



## Work and Industry in *Anna of the Five Towns*

Elizabeth Jones

In *Anna of the Five Towns*, Bennett presents a critical depiction of work and industry by displaying the detrimental effect that a particularly patriarchal and capitalist system has on individuals and on their relationships. Woolf criticised writers such as Bennett, particularly for the way they ‘write of unimportant things... they spend immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and enduring’.<sup>1</sup> However it is this immense detail that is essential to the realist style of the novel, and is especially useful in aiding our understanding of the systems at work in the novel, particularly in relation to industry and work. Indeed, as Simmons notes, ‘their attention to the ‘unimportant things’ does at least ensure a context of economic realism in their novels through the practical concerns of business’.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, the ambiguity of the narrative voice which is neither a construct of the consciousness of the characters nor entirely out of a wide objective social and historical contextual perspective is useful in aiding the subtle nature of Bennett’s criticism. Although there is very much still the sense of the validating voice of the realist writer, many of the ideas and attitudes that are communicated are less conforming than Bennett’s traditional style of realism would suggest. As such, it is arguable that the ambiguity of narrative is a calculated aid to Bennett’s method of criticism. Furthermore, by defining even human relationships in terms of industry, work and business, Bennett’s criticism falls upon the values of the patriarchal and sexist society he displays. Ultimately the reader is led to the conclusion that this society places higher value upon the domain of economic gain and capitalist industrial success (a sphere which the society of the novel defines as masculine in addition to undermining the feminine sphere of domesticity) over the values of human relationships and happiness. As such, industry and business is damningly portrayed as a system, which has a directly detrimental consequence to human relationships.

Anna Tellwright, as the heroine of the novel, is the most significant character we must consider in relation to work. Through Bennett’s domestic portrayal of Anna, the reader is guided to regard her greatest and most significant work to be that of a domestic, in her father’s home. Our sympathies are consciously employed in our appreciation of her character, who, at the age of nine, was ‘accomplished in all domesticity’ and who ‘at sixteen became mistress of the household, with a small sister to cherish and control’.<sup>3</sup> Our awareness of her domestic roles as a mother to her half-sister and as a domestic housekeeper are continuously reinforced throughout the novel and although domestic work is trivialised, Bennett insists that we are to respect her for her hard work; ‘to any Bursley matron it would have constituted the highest possible certificate of Anna’s character’.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Bennett’s realist style, and his detailed domestic descriptions, particularly of the parlour, invoke ‘an atmosphere of hum-drum domestic life, continuous through years – not an atmosphere of excitement and thrill

<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader*, First Series, (London: Hogarth Press, 1929), p.187

<sup>2</sup> A. Simmons, ‘The Early Twentieth Century’, in *The Representation of Business in English Literature*, ed. Professor Arthur Pollard, (London : The Institute of Economic Affairs, 2000) p.106

<sup>3</sup> Arnold Bennett, *Anna of The Five Towns*, (Middlesex: The Echo Library, 2006), p.14

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.62

and impending change.’<sup>5</sup> Indeed, throughout the narrative we are subject to a vast number of references to the importance of her domestic work through her thoughts and actions such as how ‘the shortcomings of the table appointments... caused anguish in the heart of the housewife’<sup>6</sup> and how, ‘she threw a housekeeper’s glance over the table’.<sup>7</sup> Such labels suggest a triviality and simplicity to Anna’s status as a domestic worker which seems inappropriate and a little demeaning when we consider her true economic and social status.

