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Christina Barquin
*Syracuse University*

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# Contesting Victorian Beliefs: The Unintended Effects of Victorian Novels

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

Christina Barquin
Candidate for Bachelor of Arts Degree
and Renée Crown University Honors
May 2015

Honors Capstone Project in English Textual Studies

Capstone Project Advisor: _____
Claudia Klaver, Professor

Capstone Project Reader: _____
Kevin Morrison, Professor

Honors Director: _____
Stephen Kuusisto, Director

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**Abstract**

Victorian society reproduced polarized gender roles known as the ideology of the separate spheres in order to confine the authority of women. However, as the Victorian Era progressed social norms were gradually contested, and the consequences of the assertion of female authority led to reform. In reinterpreting the Victorian women's movement, I will interpret the effects of the writers of the late nineteenth century who argued explicitly against proposed changes in the traditional position of middle-class women. I will most closely examine how the late Victorian novels, *A Marriage Below Zero* by Alan Dale and *The Revolt of Man* by Walter Besant end up subverting their own anti-feminist agendas and actually contributing to the political project of late-Victorian feminism by inadvertently demonstrating that the separate spheres of Victorian society were imbalanced and limiting.

## Executive Summary

During the late nineteenth century, there was a risen interest and display of female sexuality and the new woman. In reaction, many late nineteenth century novelists composed works of fiction that were intended to portray the detrimental effects that would occur within society if these two models of female identity were to be deemed as socially acceptable. Late Victorian novels such as *A Marriage Below Zero* by Alan Dale and *The Revolt of Man* by Walter Besant were intended to illustrate the disorder that would arise if the Victorian middle class did not abide by traditional beliefs.

The argument examines how both authors unintentionally bring attention to more pertinent issues regarding female sexuality and the new woman. In *A Marriage Below Zero,* Alan Dale intends to address the repulsions of sexuality, more specifically homosexuality, but in actuality the author more closely acknowledges the detrimental effects of women's ignorance to sexuality. Similarly, in *The Revolt of Man,* Walter Besant intends to criticize equality in marriage, but he instead, inadvertently supports the notion of the new woman by illustrating the preposterous confinements and limitations within the private sphere. The analysis of these two novels represents in what way late Victorian novels, such as the two listed above, actually end up subverting their own anti-feminist agendas and contributing to the political project of late-Victorian feminism by inadvertently demonstrating that the separate spheres of Victorian society were limiting and imbalanced.

The proper middle-class household derived from two essential components: the marriage and the wife. In order to construct the conventional, middle-class household the marriage must operate abiding by the ideology of the separate spheres. The husband and the wife were not only confined to separate "spheres" defined as public and private – the public sphere referring to the

responsibilities of the man in the workplace, the private sphere denoting the obligations of the woman in the household – but their very characters were assumed to operate on separate principles (Murray, 19).

Within the marriage of the separate spheres, there must be the presence of the idyllic wife. Women were expected to fit the character of the "ideal" wife, but for some time the wife's role in the private sphere lacked clear definition. In order to emulate the aristocracy, members of the middle class abided by a list of essential behaviors which can be best illustrated through Victorian conduct books. Repeated attempts to describe true womanliness in moral terms and to set appropriate boundaries for female behavior were made through conduct books like *Women of England, Their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits* (1839) by Sarah Stickney Ellis. These conduct books depicted the ideal wife as devotedly maternal and happily self-sacrificial while masking the reality of the overall powerless individual (Langland, 293). Victorian conduct books did not claim that the public sphere was superior to the private sphere, on the contrary authors explained that the separate spheres merely generated different obligations for the man and the woman.

The theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes referred to as feminism began to arise during the mid-nineteenth century as a result of the division of the masculine public and the feminine private being a social construction rather than a consensus. Many men, as well as women, felt the ideology of the separate spheres to be burdensome, yet "the pervasiveness of such thinking made it difficult for either sex to find effective challenges" (Levine, 13). It was not until the late nineteenth century that the women's movement began to discover a pride in its female identity. The movement demonstrated the organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests, and grew into a series of single-issue campaigns to fight

educational or sexual or employment battles (Levine, 14). In the late nineteenth century, feminism “signaled the adoption of an alternative set of values” such as, female sexuality and the new woman (Levine, 23). However, new models of female identity such as these were met with great opposition because these progressive designs directly contradicted the basis of the Victorian middle-class household.

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In addition, I owe a special thanks to my parents who convinced me to perceive with my Capstone Project even when I was overwhelmed while attempting to complete my student teaching placements and the Capstone Project.

## Advice to Future Honors Students

It's never too early to begin your Capstone Project. This is especially true if you are aware that your workload will become progressively more challenging or you plan to travel abroad nearing the end of your college career.

Once you do begin your Capstone Project, time management is key. I highly recommend buying a planner and jotting down specific times in the week you plan to utilize for drafting your Capstone Project because trust me, you will being drafting and editing until the due date.

Most importantly, do not let anyone tell you completing the Capstone Project is impossible. This was a concern of my own, and now that I've completed the Capstone Project I could not be more proud of my endeavors.

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Toward the late nineteenth century, new models of female identity such as female sexuality and the new woman caused changing attitudes toward Victorian sexuality. The Victorian moral code created a reluctance to articulate ideas about sexuality, and Victorian sexuality became not only repressed but often manipulated and controlled (Levine, 128). While traditional Victorian beliefs asserted that sexuality was to be suppressed along with other vulgarities, progressive designs of the feminist movement encouraged women effectively highlighted the moral contradictions within the ideology of the separate spheres (Davidoff & Hall, 401).

During the Victorian Era, it was believed that the enjoyment of sex was an exclusively male prerogative. Gynecological doctor William Acton, famously stated in his *The Functions and Disorder of the Reproductive Organs* (1857) that "the majority of women (happily for them) were not very much troubled by sexual feelings of any kind." Notions such as these were reinforced in conduct manuals on proper feminine behavior, and eventually gendered ideals of the sexual purity of the respectable woman enshrined a sexual double-standard within Victorian society (Furneaux, 768).

These conduct manuals on proper feminine behavior strengthened the notion of the "ideal" wife. Women were expected to fit the character of the ideal wife, but for some time the wife's role in the private sphere lacked clear definition until conduct books *Women of England, Their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits* (1839) by Sarah Stickney Ellis set appropriate boundaries for female behavior. These conduct books depicted the ideal wife as a devotedly

maternal and happily self-sacrificial while masking the reality of the overall powerless individual. (Langland, 293). For instance, in *Women of England, Their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits* (1839) the author claims that "the domestic character of England" depends on "the moral feelings and habits of the women of such a favored country" (Ellis, 10). According to the conduct book women, "[had] deep responsibilities…a nation's moral wealth [was] in [their] keeping" (Ellis, 13). Victorian conduct books did not claim that the public sphere was superior to the private sphere, rather authors explained that the separate spheres merely created different obligations for man and woman. However, feminist ideals such as female sexuality and the new woman generated consciousness of the fact that the obligations of the separate spheres were not only different but imbalanced. Female sexuality brought attention to the sexual double-standard between men and women, and the new woman raised awareness to the limitations of the ideal wife within the middle-class marriage.

