

"A CHRIST-LIKE, ALL-EMBRACING" METHOD

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**“A CHRIST-LIKE, ALL-EMBRACING” METHOD:  
FROM TRAGIC TO COMPASSIONATE IN SELECTED NOVELS  
OF ARNOLD BENNETT**

By  
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A Thesis  
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## Abstract

Arnold Bennett is best known for the realistic description in his work; few critics examine his success as a technician, and the general opinion of Bennett has been formed by essays written by famous critics who were unable to see what Bennett had achieved in his work. This thesis will show how Bennett's novels progressed from a tragic method in *Anna of the Five Towns* (1902) to an entirely non-tragic method in the *Clayhanger* trilogy (1910-16). Bennett's novels show a progression away from a tragic method, and towards a method that emerges from Bennett's developing idea that a great novelist must possess a "Christ-like, all embracing compassion" (*Journal*, 15 October 1896). Compassion is the defining characteristic of the method of Bennett's serious novels in this period. This understanding of Bennett's novels not only accounts for the structure of the novels themselves, but also helps to illuminate the nature of Bennett's place in the Edwardian period and in English fiction as a whole.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Bennett and His Critics

Arnold Bennett (1867-1931) was one of England's premier novelists and men of letters in the first quarter of this century. He is remembered mainly for his novels and short stories set in the industrial "Five Towns", a thinly-disguised version of what is now the city of Stoke-on-Trent. Also, he wrote a great deal of "sensational fiction" and a number of plays, with which he amassed great wealth, as well as a certain amount of scorn from other, more "serious" artists. However, Bennett ought to be taken more seriously than he is. His novels are not primarily realistic; also, they are not limitingly conventional. In his novels Bennett tested the tragic method and, as his skill grew, actually dispensed with it in favour of a method that would better express his own views.

The invective of a few critics can doom an important writer to an obscurity near the margin of the literary canon. Such has been the fate of Arnold Bennett. In his time, three writers who would later be recognised as among the greatest of early twentieth-century novelists and critics condemned his novels, so Bennett's pre-eminence, both as artist and as man of letters,

soon faded. Henry James (1843-1916), Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), and D. H. Lawrence (1885-1930) all attacked Bennett, for different reasons and in different ways.

Henry James and Arnold Bennett were never on very good terms. Bennett accepted James' place as a leading man of letters and an exquisite stylist in the early years of this century, and granted him ample, if qualified, praise. James did not return the favour, granting Bennett praise only in the most reserved and damning way possible. James' main comment on Bennett, in his 1914 article, "The Younger Generation", is that Bennett's novels merely saturate the reader with details, and little more. James agrees that at first, this is enough:

When the author of "Clayhanger" has put down upon the table, in dense and unconfused array, every fact required to make the life of the Five Towns press upon us and to make our sense of it, so well fed, content us, we may very well go on for the time in the captive condition, the beguiled and bemused condition, the acknowledgement of which is in general our highest tribute to the temporary master of our sensibility. (Edel, 183)

However, James' sensibilities are satisfied by Bennett's method for only a short time:

Nothing of such moment--or rather at the end of them, when the end begins to threaten--may be of a more curious strain than the dawning unrest that suggests to us fairly our first critical comment: "Yes, yes; but is this *all*? These are the circumstances of the interest--we see, we see; but where is the interest itself, where and what is its centre and how are we to measure it in relation to *that*?" (Edel, 183-184)



James suggests that to capture the reader's interest and keep it for the length of a novel is, indeed, an achievement, but it is not enough. Interest ought not to be held merely for its own sake.

Indeed, James goes on to state that the "saturation" method is not sufficient for the true craft of an author. Rather, it represents only half of what is required of a novel. The other half is "the application [the author] is inspired to make" (Edel, 183) of the subject with which he has held his reader spellbound so far. However, James' implication that Bennett was giving a meticulous description to draw attention away from the fact that he had little to say is irresponsible. To begin with, Bennett's description of his characters' lives is detailed and exhaustive, but it in no way pretends to be complete. The narrative voice is not meant to be authoritative; the contrast between scenes given from one point of view in *Clayhanger* (1910) and another in *Hilda Lessways* (1911) is strong evidence of weaknesses and bias in the third person narrator. Furthermore, it is not thinly disguised sentiment that compels Bennett to write as exhaustive a history of his home town as *Clayhanger* turns out to be. Bennett required some realism to hold the reader's interest throughout the fifteen years the novel spans; however, the realism is incidental to the themes of resignation and repression in the book. In all of Bennett's major works, the setting is impressively and fully rendered; perhaps it is a tribute to Bennett's skill that so many readers are so dazzled by the details that they fail to notice the depth of the novel beneath its imposing surface.

Although D. H. Lawrence published no criticism of Bennett, his letters show a great deal of hostility towards him. The hostility extended to a personal dislike of Bennett, despite the fact that Bennett was among the first to write in opposition to the banning and burning of Lawrence's *The Rainbow* (1915), and that Bennett lent Lawrence money. Bennett admired Lawrence's energy and passion; yet Lawrence's energy and passion would not allow him to sympathise with Bennett's work.

Lawrence read Bennett's *Anna of the Five Towns* (1902) while in Italy, and the book moved him to write to A. W. McLeod:

I have read *Anna of the Five Towns* today, because it is stormy weather. For five months I have scarcely seen a word of English print, and to read it makes me feel fearfully queer....I hate England and its hopelessness. I hate Bennett's resignation. Tragedy ought really to be a great kick at misery. But *Anna of the Five Towns* seems like an acceptance. (Lawrence 150)

It is true that Lawrence had no reason to love England at that time, but his dislike of Bennett's method seems somewhat exaggerated. Lawrence demands earth-shaking tragedy from novels; in this, he shies away from the Edwardians' advance into uncharted fictional subject matter. Lawrence's main difference with Bennett, however, is that he rejects Bennett's Edwardian sense of human limitations. Bennett's interest was not only in the art of tragedy, but also in life as it is lived. Although watering down tragedy with the unheroic resignation of the hero may be detrimental to the effect of tragedy, to Bennett, the novel appeared to be different from tragedy in the pure, Aristotelian sense.

Indeed, Bennett's work expresses a dissatisfaction with tragedy, beginning with *Anna of the Five Towns*. As his work progressed, Bennett showed more aversion to tragedy as a method for his novels; *Clayhanger*, in fact, throws off tragedy completely, while still addressing issues worthy of tragic treatment. The best response to Lawrence's criticism is to use the words Bennett wrote to Frank Harris: "What you wanted...was another book, but not a better one" (*Letters III* 239).

As an interesting side note, many feel Lawrence's *The Lost Girl* (1920) to be a critical response to *Anna of the Five Towns*. Bennett's response to *The Lost Girl*, then, is of interest; he comments,

I read Lawrence's new novel, *The Lost Girl*. It would be absolutely great if it had a clear central theme and comprehensible construction. It doesn't end; it stops. But it is very fine indeed, the work of genius. It held me. I read it in less than 24 hours. (*Journal*, November 30, 1920)

Although Bennett seems completely unaware that the book was a sort of challenge, his appreciation of Lawrence's work suggests that his own characters' resignation was not a result of his inability to achieve high tragedy, but rather a conscious choice. Again, the difference between Bennett and Lawrence that annoys Lawrence so much is a fundamental difference in their opinions of what the novel ought to achieve.

Virginia Woolf's "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" (1923) is the best known and most damning criticism of Bennett. Although the article was something of a sensation when it was written, Bennett characteristically

ignored it, claiming to the end of his life never to have read it. The article targets Bennett, as the worst of the Edwardian novelists (the other two being H. G. Wells [1866-1946] and John Galsworthy [1867-1933]), for using, in Woolf's view, verisimilitude empty of meaning. Jefferson Hunter sees the essay as, perhaps, less an attack on Bennett than an attempt at self-definition:

By disparaging other writers' alleged versions of Mrs Brown, Woolf clears a space for her own attempt at the character. She dispatches the past to a safe place in order to define more clearly what her own fiction must be like. Literary iconoclasm of this sort was a defining gesture of the modernists, and merely as an intention, it sets them apart from the preceding generation. (Hunter 70-71)

John Lucas supports the opinion that Woolf's criticism has more to do with herself than with Bennett:

How utterly inaccurate Virginia Woolf's criticism of the best of Bennett is, and how generously understanding he can be of a range on characters and temperaments about which, by comparison, she knows or can say nothing. (230)

Indeed, Woolf's essay displays a wilful ignorance of what Bennett was trying to achieve, and a remarkably uncharitable attitude towards all three Edwardian novelists.

The primary thrust of Virginia Woolf's attack on Bennett is aimed at his method of drawing character. Her argument (illustrated by selective quotation from *Hilda Lessways*) is that Bennett failed truly to capture the essence of people in his characters. Woolf describes Bennett's writing by postulating how he might write about the "Mrs Brown" Woolf once saw on a train:

Mr Bennett... would observe every detail with immense care. He would notice the advertisements; the pictures of Swanage and Portsmouth; the way in which the cushion bulged between the buttons; how Mrs Brown wore a brooch which had cost three-and-ten-three at Whitworth's bazaar; and had mended both gloves--indeed the left-hand glove had been replaced.... And so he would sidle sedately towards Mrs Brown. (Woolf 428-429)

Woolf's criticism is that Bennett describes characters' surroundings in an overpowering profusion of detail, but never describes the characters themselves; the essence of a character is left for the reader to interpret. More sanguine minds will quickly recognise the unfairness of Woolf's judgement. She demanded a method different from that which Bennett chose to use--hardly an unpardonable offence; or perhaps, Woolf simply did not fully understand what Bennett was trying to do.

In 1896, Bennett recorded in his journal his most definitive (and most often quoted) statement about his own aesthetic when he wrote "Essential characteristic of the really great novelist: a Christ-like, all-embracing compassion" (*Journal*, 15 October 1896). This statement provides the basis for the method of all of Bennett's major novels. On the surface, certainly, he may seem to be merely piling up details and description--describing the carriage, as it were, rather than its inhabitants. However, rather than avoiding the task of creating a character, Bennett was creating the character's entire world. The fact is that it is difficult to wholly dislike most of Bennett's characters, as people, just as it is difficult to find a real person without any redeeming qualities. The reader is never allowed prejudice or hatred; these,

for Bennett, are qualities of ill-informed and immature judgement. So when describing Woolf's Mrs Brown, it is natural, even necessary, for Bennett to mention that "her father kept a shop in Harrogate" (Woolf 432). That Mrs Brown's father kept a shop in Harrogate is fundamental to Mrs Brown's make-up as a character. The experience of the Harrogate shop is a part of Mrs Brown, and it helps to define her; if it did not, Bennett would not mention it. As Andrew Lincoln states, "Bennett's realism is of the kind that conceals art, not of the kind that stands in place of art" (Lincoln 198).

This defence of Bennett is routine; it has been made before. But Bennett's commitment to an "all-embracing compassion" is far more important in his work than James or Lawrence or Woolf perceived. His compassion was not merely an element in his drawing of character; it is the fundamental, defining characteristic of Bennett's work. Every aspect of Bennett's novels is informed by the desire to understand, to see other sides, to sympathise. And this is not merely a reason for including a great deal of detail; it is the organisational foundation on which Bennett's novels are built. The very structures of such novels as *The Old Wives' Tale* (1908) and *Clayhanger* show this philosophy at work.

In what way can a novelist express a certain philosophy through his novels' structures? Bennett does so by setting up the larger movements of the novels in such a way that they facilitate a multifaceted method of narration. Narratives are fragmented, timelines are mixed and juggled, and entire

chapters are devoted to explorations of seemingly irrelevant episodes concerning events long past. High tragedy is sacrificed to what Bennett regards as a deeper and fuller understanding of character; tragedy's keen edge is dulled by reminiscences, background information, and details about minor figures in the plot. Furthermore, all characters are given full treatment. The focus is not solely on the particular tragedy or greatness of the main character, but is allowed to examine other, less important characters. Bennett's intent is not to render one character alone, but to examine individual characters by placing them in a society made up of numerous individual minds. No character is limited; all may achieve tragic greatness. It is these qualities which allow Bennett to draw his characters in his uniquely sympathetic way, and to write his novels to express a personally compassionate outlook. For Bennett, the power of tragedy is secondary to a true rendering of life.

### **The Edwardian Period: A Dispute Concerning the Novel**

English novels of the Edwardian period (roughly 1901-14) lie between two poles, represented by two major novelists, Henry James and H. G. Wells. These two writers complement each other in an interesting way; although they corresponded extensively and were, for a time, good friends, their views on the novel were wholly different. In fact, their friendship ended due to a dispute concerning those views.

