To what extent did literary fiction contribute to the success of the British suffrage movement in 1918?

Abstract

Word count = 208

This paper examines the role of fiction in contribution to the campaign of the British Suffrage movement, which achieved success by gaining the vote on 6th February 1918. It explores how improved access to education expanded the reading public, enabling literature to have a broader societal impact. Considering a wide variety of approaches to the Suffrage movement in fiction, representative examples of three popular novels from the early twentieth century are used. This includes a particular focus on: *Howards End* by E. M. Forster, *The Tree of Heaven* by May Sinclair and *Suffragette Sally* by Gertrude Colmore. By analysing the authors' techniques in these texts, it is then evaluated how these were powerful in their capacity to affect the reader's perception and attitude towards the Suffragettes either positively or, potentially, negatively. Such techniques involved presenting a different angle on the struggle for female enfranchisement, more general discussion on gender and evoking sympathy in the reader. The authors' respective personal beliefs and the context of their lives and work are also acknowledged to support my conclusions about their messages surrounding Suffrage. The final proposition is that literary fiction, despite its vitally discursive and provocative elements, has been overlooked as a significant contributing factor to the campaign's conduct and success.

Introduction

‘Deeds not words.’ This famous motto is widely recognised and inseparably associated with the Suffrage movement. It evokes an image which has been clouded by headlines of Emily Davison and the King’s horse (London Museum, n.d.), as well as Suffragettes smashing windows and slashing paintings. Whilst the forceful impact of these protests is undeniable, this essay seeks to reveal the currently overlooked power of popular fiction books in the early twentieth century and how they helped to successfully advance the movement. It will focus on a wide scope of representations, ranging from occasional references in *Howards End* and collaboration in *The Tree of Heaven* to the endorsement of *Suffragette Sally*. Although literature has been studied and appreciated as propaganda in contribution to the Suffrage campaign, this has largely focused on the non-fiction pieces circulated by the Suffragists. These Suffragists were keen to differentiate themselves from their more militant counterparts, the Suffragettes. Literary fiction in general has not been highlighted as a critical factor or considered in the bigger picture of their eventual success. I aim to offer an insight into a relatively underappreciated dimension of a movement which can be narrowly perceived and consider how what people read impelled readers to be active themselves.

It is first worth analysing the connection between literary fiction being published at the time and how it was received. In Great Britain there were rising literacy levels and increased readership from the late nineteenth century onwards. The main cause of this was the passing of the Forster Education Act in 1870. This focused the government on the direct provision of elementary schools in Britain for the first time, giving the right of education to every child. The effects of this are seen by illiteracy being around 40% of males and 60% of females in England and Wales in 1800 but, by 1900, dropping to around 3% for both sexes (Lloyd, 2007). A legacy of this Act was attention on the importance of mass reading and writing to the function of democracy (Ingleby, 2020). This resulted in more attention to political debates of the time. Furthermore, in 1891, all school fees in state elementary schools were abolished (Lloyd, 2007), making education even more accessible. From these significant changes, it is clear that the reading ability of the British population transformed. Literary critic Sowon S Park, who specializes in British Modernism and Political Fiction, asserts that a growing interest in reading and more opportunities being created by technological changes such as improved lighting and long railway journeys (Park, 1996) provide solid evidence of a widening marketplace and audience for the readership of Suffrage fiction. It can therefore be considered that growing accessibility and expansion in the size of the reading public was a vital tool for widening the impact that Suffrage fiction had on the British population.

Taking this into account, there was undoubtedly a reading audience for which the Suffragists generously catered for. Throughout the campaign, there was a plethora of literature published discussing the topic, whether that be from mere observers, disapproving opposition or members of the franchise itself. The year 1908 saw the formation of the Women Writers’ Suffrage League (WWSL) (Eltis, 2021). The literary