Feminist campaigners placed great emphasis on the value of well-defined moral standards which Victorian society conventionally equated with codes of sexual behavior. The separate sphere ideology repressed female sexuality while male sexuality was encouraged to be active, dominant and powerful (Levine, 129). This corresponds with the physical separation of the home and the workplace. While women were confined to the domestic space, men were exposed to the public, often "immoral" world (Davidoff & Hall, 402). In the late nineteenth century, attention was brought to this "immoral" world when Victorian writers began outright challenging Victorian conventions of sexuality. For instance, the trials of Oscar Wilde demonstrated that the writer not only expressed homosexuality through his literature but through his individual identity. Oscar Wilde's novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* generated "suggestions

of aristocratic libertinism, a background of London vice, and ill-defined secret immorality" (Kaplan, 114).

Homosexuality held an unfavorable position in Victorian culture not only because it defied society's moral standards, but because it revealed the disadvantages of women's ignorance toward sexuality. The established sexual double-standard licensed male freedom and encouraged female suppression. For instance, toward the late nineteenth century it was not uncommon for, "The young wife, with several children, [to be] abandoned by [the] father" due to "homosexual connections" (Davidoff & Hall, 402). What was most alarming about occurrences such as these was not merely the wife's abandonment, but the wife's inability to detect the husband's behavior due to her ignorance of Victorian sexuality. For women, marriage was the central focus of their lives as it determined their societal status, and female sexuality was solely directed to procreation within marriage. Throughout their lives, women were educated in ways to bring out their "natural" submission to authority and innate maternal instincts (Vicinus, 4). Feminist campaigners not only encouraged the acceptance of female sexuality, but highly prioritized the sexual double-standard as a feminist concern.

Women's extreme dependence upon men led some to embrace an ethic of emancipation that entirely went against the ideal wife. Emancipationists or feminists viewed the domestic angel's character to be degrading and corrupted but were aware that by making their opinions known to the world they would be met with great opposition. For instance, in *The Emancipation of Women*, Harriet Taylor Mill writes, "[Women] depend on men's opinion…[despite] their bad opinion of men [because] they believe there is not more than one in ten thousand who does not dislike and fear strength, sincerity, or high spirit in a women" (Mill, 35). By the late nineteenth century, feminist attitudes and beliefs were gradually made more apparent to late-Victorian

society through the notion of the new woman. The new woman set against the principles and morals of the ideal wife – a woman who encompassed her duties and obligations within the private sphere. Many argued that the paid occupation of an unmarried woman was more dignified than the "shelter" of home (Murray, 20). However, like female sexuality, the notion of the new woman was met with great resistance as the progressive principles entirely went against those of the ideal wife of the Victorian order.

Many Victorians feared that female sexuality and the new woman would destroy the entire Victorian order due to its direct opposition with marriage and the ideal wife. In response to these two major threats, many late nineteenth century novelists composed works of fiction that were intended to portray the detrimental effects that would occur within society if feminist ideas were to be socially acceptable.

In the novel, *A Marriage Below Zero* by Alan Dale, the author intends to depict the detrimental effects of homosexuality on the Victorian order. Rather than being motivated by his own desires, Dale seems to have been motivated by homophobic fear. In *A Marriage Below Zero,* Alan Dale diverts his homophobic intentions by unintentionally bringing more attention to the disadvantages of women's ignorance toward Victorian sexuality. Similarly, in the novel, *The Revolt of Man* by Walter Besant the author intends to illustrate a dystopia – a future England dominated by women. Although, Besant's anti-feminist beliefs were well known to the rest of society, *The Revolt of Man* unconsciously supports the notion of the new woman by bringing attention to the outlandish idea of a society predominately controlled by a specific gender.

Late Victorian novels such as *A Marriage Below Zero* by Alan Dale and *The Revolt of Man* by Walter Besant were intended to demonstrate the disorder that would arise if the Victorian middle class did not abide to traditional beliefs. However, I will demonstrate how late

Victorian novels such as the two listed above actually end up subverting their own anti-feminist agendas and instead, contribute to the political project of late-Victorian feminism by inadvertently demonstrating that the separate spheres of Victorian society were both limiting and imbalanced.

## Chapter 2

### *A Marriage Below Zero* by Alan Dale

In 1889, *A Marriage Below Zero* demonstrated a tragicomic account of a desperate woman's attempts to uncover the secret at the center of her husband's life – homosexuality. Writing under the pseudonym "Alan Dale," drama critic and novelist Alfred J. Cohen, the sensation novel was intended to shine light on the "sensation" of homosexuality within the Victorian middle class household (Kaiser, vii). In the "Editor's Introduction" of *A Marriage Below Zero,* Matthew Kaiser claims Dale's precarious choice of subject was motivated primarily by opportunism. The author had a desire to capitalize on the public's growing curiosity of homosexuality.

According to Matthew Kaiser, much of Dale's fiction focuses to an amusing effect on the seemingly intractable emotional, sexual, and political tensions between men and women. The relationship between the protagonist and her husband of *A Marriage Below Zero* suggests that "heterosexuality is not for everyone," and instead, male homosexuality is favorably represented as "relationship-oriented, bound by a masculine intimacy, a Hellenistic friendship that no proselytizing maiden can break" (Kaiser, xii). Kaiser asserts that Dale's "satirical firepower" is reserved for the middle-class married couple primarily through the wife of the novel, Elsie Bouverie whom Kaiser refers to as a classic female hysteric, an unreliable narrator and unreliable authority on sex because of her "displaced" anger which Kaiser believes should be placed on her own ignorance instead of her husband's male companion (Kaiser, x).

While I agree with Kaiser's suggestion that the novel, *A Marriage Below Zero* was motivated by opportunism from the late nineteenth century sensation of homosexuality, I am

arguing that Alan Dale does not intend to criticize heterosexual marriage, but instead refute homosexual relationships by examining their potential, detrimental effects on Victorian order. *A Marriage Below Zero* depicts a series of traumatic events within a loveless marriage which all could have been avoided if the homosexual males of the novel had merely abided by Victorian conventions.

However, the primary focus of my argument is to demonstrate how Alan Dale subverts his own anti-homosexual agenda and instead, unintentionally contributes to the political project of late-Victorian feminism by demonstrating that the separate spheres of Victorian society were both limiting and imbalanced. The novel, *A Marriage Below Zero* is narrated from the point of view of a mistreated and jealous wife, Elsie Bouverie, who constantly falls victim to the detrimental effects of the male homosexual relationship involving her husband, Arthur Ravener and his male companion, Jack Dillington. While Kaiser believes Elsie is merely intended to be viewed as a "fool" due to her ignorance, it is precisely her ignorance that causes one to examine the biased power relations between the men and women of Victorian society in order to understand the origin of the narrator's obliviousness. Arthur's ability to maintain a secretive, long-lasting relationship with another male, "Captain" Dillington, in comparison to Elsie's continuous, naïve inability to recognize the obvious male homosexual relationship causes one to question the cause of such a drastic difference in men's ability versus women's inability. The root of the problem links to the social construction of the separate spheres. In *A Marriage Below Zero* Dale illustrates that the public sphere is what enabled Victorian men, like Arthur Ravener, with the freedom and ability to preserve male homosexual relationships, while the private sphere not only prevents women from possessing any sort of influence within the public domain, but limits women's knowledge of anything uninvolved in the private sphere – like Victorian

sexuality – which as noted, was believed to be an exclusively male prerogative. The ability of Arthur Ravener and Jack Dillington to maintain a male homosexual relationship alongside Elsie's inability to recognize her husband's relationship with his male companion represents the imbalance of the separate spheres, and the drastic extent of Elsie's ignorance, which although today may be viewed as "foolish," exemplifies just how limited women of the Victorian era were due to the confinements of the private sphere.