Wells discussed his views on the novel extensively in his letters and essays, but his opening to *Tono-Bungay* (1909) is one of his most compelling statements of intent for the novel medium:

I warn you this book is going to be something of an agglomeration. I want to trace my social trajectory (and my uncle's) as the main line of my story, but as this is my first novel and almost certainly my last, I want to get in, too, all sorts of things that struck me, things that amused me and impressions I got--even although they don't minister directly to my narrative at all....And possibly I may even flow into descriptions of people who are really no more than people seen in transit, just because it amuses me to recall what they said and did to us, and more particularly how they behaved in the brief but splendid glare of *Tono-Bungay* and its still more glaring offspring. It lit some of them up, I can assure you! Indeed, I want to get in all sorts of things. My ideas of a novel all through are comprehensive rather than austere. (5)

These words are those of the novel's narrator and protagonist, George Ponderevo, but the sentiment seems a direct response to Henry James' ideas. Wells hearkens back to the eighteenth-century English novel in the beginning passage; the only structural element he purports to use is the tracing of the social movements of the protagonist, a narrative technique much like that, for example, of Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722). Again, Wells is not speaking directly, but his voice can be clearly heard in Ponderevo's introduction.

Another interesting characteristic of this introduction is Ponderevo's avowed intention to include seemingly irrelevant details. To add extraneous events and characters which have no particular bearing on the plot might



threaten to detract from the unity and organic wholeness of the work. However, Ponderevo, in his role as narrator, muses on this, and comes up with a statement of artistic intent which is of great importance if one is to understand the Edwardian novel:

I...wonder whether, after all, this is any fair statement of what I am attempting in this book. I've given, I see, an impression that I want to make simply a hotch-potch of anecdotes and experiences... I suppose what I'm really trying to render is nothing more nor less than Life--as one man has found it. I want to tell--*myself*, and my impressions of the thing as a whole...and how we poor individuals get driven and lured and stranded among these windy, perplexing shoals and channels. (5-6)

This impressionistic form for the novel seems noteworthy to George, who has read "an average share of novels" (6)--and perhaps he takes a little too much notice of it, considering his non-literary background.

Wells discusses irrelevance in novels in his essay, "The Contemporary Novel" (1911). He maintains, here, that details and events that are irrelevant to the main plot are quite allowable in fiction:

The novel...is like breakfasting in the open air on a summer morning; nothing is irrelevant if the writer's mood is happy, and the tapping of the thrush upon the garden path, or the petal of apple-blossom that floats down into my coffee, is as relevant as the egg I open or the bread and butter I bite....Of course, all these things may fail in their effect; they may jar, hinder, irritate, and all are difficult to do well; but it is no artistic merit to evade a difficulty. (Edel, 140)

Wells' essay clearly shows the difference between himself and James. Where James would cut out anything that does not fit the taut line of the plot, Wells would hang anything on the plot line that would not unduly weigh it down.

Wells points to the short story for tightly-constructed plots: "A short story should go to its point as a man flies from a pursuing tiger: he pauses not for the daisies in his path, or to note the pretty moss on the tree he climbs for safety" (Edel, 140). Thus, Wells' view of what the novel is intended to do is fundamentally different from James'.

Ponderevo's contention in the introduction to *Tono-Bungay* that his narrative is an attempt to represent Life is critical. The reason for the baggy inclusiveness of his narrative is that it better represents life. More importantly, though, this implies that the very reason he is writing his story down is that it represents life. And if we are to accept that Ponderevo's story is a fit subject for a novel--which even Henry James himself did, if his praise of the book is any indication (Edel, 60)--then we must accept that the novel's concern is with the representation of life.

As outlined above, however, James required more of a novelist than mere representation. In his "The Younger Generation" (1914), he details the problem he finds with the most popular Edwardian novelists, especially Bennett and Wells. James' criticism of these two novelists is that they "saturate" the reader with details, episodes, and description, but fail to do anything of significance with those details. The reader is left, according to James, with an empty feeling at the end of a Bennett or Wells novel, even if the reader is captivated throughout.

What James would require, it seems, is a novel that was concerned with issues deeper than mere surface representation. Whereas Wells is content with the representation of life, James is not. Whereas Wells is confident in the ability of accurately-rendered lives to express truth, James requires the addition of something more--which we may conveniently label "art"--in order for those truths to become fully apparent. For Wells truth is self-evident; for James it is hidden and must be rendered carefully and artistically.

Bennett stands somewhere between James and Wells. Although he paid a great deal of attention to formal and stylistic concerns, he was also concerned with the representation of life in his novels. How the two might be united is, of course, a problem that every novelist addresses in one way or another; but Bennett's solution offers an original and effective way of doing so. Bennett's major novels reveal an aesthetic that is similar to the artless realism of Wells and the nineteenth-century French realists such as Zola and Maupassant, yet which is sensitive to consciously planned and rigorously defined structure, as found in the work of Flaubert, Turgenev or James. Bennett's response to the problem of the novelist's art is not only visible in his novels themselves, but also is extensively discussed in his journals, letters, and articles.

An examination of Bennett's commentary on the novelist's art reveals that he was very interested in the form and technique of the novel. Furthermore, his novels have a complex and intricate form, evidence of

Bennett's intense concentration on formal construction. However, his novels also seem sprawling, discursive, and exhaustively detailed. The reason for this apparent contradiction lies in the philosophy which inspired the novels. Bennett wrote serious novels which are not dependent on a classical tragic structure, but which instead are organised so as to express Bennett's philosophy of compassion, which he felt all great novelists must share.

## Chapter One

### Bennett in Theory

Bennett's *The Craft of Fiction* was published in 1914. He had written two books on writing before this: *The Truth About an Author* (1903) and *How to Become an Author* (1903). However, the former was mainly autobiographical, and the latter was more concerned with the publishing side of the literary business than with the actual writing of novels, and was, as the subtitle indicated, "A Practical Guide". *The Craft of Fiction*, then, was Bennett's first full-length treatment of what he felt to be the novelist's task.

By 1914, Bennett's ideas about the novel were fairly well established; his opinions on writing changed little after *The Old Wives' Tale* and *Clayhanger*. His journals show his greatest interest in the technique of writing fiction to lie in the years from 1896 to 1905; his letters reflect a similar lack of concentration on technique after this period. This is not, of course, to imply that Bennett lost interest in the subject; Ford Madox Ford (1873-1939) said that Bennett was the only writer of all those he knew who loved to discuss literary technique (Hepburn 76). However, Bennett was by this time an established and mature novelist, and the questions of technique

which he had formerly discussed theoretically in his journals and letters had been answered in practice in the dozen or so novels published by 1910.

Bennett in his early period struggled to find novelists to emulate. He had little to choose from in the English novel. Bennett, like most writers of the Edwardian period, was trying to move away from the heritage of such Victorian novelists as Dickens, Trollope, and George Eliot. The only living novelists of note at this time to whom Bennett could look were too close to this Victorian school: Bennett writes in 1897 of Hardy, "What an excessively slow method of narration Hardy employs! In this he is as old-fashioned (*mutatis mutandis*) as Richardson" (*Journal*, January 5, 1897).

Bennett chose two main groups of novelists as models for his fiction, both mainly from the continent. The first group was the naturalistic school. His excessive regard for the French naturalists is well-known, as is his admiration of George Moore, the only French-influenced English naturalist of importance at the time. Bennett contended in a preface to a later edition of the novel that *The Old Wives' Tale*, in fact, was conceived as an attempt to "go one better" than Zola's *Un Vie* (1883) (quoted in Drabble 147). Many critics, notably Henry James and Virginia Woolf, found the influence Bennett drew from these realistic authors his worst feature, and Bennett's own attention to detail does seem to show the influence of French naturalism and realism.

However, Bennett's own opinion of the French realists is ambiguous. He writes as early as 1899, "The day of my enthusiasm for 'realism,' for 'naturalism,' has passed. I can perceive that a modern work of fiction dealing with modern life may ignore realism and yet be great" (*Journal*, January 3, 1899). Thus, before any of his important novels had been written, Bennett challenged the one principle that has been ascribed to him by virtually every critic. Bennett's position, then, is difficult to determine. He openly rejected the French emphasis on realism for realism's sake, yet the aspect of his work that is most prominent is his use of particular, realistic detail.

Zola, as it happens, himself rejected realism as the aim of fiction in his essay "The Experimental Novel" (1893). Although there is no evidence that Bennett read this essay, his long familiarity with Zola's work would have made him aware that such a defence of Zola's technique was available. Zola's essay characterises the novel as an experimental process in which emotions and intellect, rather than physical or physiological functions, are tested. He complains that:

A contemptible reproach which they heap upon us naturalistic writers is the desire to be solely photographers. We have in vain declared that we admit the necessity of an artist's possessing an individual temperament and a personal expression; they continue to reply to us with these imbecile arguments, about the impossibility of being strictly true, about the necessity of arranging facts to produce a work of art of any kind....We start, indeed, from the true facts, which are our indestructible basis; but to show the mechanism of these facts it is necessary for us to produce and direct the phenomena; this is our share of invention, here is the genius in the book. (Zola, 6-7)

The resemblance of this argument to Bennett's assertion that "facts should not be ignored", but "might, for the sake of more clearly disclosing the beauty, suffer a certain *distortion*" (*Journal*, January 3, 1899) is far from trivial. Bennett has followed Zola to the same conclusion: that ultimately, realism alone is not an adequate artistic end.

One is forced, then, to consider the authors who Bennett himself, rather than his critics, considered to be his greatest influences: Balzac, Flaubert, and Turgenev. Bennett notes very early in his journal that:

In drawing character, Turgenev generally begins by sketching the previous history of the person almost from birth, with piquant gossipy detail. The reader, therefore, is made personally acquainted with the character to start with. A simple trick this, in essence. Yet what perfect art Turgenev puts into the composition of these little biographies! (*Journal*, October 12, 1896)

Bennett's admiration of Turgenev's style of character-drawing suggests what he would eventually try to accomplish in his own art. He finds in Turgenev a middle ground between the artistic concerns of James and the representative concerns of Wells; although Turgenev presents characters "almost from birth", he employs techniques which are not only more streamlined than a chronological, biographical narrative, but also are more interesting and artistic.

In the technique of Turgenev, Bennett discovered a model that he found lacking in his own English tradition. Bennett laments that:



None of the (so-called) great masters of English nineteenth-century fiction had (if I am right) a deep artistic interest in form and treatment; they were absorbed in "subject"...The novelists cared little for form, the *science* of construction--*Composition*. They had not artistic taste...these novelists may have been great writers, but... [were not] great artist[s] in the sense in which I understand the word. An artist must be interested primarily in presentment, not in the thing presented. He must have a passion for technique, a deep love for form. (*Journal*, January 11, 1898)

Here, surprisingly, Bennett edges closer to the Jamesian school of fiction. Gone is the realist desire to set out life in its greater and lesser details; Bennett has begun to demand more of a novel than the mere cumulative effect, or saturation, of detail.

Bennett's reversal on this issue is perhaps stated most strikingly when he describes in his journal his feelings upon re-reading Maupassant's *Un Vie*:

Finished *Un Vie*. Disappointed. No novel affected me as much as this did when I first read it about 10 or 12 years ago. It made me sad for days. Now I find it bâclé in parts. Too much left out--and not left out on one guiding principle but on several. The stuff not sufficiently gathered up in dramatic groupings. Recital often too ambling. Rosalie at the close rather conventional; overdrawn into a *deus ex machina*. The book too short. Sometimes too full. Sometimes too hasty. But of course good. (*Journal*, May 28, 1908)

Although Bennett seems to be trying hard to recapture his affection for the novel (especially in the abrupt last sentence), his own aesthetic theory has clearly changed in the past "10 or 12 years". (Allen speculates that Bennett probably began to read Maupassant no later than 1893, and possibly even in his late teens [Allen, 15]; this makes Bennett's estimate of how long ago he first read the book seem, possibly, a bit short.) There is good reason for the

change in Bennett's aesthetic theory, however. He had written several novels by 1908, and was, by then, able to make a career of writing. He was part of the literary elite of London; he had written some extremely popular serials; in short, he was a successful writer. The experience Bennett had gained by 1908 was bound to have changed his outlook.

Bennett was neither a disciple of James, though, nor of Turgenev. His position in relation to all of these influences is rather complex. He had rejected the great classics of realism, and embraced form and technique as higher artistic aims. However, at the same time as he was praising technique, he was also continuing to allow room for realism:

But they [superficial facts] are of *some* importance. And although I concede that in the past I have attached too high a value to realism, nevertheless I see no reason why it should be dispensed with. My desire is to depict the deeper beauty while abiding by the envelope of facts. At the worst, the facts should not be ignored....Indeed they cannot be ignored in the future.  
(*Journal*, January 3, 1899)

Bennett seems to prescribe two conflicting techniques at this point: to ignore realism where it is unnecessary, and to include facts where possible. He advocates form as superior to realism, yet desires that realism not be sacrificed.

