike many of the old Wells novels which are dismally reprinted on demand, this edition is actually a regular Penguin edition with a foreword by Margret Drabble pointing out the haste in which the novel was written, the presence of many awkward sentences, which ought to have been polished away, but she agrees with me that the scenes set in Switzerland have a delightful freshness.