Before depicting Alan Dale's unintentional portrayal of the limitations and imbalances of the separate spheres, it is important to recognize that my argument is not original in declaring Dale's sensation novel as homophobic. By the early twentieth century, *A Marriage Below Zero* was actually dismissed as homophobic and overly sensational by the few gay and lesbian intellectuals who remembered it (Kaiser, viii). This is mainly because the end of the novel does not portray a fulfilled, honorable masculine figure but rather, a selfish, hyper-sexualized male. In the final scene of the novel, Elsie examines the dead body of her husband, Arthur Ravener – who is eventually exposed to be in love with another man, Jack Dillington. After Arthur's homosexual identity is revealed, Arthur commits suicide which in itself is a significant form of death as Victorian society moved from a moral, theological, and legal condemnation of suicide to an acceptance of suicide as a deterioration of faith, family, and hope (Kushner, 440). In addition, because the Victorian middle class generated a sense of competition, if members of the middle class were unable to rise up, or merely maintain their place in society, it was viewed exclusively as the fault of the individual. Therefore, through his death alone, Arthur – a representation of the homosexual male – is exposed as incapable of succeeding within the Victorian order.

The final scene of *A Marriage Below* Zero particularly emphasizes the detrimental effects of homosexuality within Victorian order, but also demonstrates how Dale unintentionally diverts

from his own agenda bringing attention to other, arguably more pressing issues. After finding Arthur's lifeless body within the final scene, Elsie lets out an agonized cry (Dale, 170). From her reaction, Dale seems to intend to provoke feelings of sympathy toward the idyllic wife who abided by Victorian conventions throughout her life but was nevertheless inevitably wronged in the end due to the homosexual male, but at the same time Dale brings attention to another concern. Throughout the novel, despite her husband's constant neglect, Elsie makes endless failed attempts to receive even an ounce of affection from Arthur, but when Arthur's death is revealed Elsie does not demonstrate emotions of liberation because she is no longer bound to a loveless marriage. Instead, Elsie expresses intense despair for the loss of her compassionless, unloving husband. Elsie's constant devotion to her husband illustrates women's dependence on men in the private sphere because men were women's only connection to the public sphere. Throughout *A Marriage Below Zero*, Elsie's existence revolves around earning the admiration of her husband in part, by abiding to the confinements he put in place. For instance, even within her own domain of the private sphere Elsie is limited. Upon moving into their home, Arthur explains, "Here are your rooms, Elsie…you can be as completely alone here as though you were Robinson Crusoe on the desert island…I have a couple rooms on the other side of the house fitted up for myself" (Dale, 48). Despite Arthur's unfair constrictions, Elsie rarely displays interest or concern for anything but her husband's acceptance. However, it is clear that Elsie's fixation on receiving Arthur's affection does not derive from love for her husband, since it is shown throughout the novel that Elsie actually knows very little about her husband. Elsie's paranoia could be viewed more as result of her limitations, not only within Victorian society which requires women of the private sphere to solely focus on the needs of the family and household, but within her own private sphere in which Elsie does not even have access to her

entire household. Elsie has so little else to give her attention to that all she can truly focus on is her loveless marriage. Elsie's single-mindedness on Arthur demonstrates the limitations of the private sphere.

Other aspects of the novel's final scene also illustrate Dale's homophobic intentions. Just before the novel's end, Elsie notices two portraits hanging over her husband's dead body. One portrait is of Arthur Ravener alongside a portrait of his secret lover, Jack Dillington. While 'mainstream' literary interpretations, such as Kaiser's, believe that Dale intends the portraits to signify the everlasting bounds between masculine intimacies – a definition of "their union," Elsie's reaction suggests that the opposite, is in fact, the case (Kaiser, xii). After noticing the portraits, Elsie indignantly destroys the photographs shredding them into the "smallest pieces" possible regardless of the fact that "they cut [her] hands until the blood flowed freely" (Dale, 170). Through Elsie's vivid, violent actions, Dale demonstrates that the wife is seeking her own form of personal vengeance on the male homosexual relationship which is deemed to be the root of all turmoil within her marriage; Elsie viciously destroys the portraits in the same way she feels the homosexual males, Arthur and "Captain" Dillington destroyed her place in Victorian society. In one final action, Dale illustrates homosexuality's ability to destroy the entirety of Victorian order, but through the method Elsie utilizes to destroy the portraits – her own hands – Elsie's action suggests that she is rejecting more than just the homosexual male. Significantly, Elsie destroys the portraits "until the blood flowed freely" from her hands because Elsie's imposed self-damage on her hands demonstrates her internal rejection of the Victorian order. Elsie's hands represent the only asset of Elsie's being she possessed freedom of and received encouragement to employ, women were not valued for their mind which is representative of one's knowledge or for their voice which is representative of one's opinion. Instead, the ideology

of the separate spheres confined Elsie to her hands as women were valued for the heart and spirit put into completing the mindless duties of the private sphere such as cleaning the household, cooking meals, rearing children, etc. Based on Elsie's action to destroy the portraits with her hands until they bled, Dale is additionally, unintentionally demonstrating the disadvantages of the limitations of the private spheres.

Elsie's actions continue to demonstrate a similar notion of rejection toward the Victorian order within the final scene. After destroying the portraits of Arthur Ravener and Jack Dillington, Elsie turns away, "and without another look at the dead form in the chair" she leaves the room (Dale, 170). Given the homophobic intent of Dale's sensation novel, it is likely Dale intended Elsie's action to be solely targeted toward her husband, Arthur Ravener. The naïve, devoted wife finally realizes that the selfish, homosexual male she calls her husband has given her nothing but misery within their loveless marriage. Therefore, her decision to not take "another look" at Arthur can be interpreted as her decision to finally give up on their marriage and possibly begin anew conventional life within the Victorian middle class utilizing her improved awareness of Victorian sexuality. However, Dale inadvertently augments to the interpretation that Elsie has given up on the entire Victorian order after realizing how she was wronged by the ideology of the separate spheres. The deceived wife could be detesting more than merely her homosexual husband. By the end of the novel, it is evident that Elsie's ignorance is what ultimately allowed the scandal to continue for so long, and when examining how Elsie's ignorance came to be so extensive the primary cause can be deemed as the result of the separate spheres. The private sphere limited Elsie's knowledge of what goes on in the public sphere, like Victorian sexuality, and Elsie's limitation of knowledge enabled Arthur to maintain his male homosexual relationship. Because Elsie was so wronged by abiding to the conventions of the private sphere,

it is likely – arguably, more likely than anything Dale consciously intended – that what Elsie's decision to turn her back on the final scene of the novel is representative of her rejection of the entire Victorian order – the true origin of what caused her life's desolation.

Alan Dale's homophobic intent for the novel is validated, not only through the final scene of *A Marriage Below Zero* – the revelation of Arthur Ravener's homosexuality – but through the entire novel's depiction of the major milestones of a Victorian woman: the engagement, the wedding, and the marriage. Although intended to demonstrate the detrimental effects of homosexuality, Dale's portrayal of these milestones additionally recognizes the limitations and imbalance of the ideology of the separate spheres.