Bennett's criticisms of novels as his journals progress reveal this tension between technique and realism. Of Balzac, Bennett writes:

Balzac thoroughly enjoyed building up the social atmosphere of a place--and taking his full time over the business. Witness *Ursule Mironet*, in which a third and more of the book is "preparation."

*The Country Doctor* contains, strictly speaking, no "story"; the sole concern is a change of atmosphere. (*Journal*, May 30, 1899)

Bennett is sensitive to Balzac's, on the one hand, slowly building an atmosphere, and on the other, expending a great deal of effort in setting up the story. Later, Bennett would even praise Balzac's "superb digressiveness" (*Journal*, June 6, 1900). Yet he excuses the digression, for it is useful to the story. He is not so kind to Balzac in a later entry:

I finished *La Cousine Bette* again this morning. It is magnificent, but there is a wild creative rush about it that is rather too wild. The trick of leaving out is pushed to its farthest, perhaps too far, and though the book is long it contains nothing but fundamental stuff. Often, it seems to me, Balzac has not given sufficient care to the manufacture of convincing detail. He must have been decidedly in a very frenzy of creative impulse when he wrote it. (*Journal*, May 18, 1904)

Bennett's reaction indicates that although he might reject the realistic depiction of life as an end, he sees it as a necessary part of the total aesthetic success of a novel. Again, Bennett is unwilling to dismiss realism altogether.

In order to resolve this tension, Bennett finds a guiding principle to which both technique and representation must conform. Bennett sees this principle as an aesthetic principle: "To find beauty, which is always hidden -- that is the aim....What the artist has to grasp is that there is no such thing as ugliness in the world" (*Journal*, January 3, 1899). This is the sort of principle that, in Bennett's view, Maupassant is missing in *Un Vie*, and that Balzac is missing in *La Cousine Bette*.

Bennett does not, unfortunately, remain with this single organising principle (although he does not stray too far from it, either). Bennett finds “the interestingness of existence” a primary aim for the novel in *The Craft of Fiction* (as will be discussed below); as well as “a Christ-like, all-embracing compassion”. However he chooses to express his aims, Bennett is searching for a single impression to give the reader. He attempts to find a central idea around which the novel can be organised, as James would suggest. However, the purpose of that idea is not to create a greater work of art, in the Jamesian sense, but to achieve a greater representation of life, as Wells had suggested in *Tono-Bungay*. Thus, Bennett is not positioning himself somewhere between James and Wells, but, he believes, beyond them. Their arguments concern the mechanics of narrative, James with his demand for artistic presentment, Wells with his journalistic desire to represent Life as accurately as possible. In contrast, Bennett sees the dispute as an aesthetic one.

*The Craft of Fiction* represents a theory, then, that had by 1914 crystallised for Bennett. It is an explanation of the way a novel is constructed--more specifically, of the way Bennett would construct a novel. At first glance, *The Craft of Fiction* may seem to espouse a realistic, representative theory of the novel. However, Bennett’s idea of an organising aesthetic principle soon becomes apparent.

The first part of the study is entitled “Seeing Life”, and Bennett begins with a scene from real life: an account of an accident in which a dog has been

run over by a tram. His description spans several pages, and pays attention to detail while maintaining a somewhat ironic tone. At the end of this, Bennett says of the crowd:

They have watched a dog run over. They analyse neither their sensations nor the phenomenon. They have witnessed it whole, as a bad writer uses a cliché. They have observed--that is to say, they have really seen--nothing. (15)

Bennett also adds that "people are not very observant, or not intelligently observant" (18). Thus, Bennett establishes from the beginning of the study that observation is not simply the act of watching something happen; it requires analysis, structure, and intellectual work.

When Bennett goes on to select a comparative example from earlier fiction, he is on ground similar to that plotted out in his journal. He claims that Dickens was a great observer,

but he would assuredly have been a still greater observer had he been a little less pre-occupied with trivial and unco-ordinated details. Good observation consists not in multiplicity of detail, but in co-ordination of detail according to a true perspective of relative importance, so that a finally just general impression may be reached in the shortest possible time. (19)

This provides a good summary of the theory Bennett slowly built up in his early journals. He again strives for a central organising principle in "a true perspective of relative importance." Furthermore, he sees the ultimate aim of the novel as providing a "finally just general impression". But Bennett never loses sight of the balance he is striking between James and Wells. He cautions that, although the success of the observation is a matter of technique:

the observer must never lose sight of the fact that what he is trying to see is life, is the woman next door, is the man in the train, --and not a concourse of abstractions. (22)

Bennett dramatically presents the Wellsian side of the argument in the first section of *The Craft of Fiction*. He shows how life is to be seen, and what exactly might be seen in it, in his description of an everyday event.

However, Bennett does not lose sight of the Jamesian side at all, and weaves it through his discussion of "seeing life". But Bennett concentrates solely on technique in the third section of the book, "Writing Novels". He begins with the topic of the design of a novel:

In my opinion the first rule [of design] is that the interest must be centralised; it must not be diffused equally over various parts of the canvas....A novel must have one, two, or three figures, that easily overtop the rest. These figures must be in the foreground, and the rest in the middle-distance or in the back-ground. (52-53)

So far, Bennett's prescribed technique is similar to James'. A novel ought to be organised around a central figure or small group of figures. However, Bennett's emphasis on the sympathetic purpose of the organising principle soon follows:

Moreover, these figures--whether they are saints or sinners--must somehow be presented more sympathetically than the others....what makes a hero is less the deeds of the figure chosen than the understanding sympathy of the artist with the figure. (53)

Bennett's central concern--the concept around which all of the observation is organised, and therefore the filter through which the entire fiction passes--turns out to be human sympathy. Bennett's early desire for the novelist to

possess a "Christ-like, all-embracing compassion" has become the principle by which all novels must be written.

Bennett has something to say on the subject of technique as well. His discussion first takes aim at the Victorian novel:

The Edwardian and Georgian out-and-out defenders of Victorian fiction are wont to argue that though the event-plot in sundry great novels may be loose and casual (that is to say, simply careless), the 'idea-plot' is usually close-knit, coherent, and logical.... Assuming that an idea-plot can exist independently, and that the mysterious thing is superior in form to its coarse fellow, the event-plot (which I positively do not believe), --even then I still hold that sloppiness in the fabrication of the event-plot amounts to a grave iniquity. (56-57)

This attack on the Victorian novel and its supporters shows again why Bennett found no consistent model for emulation in earlier English fiction, and chose to look abroad for inspiration. However, this also reveals the Jamesian quality of Bennett's theory. Bennett cannot conceive of the events in a plot as something separate from the ideas in a novel; a novel must be an unified whole, without the looseness and sloppiness that, for Bennett, characterised too many Victorian novels.

Interestingly, Bennett also fires a salvo at naturalism. He describes naturalism as a mere passing fad:

The one other important rule in construction is that the plot should be kept throughout within the same convention.... The defects of a new convention disclose themselves late in its career. The notion that 'naturalists' have at last lighted on a final formula which ensures truth to life is ridiculous. 'Naturalist' is merely an epithet expressing self-satisfaction. (57)

Bennett explicitly states his opposition to naturalism, and the preceding argument reveals that he was clearly attempting something much different from naturalism. In fact, his attack on naturalism is probably a response to the fact that that label had been applied to him too often for his liking. He notes in his journal his annoyance at some reviews of *Clayhanger*:

*Daily Mail* and *Observer* (9 ins. and 15 ins.). Usual rot about total absence of plot, and about cinematograph, and photograph, and that book might end anywhere or nowhere. (*Journal*, September 21, 1910)

Bennett's critics, including James and Woolf, persisted in applying the naturalist label to him, and today's critics do the same, despite the great lengths to which Bennett went in order to show how fundamentally different his novels were from those that truly are examples of naturalism.

Bennett was not a great innovator or experimenter in the craft of fiction. However, his journal entries on the subject and his study of novelistic method reveal a single-minded purposefulness concerning fiction, which must be understood if Bennett's novels are to be fairly and fully appreciated. As Bennett's skill and experience grew, he moved away from the straightforward tragedy of *Anna of the Five Towns*, and began to write novels whose method does not conform to Aristotelian rules of tragedy or comedy. The result would be *Clayhanger*, Bennett's greatest--and, importantly, his most sympathetic--novel.



**Chapter Two**  
**Bennett in Practice**  
*Anna of the Five Towns*

When D. H. Lawrence complained of the substitution of resignation for tragedy in *Anna of the Five Towns*, he was, in a way, correct. However, *Anna* is one of Bennett's most purely tragic novels, the only other being *Riceyman Steps* (1923). *Anna of the Five Towns* is conceived of and executed as a tragedy in the classical sense. Lawrence's sense of the incompleteness and ineffectiveness of the tragedy stems from Bennett's complication and dilution of the central thrust of the tragedy with a distinctly non-classical sympathy for the other characters in the novel, particularly the antagonist. This dilution of a potentially tragic theme would later develop into the much more complex novels, *The Old Wives' Tale* and *Clayhanger*.

Tragedy is not necessarily a strictly-defined concept, unchanged since Aristotle wrote his *Poetics*. However, many of Aristotle's ideas on how tragedy can and cannot succeed are still valid. Northrop Frye writes that tragic fiction "guarantees, so to speak, a disinterested quality in literary experience" (Frye 206). If this disinterestedness is important to tragedy, then Bennett begins to move away from tragedy in *Anna of the Five Towns*. Anna

is an adequate tragic hero, but the novel, for all its tragic pretensions, lessens the effect of its own tragedy with the character of Ephraim Tellwright. Contrary to Aristotle's advice, Bennett makes it difficult for the reader not to sympathise with Ephraim, who is set up as an evil man. Bennett goes to great lengths to keep the tragedy from developing along the lines prescribed by Aristotle.

Bennett further complicates the Aristotelian idea of tragedy in his introduction of comedy to his tragic novels. The ironic tone, which sets up the dualities necessary for the tragedy in an interesting and compelling way, is only part of what is implied by "comedy". Equally important are the aspects of comedy which are not precisely humorous, but which have more to do with the idea of comedy as a dramatic mode. James Kincaid characterises tragedy in a way similar to Frye's when he presents Aristotle's *Poetics* in his own words to define the difference between comedy and tragedy:

Tragedy's seriousness is guaranteed by its bullying greed, its insistence on having things its own way and pulling from us not only our tears, which we value little, but our attention, which we hate to give. Comedy, on the other hand, doesn't care if we attend closely. Tragedy is sleek and single-minded, comedy rumpled and hospitable to any idea or agency.... Comedy is not the opposite of tragedy, it is the *whole* story, the narrative which refuses to leave things out. Tragedy insists on a formal structure that is unified and coherent, formally balanced and elegantly tight. Only that which is coordinate is allowed to adorn the tragic body. With comedy, nothing is sacrificed, nothing lost; the discoordinate and the discontinuous are especially welcome. Tragedy protects itself by its tight linearity, its tight conclusiveness; comedy's generosity and ability never to end make it gloriously vulnerable. (Kincaid, 92-93)

*Anna of the Five Towns* is much closer to Kincaid's definition of tragedy than to comedy. However, even at this early stage in Bennett's writing, Bennett was beginning to reject strict tragedy and embrace comic elements, in pursuit of more sympathetic aims.

In synopsis, *Anna of the Five Towns* is tragic enough. It is the story of a young woman as she enters adulthood. She is the victim of the crushing, long-term oppression of her father, a gruff, unloving, miserly man. On her twenty-first birthday, however, she receives her inheritance from her long-dead mother, and with it, the power to fight the oppression--for in all of Bennett's novels (and indeed in his own view of the world), independence cannot simply be given: it is a quality which must, at some point, be earned. *Anna* also has a love plot: Anna is faced with a choice between two suitors: the up-and-coming businessman, Henry Mynors, and the son of a near-bankrupt local potter (who is incidentally, thanks to the inheritance, Anna's tenant), Willie Price. Anna sacrifices her relationship with her father to save Willie Price from imprisonment; she sacrifices her love for Willie and her new-found autonomy, however, to Henry, whom she marries but does not love.

Thus, the tragic hero in *Anna* is not Anna herself, but her "spirit", as Bennett implies in the final line: "the world [is] the poorer by a simple and meek soul stung to revolt only in its last hour" (236). Anna lives on, but her marriage is loveless and childless; the spirit within her that freed her from her

father's oppression dies when Anna allows her sense of duty and propriety to overpower her love for Willie. In this sense, the novel is truly tragic.