output of this organisation was one of vast variety, including novels, plays, newspapers, articles, leaflets and comical sketches. The President of the WWSL, Elizabeth Robins, wanted writers to take this opportunity to escape the constraints of male editors and publishers and to describe life "fearlessly from the woman's standpoint" (Eltis, 2021). The most famous and popular of these works included Sylvia Pankhurst's historical account, *The Suffragette,* published in 1911 (DiCenzo, 2005), the weekly subscription paper *Votes for Women* and the comic vision of victory play *How the Vote Was Won,* performed in 1909 and written by Cicely Hamilton and Christopher St John (Eltis, 2021). However, whilst this association was successful in fulfilling its self-established role, it was perhaps intrinsically limited and hindered by its overt feminist nature. In other words, the particular body of literature it produced might have not been able to reach a broad enough audience to have had a widespread impact. Ultimately, only those in support of or interested in Suffrage would have purchased or bought tickets to see these works. Despite, or possibly because of this relatively narrow focus, other forms of Suffrage literature materialized, contributing to a widened range in the rhetoric of polemic.

One example of this was E.M Forster's Howards End, published in 1910. The novel was met enthusiastically by reviewers with one review calling it 'the year's best novel' (Milligan, 1987). So, whilst there is no numerical evidence to prove it, one can reasonably assume that the novel gained traction and was read by a wide audience in Britain. This novel primarily features the themes of class and social attitudes and the seminal idea of 'only connect'. In addition, Forster also explores different outlooks on gender and fundamentally engages with the Suffrage movement in Chapters 1 and 9. In the first chapter, Helen Schlegel writes to her sister Meg of Mr Wilcox's opinion on the matter:

> "He says the most horrid things about women's suffrage so nicely, and when I said I believed in equality he just folded his arms and gave me such a setting down as I've ever had. Meg, shall we ever learn to talk less? I never felt so ashamed of myself in my life."
>
> (Forster, 1910)

This interaction demonstrates condescension from Mr Wilcox to Helen as he rebukes her for her opinion. This idea continues as Helen writes in her letter that, in response, she "couldn't say a word. I had just picked up the notion that equality is good from some book – probably from poetry" (Forster, 1910). Not only does this suggest that she surrendered to Mr Wilcox's opinion on the matter, but her confession that she acquired a social belief from literature is a crucial hint from Forster of the subtle didactic role of fictional writing. When it comes to attitudes to the cause held by Forster himself, Vladimir Burbank states, "Overall, Forster is to support women's rights, but only for an abstract justice, because he believes that women do not vote on the benefits". Later in his career, Forster had more conservative and negative views on the suffrage movement (Dong, 2016). This is prefigured in his somewhat ambivalent portrayal of suffrage, as seen in chapter 9. When

Mrs Wilcox, Margaret, and their guests discuss current affairs, Mrs Wilcox remarks "I sometimes think that it is wiser to leave action and discussion to men." This provokes further discussion by the women on the topic:

> "One admits that the arguments against the suffrage *are* extraordinarily strong, said a girl opposite.
>
> "Are they? I never follow any arguments. I am only too thankful not to have a vote myself.
>
> "We didn't mean the vote though, did we? supplied Margaret. "Aren't we differing on something much wider, Mrs Wilcox? Whether women are to remain what they have been since the dawn of history; or whether, since men have moved forward so far, they too may move forward a little now, I say they may."
>
> (Forster, 1910)

This conversation provides clear evidence of Burbank's previously mentioned theory of Forster's 'abstract justice' for women. Whilst there is a consensus against Suffrage itself, Margaret illuminates the idea that women deserve a change from their traditional roles, and the attention that Suffrage brings to women's rights may be the driving force for this change. Forster conveys this to the reader, prompting them to consider this feminist idea of 'abstract justice' in the context of the imbalance between social advances of the two sexes. Thus, by portraying his protagonist as a politically engaged character, he effectively introduces Suffrage as a subject of discussion in his novel *Howards End*.