For instance, the engagement between Arthur Ravener and Elsie Bouverie encompasses immediate turmoil that Elsie is unable to understand, or even question. Before announcing their engagement, Elsie is apprehensive to the peculiar relationship between her future husband, Arthur and his closest companion, Jack Dillington. After Jack Dillington congratulates the newly engaged couple, it occurs to Elsie, "that it was rather strange Jack Dillington should know anything about [her] engagement. Arthur had not left [her] side since [she] had accepted him as [her] future husband" (Dale, 37). Despite her concerns, Elsie does not question the relationship between Arthur and Jack Dillington. Rather, the dutiful fiancé puts on her "happy expression" because although, "still, [she] was not quite satisfied," she believed, "it would be better to appear so" (Dale, 37). Through Elsie's exceptionally obedient character, Alan Dale aims to evoke a sense of compassion for the soon-to-be wife because the reader is indirectly made aware of Arthur's unconventional sexuality through characters' snide remarks and sardonic comments. As the novel progresses, one becomes more and more aware that no level of compliance of which Elsie can provide her husband will ever diminish the male homosexual relationship. Compassion

is evoked towards Elsie's character primarily because, despite the reader's growing awareness of the homosexual relationship, it is apparent through Elsie's internal dialogue that she has no suspicion at all of Arthur and Jack until the very end of the novel. Through the relationship of Arthur and Jack, Alan Dale implies the selfish, tactless nature of homosexuality. However, Dale's depiction of Elsie's submissive nature or fictitious "happy expression" acknowledges the source of a greater socially constructed issue (Dale, 37). Elsie's passive, subservient character is not unique for a Victorian woman; rather, it is the expected nature of a woman within the private sphere to employ. Yet, given the outcome of the novel, one must question what benefits, if any at all, women received from complying with the submissive, obedient character of the private sphere. In Elsie's case, abiding to the conventions of the private sphere left her with nothing but a loveless, chaotic marriage. Dale demonstrates the imbalance of the separate spheres by illustrating that while men of the public sphere, like Arthur Ravener and Jack Dillington, are enabled to act out all, or at least most of, their desires, women are often unable to express their desires or even curiosities. For instance, even in extreme cases, like Elsie's inability to question the relations of her fiancé – the man she has agreed to spend the rest of her life with. If Elsie had chosen not to abide by Victorian conventions perhaps the outcome of the novel – the outcome of her life – would've possessed a more favorable ending.

During the engagement period, one is provided with more insight into the relationship between Elsie and her mother, Mrs. Bouverie. The mother-daughter relationship portrays how the submissive nature of the domestic sphere was engrained in Victorian women from generation to generation. Throughout the novel, Elsie's mother appears to be obsessed with abiding by what is "fashionable" or in other words, conventional. Although Elsie constantly criticizes her mother, Mrs. Bouverie's obsession has undoubtedly been deep-seated in her daughter, as well. When

Mrs. Bouverie explains to Elsie that as a result of a short-term engagement, “People might talk,” Elsie immediately worries, “There was no more awful possibility. An earthquake would have been pleasant, and a conflagration merely an episode in comparison” (Dale, 39). Ironically, the ending of *A Marriage Below Zero* demonstrates that there is in fact a “more awful possibility” or at the very least, the ending of the novel forces Elsie to experience true agony when she finds her husband’s lifeless body by the fireplace (Dale, 170). Like her mother, Elsie does not consider the detrimental effects that could come from a rushed marriage, but given the conventions of Victorian society, Elsie is forced to focus more on the opinions of others than her own well-being. Dale’s emphasis on the women’s dedication to the conventions of the private sphere does not heighten sympathy for the marriage’s unfavorable outcome as Dale may have intended. Instead, the devotion of Mrs. Bouverie and Elsie to domesticity causes one to question the purpose of the Victorian woman’s existence. In accordance with the private sphere, women were forced to constantly consider the perceptions and opinions of others, but as revealed through *A Marriage Below Zero,* it was rare that the well-being of women was ever taken into consideration by the public sphere, just as Elsie’s well-being is never taken into consideration by Arthur Ravener or Jack Dillington. For instance, even after the first night of Arthur and Elsie’s loveless marriage turmoil arises when Arthur does not arrive home until the next morning because his love with Jack is far greater than his concern for Elsie. When Elsie expresses apprehension, the first thing Jack addresses is, “Now, Elsie, there is not a soul who knows anything about this…and I would not talk about it…W-with anybody. With your mother, for example” (Dale, 57). Once again, through this complex dynamic, Dale is unconsciously demonstrating the imbalance of the separate spheres – the public sphere enables Arthur to

continue his homosexual relationship, but the private sphere restricts Elsie from confiding in even her mother.

This overwhelming concern with the perceptions of others devalues the female relationships amongst the women of *A Marriage Below Zero.* Although Dale may have intended to evoke sympathy for the ignorant women through Elsie and Mrs. Bouverie's cluelessness of Arthur's sexual identity in comparison to the readers' growing recognition of Arthur's homosexual relationship with Jack, what Dale unintentionally illustrates is the flaws and restrictions within female relationships due to the duties and obligations of the private sphere. The private sphere was meant to be a place of sanction; in other words, any familial conflicts were to be dealt with within the household. Therefore, women of the private sphere were obligated to ensure that private matters were never exposed to the public sphere. This particular requirement of the private sphere often lessened the relationship between women. Elsie and Mrs. Bouverie illustrate a mother-daughter relationship that lacks compassion and concern for one another. For instance, Mrs. Bouverie does not display concern for the well-being of her daughter by questioning Arthur's desire for a short-term engagement. Elsie claims, "My mother would have been perfectly satisfied to have escorted me to the altar on the day following our betrothal, if fashion had established any precedent for such a course" (Dale, 39). Although functioning within the private sphere, Elsie's mother's ultimate concern is not for her daughter, but of with how she is perceived by the public sphere. When describing her mother Elsie states, "I have a mother who loves me a great deal more than she did come time ago…[because] Now I do my best to assist her in her vigorous struggle for perpetual youth" (Dale, 1). Unfortunately, in comparison to the male relationships within the novel which prove to be either intensely compassionate to a sexual degree, such as the relationship between Arthur and Jack or at the very

least, dependable and honest like the men on the train who are comfortable with another enough to discuss the secret relationship occurring between Arthur and Jack, the relationship between women even those with familial bonds like the one between a mother and daughter, are devalued due to the responsibilities of the private sphere that emphasize an unyielding concern with the perception of the public sphere. When describing her mother Elsie states, “So you see that her affection for me is by no means maternal. I call her ‘mother’ from force of habit, though, accustomed as I am to the word, it’s often rather ludicrous in my ears” (Dale, 2). Throughout the novel, Elsie’s lack of affection towards her mother is evident as she rarely confides in her mother about her chaotic, loveless marriage. Overall, *A Marriage Below Zero* recognizes that women of the private sphere were not granted the same freedom to enhance female-to-female bonds primarily because of their obligation to keep all conflicts within the private sphere *private* from not only the public sphere but from one another.