However, many elements of the novel do not fit into a tragic framework very neatly. The most striking element is the character Ephraim Tellwright, Anna's father. In the tragedy, Ephraim is the villain. He is the greatest obstacle to Anna's self-determination; he actively opposes at every opportunity Anna's attempts to break free from his grip. Indeed, Bennett originally conceived of the novel as a study not of Anna, but of Ephraim. He notes in his journal entry of September 29, 1896, that he is beginning his new novel, "*Sir Marigold*, a study of paternal authority." To characterise Ephraim as a villain is no exaggeration.

Curiously, though, Bennett does not draw Ephraim as an evil man. Bennett's most telling revelation of Ephraim's character is equivocal and avoids harsh judgement. The narrator (in the typical Bennett style of telling about, rather than showing, character) first attributes Ephraim's ill-treatment of his daughters to pure instinct:

This surly and terrorizing ferocity of Tellwright was as instinctive as the growl and spring of a beast of prey. He never considered his attitude towards the women of his household as an unusual phenomenon which needed justification, or as being in the least abnormal. (127)

Thus, Ephraim's attitude towards his daughters is not conscious ill-will, not motivated by conscious hatred or a malicious desire to inflict suffering. Furthermore, Bennett reveals that it is not easy to indict Ephraim alone:

The women of a household were the natural victims of their master: in his experience it had always been so. The master had always, by universal consent, possessed certain rights over the self-respect, the happiness, and the peace of the defenceless souls set under him. (127)

If anyone is to blame for the situation, everyone is to blame; in fact, the entire society is at fault, for Ephraim "belonged to the great and powerful class of house-tyrants, the backbone of the British nation, whose views on income-tax cause ministries to tremble" (127). The irony is heavy here, of course, but Bennett certainly is not singling out Ephraim; he is criticising not the man, but the society that produced him. Anna's opponent is Ephraim, but he is merely the epitome of the society in which they live.

If Ephraim is to be blamed for anything, it is for his unquestioning acceptance of the situation. He simply does not expend the energy to consider his relationship with others in his household; in his position of advantage, he is so comfortable that he has no need to do so. The rights of the master:

were rooted in the secret nature of things. It was futile to discuss them, because their necessity and their propriety were equally obvious. Tellwright would not have been angry with any man who impugned them; he would merely have regarded the fellow as a crank and a born fool, on whom logic or indignation would be entirely wasted. He did as his father and uncles had done. He still thought of his father as a grim customer, infinitely more redoubtable than himself. He really believed that parents spoiled their children nowadays: to be knocked down by a single blow was one of the punishments of his own generation. He could recall the fearful timidity of his mother's eyes without a trace of compassion. His treatment of his daughters was no part of a system, nor obedient to any defined principles, nor the expression of a brutal disposition, nor the result of gradually-

acquired habit. It came to him like eating, and like parsimony.  
(127)

Ephraim might be blamed for his lack of compassion, his willingness to allow the status quo to continue unchallenged. But the real problem is this: Ephraim lacks imagination. It is not that he will not look for a better way to live his life, but that he can not see that any better way might exist. And in this Ephraim is no more (or less) to blame than the rest of society, including Henry Mynors and the well-to-do Sutton family.

Were this the entire case for Ephraim's defence, the novel would be a straightforward tragedy. There would be the society of oppression, with those who profit from it perpetuating it, dominating the victims of that society, who can do nothing to change it. And in many ways this is the case. Bennett certainly shows more than parental oppression trapping Anna: other respectable institutions also work against her, including those of finance, marriage, and organised religion. The classical tragic theme of the individual spirit as a victim of collective complacency, a theme present in the perfect tragedy of, for example, *Antigone*, is indeed present.

However, Bennett subverts this theme. He does not allow any clear line to be drawn between oppressor and victim. Such is necessarily the case if we are to blame an entire society. Henry, for instance, willingly receives Anna's bank-book and cheques--and with them, of course, Anna's independence. Henry continues where Ephraim left off, as the male controller of Anna's

destiny; she has not, in fact, won any real freedom at all. She has won a certain amount of peace and happiness, though; the reader has every confidence that Henry will treat her well. Henry will control Anna, though, to the same degree that Ephraim did, and Anna's fortune of fifty thousand pounds is a great prize to Henry, who, ironically, "had not expected more than fifteen or twenty thousand pounds, and even this sum had dazzled his imagination" (227). But Henry loves Anna, nevertheless; he too is a product of the society, and both he and Anna see the marriage as an improvement on the oppression of Ephraim.

Also notable is Anna's own attitude in matters of finance. She is initially shocked to find out that Titus Price's rent is five quarters in arrears, and shows little sympathy for him:

The idea of being in debt was abhorrent to her. She could not conceive how a man who was in debt could sleep at nights. "Mr Price ought to be ashamed of himself," she said warmly. "I'm sure he's quite able to pay....I think it's a shame." (45)

Anna almost immediately learns that the fault may lie with her to some degree, for Price's pottery works is in poor repair; to her credit, she feels ashamed and guilty. However, she visits the Price works in order to collect some rent money, and her attitude changes again to contempt when Price tells her:

"You tell ye father what I've told ye, and say as I'll send up twenty pounds next week. I can't pay anything now; I've nothing by me at all."

"Father said particularly I was to be sure and get something on account." There was a flinty hardness in her tone which astonished herself perhaps more than Titus Price. A long

pause followed, and then Mr Price drew a breath, seeming to nerve himself to a tremendous sacrificial deed.

"I tell ye what I'll do. I'll give ye ten pounds now, and I'll do what I can next week. I'll do what I can. There!"...

"Liar! You said you had nothing!" her unspoken thought ran. (51-52)

Anna here shows a side of herself uncomfortably similar to Ephraim in her horror of debt and poverty, and in her lack of compassion for the difficulties of others. Any defence that might be made of Anna's attitude--that her father had instilled such values in her, for example--could just as easily be applied to Ephraim. Thus, in many ways, Anna shares the guilt for the creation and perpetuation of the society that oppresses her.

Henry and Anna are not perfect; their characters blur the clear lines along which the tragedy would otherwise run. However, these two (and others) still might not seem as terrible as Ephraim. Ephraim's position, though, is qualified further by Bennett. For Ephraim does not only cause unhappiness in others, but also in himself. He is as much a victim of the society as others are:

If you had told him that he inflicted purposeless misery not only on others but on himself, he would have grinned again, vaguely aware that he had not tried to be happy, and rather despising happiness as a sort of childish gewgaw. He had, in fact, never been happy at home: he had never known that expansion of the spirit which is called joy; he existed continually under a grievance. The atmosphere of Manor Terrace afflicted him, too, with a melancholy gloom--him, who had created it.... [H]is heart lightened whenever he left the house, and grew dark whenever he returned. (128)



That Ephraim oppresses himself as much as he does his daughters does not excuse him. But the reader is forced to sympathise with him, if only to a slight degree. Ephraim cannot be seen as a redoubtably soulless, cruel figure; he is human, and as trapped as any other character in the novel. Bennett looks closely enough at Ephraim to allow the reader to see that here, too, is tragedy, tragedy as deep and touching, in its way, as Anna's.

Furthermore, once the tragedy of Ephraim is revealed, the reader begins to find aspects of his character that show his humanity more and more. A couple of chinks show through his miserly armour when Ephraim hands over to Anna her fifty thousand pound inheritance, which he has been keeping in trust for her up to this point. He is dumbfounded when Anna asks what she is to do with the money; miserliness is second nature to Ephraim, to the extent that his only answer is "'Tak' care on it. And remember it's thine'" (43). Then a remarkably uncomfortable moment occurs:

Tellwright gathered everything into a bundle, and gave it to her to hold.

"That's the lot," he said. "Have you gotten 'em?"

"Yes," she said.

They both smiled, self-consciously. As for Tellwright, he was evidently impressed by the grandeur of this superb renunciation on his part. (43)

Of course, Ephraim does not lose control of the fortune; this scene is also the scene of Anna's first renunciation, for she allows Ephraim to keep the cheque-book, papers, and so on. However, knowing Ephraim's selfish nature, the phrase "grandeur of this superb renunciation" loses much of its irony.

Ephraim is uneasy here, for it is the first time he has ever had to involve Anna in finances--thus the first time Ephraim has been able to speak to Anna in a language he can understand, and on matters he can care about. Ephraim is absorbed by money, but in this scene, through money, Anna can reach Ephraim's world.

Ephraim's humanity breaks through in a very different way when Mrs Sutton, wife of an alderman and mother of a friend of Anna's, comes to tea. Her intention is to persuade Ephraim to allow Anna to accompany the Suttons on a holiday on the Isle of Man. When she first enters the room, Ephraim acts in a remarkable manner:

"You're welcome," he said curtly, but with a kindness that amazed Anna. She was unaware that in past days he had known Mrs Sutton as a young and charming girl, a vision that had stirred poetic ideas in hundreds of prosaic breasts, Tellwright's included. There was scarcely a middle-aged Wesleyan in Bursley and Hanbridge who had not a peculiar regard for Mrs Sutton, and who did not think that he alone truly appreciated her. (132-133)

Ephraim may have become an unapproachable miser in his middle age, but a romantic heart still beats within him. This is proved by Mrs Sutton's astounding feat: getting permission for Anna to go to the Isle of Man:

"I think as you'd better leave Anna out this year," said the miser stubbornly.

Anna wished profoundly that Mrs Sutton would abandon the futile attempt. Then she perceived that the visitor was signalling to her to leave the room. Anna obeyed, going into the kitchen to give an eye to Agnes, who was washing up.

"It's all right," said Mrs Sutton contentedly, when Anna returned to the parlour. "Your father has consented to your going with us." (136)

The coup that Mrs Sutton achieves here proves that Ephraim does possess some kind of romantic feeling. The skilful concealment of Mrs Sutton's actual persuasion of Ephraim creates some humour, and titillates the reader, adding again to the reader's perception of Ephraim as a human character.

The strongest evidence of Ephraim's humanity, however, concerns Willie Price. Although Anna does not really understand her feeling for either Willie or Henry, she does recognise a motherly instinct where Willie is concerned. Her desire to protect him leads to her destroying a note of credit that had been forged by Willie and given to Ephraim, lest Willie be arrested. She knows that the act will enrage her father, and although his response is something like she had expected, Ephraim makes a surprising observation. He first challenges her concerning her secret visits to Willie on a number of occasions:

"Now what is it? What's this carrying-on between thee and Will Price? I'll have it out of thee."

"There's no carrying-on, Father."

"Then why hast thou gotten secrets? Why dost go sneaking about to see him--sneaking, creeping, like any brazen moll?" (203)

Ephraim's conclusions are, for the most part, incorrect; Anna and Willie have had no illicit affair, Anna's chastity is secure, and her intentions have always been pure. However, the essential fact of Ephraim's tirade--that, although she is engaged to Henry, she is actually in love with Willie--is confirmed in the final meeting between the two:

She put a hand on his shoulder. "Yes," she said again, passionately: "I shall always remember you--always."

The hand with which he touched her arm shook like an old man's hand. As their eyes met in an intense and painful gaze, to her, at least, it was revealed that they were lovers. (235)

This revelation is presumably a shock to Anna, as it is to the reader; what is more shocking, though, is that Ephraim saw it first. Ephraim sensed Anna's feelings before Anna herself did. This might to some extent be attributed to Ephraim's lack of trust in Anna, or his lack of trust in women in general, but Ephraim is the only character other than Anna and Willie who knows that Anna has not married Henry out of love. Ephraim's perception of Anna's feelings--despite an extremely insensitive reaction--makes Ephraim a more complex character than the typical tragic villain.

Thus, when considering *Anna* as a tragedy, some troubling complexities arise. Anna is robbed of an antagonist; one cannot entirely blame Ephraim for Anna's downfall, for the reader knows too much about him to remain entirely unsympathetic. Actually, Ephraim is not much of an antagonist. Anna's conquering of Ephraim is complete; she frees herself, little by little, from his control. Moreover, Anna is like Ephraim in that she lacks the imagination to see things differently; of her decision to let Willie go and to marry Henry, the narrator comments:

Some may argue that Anna, knowing she loved another man, ought not to have married Mynors. But she did not reason thus; such a notion never even occurred to her. She had promised to marry Mynors, and she married him. Nothing else

was possible. She who had never failed in duty did not fail then.  
(235)

The passage is all the more ironic when the reader considers it in light of the fact that the entire novel has been about her failure in duty towards her father. One cannot entirely blame the society in which Anna lives, either, for it is Anna herself who fails, at the crucial moment, to act on the self-knowledge that she has gained. Anna's downfall is brought about by herself; her resignation is her defeat.

D. H. Lawrence is correct, then, when he complains that *Anna's* tragedy is not "a great kick at misery" (Lawrence 150). *Anna's* tragedy is that she accepts misery; the oppression brought about by an entire society is to blame for it, if anything is. The problem with indicting the whole society, however, is that it dilutes the tragedy completely.