Indeed, Anna is socially comparable to Beatrice. Her character, although inoffensive, offers the reader a whimsical comparison to Anna, especially in their relative attitudes to work. Beatrice’s pretention to the work of an artist is humorously undercut by Anna’s inability to recognise the man in her portrait as Beatrice’s father, and by the pretentious nature of many of the gushing statements that Beatrice makes, such as, ‘I’m obliged to have this room...it’s the only one in the house with a north light, and of course you can’t do without that’, and ‘Mother says I work far too long up here’.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, her precocious love for chocolates, ‘I simply dote on them. I love to eat them in bed, if I can’t sleep’ emphasises the ridiculousness of her character, and sets her bourgeois idea of ‘work’ to be mocked rather than respected.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, as one critic commented, ‘Though he does not make it too obvious, the author is essentially a satirist’.<sup>10</sup> Anna, herself, is ‘conscious within herself of a fundamental superiority’ to Beatrice, and we too are aware of this and the relative attitudes of the two women towards work are certainly elements which guide us to construct this opinion.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, the way in which Bennett defines and controls Anna’s character and behaviour by her domestic surroundings immediately limits the boundaries of her capabilities, indicating from very early on that she is not cut out for the work involved in the industrial businesses of the Five Towns. It is arguable that Bennett’s criticism lies in his reduction of ‘human character to “social character”...meticulously described as determined by its environment’.<sup>12</sup> There is certainly this element of discord in Bennett’s initial description of Anna. Bennett clearly states for the reader’s benefit that ‘through the error of destiny’ she had ‘been born into a wrong environment’<sup>13</sup>, ‘the central seat of that honoured manufacture’<sup>14</sup> (the pottery and ceramic industry). Indeed, even the most minor of changes to her situation outside of her domestic domain make Anna feel uneasy; ‘she longed to be at home, in her kitchen, in order to examine herself and the new situation’.<sup>15</sup> This statement makes it very clear that even Anna knows herself best within her domestic sanctuary. By placing such a deliberate emphasis on Anna’s domestic work and environment to compliment the formation of her character, it is evident that Bennett intends a secondary effect for this traditionally sexist definition of the female role, more significant than simply for characterisation.

Having had it clearly explicitly detailed where Anna is most comfortable, it is necessary to reconsider the way in which her domestic work is valued and identify possible ways in which Bennett tries to challenge such estimations. We are clearly intended to admire

<sup>5</sup> Letters between George Sturt and Bennett, September and October 1902, in *The Critical Heritage Arnold Bennett*, ed. James Hepburn, (London: Routledge, 1997), p.160

<sup>6</sup> *Anna of The Five Towns*, p.32

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.18

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.53

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> ‘Critic’, ‘Unsigned Review’, (New York) June 1903, in *The Critical Heritage Arnold Bennett*, ed. James Hepburn, (London: Routledge, 1997), p.168

<sup>11</sup> *Anna of The Five Towns*, p. 11

<sup>12</sup> Edwin J. Kenney, Jr. ‘The Moment, 1910: Virginia Woolf, Arnold Bennett, and Turn of the Century Consciousness’ *Colby Quarterly*, Vol. 13, Issue 1, Article 5. The Berkeley Electronic Press: March 1977 p.65

<sup>13</sup> *Anna of The Five Towns*, p.5

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p.67

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.7

Anna for her diligence and hard work. It is, however, interesting to consider Bennett's attitude towards the restriction of his female protagonist to the realms of domestic work. Anna's incompatibility with her industrial surroundings is reiterated convincingly through her inability to cross over into an active involvement in the economically driven industry of the potteries. The description of Anna's 'unaccustomed efforts' at line painting also reiterate the sexist attitude towards women's ability at industrial work.<sup>16</sup> In her attempt, Anna solicits patronising responses from both the paintress who 'respectfully applauded' despite 'not attempting to hide her amusement' and from Mynors who 'smiled indulgently', again emphasising Anna's incompatibility with industrial work.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, her failure to grasp the concepts of this sphere of work, and her feeling of estrangement from the processes of economic business are highlighted. Despite her sizeable inheritance, her father's patriarchal insistence of control over business matters renders her inheritance of real estate a completely alien concept to Anna, who, having been thrown into the deep end of a business partnership with Mynors finds such dealings to be 'activities of which she was completely ignorant and would always be completely ignorant'.<sup>18</sup> This lack of industrial and business knowledge is immediately assumed on her visit to the works where we are told that Mynors 'did not need to be told that Anna was perfectly ignorant of the craft', emphasising the sexist assumption of female ignorance of industry.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore we are party to her psychological and emotional response to her new 'disturbing experience' of involvement in industrial society. Bennett, fittingly, (in regards to her naivety), renders her comparable to 'a child, whose sensations hesitate between pleasure and apprehension'.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, it is her childlike ignorance of business and the prioritising of compassion which leads her to make the imprudent decision to destroy the fraudulent bill. Importantly, we too, like Anna, feel her rush of excitement and terror as 'she lay in bed, breathless, her heart violently beating', after she dares to take control of dealings with the Prices' debt.<sup>21</sup> By removing the bill from her fathers' bureau and burning it she directly contradicts her previous statement; "'I needn't tell you... that of course I am in father's hands'"<sup>22</sup> This statement both reasserts society's general assumption of patriarchal control, and references elements of Tellwright's so-called 'rights' over her as one of the 'women of his household... the natural victims of their master'.<sup>23</sup> Ultimately, however, despite her benevolent and compassionate intentions, Anna's act to attempt to take responsibility for her own investments and business, and cross into the male dominated capitalist system of work has devastating effects. Her already tentative relationship with her father is damaged beyond repair, and Anna accepts this as a reasonable and logical consequence of her contradiction of the patriarchal system in which she is so clearly indoctrinated: 'she had ruined herself with her father. She knew well that he would never forgive her'.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, her attempt at autonomy also affects her relationship with Mynors: 'Three times she had seen him since her disgrace, and each time the secret bitterness of her soul, despite conscientious efforts to repress it, had marred the meeting'.<sup>25</sup>