Within the engagement period, the actions of Mrs. Bouverie in comparison to the actions of Arthur Ravener demonstrate a direct correlation to the inequity of the separate spheres. As a result of the confinements of the domestic sphere, despite Mrs. Bouverie’s concern with the opinions of others, Elsie’s mother still possesses a strong desire to marry off her daughter. As a Victorian woman abiding by the conventions of her ideological sphere, Mrs. Bouverie has dedicated her life to two major facets: the household and the family. Like all members of the Victorian middle class, the household and the family were representative of whether or not the idyllic wife properly achieved her role within society. While Mrs. Bouverie is able to possess total control of the inanimate household, the life of another being, like her daughter, is far less predictable. The constant worry Elsie’s mother possesses over the outcome of her daughter’s future is apparent throughout the novel as Mrs. Bouverie is well known for intruding into Elsie’s

personal life at inappropriate times. Yet, while women were forbidden from breaking tradition or convention, Alan Dale demonstrates that men were entirely capable of doing so when they deemed suitable. For instance, Arthur suggests that Elsie and him, "abolish that old-fashioned notion of honeymooning, and go immediately after the wedding to [their] house in Kew" (Dale, 41). Elsie does not question her future husband's motives for not wanting a honey-moon, but instead internally alters her entire perception of the honeymoon referring to the notion as having, "distinctly unpleasant features" (Dale, 42). As opposed to chastising Arthur for his unconventionality, as Elsie likely would have done to herself or another women, she admires her future husband's "eccentricity" and abides by his desire not to have a honeymoon in turn denying her own, original desires (Dale, 43). Just before the end of the passage, Elsie recognizes her internal, true feelings of disappointment, but once again the dutiful Victorian woman tries to put on a satisfied face for society, "I tried to believe that I was satisfied, but I was not. With all my superiority, I was disappointed" (Dale, 43). Dale's recognition of Elsie's internal confliction may cause resentment towards Arthur's devious, calculated actions and in reaction disdain toward homosexuality, but Elsie's passive, malleable character also causes one to acknowledge that by fulfilling the ideology of the private sphere the wife was ministering the occurrence of the doomed marriage.

Another milestone of the Victorian woman that *A Marriage Below Zero* depicts is the wedding day. Just like the engagement period, the wedding of Arthur and Elsie causes one to reflect on the imbalance of the separate spheres and the limitations of the domestic sphere. On their wedding day, Elsie is not alarmed by Arthur's drastic change in character. She does not question why a typically withdrawn, compassionless man is making such an effort to bring attention to their wedding ceremony. Elsie stands by and observes as Arthur publicly announces

his marriage “in the four corners of the globe” (Dale, 45). She does not question his odd behavior, but instead justifies his actions by claiming he “gloried” in the wedding (Dale, 45). While Dale intends to portray Elsie’s ignorance as endearing, in reality Elsie’s unawareness of her husband’s ulterior motives for the wedding is quite alarming. Even when exchanging their vows, Elsie does not question Arthur’s “hoarse” response, “trembled” hands, or “icily cold” fingers. As Elsie begins to embark on a momentous event in her life, “Only once did he look at [her]” (Dale, 46). However, Elsie does not blame Arthur for his lack of compassion, instead she blames herself by exclaiming, “Ah! He little knew what a lucky girl I thought myself” (Dale, 46). Elsie’s decision to blame herself is illustrative of the belief that the private sphere is solely responsible for effecting the public sphere. More specifically, conduct manuals of the Victorian era such as, *Women of England, Their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits* (1839) by Sarah Stickney Ellis emphasize the vitality of women’s exceptional care for the household because as mentioned, the private sphere was deemed as the sanction to the public sphere. In other words, the household was intended to be a place for men to escape from all the chaos and turmoil of the public sphere in their own orderly, composed household. This is why the woman was obligated to take such great care of the home; if the woman properly completed her duties within the private sphere then she should have achieved in satisfying her husband. By blaming herself for her husband’s peculiar actions, Elsie is already demonstrating a mindset similar to the ideology of the separate spheres. After the second milestone of a Victorian woman, Elsie’s unremitting obliviousness and self-blame far surpasses Dale’s desire for the conjuring of resentment towards homosexuality or compassion towards the dutiful wife, but instead raises feelings of astonishment and frustration toward the ignorance of women.

The remainder of the novel focuses on Arthur and Elsie's loveless marriage. During the marriage period, a series of encounters between Arthur and "Captain" Dillington confirm there is in fact an intimate relationship between the men, but Elsie's obliviousness to the nature and motives of such encounters demonstrates the extent of women's ignorance to Victorian sexuality. After two years of minimal interaction with her husband and constant suspicions of his actions in the public sphere, Elsie investigates into whether or not Arthur is having an affair with another *woman*. Elsie still does not suspect that the affair is between Arthur and "Captain" Dillington; she merely believes that her husband's male companion is supporting Arthur in his affair with another woman. It is not until the very end of the novel – just before Elsie discovers Arthur's dead body – that she displays even a smidgen of doubt that "there were [even] a 'woman in the case,' after all" (Dale, 163). Dale demonstrates the imbalance of the separate spheres by portraying women's minimal knowledge of Victorian sexuality through Elsie who is unaware of her husband's male homosexual relationship until the very end of the novel in comparison to the men of *A Marriage Below Zero* whom display "contempt" for Arthur and "Captain" Dillington in the very beginning of the novel likely because as it is insinuated, they are aware of the nature of the men's relationship (Dale, 46).

Dale's continuous depiction of the men's evident "contempt" for Arthur and Jack Dillington in comparison to Elsie's ongoing unawareness subverts his own anti-homosexuality agenda and instead brings attention to the imbalance of knowledge about Victorian sexuality within the public sphere opposed to the private sphere. For instance, while eavesdropping on the train, Elsie overhears two men gossiping about Arthur. Although it is evident that the men are gossiping about Arthur's sexual identity – even implying his male homosexual relationship with Jack Dillington, like always Elsie remains clueless to the meaning of the men's banter. By

juxtaposing Elsie's naivety to such apparent insinuations alongside the men's certainty within their conversation, as one male claims, "No evidence is necessary. Eyes are evidence in this case" referring to his belief of Arthur's sexual identity, Dale evidences the limited knowledge women possess of Victorian sexuality (Dale, 110). While it is clear that the men are devaluing Arthur's attempt to hide his sexual identity by marrying Elsie, whom they refer to as, the "silly little fool" – ironically, Elsie remains to have no idea of what they are inferring, "I wondered what Arthur had done…It seemed to me that a quiet, refined young man, such as I previously supposed him to be, could not have given any very serious offense" (Dale, 111). Aside from acknowledging Elsie's limited knowledge, her statement is particularly significant because at this point in the novel, Elsie is truly miserable with Arthur after having endured almost a year of their loveless marriage. In fact, Elsie overhears the men's conversation while on her way to spy on her husband whom she believes is having an affair with another *woman*. Yet despite her misery, she still internally defends him, referring to him as a "quiet" and "refined" (Dale, 112). While Dale intends to evoke remorse for the clueless wife, Elsie's defensive statement unconsciously illustrates the private sphere's engrained devotion to the public sphere.