If one is determined to tease out every thread in the line of tragedy that runs through the work, as Bennett does, then eventually that line becomes frayed and indefinite, and loses its strength. At the end of *Anna*, the most one can say is that it all runs too deep; no one really could have had a great effect on this wide and complex interrelationship; this is the way life is. Even in *Anna*, Bennett's most clearly tragic novel, the tragedy is incomplete and, in a way, not entirely effective.

**Chapter Three**  
**Bennett in Practice**  
*The Old Wives' Tale*

If *Anna*'s tragedy is ineffective, *The Old Wives' Tale* is a failure as far as classical tragedy is concerned. The tragedy in *Anna* is diluted by Bennett's wide-angle lens; tragedy requires a sharp focus and a narrow view. *The Old Wives' Tale*, taken as a tragedy, suffers from this fault, to a greater degree. Where *Anna* concerns itself with a few months in its heroine's life, *Wives* portrays the life of a woman from adolescence to old age, twice: once for each of its central figures.

In *Anna*, the plot is constructed as a classical tragedy. The basic lines of the plot are drawn very early: Anna's feelings for Henry, her conflict with her father, and her desire to protect Willie are all introduced in the first four chapters. Anna gradually overcomes the obstacle represented by her father, comes to terms with her feelings for Henry, achieves full self-knowledge in her realisation that she loves Willie, and meets her downfall in her failure to act on that self-knowledge.

By contrast, *The Old Wives' Tale* almost seems to lack construction. The novel's central characters, Constance and Sophia Baines, are

characterised very early on, one tending (to use James Hall's terms [Hall 9]) towards "primitivism" (convention and tradition), the other towards "taste" (dynamism and sensuality). These tendencies lead Constance to live an entirely conventional life in Bursley, according to the middle-class, provincial values with which she has been brought up; they lead Sophia to live an entirely unconventional life in Paris, also according to middle-class, provincial values. The two great events in the novel--the separation and the reunion of the sisters--are the only structural elements which stand out in any way. Even the death of Samuel Povey and Gerald Scales' abandonment of Sophia do not constitute great crises in the novel; both are well-prepared for and neither heralds a great change in the woman it affects. In fact, the plot may seem at first quite "loose and baggy," to use Henry James' phrase (James 10); it seems to merely tell what happened, with nothing but the crudest structure organising the events.

On the other hand, the novel does have elements of an extremely intricate structure. The temporal structure is itself difficult, for two reasons. The first, more obvious reason is the fragmentation of the narrative. The narrative involves four large blocks of time; the second and third blocks span the same period, but show it from different points of view. Bennett's handling of this double narrative is delicate. The parallel time frames must not overlap too much if the reader's interest is to be held the second time round; however,

if any resolution is to be found in the conflict between primitivism and taste, the parallel narratives must make contact through other elements.

In fact, the elements which help lend structure to *The Old Wives' Tale* are mostly events with some sort of metaphorical or thematic connection between them. Many connections between the four books are found in similar or parallel events, or, to extend the metaphor, different or perpendicular. Numerous critics have posited a great number of parallels in the book. Mrs Baines and Aunt Harriet's hushed conversation in Book I parallels Constance and Sophia's lives together in Book IV (Hall 49); Mrs Baines' defeat in the end of Book I parallels Constance's near-defeat in Book IV (Hall 50); the execution of Daniel Povey in Book II is balanced by the beheading of Rivain in Book III (Batchelor 172); Chirac's escape from Paris in a balloon is balanced by Dick Povey's ballooning in Book IV; the list goes on.

Furthermore, Batchelor finds a "highly worked" structure in the novel. He characterises the novel's four books in terms of a musical analogy:

The three parts of the sonata form--exposition, development, recapitulation--loosely match the first three books of the novel....Book Four is a coda to the other three in which Sophia and Constance are reunited in their old age, and Sophia then dies leaving Constance to the harder fate of bleak survival into the unfamiliar and heedless world of the twentieth century. (171)

Although such a structure may not have been consciously worked out by Bennett, it is nevertheless true that Bennett was learning to play the piano



while he was writing *The Old Wives' Tale*. Batchelor goes on to suggest some possible reasons for Bennett's structuring of the novel:

structure which gives a secure framework for Bennett's objectivity: the way the novel is organised facilitates the rhetoric with which Bennett presents 'life'....He has no vantage point from which to perceive his writing other than that provided by the work of art itself. (170)

Bennett, in Batchelor's estimation, is searching for some supreme objectivity from which a truly sympathetic narrative might be reached. In any case, the structure of *The Old Wives' Tale* is impressively intricate and complex; it was certainly not simply an outpouring of details which, by sheer abundance, somehow make up a novel. These numerous parallel events in the work suggest that Bennett was developing each part of the novel consciously and deliberately.

However, it is difficult to put one's finger on the particular result which Bennett achieves. The themes and scope are sufficiently grand, and the ending is suitably sad and final, for a tragedy; but there is no force to the tragedy in the long, slow build-up of minor events. The execution is more slow-paced than one would expect from a tragedy: there is little tragic about growing old and dying if described in all its tedious detail.

An important element of *The Old Wives' Tale* is the comedy in the novel. *Anna of the Five Towns* almost completely lacks humour, except possibly in the character of Agnes, whose youth and vigour do provide some humour that is not ironic. *The Old Wives' Tale*, however, is much more

openly humorous, and in a very different way. It has an ironic tone which numerous critics (e.g. Hall 48) have found reminiscent of Jane Austen, a novelist with whose work Bennett was quite familiar (*Journal*, October 15, 1896). Hall even characterises Book I as “almost a comedy of manners” (48), and the tone with which the novel opens is, indeed, quite light.

The description of Constance and Sophia in “The Square”, the first chapter of the book, sets the entire book in an ironic context. The county, district, town, square, house, and family in which the girls exist are described in a negative sense, as important and impressive things which the girls entirely ignore. The girls “paid no heed to the manifold interest of their situation” (3): they “recked not of such matters” as the geography of Staffordshire, and “though Constance and Sophia were in” the Five Towns district, “they were not of it” (3-4). The girls’ total ignorance of their living in such a busy part of a very important area of England is genially condemned through the narrator’s wry tone.

However, as his description becomes more particular, the narrator begins to lose sight of the girls amid the interestingness of their surroundings. The focus ignores the girls’ attitudes in favour of the district’s; then those of the town of Bursley; then St Luke’s Square’s. Layer by layer, the setting is penetrated, and as he nears the girls themselves, the narrator’s praise of the attitude of the girls’ neighbours increases, until it reaches its near-reverent apex in the description of the girls’ father, John Baines.

John Baines is introduced as a man who "lived on the lips of admiring, ceremonious burgesses as 'our honoured fellow-townsmen'" (6). Furthermore, the narrator agrees that "he deserved his reputation" (6), for John Baines is the founder and owner of the most respected draper's shop in the Five Towns; if St Luke's Square is a microcosm of the town, the district, and the county, Baines's shop reigns supreme, for five drapers' inhabit the Square, and "the aristocracy of the Square undoubtedly consisted of the drapers" (6). And to prove conclusively the supremacy of Baines's shop to all other businesses in the Square--and thus, by extension, the town, the district, the county, and perhaps even all of England--the narrator indulges in a short tale to explain the peculiar lack of a sign on the front of the shop.

The shop is unique in the Square in having no signboard. This is not by design, however: "Once it had had a large signboard which a memorable gale had blown into the Square" (6)--the reader may be assured that the gale is memorable *because* it blew the sign into the Square. And John Baines's greatness as a businessman in the Square is proved once and for all, because he has never replaced it:

He had always objected to what he called "puffing," and for this reason would never hear of such a thing as a clearance sale. The hatred of "puffing" grew on him until he came to regard even a sign as "puffing." Uninformed persons who wished to find Baines's must ask and learn. For Mr Baines, to have replaced the sign would have been to condone, yea, to participate in, the modern craze for unscrupulous self-advertisement. This abstention of Mr Baines's from indulgence in signboards was somehow accepted by the more thoughtful members of the

community as evidence that the height of Mr Baines's principles was greater even than they had imagined. (6-7)

The narrator's bland, uncritical acceptance of John Baines as a "credit to human nature" (7) is undercut by the ridiculousness of the situation. To respect Baines as a great businessman because he makes a supremely unwise business decision is clearly contradictory; one does not have to be Wells' Teddy Ponderevo to accept a signboard above a shop as a practical necessity for a business. John Baines's refusal to replace the sign obviously is a far greater indulgence than replacing it would have been.

If John Baines, the paragon of respectability in the Square, is described ironically, then all of the preceding description of the area must also be taken ironically. The Square's supremacy in Bursley, for example, is an opinion held only by its inhabitants, and says more about their unquestioning sense of pride and self-importance than about any true worth. The greatness and importance of the Square is a notion originating and existing almost exclusively within its own borders; from without, it is only another square, just as Staffordshire is sometimes overlooked by the rest of England.

However, Bennett's critique in the opening is not so much of this particular area as it is of the values it seems to hold. The values personified by John Baines are those of Victorian England; Bennett almost explicitly states this in Baines' death scene, where "Mid-Victorian England lay on that mahogany bed" (69). The narrator's light tone, however, partly conceals the

serious nature of these values. John Baines's resistance to "puffing" could be seen as a reflection of an inclination towards self-repression; the town's near-reverence for Baines implies that this is not Baines's own morality, but that of the entire society. And in the midst of this impressive, unassailable system of stiff values stand Sophia and Constance.

The humour in this long introductory description of the setting is crucial to the rest of the narrative. Bennett's aim is to examine the possibility of self-determination for a woman in a conservative society; thus he must place the vibrant young girls within a system of oppressively traditional values. This would be a structure similar to that of *Anna of the Five Towns*, were it not that those oppressive values are described so indirectly, humorously, and generously. Because the system is presented in an ironic dual tone of respect and criticism, one cannot really condemn the John Baineses of the world any more than one can totally accept their way of thinking. Constance and Sophia must live in a system which is, as all human systems are, too complex to be completely right or completely wrong. Bennett does not allow the reader to pronounce a simple judgement on an entire society.

A reason for both Bennett's restricted use of tragedy and his reluctance to judge any character is to be found in his position as an Edwardian writer. Questioning Victorian values is an occupation common to, if not characteristic of, novelists of this period, certainly of the greatest ones. Jefferson Hunter summarises this aspect of Bennett's novels well:

Bennett makes change occur imperceptibly, in the midst of an environment hostile to drama and even to the idea of change. Ideals die while one's head is turned, he remarks in *The Old Wives' Tale*....To adapt John Gross' phrase for Bennett, he is almost unsurpassed at showing how nothing remains the same but everything goes on as usual. (212)

This understanding of the nature of the status quo comes mainly from Bennett's reading of Herbert Spencer. Bennett was a great reader and admirer of Spencer, and claimed that "you can see [Spencer's] *First Principles* in almost every line I write" (*Journal*, September 15, 1910). The passage from Spencer which seems to have had the greatest impact on Bennett's ideas about society concerns society's progress and evolution. Spencer contends that because "the structures and actions throughout a society are determined by the properties of its units", "great alterations cannot suddenly be made to much purpose" (Spencer, 400). The slow pace of social change, and the immense difficulty of change for those who enact it, is fully represented in Bennett's novels, and is the driving force behind *The Old Wives' Tale*. Bennett shows all of his characters as prisoners, more or less, of the general will of the society around them; those individuals who rebel against the conventions of the society--primarily Sophia, but also Cyril and Daniel Povey, and even Maggie--are continually opposed, and often defeated, by that great mass of individuals who do not share their views.

Daniel Povey is a good illustration of this. He is a social revolutionary, in a way; he introduces the first boneshaker into St Luke's Square, which,

Lincoln contends, also signals the dawning of a new age, as it heralds the coming messiah of social change, Cyril Povey (Patterson 251). Daniel is well-known and well-liked in the town: "His good humour seemed to be permanent. He had dignity without the slightest stiffness; he was welcomed by his equals and frankly adored by his inferiors" (150). However, despite this glowing introduction, the narrator reveals the town's bias against Daniel:

He ought to have been chief bailiff, for he was rich enough; but there intervened a mysterious obstacle between Daniel Povey and the supreme honour, a scarcely tangible impediment which could not be definitely stated. He was capable, honest, industrious, successful, and an excellent speaker; and if he did not belong to the austerer section of society, if, for example, he thought nothing of dropping into the 'Tiger' for a glass of beer, or of using an oath occasionally, or of telling a facetious story--well, in a busy, broad-minded town of thirty thousand inhabitants, such proclivities are no bar whatsoever to perfect esteem. (150-151)

Of course, the town's views are presented ironically; however, it is essentially true that the town might accept Daniel's less dignified traits because of his personality and success. These are named, however, in order to show the contrast between these run-of-the-mill bars to social esteem, and the real reason for Daniel's rejection by the general populace:

The truth is that, for the ruling classes of Bursley, Daniel Povey was just a little too fanatical a worshipper of the god Pan. He was one of the remnant who had kept alive the great Pan tradition from the days of the Regency through the vast, arid Victorian expanse of years. The flighty character of his wife was regarded by many as a judgement upon him for the robust Rabelaisianism of his more positive conversation, for his frank interest in, his eternal preoccupation with, aspects of life and human activity which, though essential to the divine purpose, are not openly recognized as such--even by Daniel Poveys. It was

not a question of his conduct; it was a question of his cast of mind. (151)

Povey's frank acceptance of bodily pleasure is more than the Bursley townspeople can bear; they attempt to dissociate themselves from his opinions, although they "usually conquered by virtue of their inherent truthfulness" (151).