Another author who engages with Suffrage in her novels, but much more avidly, is May Sinclair. Considered as 'England's leading woman novelist between the death of George Eliot and the rise of Virginia Woolf' by David Williams in *Punch* (Poetry Foundation, 2017), she wrote and published twenty-four novels (Gough, 2009) on a range of subjects concerning early twentieth century Britain. She began her career as a novelist during the rise of the militant movement (Gillespie, 1985) and so the events of the Suffragettes were without doubt a galvanizing source of literary inspiration for her. When living in London, Sinclair became active in the Suffrage movement and in 1908 joined the Women's Freedom League and, later, the Women Writers' Suffrage League. In this same year, she wrote in a letter to *Votes for Women* 'If I were not a mere novelist, I would be a Suffragette' (Gillespie, 1985), indicating that she was highly devoted to the cause. It was in this spirit of feminist solidarity that Sinclair wrote her robust and fearless riposte to the virulently misogynist and anti-Suffragist Sir Almroth Wright – a medical public figure whose caustic criticism of the Suffrage campaign (Schwab-Graham, 2023) materialized in an influential letter to the Times in March 1912 and in his 1913 novel *The Unexpurgated Case Against Woman Suffrage* (Gough, 2009). Sinclair and Wright had both developed strong parallel interests in philosophy, literature, science and feminism but interpretations of these led Sinclair and Wright to diametrically opposed viewpoints (Gough, 2009). Sinclair rebutted

Wright's medical arguments with a castigating response in her pamphlet *Feminism*, published by the forementioned WWSL (Gough, 2009). Regarding her fiction, however, Sinclair was highly conscious that the language and style of suffrage writing *had* to be intelligible and popular to the mass audience it was intended to reach (Park, 1996). Although Sinclair was clearly sympathetic to the cause, her novel writing took priority and this was ultimately market driven. Her multi-faceted approach to Suffrage meant she tactically balanced marketability with political purpose.

An example of this is her war-time novel, *The Tree of Heaven*. In this novel Sinclair identifies the suffrage movement within World War I (Gillespie, 1985), as Dorothea Harrison and her three brothers' lives are overtaken by the outbreak of hostilities. Published in 1917, in some ways The Tree of Heaven is in keeping with the middlebrow novels of the period, in that it focuses in detail on the emotions and lives of the Harrisons, depicted as a fairly ordinary British family. Sinclair however does an impressive job of identifying many of the forces that would shape the twentieth century. These included women's rights, changes to marriage and relationships and attitudes to war (Kirk, 2020). Interestingly, Part I of the novel contains no mention of Suffrage whatsoever. Sinclair first establishes the reader's connection to the characters and guides them through the comfort and satisfaction of the children growing up and reaching adulthood. She includes amongst her characters multiple types of Suffragette and Suffragist, who readers are introduced to at the meeting of the committee of the Women's Franchise Union (a fictional group invented by Sinclair). The character of Dorothea is the suffragette most likely to represent Sinclair's own position (Gillespie, 1985). This is seen in her response to the militant Maud Blackadder's call for women to sacrifice everything, including their independence and all personal relationships with men, to the cause. Instead, Dorothea states that she offers her service to the suffrage campaign:

> "I'll work for you; I'll speak for you; I'll write for you; I'll fight for you. […] But I won't give up my liberty of speech and thought and action. I won't pledge myself to obey your orders."
>
> (Sinclair, 1917)

Her passionate response, so expressive of feminist militancy, demonstrates a deeply held commitment to furthering women's emancipation (Schwab-Graham, 2023), as well as stressing the importance of her individual freedom as a woman. By presenting these two differing viewpoints, Sinclair is illustrating to the reader the varying extremes of Suffrage, perhaps seeking to dismantle myths that all Suffragettes are as belligerent as Mrs Blackadder. Furthermore, where this model of absolute devotion may have deterred participation in the past, readers now have reassurance that they can be fully committed to the cause whilst simultaneously keeping their selfhood as Dorothea does.

The aspect of Sinclair's novel which was arguably most effective in helping the Suffrage movement was her crucial engagement with the lived experiences of her readers. Sinclair cleverly makes her readers feel comfortable with familiarity before subtly adjusting their view on events by presenting them though a new lens. One example of this is mentioning:

> "the very painful but possible necessity of interfering with British Sport – say the Eton and Harrow Match at Lord's – in some drastic and terrifying way that would bring the men of England to their senses."
>
> (Sinclair, 1917)

Although Sinclair recognises the extremity and disruptiveness of this potential plot, she simultaneously illustrates it as a vital measure which should be undertaken. She also does not hesitate to expose some of the harsh but realistic circumstances that some Suffragettes had to endure, which may give a new perspective to readers. Dorothea is torn by her relationship with Frank Drayton, who disapproves of her involvement in the movement, but who loves her and dies fighting in the war. In dealing with her grief at this news, Dorothea regrets sacrificing the time she and Frank could have had together, "all those years - like a fool - over that silly suffrage" (Sinclair, 1917). Despite this, she nevertheless does not reject the goals of the movement. Instead, she contrasts the limited perspective of many of the Suffragettes she knows with the broader one (Gillespie, 1985).