However, Dale demonstrates that neither Victorian men nor women possess an accurate understanding of what women's sexuality entails. As noted, it was believed that Victorian women possessed no sexual urges or desires. This is likely why Arthur believes Elsie would be content in an affectionless, loveless marriage. He asks Elsie to marry him precisely because he assumes that she has no interest in consummating their marriage. For instance, within Arthur's marriage proposal he asks, "Would you be satisfied to marry a man who absolutely declined to be the conventional lover…?" (Dale, 35). Throughout his proposal, Arthur continuously emphasizes Elsie's acknowledgement of him being "different" from other men and how she

despises “demonstrative beings” such as heterosexual couples (Dale, 35). Arthur’s insinuations demonstrate that men were also under a misconception of women’s knowledge of Victorian sexuality as he clearly believes that Elsie has the ability to recognize the male homosexual relationship between himself and “Captain” Dillington. It is not until months within their marriage that Arthur realizes Elsie has no idea about the very existence of his sexual identity. Through Arthur and Elsie’s misinterpretations of their own motives and intentions, Dale portrays that the opposition of the public sphere and the private sphere has created an inability between its members to understand one another. In reality, during the proposal, Elsie merely agrees with Arthur’s every last word because it is what she has, “read [in] novels in which the heroines ‘look up with large surprised eyes” (Dale, 36). Within the marriage proposal, both Arthur and Elsie are attempting to abide by Victorian conventions. Despite, Arthur’s sexual identity he is attempting to at least live a seemingly conventional life by marrying Elsie. Similarly, despite Elsie’s true feelings toward marriage and heterosexual couples, she is responding in a way the private sphere deems acceptable – in accordance with the man’s opinion. The interaction between Arthur and Elsie demonstrates not only the imbalance of the separate spheres, but how the ideology of the separate spheres can be detrimental to both members of the public and private spheres.

Conclusively, after depicting major aspects of the novel, *A Marriage Below Zero* – the final scene, the milestones of the Victorian woman, and the marriage proposal – the limitations and imbalance of the separate spheres is apparent. Elsie’s realization of Arthur’s homosexuality coincides with one’s realization of the effects of women’s ignorance. While Alan Dale intends Elsie’s apprehension to emphasize the detrimental effects of homosexuality, what he ends up bringing more attention to is the disadvantage women possess within society due to their ignorance towards Victorian sexuality. While Alan Dale may have been attempting to support

the Victorian order, in reality the author subverts attention to another major issue within the late nineteenth century that derives from the restrictions of the private sphere. The author depicts how the restrictions of the private sphere enabled women's ignorance toward Victorian sexuality, and by the end of the novel it is evident that without knowledge of Victorian sexuality women are destined to possess an inferior place within society.

## Chapter 3

## *The Revolt of Man* by Walter Besant

*The Revolt of Man* by Walter Besant is commonly viewed as an anti-feminist novel (Heilmann, 58). Besant depicts a late twenty-first century dystopia where Victorian gender roles are reversed as women occupy traditionally male positions and occupations, while men are limited in education or career opportunities. The novel results in a restoration of the 'natural' order which deems men the only suitable political leaders. Ann Heilmann's, "Revolting Men? Sexual Fears and Fantasies in Writings by Old Men, 1880-1910" claims that Besant mobilizes feminist arguments for anti-feminist purposes (Heilmann, 61). However, I am arguing the exact opposite in claiming that Besant's critique of the "outlandish" notion that solely women should comprise positions of power inadvertently exposes the injustice of the imbalance and limitations of the separate spheres. This unanticipated perception defied the author's intentions of sending a strong cautionary message to middle-class women becoming motivated by the idea of female emancipation, and instead, Besant's acknowledgment of the unfair conditions present within Victorian conventions invoked feelings of rebellion and aided in heightening women's suffrage toward the end of the nineteenth century.

According to Ann Heilmann, in order to conjure anti-feminist attitudes Besant draws on all contemporary arguments for women's rights: education, middle-class married men's property, middle-class men's exploitation at work, the critique of the separate spheres, and man's degradation to domestic drudge (Heilmann, 59). While I agree that *The Revolt of Man* revolves around such contemporary arguments for women's rights, I am arguing that Besant's anti-feminist purposes reinforced feminist beliefs in spite of themselves.

To address Besant's argument on education, the dystopian novel illustrates that, "It would have been foolish to figure [men] with book, pencil, or paper. Art, literature, science, politics, all belonged to the other sex" (Heilmann, 45). Besant's argument aims to invoke sympathy from readers because it is a clear display of unconventional, unfair treatment toward men. However, from a feminist's perspective, Besant agrees with the feminist tradition that directly equated freedom with the acquisition of knowledge (Schwartz, 671). Ironically, just like many women of the Victorian era, the men of Besant's dystopia similarly feel at a disadvantage in society without access to education. As mentioned, Besant's drastic, opposing power structure within the dystopia of *The Revolt of Man* based solely on gender is what brings attention to the injustice of the separate spheres. While women were often encouraged to pursue more creative hobbies, such as activities within the arts or literature, in Besant's dystopia, women possess total control regardless of the subject, "Art, literature, science, politics..." (Heilmann, 45). Although Besant is mocking the idea, by not discriminating between men and women's aptitudes, Besant is suggesting that men and women are capable of possessing the same talents regardless of the focus. Therefore, Besant is inadvertently acknowledging the limitations of the separate spheres by portraying how the separate spheres prevent women from fulfilling their true abilities and desires.

Besant attempts to strengthen his anti-feminist argument by providing an example of a 'self-taught' male artist who assumes a female name. Before the artist's true identity is revealed his painting is highly regarded by "country girls" and other women of the dystopian society, insinuating the innate superiority of men and the inherent ignorance of women. However, in his example, Besant's choice of profession – a 'self-taught' male artist – is thought-provoking because women were typically deemed to be more suitable for creative hobbies. By suggesting in

his dystopia that men were capable of teaching themselves traits that were typically associated with femininity, Besant unintentionally suggests women's ability to be 'self-taught' in socially constructed masculine professions. According to Besant, the male artist had never seen any art exhibitions within the Royal Academy, but was still able to produce a painting worthy enough of being exhibited in the Academy (Besant, 45). This fictional example was more likely to encourage feminists rather than dishearten their efforts in the women's movement because it recognizes an individual's innate ability despite one's gender. Motives such as these were why during the late nineteenth century the foundation of new educational opportunities for women was one of the major areas of the new feminist activity which emerged. Women aware of the capabilities they possessed outside of the confinements of the domestic sphere saw education as key to a broad range of other freedoms – such as being acknowledged by the public sphere (Levine, 26). In addition, Besant's literary example serves as an acknowledgement that the spread of feminism was not only occurring in literature, but in art, as well. I contend that Besant's example may even demonstrate the author's fear of the current influence and progress the feminist movement was imposing on society. Besant's explicit recognition of the effects of and subtle demonstration of concern for the progression of the feminist movement validates that the political project occurring in the late nineteenth century was not irrational although that is precisely what Besant originally intended to establish through *The Revolt of Man.* On the contrary, the novel enabled a sense of confidence and hope that the feminist movement had the potential to powerfully and permanently impact society.