Interestingly, however, Bennett does present a society where women are involved in non-domestic work, and so, where we might have expected a clichéd sexist division we are instead presented with spheres of work which are not clear cut or kept completely separate.

---

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.72

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.64

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.69

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.64

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p.123

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p.77

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.76

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p.123

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.126

Similarly, this bleeding of gendered domains of work is further problematised by the fact that the main product of the potteries is domestic ware, such as the cups and saucers Mynors gives to the Tellwrights. Despite this blurring, however, even the status of women in the industrial works of the pottery is inferior and sexualised, and the menial tasks prescribed to the women in relation to the jobs of the men demonstrate this. When Anna visits the pottery, Bennett immediately points out the power dynamic within the factory, where although ‘the men and women were working side by side’ he modifies this statement immediately, commenting ‘the women subordinate to the men.’<sup>26</sup> Even more critically, the interaction between the men and the women is sexualised, ‘In order to move to and fro, the women were ‘compelled to insinuate themselves past the stationary bodies of the men.’<sup>27</sup> Additionally, the pottery is divided into gendered areas of work, where, again, the feminine role is demeaned. Bennett describes how the ‘women and girls...interminably repeated some trifling process’, in an area of the works described as the ‘very centre of that mass of femininity’.<sup>28</sup> Here, ‘the atmosphere was more languid, more like that of a family party’ where ‘The few men seemed out of place’, and ‘It seemed wrong, scandalous that they should remain.’<sup>29</sup> Bennett continues, painting a stereotyped portrait of the frivolous women and their work. These ‘paintresses’ who all have ‘delicate fingers’ and ‘enjoy a general reputation for beauty’, are again sexualised in the description of their ‘coquettish heads’ and by the references to gossip and scandal about one or other of them ‘getting married or omitting to get married.’<sup>30</sup> Finally, one woman’s work is ultimately undermined by the subordinating patriarchal attitude, this time of Henry Mynors. ‘Her work represented the summit of monotony...Mynors himself was impressed by this stupendous phenomenon of absolute sameness’.<sup>31</sup> The affected use of hyperbole here leaves the reader in no doubt as to Bennett’s criticism of a sexist attitude towards woman’s ability to work. Of particular interest in Anna’s tour of the pottery, is the fact that ‘the visit has an impact on Anna, but Bennett makes no attempt to develop her character in light of what she sees at the factory’<sup>32</sup> in order to underline, once more, the incompatibility of her character with industry.

We witness the development of Anna and Mynors’ relationship in industrial terms when it is paralleled with the production of the plate in her visit, and thus even their romantic attachment is constructed as an industrial and business transaction rather than a passionate or genuine romance. It is exactly this complication of plot strands, of love and industry which problematises their relationship for us. Indeed, ‘In dramatic terms they cannot be separated, for the power of one reinforces that of the other, and vice versa.’<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, both characters are acknowledged for their financial eligibility. Due to his industrial success Mynors is considered highly as ‘a man of business’<sup>34</sup>, ‘an unrivalled commercial traveller’<sup>35</sup>, and ‘a man who had saved money, had made money for others, and now was making it for himself’.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Tellwright questions Anna, ‘Dost think he isna’ marrying thee for thy brass? Dost think as he canna’ make a fine guess what thou’rt worth?’<sup>37</sup> A reader might expect this from the miserly Tellwright, but his scepticism is reiterated by the townspeople

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p.69

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p.70

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p.71

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p.72

<sup>32</sup> Peter Preston, ‘A Grim and Original Beauty’: Arnold Bennett and the Landscape of the Five Towns’, in *Geography and Literature: A Meeting of the Disciplines*, ed. William E. Mallory and Paul Simpson-Housley (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987), p.45

