

# The Literary Encyclopedia

## The Old Wives' Tale

**Bennett, Arnold**

(1908)

- Rudolph Glitz (University of Amsterdam)

Genre: Novel. Country: England.

With regard to lasting popularity and critical acclaim, Arnold Bennett's literary output includes few texts that could rival *The Old Wives' Tale*. Written during his years in the French capital (1903-1912), the novel constitutes his conscious attempt to "go one better" than Maupassant's *Une Vie* by offering, as he puts it in the preface, "the life-history of two women instead of only one" (p. 33). Although this mission statement is complicated by the same tongue-in-cheek irony that also marks Bennett's narrative voice in the text, it still accurately sums up the basic plotline of the novel. The old wives of the title are the two shopkeeper's daughters, Constance and Sophia Baines. Their divergent mid-life careers in, respectively, provincial England and metropolitan Paris, form the centrepieces of a carefully balanced four-part narrative that begins with the equally weighty account of their adolescence and coming of age in the industrial market town of Bursley and ends with that of their reunion, old age, and death in the same place. While Bennett's style, locations, subject matter, and stated artistic aims place *The Old Wives' Tale* squarely in the tradition of the realist novel, its temporal scope points towards an even more specific generic affiliation. In the process of rendering the complete adult lives of the two sisters, Bennett also outlines those of their parents and that of Constance's son Cyril, thus covering in considerable detail almost five decades of the recent nineteenth-century past. This generational and historic expansiveness makes *The Old Wives' Tale* a classic example of the early twentieth-century family chronicle.

Titled "Mrs Baines" after the third most important "old wife" in the text, Book One of the novel introduces us to the social setting and complex internal dynamics of Sophia and Constance's family home on St. Luke's Square, Bursley, which in turn forms part of Bennett's "Five Towns", a fictional region in the North of England that is dominated by the pottery industry and closely modelled on what would later become Stoke-on-Trent. Within the Baines household, it is at least initially very much the mother who is in charge. While paying elaborate lip-service to the authority of her apoplectic and bedridden husband John, she practically runs the family draper's shop and – advised by her widowed sister, Aunt Harriet, and her husband's crony Mr Critchlow – holds absolute sway over her children's education, social life, and future prospects in general. From her elder and more submissive daughter Constance, Mrs Baines's rule meets with little resistance. In getting the matriarch's permission to marry Constance, the slightly diminutive

live-in employee Samuel Povey needs to do all the work himself, succeeding only, near the end of the first book, by asserting his supposed *prima facie* authority as a man and invoking his indispensability to the family business. From the proud and beautiful Sophia, by contrast, Mrs Baines's authority has to endure quite a number of filial batterings. These are sometimes verbal, as when she asks Sophia to break off her lessons with the local teacher in order to work in the family shop, and sometimes cases of plain disobedience, as when Sophia goes out unaccompanied or secretly meets with the dandyish sales representative Gerald Scales. Fuelled partly by the conflict with her mother, Sophia's romantic fascination with the latter causes increasing turmoil in the Baines household. During one of their flirtatious encounters on the shopfloor, which takes place while Sophia is in sole charge of the house, John Baines suffocates in his bedroom upstairs. This leads to unspoken attributions of blame and painful self-recriminations. Eventually, Sophia scandalously elopes with Gerald, not to be heard of again in Bursley for more than twenty years.

With the shamed Mrs Baines having left St Luke's Square to live with her sister, the novel continues to follow the domestic life of Constance. By means of revealing vignettes amply commented on by the narrator, it shows us the Poveys' married life alongside with, and itself contributing to, historical change of a kind barely recognised by traditional drum-and-trumpet history. Samuel, for example, makes friends with his more liberal-minded cousin Daniel on the occasion of a boneshaker ride by the latter's son Dick – perhaps the first bicycle ride ever in town! And Constance, after Samuel physically punishes their young son Cyril for having snatched cake from the plate of another child, agonises in a way that is highly representative of contemporary changes in middle-class parenting. Feeling “somewhat as Mrs Baines had felt on historic occasions”, she says to herself “that Samuel was quite right, quite right. And then she said that the poor little thing wasn't yet five years old, and that it was monstrous. The two had to be reconciled. And they never could be reconciled” (p. 223). There are also descriptions of the Poveys' regular holidays in Buxton, a Christmas visit by Mrs Baines, during which the family receives a life sign in the form of a postcard from Sophia, and not least the birth and growing-up of the talented and glamorous but also spoilt and rather selfish Cyril. About half-way through Book Two, a futile judicial campaign Samuel conducts to save his cousin from the gallows leads him to contract a fatal form of pneumonia. After his death, predictably, his son's emotional dominion over his mother becomes increasingly pronounced until, to her irrepressible distress, the young man departs for London on a national scholarship for craft and design.