Another argument for women's rights Besant recognizes through his dystopian narrative concerns middle-class married men's property. In *The Revolt of Man* men are not only given very little power in society, but in courtship and spousal choice, as well, while the women of the

novel are able to marry whomever they would like, whenever they would like. The age, quantity, and status of the men pose no conflicts for the women. For instance, the Duchess of the novel has three, young husbands. The protagonist, Lord Chester makes what Heilmann would refer to as the antifeminist purposes of the novel's dystopian marriage evident by deeming the polygamy and age difference as unnatural (Heilmann, 59). However, Lord Chester demonstrates a particular disgust in the Duchess' increase of property by her new marriages when he exclaims, "As if she were not rich enough already!" (Besant, 36). Lord Chester's statement is significant because of the multiple interpretations it provokes. According to Heilmann's argument, Besant intended to augment fear of the spread of feminism by suggesting that it would ultimately lead to an 'unnatural' order encompassing polygamous marriages, infertile mothers, and acquisitive wives (Heilmann, 59). The protagonist's apparent dissatisfaction with women's property rights is especially thought-provoking because just before Besant published his novel, the Married Women's Property Act of 1882 altered the common law doctrine of coverture to include the wife's right to own, buy and sell her separate property (Tempany, 555). I would dispute that instead of emphasizing how women's rights could damage the natural order, Besant again highlights a feminist victory – the Married Women's Property Act of 1882. Besant's recognition of the feminist victory– especially given Besant's well-known conservative, anti-feminist views – subverts his own anti-feminist agenda; his acknowledgment of the anti-feminist victory notoriously recognizes the power and ability of the feminist movement to disrupt Victorian order. In an 1894 interview the author states, "I do not think that women have shown themselves as capable as men in intellectual work" (Parker, 5). Despite "Walter Besant's Opinion of Women," women's ability to achieve law reform demonstrates that women are just as capable of performing intellectually as men. In addition, Besant's recognition of the feminist victory also

gave the political project even greater incentive to continue to transform society, more specifically through their attempts in law reform. Even after the 1882 Act, the issue of property continued to be a crucial factor in the arguments put forward by feminist reformers, many of whom did not view the reformed laws as a panacea for all women because an unequal distribution of property remained in place (Wynee, 145).

Lastly, Lord Chester's statement is significant not only because it recognizes a major feminist victory but also because of the dramatic irony it encompasses. As mentioned, when describing the Duchess – a powerful female figure in *The Revolt of Man* – Lord Chester states with disgust, "As if she were not rich enough already!" (Besant, 36). Lord Chester is criticizing the Duchess' need to expand her wealth by utilizing the men of the dystopia. The protagonist's critique is particularly ironic in relation to the "ideal" wife – a crucial element of the separate spheres. As emphasized earlier, the ideal wife of the Victorian era served economic benefits for the public sphere by taking care of the children, purchasing and preparing the food and making the clothes, but she possessed little authority or influence in her society (Vicinus, 4). Instead, the males of the public sphere continuously reaped the economic benefits of the ideal wife without ever providing anything in return. Lord Chester's comment is ironic because by poking fun at the *potential* greed of women in the given dystopia, Besant carelessly recognizes the self-indulgence of men within Victorian society's public sphere. Besant's intended mocking of the reverse roles of husband and wife in *The Revolt of Man* involuntarily admits to the imbalance of the separate spheres.

Another argument for women's rights Besant references in *The Revolt of Man* is middle-class men's exploitation at work. In *The Revolt of Man*, "the greatest care was taken to prevent men from working together, conspiring, and meeting, so that most work was done in solitude or

at home" (Besant, 13). In accordance with Besant's antifeminist purposes, this aspect of the dystopian society may be perceived as preposterous because in agreement with Victorian ideals, "there is more in life for a man to do than to work, to dig, to carry out orders, to be a good athlete, an obedient husband, and a conscientious father" (Besant, 13). However, I must argue that in illustrating such an absurd societal state, Besant is also recognizing one of the primary concerns that influenced the English women's movement. Late Victorian women were primarily concerned with gaining access to the public sphere and expanding their public role due to the oppression felt by many in domestic life, marriage, and all forms of sexual relations (Baylen, 109). Just like the men of *The Revolt of Man* felt they had more to offer to their society, many late nineteenth century feminists felt they had more to offer to Victorian society than household chores, culinary tasks, and child rearing. In addition, Besant states that male relationships were devalued because, "the greatest care was taken to prevent men from working together, conspiring, and meeting…" (Besant, 13). By acknowledging this specific disadvantage within his dystopia, Besant is unconsciously raising awareness to a concern that often went unrecognized in Victorian society. The private sphere was intended to represent one's status to the public sphere; therefore, women were often forced to keep all concerns *private*, even from one another. This required secrecy lessened female relationships of the nineteenth century. Although Besant is scorning the ludicrous notion of men working in "solitude," he is actually bringing more attention to the injustice of confining women to solitude within the household.

In the "Conclusion" of *The Revolt of Man*, the demise of the dystopian society is met when 'The Great Revolution' is finally accomplished. 'The Great Revolution' is perceived as accomplished once 'natural' order is restored and men hold positions of power instead of being confined to and exploited at their work at home. Conversely, women are then restricted to their

domestic duties within the household. However, within a matter of a few short paragraphs, Besant entirely contradicts himself. First the author writes, “The middle-aged women…no doubt suffered greatly by being deprived of the work which was to them their chief pleasure.” Then shortly after he asked, “Who would not prefer liberty and seeing the men work?” (Besant, 154). Not only does Besant answer his own question, but in doing so, he acknowledges that women possess individual talents like “the middle-aged women” of *The Revolt of Man*, but are deprived of fulfilling their “chief pleasures” due to the limitations of the separate spheres. The feminist movement could easily formulate an argument in repost to Besant’s questions as ‘The Great Revolution’ of the novel does not establish a foreign, unheard of society. Instead, ‘The Great Revolution’ establishes a society identical to the conventions of the Victorian era – conventions which exploited, disregarded, and restricted women from expanding their societal influence. Instead of supporting his own anti-feminist values, Besant is more likely to have provoked enraged reactions toward anti-feminist ideals. *The Revolt of Man* acknowledges that women possess abilities equivalent to those of men, but portrays how the separate sphere limit women from fulfilling their aptitudes.

This leads to the examination of Besant’s critique of the separate spheres (Heilmann, 59). Besant more directly addresses his view of the ideal wife within his critique of the separate spheres, but instead titles the role as the “Perfect” Woman. “The Perfect Woman lives in the shadow of the Divine Man: she has her place in the Order of the World; but it is not the highest place” (Besant, 156). Just like the “perfect” wife, the “Perfect” Woman is described in “The Conclusion” of *The Revolt of Man* as being a crucial aspect of the natural order. Besant’s intentional capitalization of the words “order” and “world” within the description indirectly references that just like names and titles, the “Order” and “World” are permanent facets in turn

inferring that the ideology of the separate spheres – crucial aspects of the Victorian order – are constant. Besant's anti-feminist argument is an attempt to instill the idea that order is a permanent fixture, and it is rightfully achieved once the woman is in her rightful place. However, I would disagree that feminists would interpret Besant's argument in such a way. After describing the "Perfect" Woman, the King of 'The Great Revolution' turns to his Queen and says, "Together we will reign" (Besant, 156). Besant once more directly contradicts himself by first claiming that within natural order women are inferior to men, and then illustrating that the King and Queen of 'The Great Revolution' plan to reign society *together*. If 'The Great Revolution' is truly attempting to mirror an alternative Victorian society then this is where Besant's civilization is surely flawed as one of the greatest causes of the feminist movement was that women had minimal access to and held little influence within the public sphere, and this is not the only unnatural, flawed assertion Besant makes in his description of 'The Great Revolution' (Besant, 151). Besant states that after 'The Great Revolution' was accomplished, "No woman was insulted: there was no pillage, no license, no ill-treatment of anybody, no revenge" (Besant, 151). While Besant attempts to describe proper etiquette of women within the domestic sphere, he is inadvertently describing unnatural, improbable reactions given from the opinionated, strong-willed women he spent the majority of the novel depicting. This unnatural reaction to 'The Great Revolution' instead generates the idea that the cause of the women's movement is justified as it has been displayed throughout *The Revolt of Man* that men and women are equally capable of possessing influence within the public sphere.