*The Old Wives' Tale*, then, can be seen as a tragedy in that it traces the crushing of those who feel "the savour of life." Daniel Povey is not only shunned by the town, but abandoned by his entire society when he is driven to kill his insufferable wife. Constance and Sophia, so exhilaratingly lovely as young girls, are slowly worn down by the pressure of circumstances until they die. Only in rare moments of reflection do either Constance or Sophia consider that their youth, vigour, and beauty (in a deeper sense than the mere physical) have been slipping away, as in this passage:

Was Constance happy? Of course there was always something on her mind, something that had to be dealt with, either in the shop or in the house, something to employ all the skill and experience which she had acquired. Her life had much in it of laborious tedium--tedium never-ending and monotonous. And both she and Samuel worked consistently hard, rising early, 'pushing forward,' as the phrase ran, going to bed early from sheer fatigue...Just before she went to sleep, Constance might reflect upon her destiny, as even the busiest and smoothest women do, and she would decide that it was kind. [But] the naïve ecstasies of her girlhood had long since departed--the price paid for experience and self-possession and a true vision of things. The vast inherent melancholy of the universe did not exempt her. (146)



The passage presents Constance's life in the best possible light, but it is not an unequivocally happy life that Constance has lived. Furthermore, twenty years or so later, with her husband long dead and her son just off to school in London, Constance reflects further:

Her soul only kept on saying monotonously: 'I'm a lonely old woman now. I've nothing to live for any more, and I'm no use to anybody. Once I was young and proud. And this is what my life has come to! This is the end!' (246)

Although Constance carries on for several years more, her decline is inevitable. In the pressure of running a shop, a family, and a household, in living for her husband and then for her son, the life within Constance slips away. Her brief revitalisations--the return of Sophia, for example, and her part in the defeat of the "Federation" of the Five Towns--stall, but do not at all stop, the transformation of the beautiful young girl into the old woman. In the end, Dick Povey, Constance's nephew, only associates with her in the hope that he will take a share in her will, and Amy, Constance's servant, refuses to heed her, and takes advantage of her whenever possible.

There is no question that *The Old Wives Tale* is tragic; it insists, for example, on returning to the one important issue of the tendency of life to decline. However, much of Kincaid's description of comedy discussed in Chapter Two applies to this novel. Bennett allows the linear structure of the novel to be disrupted, not only by digression and description, but also by his own fragmentation of the middle part of the narrative into two parallel blocks

of time. Fully unified and elegantly tight form give way to a bulk of events and impressions; given the choice whether to include or omit, Bennett includes.

*The Old Wives' Tale* is a tragedy in which the antagonist is not any particular character in the novel, or even society, in part or whole. The antagonist in *The Old Wives' Tale* is that quality of life that makes it impossible to keep one's life from slipping away, that which deadens one's imagination, one's savour of existence.

E. M. Forster (1879-1970) claimed that the real hero of *The Old Wives' Tale* is time (Forster, *Aspects*, 45). Time, however, is only the henchman of the antagonist, merely the thing that makes apparent the damage wrought by a lack of imagination, a concentration only on the here-and-now. The antagonist-protagonist duality, so necessary to a successful tragedy, is diluted to the point where neither can be pinned down with any certainty; both end up as vague generalisations that bear a notable resemblance to terms in Bennett's pocket philosophies ("the savour of life" or "the interestingness of existence", for example). Yet the indistinct nature of the tragedy runs straight to the heart of Bennett's own philosophy. One cannot decide on a particular figure--whether metaphoric or, within the novel, real--that might represent a protagonist or antagonist, in the tragic sense. Bennett is not only complicating the issue because, in real life, problems do not necessarily boil down to a simple duality; but also he is more concerned with making the

reader aware that such a duality is false, that life can only be truly understood with a compassionate and sympathetic outlook.

Bennett forces his reader to understand both sides of each conflict, to consider all the forces which have contributed to the rise of that conflict, and often, to reserve judgement on the winner or loser when the conflict is resolved. Characteristic of this is Bennett's appraisal of Samuel Povey when he dies. Samuel has recently been painted as a stern, moralistic father figure in his response to Cyril's theft of money from the shop till. Indeed, the chapters in which Cyril steals the money and Daniel murders his wife are juxtaposed, with their titles, "Crime" and "Another Crime" respectively, ironically implying that the crime against property is a greater offence than the crime against person (Hepburn 76). Samuel's vigorous attempt to gain a pardon for his cousin further underlines this irony; his work on Daniel's behalf causes pneumonia to set in soon after Daniel's execution, and Samuel quickly follows him into the grave, "a casual death, scarce noticed in the reaction after the great febrile demonstration" (215) surrounding Daniel's execution. Thus, it is surprising when, in a rare instance of first-person candour, the narrator says of Samuel:

Samuel Povey never could impose himself upon the burgesses [as Daniel could]. He lacked individuality. He was little. I have often laughed at Samuel Povey. But I liked and respected him. He was a very honest man. I have always been glad to think that, at the end of his life, destiny took hold of him and displayed, to the observant, the vein of greatness which runs through every

soul without exception. He embraced a cause, lost it, and died of it. (215)

A more heroic death than this, Bennett implies, is quite simply not possible. Yet this, in turn, implies that the very subjects of the book, Constance and Sophia, are neither more nor less heroic than the somewhat ridiculous Samuel. Bennett democratises tragedy in *The Old Wives' Tale*. Anyone, not only the likeable and impressive, not only the rich and important, not only the young and the beautiful, but anyone, without exception, has the possibility, and quite likely the experience, of tragedy within him. And Bennett's goal is to be, and to make the reader, sufficiently observant to see that.

**Chapter Four**  
**Bennett in Practice**  
*Clayhanger*

*Clayhanger* is a very different novel from any that Bennett wrote prior to it, with the possible exception (on a rather superficial level) of *A Man From the North* (1898). Most critics fail to recognise this difference, although many do see *Clayhanger*, rightly or wrongly, as the acme of Bennett's pre-war (Hepburn, Lucas), if not of his entire (Batchelor, Hall), career. Because it treats many of the themes considered in earlier novels, especially *The Old Wives' Tale*, and because it treats them in a sprawling *bildungsroman*, much like *The Old Wives' Tale*, and because it was the first serious novel after *The Old Wives' Tale*, most critics accept *Clayhanger* as an extension of it. In fact, *Clayhanger* is entirely different. It displays Bennett's new confidence as the leading novelist of the day and the darling of the literary scene. Bennett is able to break free of the conventions of structure and plot which he had been testing ever since *Anna of the Five Towns*; he sacrifices the tightness of tragedy once and for all to his more general philosophy of compassion.

The hero of *Clayhanger* is a young man caught between two extremes: the rather strict household in which he lives, and the life of intellect and

aesthetic stimulation represented by his friends, the neighbouring Orgreave family. James Hall views this characterisation as another example of a hero caught in the tension between the “primitivism” of conservative Victorian and Methodist ethics and the “taste” of the artistic, sensitive temperament; this has been a highly influential view of the novel. Hall is correct as far as his terms of reference go, for he sees “primitivism” as embodied in the character of Darius, while “taste” is represented by Osmond Orgreave. The problems caused by reducing such a complex novel to a simple duality, however, are readily apparent.

First is the characterisation of the two symbolic figures in Hall’s system. Darius may be a domestic tyrant, but Bennett has created in him a character much more complex than critics usually grant. Darius’ own feeling that he rather coddles and indulges his son is, of course, immaterial, for his internal feelings are rarely expressed to Edwin. However, certain aspects of Darius’ character do indicate rather more “taste” than Hall’s duality would allow. One significant example is Darius’ reaction to Edwin’s purchase of some books:

As the light failed, he brought one of them and then another to the window.

“Um!” he muttered. “Voltaire!”

“Um! Byron!”

And: “How much did they ask ye for these?”

“Fifteen shillings,” said Edwin, in a low voice [the actual price had been seventeen shillings].

“Here! Take it!” said his father, relinquishing a volume to him....

Despite his father's intonation of the names of Edwin's authors--Voltaire and Byron--he did not fear to be upbraided for possessing himself of loose and poisonous literature. It was a point to his father's credit that he never attempted any kind of censorship. Edwin never knew whether this attitude was the result of indifference or due to a grim sporting instinct. (248-250)

That Edwin can grant his father any credit while one of Darius' storms is about to break is significant (even if it is due to some "sporting instinct" in Edwin himself). That Darius' response is to literature that might be considered morally questionable in a Methodist family is more impressive still. Yet Edwin is confident in his father's acceptance of such literature, which indicates more "taste" in Darius than Edwin--and Hall--grant him. Because the narrative is given almost exclusively from Edwin's point of view, to sympathise entirely with Edwin is a dangerously seductive position. But Edwin's persistent misunderstanding of his father indicates that the more generous explanation of his father's behaviour is probably more correct. Edwin usually deprecates his father's intellect, but the reader knows of Darius' precocious ability in reading from the chapter entitled "The Child-Man", on Darius' early life: Darius may not be entirely ignorant of literature.

Hall's idea of the novel's duality also suffers when it comes to the Orgreaves. Although Edwin is quite understandably impressed by the Orgreave household--Tom Orgreave's books and the lively debate at dinner have a particularly strong effect on Edwin--Bennett begins to undermine the portrait of the Orgreaves at a very early stage. His device for doing so is

Hilda, who criticises the less endearing traits of the Orgreaves. The first instance is her defence of Victor Hugo's poetry:

"You ought to read the French *in* French," said Tom, kindly authoritative.

"Can't," said Edwin.

"Bosh!" Charlie said...."You simply begin to read, that's all. What you don't understand, you miss...It's all very well, and Victor Hugo is Victor Hugo; but you can say what you like--there's a lot of this that'll bear skipping, your worships."

"Not a line!" said a passionate, vibrating voice. (196)

Charlie Orgreave's casual dismissal of literature is emphasised through Hilda's contradiction of his method. She is even more explicit later, talking privately to Edwin, when she complains of the Orgreaves' "cleverness," as when she says "'That's what they're always doing in that house, you know--being clever!'" in an "invariably harsh" tone (207). Hilda's prominence as a figure in the novel helps to underline the shortcomings in the Orgreaves' attitudes. Their acceptance of literature is, even as it is introduced, exposed as a thin veneer; the intoxication of being in this happy household is later revealed to be fleeting. The Orgreaves are not drawn without criticism, just as Darius is not drawn without praise; their suitability as symbols of social ideas is, then, questionable.

The greatest difficulty with Hall's analysis of *Clayhanger*, however, is that it fails to account for Book IV of the novel. Hall puts the blame on Bennett, claiming that "after the death of the founder of the Clayhanger line, the book never finds an equally impressive motif" (Hall 105). It is more



useful, however, to try to understand what Bennett is trying to convey than to reprove him for not fitting one's own theory. It seems to me that the most suitable way to look at Edwin's situation is to consider it from Edwin's point of view. He is, indeed, caught between two poles: his circumstance in the pragmatic, stiff Clayhanger home, and his ideal, sensitive, artistic nature. Edwin's challenge is to find a balance, and the novel's success depends on convincing the reader that such a balance has been reached. Batchelor comments that "Edwin Clayhanger [is broken] by heredity and environment in the *Clayhanger* novels--though he is allowed...the male consolations of marriage and headship of a household" (Batchelor 180). However, such an explanation ignores some important differences between the narratives of the characters in the *Clayhanger* trilogy and those in *Anna of the Five Towns* and *The Old Wives' Tale*.

*Clayhanger* is unlike Bennett's previous serious novels in that it is not, in any sense, tragic. Tragic themes are explored, notably the succession of one generation by another, and the surrender of youthful idealism to oppressive social norms. However, the construction of the novel does not rely on these themes. It is constructed so that the tragic elements occur in the first three books alone; the concluding book is quite different.