<sup>33</sup> Andrew Popp, ‘Though it is but a promise’: Business probity in Arnold Bennett’s *Anna of the Five Towns*’, *Business History*, 48: 3, (London: Routledge, 2006), p.333

<sup>34</sup> *Anna of The Five Towns*, p.140

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p.111

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p.112

who recognise Mynors' eligibility; 'Of course, it was inconceivable that a fine, prosperous figure of a man, such as Mynors, would have made up to her, if she had not been simply rolling in money'<sup>38</sup> and this is finally confirmed by Mynors, himself; 'The fifty thousand danced a jig in his brain that night'<sup>39</sup>. Interestingly, this allusion to the benefits of women's money is perhaps a deliberately subversive inclusion by Bennett who overtly echoes the dynamic of the relationship between Anna's own parents. We are told that Tellwright and Anna's mother, 'suddenly married, without any perceptible public wooing' and, shortly afterwards, her mother 'inherited from her father a sum of eighteen thousand pounds'.<sup>40</sup> This blurring of the novel's divisions between the economically and industrially minded men and the comparative insignificance of the women and their domestic ignorance of industrial work criticises the sexist male dominance in matters of money and industry as we see two cases of men benefiting from women's money. Indeed Anna herself recognises this, but, frustratingly, has no sense of the injustice, 'She was not rich Õ she! was merely a fixed point through which moneys that she was unable to arrest passed with the rapidity of trains.'<sup>41</sup> This fascinating metaphor defines Anna's inability to engage in the male dominated sphere of business by displacing Anna with the use of an alien image of the industrial railway networks. Furthermore, although the match is displayed as Anna making an advantageous marriage to Mynors, it is in fact rather Mynors, who fully intends to exploit and benefit from Anna's money, 'He now saw himself the dominant figure in all the Five Towns' and despite knowing that 'there ought to be a settlement', due to Anna's wealth, he has no intention of raising the matter with Tellwright himself.<sup>42</sup> Noticeably, Anna first cements her 'partnership with Mynors' through the signing of a business contract, aligning them first and foremost in terms of industry and business.<sup>43</sup> Almost like the signing of a marriage register, we witness as Anna 'dimly deciphered her own name coupled with that of Henry Mynors, in large letters' and is guided through the transaction step-by-step by her father until his proclamation "'thou'rt bound, willy-nilly. Law's law, and thou'rt bound.'"<sup>44</sup>

Perhaps Bennett's most poignant criticism of the way in which this patriarchal society favours financially and capitalist advantageous methods of work, despite their damaging effects on human relationships is best expressed through the comparison of Anna's relationships with Mynors and Willie Price. Although Mynors is successful in business, and Anna has considerable wealth, and together they are very successful partners in industry, this compatibility is clearly not extendable into an intimate, personal and romantic attachment. Their relationship is presented as sterile and occasionally even farcical. Mynors' proposal to Anna is businesslike, matter of fact, and passionless. Bennett informs us that 'the actual question was put in a precise, polite, somewhat conventional tone', the tone that all too commonly we associate with Mynors and his business transactions.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, Mynors himself acknowledges his abrupt tone and the pointlessness of any pretensions, stating 'Its no use making a long story of it' and 'I'm not going to praise you to your face', making no allusions to romance.<sup>46</sup> His token effort at a compliment, 'It's something in your face Anna-Anna, will you be my wife?'<sup>47</sup> seems most absurd of all, knowing as we have from the outset that Anna's face has the severe aspect of 'a face for the cloister'.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, Bennett draws

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p.130-1

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p.141

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p.13

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p.64

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p.140

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p.65

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p.106

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p.5

our attention to ‘her dispassionate frigidity under Mynors’ caresses’<sup>49</sup> and the sheer fact that although she sees ‘pictures of her career as his wife’ (which is in itself an interesting choice of words) ‘she experienced no new sensation... no ineffable rapture, no ecstatic bliss.’<sup>50</sup> It is made clear through Anna and Mynors’ relationship that business and industry are given the status of primary importance to the detriment of genuine and meaningful human relationships.