Finally, the last contemporary argument of Besant's I examine is the man's degradation to domestic drudge (Heilmann, 59). Besant describes the men of his dystopia stating, "Those men in the fields, those working men sitting at the windows – they are all alike unhappy, and

they know not why. It is because the natural order has been reversed; the sex which should command and create is compelled to work in blind obedience" (Besant, 60). Besant's statement is intended for his anti-feminist purposes – recognizing the author's implications as a degraded consequence of what would happen if the natural order of Victorian society was disturbed or reversed. However, despite what Besant believed the purpose of the women's movement to be, one is more likely to view Besant's argument as ill-informed largely because the feminist movement was not attempting to gain female superiority. On the contrary, the political project attempted to address social issues within Victorian law, science, work and religion in the hopes of achieving equality. More specifically, Besant recognizes the imbalance of the separate spheres by claiming that the men of the dystopia, "…are all alike unhappy, and they know not why" (Besant, 60). Besant is unintentionally recognizing many women's unexplainable unhappiness within the confinement of the private sphere which has ultimately derived from their lack of education. Not only does Besant identify this disservice to women, but within Besant's argument on education rights, the author inadvertently acknowledges that women are capable of possessing the same knowledge as men. Therefore, Besant is not only recognizing a feminist concern, but he is admitting that there is a solution.

Ironically, Besant views the dystopian men's "blind obedience" as a valid reason to revolt in the novel. This "blind obedience" is a specific characteristic which relates to the "ideal" wife of Victorian society. The "ideal" wife possessed duties and obligations as wife, mother, and homemakers, and she was to obediently fulfill her role without expecting anything in return – even a simple form of gratitude. Likewise, the men of *The Revolt of Man* were expected to fulfill their specified responsibilities to the dystopian civilization even if they found no sense of happiness or fulfillment from their roles. When the protagonist, Lord Chester attempts to

understand why men of the dystopia fall victim to this "blind obedience" it is explained to him that no individual is to blame, "but blame the system" (Besant, 59). In regards to the dystopia within *The Revolt of Man* this "system" is the reversed ideology of the separate spheres. However, in attempting to assert that the reversal of the separate spheres is the cause of chaos within Victorian order, Besant unintentionally evokes the idea that it is the entire notion of the separate spheres that is flawed because just as Besant views the degradation and corruption of the men of the novel as reason to revolt, he is inadvertently empathizing with the women's movement of the late nineteenth century who reacted the exact same way towards the "ideal" wife. Therefore, one might argue that Besant's reason for revolt in *The Revolt of Man* justifies one of the major reasons for the rise and spread of feminism. Interestingly, Lord Chester is taught about this flawed dystopian "system" by a female Professor. Given the dystopia, it is not peculiar that the educated, powerful Professor is female, but it is noteworthy that she not only teaches against the "system" but against her own gender. The Professor explains to Lord Chester that, "the being [she] obeys…is none other than – [her] own husband" (Besant, 59). The author utilizes the gender of the Professor for his own anti-feminist purposes in order to portray what is part of nature. He is suggesting that even given the entitlement the Professor has been granted based on her own gender, it does not feel natural or suitable to her to be in such a position within society. In her teachings the Professor states, "Man is the Lord and Master of all created things, including – Woman" (Besant, 59). Besant's choice to capitalize "Man" and "Woman" demonstrates his acknowledgement that both man and woman possess specific roles within society, but through the teachings of the Professor, Lord Chester describes that, "Each word, each new fact, tore something from him that he would have believed part of his nature" (Besant, 60). Lord Chester is reinforcing Besant's anti-feminist suggestion of the innate nature of the

separate spheres. Yet, despite the Professor's lesson, Besant contradicts himself given the differences of rank between the female and the male within the conversation, and the resulting productivity of the conversation. Despite the Professor being a female she proves to be capable of fulfilling a superior role to the male. She adequately engages her student, Lord Chester while Lord Chester who proves to be capable of being in a naturally inferior position to a women; he even remarks on the knowledge of such a "crafty woman" (Besant, 60). Once again, while Besant attempts to make a seemingly obvious claim in support of sustaining Victorian traditions, he unconsciously contradicts his claim by proving that men and women are capable of functioning within their opposing spheres.

What Besant's example does correctly suggest is that as long as the separation of spheres exists there will always be one superior sphere and one inferior sphere. Besant describes the dystopian men as, "unhappy, and they know not why," but the protagonist of the novel, Lord Chester cannot seem to understand why these men abide by the "system" if it is what makes them so unhappy (Besant, 60). Lord Chester is portrayed as brave and operative for his decision to take a great part in 'The Great Revolution' despite the many men who follow the system with "blind obedience" (Besant, 59) While Besant is attempting to depict a man who possesses traits associated with the public sphere, he unintentionally acknowledges the valid actions of feminists within the women's movement. One could potentially perceive Besant's description as an applicable description to many of the women of the Victorian era. Just as it is deemed limiting and imbalanced for the dystopian men to solely possess labor intensive, menial occupations in the novel, late nineteenth century feminists found it equally confining and unjust that women of the Victorian era were expected to exclusively focus on their obligations within the family and household. Therefore, instead of fearing the disturbance or destruction of the natural order –

which Besant originally intends from his dystopian illustration –the author's depiction is more likely viewed as another reason the separation of spheres should be diminished.

# Chapter 4

## Conclusion

Conclusively, through detailed analysis it is apparent that *A Marriage Below Zero* by Alan Dale and *The Revolt of Man* by Walter Besant exemplify the unintended effects of Victorian novels. During the mid-nineteenth century, the ideology of the separate spheres was gradually being contested, but it was not until the late-nineteenth century when progressive models of female identity such as female sexuality and the new woman truly began to lead to reform through the assertion of female authority. In reaction to the political project of the women's movement, many writers of the late-nineteenth century, like Alan Dale and Walter Besant argued explicitly against proposed changes to the traditional position of middle-class women.

Both novels were written with evident, anti-feminist intentions. In *A Marriage Below Zero,* Alan Dale intends to portray the detrimental effects of sexuality – specifically homosexuality – but ends up subverting his own agenda by bringing attention to the problematic extent of women's ignorance toward sexuality. In reaction, Dale ends up supporting the feminist ideal of female sexuality. Similarly in *The Revolt of Man*, Besant sets out to illustrate a chaotic, eccentric dystopia that criticizes women's inability to hold positions of power. However, in critiquing the fictional role of the women in the novel, Besant unintentionally addresses the imbalance of the separate spheres. The examination of both the late Victorian novels, *A Marriage Below Zero* by Alan Dale and *The Revolt of Man* by Walter Besant typifies how late-nineteenth century writers were capable of subverting their own anti-feminist agendas and

actually contributing to the political project of late-Victorian feminism by inadvertently demonstrating that the separate spheres of Victorian society were imbalanced and limiting.

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