Book Three takes the reader back to Sophia's elopement. Almost immediately after getting married to Gerald, she already finds herself disillusioned with him. During the first days of their honeymoon in Paris, he still impresses her with his upstart worldliness, yet when he takes her to Auxerre to witness a public execution, possibly solicits a prostitute there, and lies to her about the hotel bill, she starts to lose all respect for him. A few years of reckless expenditure later, Gerald leaves her when she refuses to write to her family for money. Alone and desperate, Sophia falls gravely ill, but supported by the couple's gentlemanly acquaintance M. Chirac, several slatternly Frenchwomen, and some hidden emergency funds, she not only pulls through but manages to set up a small room-rental business. Sophia's home-grown shopkeeper's prudence and practical

common-sense prove exceptionally useful during the Siege of Paris (1870-1871) – an episode of the Franco-Prussian war which Bennett makes it a point to render no more sensationally than most Parisians probably experienced it. Her adventures consist of wisely managing her food stocks, defending herself against unwelcome advances from aging lodgers, and getting romantically propositioned by her long-smitten friend Chirac. The latter, after getting rejected, embarks on a doomed hot-air balloon mission that Bennett presents as pathetic in both the regular and the colloquial sense of the word. His stormy launch constitutes by far the most spectacular turn of Sophia's career in France. Shortly afterwards, the siege ends and she purchases an English pension, which she runs successfully for more than two decades.

A guest who turns out to be Cyril's best friend brings Sophia into renewed contact with Constance, which causes the elder sister to faint and the younger to suffer a mild stroke. After some deliberation, Sophia sells her pension and returns to Bursley for good. Here as well as in the rest of "Book Four", the sisters' old age becomes increasingly apparent. Constance's rheumatism grows more debilitating; the imperious Sophia – while charming her flamboyant nephew – clashes irreparably with Constance's old maid servant Amy; and there is much fuss and anxiety over dogs as well as Cyril's letter-writing and generally neglectful treatment of his mother. Although Sophia is usually the dominant one of the pair, Constance proves tearfully immovable when, during a holiday on doctor's orders in the familiar resort of Buxton, her sister urges her to give up the family house for an even more extended period of travelling. Their continued co-existence on St Luke's Square is, however, unavoidably interrupted by the re-surfacing of Gerald Scales, who dies a homeless vagrant in Manchester just before Sophia gets to see him and, stricken with pain, reflect sorrowfully on "the riddle of life itself" (578). On her ride back in the automobile of the once-pioneering cyclist Dick Povey, she suffers her second, and this time fatal, stroke. The grieving Constance survives her for roughly another year before on her part succumbing to her illness – a year that is marked by the tragic decline of the former Baines shop, a few encounters with the younger generation, Cyril's continued neglect of her, and the imminent arrival of electrical trams, large-scale retail, and her resistance against the "Federation" of the Five Towns.

### Critical Reception

The powerfully anti-climactic ending, and humane but hard-nosed realism of *The Old Wives' Tale* determined much of its early reception. Critics drew comparisons to the great French naturalists and praised Bennett's social perceptiveness. The book received high critical acclaim from such diverse readers as H. G. Wells, André Gide, and even, eventually, Ezra Pound, although it was also soon targeted as a classic example of exactly the kind of realism Modernism set out to repudiate. The main modernist complaints against *The Old Wives' Tale* and its author's artistic *œuvre* as a whole can already be found in Henry James's essay "The New Novel" (1914), which simultaneously anticipates Virginia Woolf's famous attack on Bennett's descriptive materialism in "Modern Novels" (*TLS*, 10 April 1919) and charges the novel with a frustrating pointlessness. Just like Bennett's *Clayhanger*, *The Old Wives' Tale* constitutes for James "a monument exactly not to an idea, a pursued and captured meaning, or in short *to anything*

whatever, but just simply *of* the quarried and gathered material it happens to contain” (p. 136). In his controversial but influential textbook study *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), E. M. Forster does, by contrast, ascribe an overarching meaning to *The Old Wives’ Tale*, but not in a way that would salvage its reputation: “Of course we grow old. But a great book must rest on something more than an ‘of course’” (p. 26).

James, Woolf, and Forster’s assessments largely stuck. Although *The Old Wives’ Tale* remains widely popular and is surprisingly well-known for instance among readers of English in Eastern Asia, it has effectively been consigned to the margins of the novel canon. In the academy, together with Bennett’s other work, *The Old Wives’ Tale* survived almost exclusively thanks to a few prominent author-critics. Thus Margaret Drabble describes it as “one of the most English of masterpieces” in her 1974 biography of Bennett (p. 141), David Lodge respectfully analyses the book’s gripping execution-scene in *The Modes of Modern Writing* (1977), and John Wain celebrates, among other things, its subtle metaphorical patterns in his introduction to the 1983 Penguin edition. With its markedly Tolstoyan emphasis on common men and women as the agents of historical change, the novel naturally plays an important part in Bennett’s more recent re-discovery on political grounds in John Carey’s *The Intellectuals and the Masses* (1992). In two subsequent and more text-focused studies of his work, Peter D. McDonald (1997) situates the novel within the contemporary literary field and Robert Squillace (1997) reads it as an anti-patriarchal “analysis of secrecy and its exposure” (p. 44). My own monograph of 2009 looks at how *The Old Wives’ Tale* represents and constructs the Victorian past in comparison with other family chronicles of the early twentieth century, such as, most notably Galsworthy’s Forsyte saga, D. H. Lawrence’s *The Rainbow* and Virginia Woolf’s *The Years*. If a triumphant academic renaissance of the novel still seems unlikely at the moment, then so does its future disappearance as an object of scholarly interest.

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