Books I, II, and III deal with Edwin's maturing into an adult within the two important social structures in his life, his family and the town of Bursley. The first book traces his life from the "official" beginning of his adult life--

that is, the beginning imposed on him by the society: the end of his schooling. The primary conflict concerns, as the title of Book I indicates, Edwin's vocation. Edwin feels drawn to architecture both as an occupation and in his aesthetic response. He is fascinated and thrilled by architecture:

But lying flat on one of the top shelves he discovered...an oblong tome which did interest him: *Cazenove's Architectural Views of European Capitals, with descriptive letterpress*....He took the volume to the retreat of the desk, and there turned over its pages of coloured illustrations. At first his interest in them, and in the letterpress, was less instinctive than deliberate. He said to himself: "Now, if there is anything in me, I ought really to be interested in this, and I must be interested in it." And he was. He glanced carelessly at the clock...and now it was a quarter past four...In another half-minute he glanced at the clock again, and it was a quarter to five. (68-69)

Bennett deftly gives a believable portrait of the young man; Edwin is not so artistic as to be unduly romanticised, yet with some inner response that justifies his opinions as to his own vocation.

The problem is that Darius has other plans for his son's future. He has built himself up from nothing through pure application and honest work, justifying the Victorian ethic; he does not intend to sacrifice the miracle of the "boy from the Bastille" to the whims of his son, for:

He saw in his son an amiable, irresponsible fool....Edwin had lived in cotton-wool, and knew less of the world than his father had known at half his years; much less. Darius was sure that Edwin had never even come near suspecting the miracles which his father had accomplished: this was true, and not merely was Edwin stupendously ignorant, and even pettily scornful, of realities, but he was ignorant of his own ignorance. (94)

The narrator's attempt to portray both Edwin and Darius judiciously in this passage confirms what the reader must already have suspected: that Edwin is, indeed, a naïve young man whose decisions concerning important issues ought not to be trusted too far. When Darius refuses to allow Edwin to follow his dream of architecture rather than continue the tangible miracle of the print shop, the reader must admit that Darius has a point; Darius speaks truly when he says of Edwin's architectural vocation, "'There's neither sense nor reason in it! Neither sense nor reason!'" (144)

The battle ends in a victory for Darius, of course. Edwin's fear of confronting Darius prompts him to write a letter to his father; it is touching--and very funny, in a way--as an expression of an honest yet still quite immature mind:

Dear Father, -- I dare say you will think it queer me writing you a letter like this, but it is the best thing I can do, and I hope you will excuse me. I dare say you will remember I told you that night when you came home late from Manchester here in the attic that I wanted to be an architect. You replied that what I wanted was business experience. If you say that I have not had enough business experience yet, I agree to that, but I want it to be understood that later on, when it is the proper time, I am to be an architect. I feel I shall not be happy in the printing business because I want to be an architect. I am now nearly seventeen. Perhaps it is too soon yet for me to be apprenticed to an architect, and so I can go on learning business habits. But I just want it to be understood. I am quite sure you wish me to be happy in life, and I shan't be happy if I am always regretting that I have not gone in for being an architect. I know I shall like architecture. -- Your affectionate son, Edwin Clayhanger (136)

The repetition of "I dare say", the reminder of Darius' own words, the careful rejection of the printing business--Bennett masterfully portrays Edwin's nervous yet adamant position. Naturally Darius ignores the letter, just as he ignored Edwin's original attempts to state his desire to become an architect; Edwin finally faces his father, and Darius is forced to express his incomprehension of Edwin's plans by yelling such unanswerable questions at Edwin as "what's made ye settle on architecting, I'd like to be knowing?" and "D'ye think architecting 'll be any better than this [printing]?" (143). When Edwin can only answer that he does not know and begins to cry, Darius simply walks out of the room, saying, "Ye've been doing well, I'll say that, and I've shown it! I was beginning to have hopes of ye!" (144). (The narrator notes that this is "a great deal to say.") Edwin resigns himself to his fate as a printer.

Bennett did not, however, want to make the suppression of aesthetic responses in favour of pragmatism an important issue in the novel. Book I ends ambivalently, with no clear side being taken by the narrator, and indeed, no clear victor or victim in the conflict's resolution. First, Edwin's response to the problem after Darius' explosion is to accept his fate as a printer:

Not till Saturday did the atmosphere of the Clayhanger household resume the normal. But earlier than that Edwin had already lost his resentment....He could not continue to bear ill-will. He accepted his destiny of immense disappointment. He shouldered it. You may call him weak or you may call him strong. (146)

Edwin makes no “great kick at misery”; furthermore, the narrator tacitly supports him in not doing so by suggesting that there is a strength in that response, too. Next, Bennett presents a scene which proves, and emphasises, the narrator’s point:

On Saturday Darius said to his son, good-humouredly--  
 “Canst be trusted to pay wages?”  
 Edwin smiled. (146)

Edwin and Darius really connect in this little scene. Darius shows a great deal of trust in Edwin’s ability to take care of an important part of the business; Edwin shows his understanding and appreciation of that trust when he accepts the duty by simply smiling. This is a reconciliation, but it is also much more; it represents possibly the closest bond ever felt between father and son.

Finally, Book I ends with Edwin reading a translation of Victor Hugo’s *Notre Dame*. Before the confrontation with Darius, Edwin “had meant to read that book, with due precautions, in bed. But he could not fix attention on it. Impossible for him to follow a single paragraph” (139). At the end of the struggle, though, something has changed:

That night, for the first time, Edwin could read *Notre Dame* with understanding and pleasure. He plunged with soft joy into that river of the gigantic and formidable narrative. He reflected that after all the sources of happiness were not exhausted. (146)

This passage negates any tragic tone which might have been present to this point in the novel. Although Edwin is forced to resign himself to a career not

of his own choosing, the feeling in him that rebelled against a career in the print shop--his "flame"--is not quashed, and is, in fact, as strong as ever.

The resolution of the conflict in Book I is typical of the resolutions to Edwin's battles throughout the book. In Book II, the major conflicts with his father concern money; Darius' suspicion that Edwin is stealing and Darius' refusal to give Edwin a raise so that he can marry are the main events of the section. Edwin clearly gains the upper hand in resolving the first conflict (because he possesses the moral high ground); Darius regains it in the second, again thwarting Edwin's plans for the future. Yet the end of Book II involves an action on neither Darius' nor Edwin's part. - Hilda, giving no explanation whatever to Edwin, marries George Cannon and moves to Brighton. No clear resolution comes out of the Darius-Edwin conflicts, as the source of the major conflict is abruptly removed.

The most significant altercation in Book III occurs when Darius, whose mental capacity has significantly diminished in the past few months, launches a tirade of accusations and curses at Maggie and Edwin because they will not allow him to grow mushrooms in the cellar. Ironically, the real problem for Darius is that they will not give him money--the positions of father and son have been reversed. This is the situation for which Edwin has been waiting for years. Edwin has predicted this situation repeatedly before Darius became ill; when his father acts unreasonably towards Edwin, Edwin vows, "by God! If ever I get the chance, I'll pay you out for this some day!" (161) and "when

I've *got* you and you can't help yourself, by God it'll be my turn'" (298). This is the climax of the Darius-Edwin campaign, and Edwin settles it in the way he predicted:

"I'm going to have that spawn, and I'm going to have some change! Give me some money!" Darius positively hissed.

Edwin grew nearly capable of homicide. All the wrongs that he had suffered leaped up and yelled.

"You'll have no money!" he said, with brutal roughness. "And you'll grow no mushrooms! And let that be understood once for all! You've got to behave in this house."

Darius flickered up.

"Do you hear?" Edwin stamped on the conflagration.

It was extinguished. (378)

However, Bennett again forces the reader to consider this scene carefully before passing any judgement on either participant, for as Darius stumbles out of the room, Edwin reflects on his first complete victory:

Once Edwin had looked forward to a moment when he might have his father at his mercy, when he might revenge himself for the insults and bullying that had been his...That moment had come, and it had even enabled and forced him to refuse money to his father--refuse money to his father!...As he looked at the poor figure fumbling towards the door, he knew the humiliating paltriness of revenge. (378-379)

This scene brings to an end any possibility of further conflict between Edwin and Darius, as indicated by Edwin's shocked repetition of the phrase "refuse money to his father" in the above passage. There can be no more conflict between father and son, any more than there might have been conflict between Darius and the infant Edwin.

Furthermore, if Edwin has, up to this point, been attempting to accomodate his own aesthetic responses to the pragmatism demanded by the world, in this scene he comes to a new understanding of the reality of doing so. In taking revenge, Edwin's aesthetic sense is outraged. His humiliation here is more deeply felt than when he was humiliated by Darius in the past; indeed, Edwin carries a sense of guilt and shame with him for a long time afterwards, as revealed when he thinks to himself at Darius' deathbed:

"Why couldn't we have let him grow his mushrooms if he wanted to? What harm would it have done us? Supposing it *had* been a nuisance,...supposing he *had* hurt himself, what then? Why couldn't we let him do what he wanted?"

And he passionately resented his own harshness and that of Maggie as he might have resented the cruelty of some national injustice. (406)

The last remark is not ironic, for deep feelings have been aroused in Edwin before; he feels sympathy when he sees the union meeting, he is filled with exultation when he reads Gladstone's Home Rule speech, and he is thrilled when he votes Liberal in the election that occurs just before Darius' death. Edwin's reflection here puts him in a class with Darius; he acts like an employer instead of an employee, like a master instead of an underling. This connects him with the Darius whom Edwin had resented and battled with all his life; his ability to put this new development in political terms shows that Edwin has come to a new understanding of himself.

But Bennett continues Edwin's story for many pages after his father's death. The love-plot with Hilda has yet to be completed, and to this Book IV



is devoted. In many ways, though, Book IV is an exposition of the points raised in the first three books. The effect of outside influences on those facets of Edwin's character which have been examined so far has yet to be examined. In fact, Book IV is something of a relief, for the reader finally gets a chance to see Edwin alone, without the great and continuous influence of Darius. For the first time, the reader really has a chance to get to know Edwin.

The first two chapters of Book IV examine Edwin's relationship with Maggie. Edwin is portrayed to show both his similarities to and differences from Darius. He retains his father's brusqueness, for example, and his illusion of infallibility, as in this exchange with Maggie:

It was Auntie Hamps' birthday.

"She must be quite fifty-nine," said Maggie.

"Oh, stuff!" Edwin contradicted her curtly. "She can't be anything like as much as that."

Having by this positive and sharp statement disposed of the question of Mrs Hamps' age, he bent again with eagerness to his newspaper. (418)

Although Edwin demonstrates various ways in which he has broken with his father's traditions--reading the *Manchester Guardian* (which Edwin sees as rather daring), and changing the morning routine at the shop so that he might eat a leisurely breakfast "like a gentleman"--Maggie insistently pushes him until he reveals more of his character:

"Well," Maggie continued, with her mild persistence,

"Aunt Spenser told me--"

"Who's Aunt Spenser, in God's name?"

"You know--mother and Auntie's cousin--the fat old thing!"

"Oh! Her!" He recalled one of the unfamiliar figures that had bent over his father's coffin.

"She told me auntie was either fifty-five or fifty-six, at father's funeral. And *that's* nearly three and a half years ago. So she must be--"

"Two and a half, you mean," Edwin interrupted with a sort of savageness.

"No I don't. It's nearly three years since Mrs Nixon died."

Edwin was startled to realize the passage of time. But he said nothing. Partly he wanted to read in peace, and partly he did not want to admit his mistake. Bit by bit he was assuming the historic privileges of the English master of the house. He had the illusion that if only he could maintain a silence sufficiently august his error of fact and of manner would cease to be an error. (418-419)

The exchange ends with Edwin bringing Maggie to tears--to Edwin's great surprise. But the reader is aware that Edwin's manner is one which would have infuriated Edwin the fastidious sixteen-year-old almost to the point of crying himself. Edwin may have changed the trappings of the office of head Clayhanger, but many of the customs persist.

Now that Edwin has shown himself to have assumed some of his father's manner, Bennett turns the situation around and mitigates that judgement on Edwin. For once Edwin sees Maggie crying, he begins to consider what he did to cause her to cry--something which Darius, and indeed most of Bennett's novels' father figures--would never do. Edwin consciously attempts to change his relationship with Maggie, and indeed succeeds; in the next scene he quietly says small things, only in passing and not in themselves

meaningful, that show his willingness to make his life and Maggie's easier. This is not the attitude of a "master of the house"; it is Edwin's "flame", still idealistic, still shining.