It is at the point when the farce of their engagement is compared to intensity of the devastatingly impossible but deeply emotional relationship of Anna and Willie Price that it becomes evident that Bennett is criticising the immense value that such a society attaches to industrial and economic success and business despite the all too visibly damaging effects that priorities of this nature have on the individual mind and intimate relationships. Anna’s love for Willie Price but her decision to marry Mynors is a construct deliberately employed by Bennett in order to portray the problematical dichotomy of the society we are given access to. Throughout the novel we follow Mynors from success to success, while in contrast, as a direct result of the failure of his industry, we witness as Willie Price’s life come crashing down around him. His debt, his illegal forgery, his father’s suicide, the loss of his business and his family home, the death of his housekeeper and finally Anna’s decision to marry Mynors, ultimately leaves him nothing to live for, pushing him towards the tragic resolution of suicide. Most importantly, Anna’s choice to marry Mynors over Willie places industrial success over the ‘moments of deep feeling’<sup>51</sup> which Anna and Willie share, purely for the reason of Willie’s industrial failure. Thus, the portrayal of a loveless and sterile relationship for Anna and Mynors is ultimately a way for Bennett to criticise Anna’s decision and the social constructs which governed her choice. Indeed, Bennett concludes ‘Some might argue that Anna, knowing that she loved another man, ought not to have married Mynors. But she did not reason thus’.<sup>52</sup> In this way we see the ideologies and systems of a particular capitalist and industrial society, directly affecting and damaging both the individual and human relationships.

The application of varying degrees of value to deliberately constructed categories of stereotypically male and female work emphasises and brings to light the capitalist and patriarchal attitudes of Anna’s society. Moreover the higher level of esteem that is held for the type of industrial work and business where capital gain is the ultimate achievement is ultimately criticised through the representation of the damage that this preference causes to the individual and particularly human relationships. It is in this respect that the full weight of Bennett’s criticism can be found. Bennett’s decision to display the attitudes of such a system could easily be misinterpreted as a reiteration of such values. However, even though he prioritises for the reader a sexist, capitalist, and ‘favourable’, system of work, as a notion that is characteristic of the novel’s context, the deliberate inclusion of discordant and subversive elements within the male dominated field of industry suggest a covert criticism of turn-of-the-century attitudes towards the respective values of the domains of male and female work. This can ultimately be seen as a criticism of the sexist values inherent within this society and certainly precipitated the ‘urgent demand, not just the opportunity, for some kind of self-definition to replace social definitions’ in 20<sup>th</sup> century fiction.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p.130

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., pp.106-7

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p.124

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p.146

<sup>53</sup> Edwin J. Kenney, Jr. ‘The Moment, 1910: Virginia Woolf, Arnold Bennett, and Turn of the Century Consciousness’ *Colby Quarterly*, Vol. 13, Issue 1, Article 5. (The Berkeley Electronic Press: March 1977), p.49

**Bibliography**

Bennett, Arnold. *Anna of The Five Towns*, (Middlesex: The Echo Library, 2006)

Cannadine, David. *Class in Britain*, (London: Penguin Books, 2000)

Hepburn, James ed. *The Critical Heritage Arnold Bennett*, (London: Routledge, 1997)

Hudson, Brian J. 'Bennett's Five Towns: A Prospect-Refuge Analysis', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 33, No. 1, (Oxford University Press, January 1993)

Stable URL: <http://bjaesthetics.oxfordjournals.org>

Kenney, Edwin J. Jr. 'The Moment, 1910: Virginia Woolf, Arnold Bennett, and Turn of the Century Consciousness' *Colby Quaterly*, Vol. 13, Issue 1, Article 5. (The Berkeley Electronic Press: March 1977)

Stable URL: <http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>

Meakin, David. *Man and Work: Literature and Culture in Industrial Society*, (London: Methuen, 1976)

Popp, Andrew. "Though it is but a promise': Business probity in Arnold Bennett's *Anna of the Five Towns*", *Business History*, 48: 3, 332 – 353 (London: Routledge, 2006),

Stable URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00076790600791771>

Preston, Peter. "A Grim and Original Beauty': Arnold Bennett and the Landscape of the Five Towns", in *Geography and Literature: A Meeting of the Disciplines* ed. William E. Mallory and Paul Simpson-Housley (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987)

Simmons, A. 'The Early Twentieth Century', in *The Representation of Business in English Literature*, ed. Professor Arthur Pollard, (London : The Institute of Economic Affairs, 2000)

Squillace, Robert. *Modernism, Modernity and Arnold Bennet* (London: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1997)

Williams, Raymond. *Culture and Society 1780-1950*, (London: Penguin Books, 1963)

Woolf, Virginia. *The Common Reader*, First Series, (London: Hogarth Press, 1929)