Here, then, is the mature Edwin. His habits lean towards taste--he still collects fine books, for example--and his mind tends towards idealism. The influence of his surroundings is great; he is certainly of, and not merely in, his environment. Yet he has transformed these influences on his character into his own individuality. His sensitivity to aesthetics and his somewhat tempered idealism have opened up great possibilities for him; he certainly does not have to become his father, and indeed does not. He has struck a balance between the practical--those qualities needed to be head of a household and owner of a successful business--and the "flame".

Edwin's new balance allows him, finally, to enter a relationship with Hilda. Both sides of his personality are necessary in order to win her. Just to set out on his journey requires something of the idealistic, adventurous spirit; yet the complexity of Edwin's character is revealed in his internal dialogue on the train heading for Brighton:

He could not think consecutively, not even of his adventure. His brain was in a maze of anarchy. But at frequent intervals recurred the query: 'What the devil am I up to?' And he would uneasily smile to himself. When the train rolled with all its majesty out of the station and across the Thames, he said to himself, fearful, 'Well, I've done it now!' (437)

Yet, ironically, Edwin's adventure begins with an act which was typical of his father:

On the Thursday he had told Maggie, with affected casualness, that on the Friday he might have to go to London, about a new machine. Sheer invention! Fortunately Maggie had been well drilled by her father in the manner proper to women in accepting announcements connected with "business". And Edwin was just as laconic and mysterious as Darius had been about "business". It was a word that ended arguments, or prevented them. (437)

Edwin does something that his father would never have done--Darius' only travel, as far as we know, concerned only business--yet Edwin does it in a style that is characteristic of Darius. This is a symbolic moment, for it captures all of Edwin: he certainly cannot be expressed in a mere duality, for at all times several forces and influences are at work on him.

The heart of Bennett's method is this use of detail. Numerous actions, details, characters' impressions, and descriptions are arranged not merely to give the reader an impression of the scene--nor even to impress the reader with the realism of the scene. Bennett's own aesthetic had, by this point, moved far beyond questions of craft, which is to say the task of giving to the reader, in an effective way, some representation of real life or real people. Instead, Bennett is concerned with a higher ideal. The great amount of detail in *Clayhanger* allows many forces to become apparent, allows many voices to speak. If we are to understand Edwin, we must understand a great deal about him: we must know of his conversations with his friend as a schoolboy; we must know of the model schooner in his room; we must know how and when

he eats his breakfast, and in what manner, as a boy, he descends the stairs. All of these seemingly infinitesimal details must be worked into the picture if Edwin is to be completely understood.

Action must be handled in the same way. The philosophy of Herbert Spencer has been assumed by Bennett; characters change, not in grand events and monumental conflicts, but in seemingly meaningless conversations, petty arguments, and minor successes. And one cannot help but agree with Bennett; any great action is really the product of a nearly infinite number of other, lesser actions. Human beings tend to be too complex to reduce to a single conflict; a plot must be a long string of small battles, rather than one great battle stretched out on a tragic frame.

It is Bennett's handling of conflict, though, that allows his novels to succeed. Indeed, his handling of conflict is what prevents him from being a mere realist. For Bennett never gives a conflict from one side only. He is continually forcing the reader to look at both sides--or if necessary, many sides--of every battle. Although Edwin cannot see it at the age of sixteen, no one is trying to keep him from being an architect from sheer malevolence; yet the reader must sympathise with him, for there is no way for Edwin to know of the forces which happen to conspire against that particular dream. The reader knows, though, of Darius' past, and can appreciate why Darius would not want his business to fail. And Auntie Hamps' siding with Darius is equally

understandable, for she and Darius have an affectionate relationship, and she has seen more of Darius' struggle than anyone else in the book.

The plot is, in this way, prevented from being merely linear. Its forward momentum is repeatedly slowed by explanations and background information. For example, Edwin's book-buying, which leads to a momentous argument with Darius, has its roots in a building society fund. The history of the building society is reviewed; its particular suitability to Bursley is affirmed. Edwin's attitude towards it is explained, and how he comes to draw his hundred pounds from it is narrated in great detail. That Darius is not told--in fact, Edwin keeps the entire thing a secret--is noted; the stage is then set for the two sides to converge. A great deal of time and energy is given to this explanation, so that when the conflict comes, the reader understands the case put forward by both sides, Edwin with his moral superiority, Darius with his supreme self-confidence. Without the immense preparation, the reader would have to side with one or the other; but both Edwin and Darius are given a full enough treatment that the issue loses any black-and-white qualities, and becomes mired in a grey area.

James Hepburn comments that Bennett "is, when all is said and done, a realist in the most serious sense of the term; he is preoccupied with the realities of the human situation" (Hepburn 77). For Bennett, the human situation is something infinitely complex; there are as many variables as there are people, and one influences and is influenced by a large number of people.

By giving such great care to the presentment of all sides of all conflicts, Bennett presents people, as fully as possible in a novel, as they really are. *Clayhanger's* use of multiple points of view and its refusal to give an easy resolution to any conflict make it, above all of his other novels, Bennett's greatest humanistic expression. Bennett has, in *Clayhanger*, put aside all conventions of method in order to create a novel whose structure not only allows, but also facilitates the expression of his compassionate philosophy.

## Conclusion

J. E. Dearlove wrote of *The Old Wives' Tale* that the novel's emphasis is "cosmological rather than moral...The microcosmic quality of each scene predisposes us to see Bennett's macrocosmic vision on each page" (Dearlove 79). Bennett's language, though, is not as symbolically charged as that of later writers; as Hepburn notes, symbols in Bennett's novels "do not possess appropriateness or inevitability in a broad extra-artistic sense" (Hepburn 77). Bennett's symbolic elements are chosen primarily for their appropriateness in terms of realism; perhaps this is why so many critics--James and Woolf especially--have failed to understand him.

Yet it is Bennett's method which is most striking. Once Bennett's reputation for photographic realism is dismissed, one might more easily see what he is attempting to achieve in his writing. The narrative method that Bennett uses is dictated not by its effectiveness in terms of, for example, reader interest; rather, it is dictated by the content of the narrative, and the philosophy which inspires it. This is a revolution in English fiction. Many Victorian novelists used an essentially tragic structure in their works: one might consider Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*, George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, Anthony Trollope's *The Warden*, or Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of*



*Casterbridge* to see this. Bennett not only ignores the conventions of tragedy in his work, but also works to subvert it more and more as his skill as a novelist progresses. By the time he was writing *Clayhanger*, Bennett had rejected the tragic narrative completely, presenting the history of a protagonist who is triumphant in the end, and who is more complex because of this.

It is possible to account for Bennett's new sympathetic narrative method in more than one way. John Carey sees it as a result of Bennett's relatively humble origins. Carey calls Bennett the hero of his book *The Intellectuals and the Masses* (1993), a study of intellectuals' attitudes towards the lower classes at the beginning of this century. For Carey, Bennett's works "represent a systematic dismemberment of the intellectuals' case against the masses" (Carey 152). Bennett, Carey contends, worked for a democratisation of art--hence his championing of H. G. Wells as "an intellectual who has...written for the 'intelligent masses'" (Carey 155). Central to this aspect of Bennett as an artist is this quotation from one of his early essays:

Not only is art a factor in life; it is a factor in all lives. The division of the world into two classes, one of which has a monopoly of what is called 'artistic feeling', is arbitrary and false. Everyone is an artist, more or less; that is to say, there is no person quite without that faculty of poetising, which by seeing beauty creates beauty, and which, when it is sufficiently powerful and articulate, constitutes the musical composer, the architect, the imaginative writer, the sculptor and painter. To the persistent ignoring of this obvious truth is due much misunderstanding and some bitterness. The fault lies originally with the minority, the more artistic, which has imposed an artificial distinction upon the majority, the less artistic. (*Fame and Fiction* 3)

Indeed, Bennett saw his own work as an attempt to reunite artistic feeling with the people whom the intellectual few supposed were incapable of possessing it. A brief consideration of the feelings that Bennett centres on in his novels, such as Edwin Clayhanger's rush of emotions in response to the new house's plumbing system or Samuel Povey's achievement of greatness, shows clearly that Bennett did not reserve any emotions for the privileged and sensitive minority.

Carey finds, however, no resolution to Bennett's mediation between the two camps. Although Bennett was concerned about the achievement of artistic feeling in the masses, he nevertheless held that that which the intellectuals deemed worthwhile--literature marked as valuable by the "passionate few" (*Literary Taste* 34)--was what was necessary for a full life for the masses just as much as for the privileged minority.

However, Bennett himself offers two separate resolutions to this problem. One is expressed mainly in his pocket philosophies, especially *How to Live on 24 Hours a Day* (1908) and *Literary Taste* (1909). Bennett does stress the necessity of art for a full and contented life, but his real aim is to show his readers (in as uncondescending a manner as possible) how they might come to experience the 'artistic feeling' which he himself valued so highly. This is a true democratisation of art, for it is intended for the laity, the millions of those for whom sensitivity to the arts is unattained, yet possible.

Bennett attempts to tear down the shroud of mystery with which the privileged few have hidden artistic feeling from the masses, and, indeed, he has much success; even today these pocket philosophies remain thought-provoking.

The second way in which Bennett works for the democratisation of artistic feeling is through his novels themselves. The sympathetic philosophy which is their defining quality is also the means by which Bennett shows the possibility of an artistic response regardless of social class. Bennett does not stop at admitting the possibility (as E. M. Forster does with Leonard Bast in *Howard's End* [1910]); he actually gives examples of how and why it happens. The new hot water system in Edwin's house affects him "like a poem"; Anna Tellwright, despite her prosaic life, experiences a passionately lyric response when she sees Henry Mynors approaching her house. There is no condescension in these descriptions; the characters are not made to seem ridiculous or superficial. Bennett forces the reader to see that anyone can experience highly artistic feelings. The only criticism of Bennett on this score is that, despite his best efforts, he failed to change the intelligentsia's way of thinking.

Thus, Carey is more correct than even he himself supposed when he placed Bennett above the intelligentsia. Bennett's democratisation of artistic feeling is without parallel in his time, and is perhaps not acknowledged to the extent it ought to be today, when the fruits of Bennett's labour are beginning

to be reaped in the wider critical acceptance of the literature of racial and social minorities.

Bennett has often been praised for his humanism and compassion. What many critics fail to see is that that humanism goes hand in hand with artistic control. Bennett's idea of compassion in the novel is as important in terms of form as it is as philosophical statement. Indeed, modern theories of the novel--for example, Mikhail Bakhtin's (1895-1975) theory of the novel as dialogue--support such an estimation of Bennett. In fact, a Bakhtinian reading of Bennett's work might provide a greater understanding not only of it as a discrete group of novels, but also as a necessary and important development in the history of the genre.

Bakhtin's definition of the novel genre as a form of literature which allows more than one "voice" to be heard, because it lacks specific formal characteristics and thus is not bound by a voice imposed by the form itself (as in an epic or lyric), almost immediately suggests connections between Bakhtin's theory and Bennett's practice. Bennett's handling of character interaction, in which the reader is intended to understand and, therefore, sympathise with all sides of a conflict, does show strongly the characteristics of the novel outlined by Bakhtin. However, Bakhtin's theory can help to shed light on the structure of Bennett's novels, especially *The Old Wives' Tale* and the *Clayhanger* trilogy.

Bennett's novels, obviously, are far more successful as Bakhtinian dialogues than many nineteenth-century works, with their dependence on an older (and, Bakhtin would argue, dead) form, such as tragedy (Bakhtin 3). Bennett's response to the problem of representing the voices in a dialogue was structural; he broke up the narrative with side-plots, fractured timelines, and even extra novels to accommodate different voices. Far from being a mere realist, Bennett was working at the beginning of this century to solve problems which, at the end of the century, literary criticism and theory are only beginning to understand.

Bennett's experiments with dialogue in fiction, however, were not repeated. After the *Clayhanger* novels, Bennett did not attempt any further experiments with structure; his works still expressed his sympathetic philosophy, but some novels (notably *Riceyman Steps*) slipped back into a tragic mode (although *Riceyman Steps* does work with the points of view of three characters). And his experiments were not repeated by other novelists in his time; the modernists performed their own experiments, most notably with style (in, for example, James Joyce's *Ulysses* [1922]), in accommodating multiple voices in their work.

Both Bennett's personal and technical aims in writing novels found their fulfilment in the creation of novels whose understanding and sympathy are their defining characteristic. Frank Swinnerton notes that Bennett was fond of saying "nine out of every ten people improve on acquaintance" (Swinnerton

85); this charming little saying contains a deep and meaningful philosophy. Bennett was one of the great humanists in English literature of the early twentieth century. He is also one of the great technicians in the history of the English novel. That his place in the canon is questionable, whereas Virginia Woolf's and E. M. Forster's, for example, are not, suggests that perhaps the makers of the canon itself lack the sympathy and generosity of judgement which Bennett worked so hard to introduce into his novels.

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