If Sinclair had been generally "acknowledged in the 1920s as one of the most important writers of her day" according to *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English* (Poetry Foundation, 2017), it can be reasonably presumed that her work was admired and read eagerly. To many, this novel may have shown a new side to the movement, a side of vulnerable sacrifice, of conflicting internal interests and often of desperation in the face of hope. Whilst Suffrage is admittedly not a driving force of action in *The Tree of Heaven*, it is undoubtedly a purposefully chosen and skilfully interwoven theme by Sinclair. Works of this kind were very feasibly the most impactful type of Suffrage fiction because of their multidimensional nature; combining didactic qualities with a fundamentally engaging story and satisfactory read.

This new, early twentieth century Suffrage fiction became popularly known at the time as "Votes for Women" novels (Park, 1996). One of the many authors who embraced this emerging genre was writer and feminist Gertrude Baillie-Weaver, who used the writer's name of Gertrude Colmore. Her novel *Suffrage Sally*, first published in 1911 and then reissued in 1984 under the title *The Suffragettes: A Story of Three Women* (Kean, 2012) falls into this fresh category. Colmore's literary motivation drew on her personal political activity and the humanitarian milieu in which she lived; she supported the militant suffrage organization the Women's Freedom League and chaired the suffrage group in Saffron Waldon. Acknowledging her political outlook, there is a clear meaning behind her

novels. Critics of Suffrage fiction, such as Sowon S. Park and Sos Eltis, note that these works are "grounded in what they presented as an accurate reading of reality", but that they are, simultaneously, complex literary texts that develop new formal and thematic structures "to challenge established social structures and class hierarchies" (Edwards S. , 2021). Park's and Eltis's conclusions are realistic and certainly applicable to *Suffragette Sally,* as the three protagonists, Sally, Edith and Lady Hill, are all representative of different classes. However, in the context of wider literary developments, Edwards' suggestion of "a new formal structure" is, arguably, hyperbolic. Considering how there is a canonical focus on the modernist novel in Colmore's period of writing, hindsight suggests that this form of literature is not one of utmost relevance. Despite this, at the time of publication – when it was intended to be read and received – it was one of the most popular Suffragette novels written by women who were themselves active in the union (Paul, 2020).

One way in which Colmore's 'Votes for Women' novel is so effective as persuasive fiction is by means of striking retellings of recent Suffrage acts. Throughout the course of the novel, Colmore graphically depicts many historic events to emphasise the violent backlash and inhumane treatment Suffragettes had to endure. It is notable that in *Suffrage Sally*, Colmore often signposts specific dates, such as "in the years of grace 1909 and 1910, prisoners, who adopted the hunger strike, were fed." (Colmore, 1911). This may perhaps be to prompt readers to recall the event themselves so that her fictional retelling is more resonant.

The novel relates many instances of brutality in the face of Suffrage, the most memorable of these being Sally's force-feeding in prison. This was a controversial government policy to prevent suicide by starvation as a result of the Suffragettes' hunger strikes (Miller, 2016). Colmore's describes this vividly, in the present tense:

> "her mouth is prised open with what, as far as she can judge by the feel of it, is a steel instrument. Very wide the doctors open her mouth, just as wide as the jaws will stretch, and the gag is fixed so that the teeth cannot close. Then down the throat goes an Indian-rubber tube, not too small. She is choking now or feels as if she were in all the agony and the horror of suffocation is upon her."
>
> (Colmore, 1911)

Here, Colmore does not hesitate to provide her readers with the gruesome details of this procedure. As the extract develops, the fact that her body parts are described without personal pronouns, such as "the jaws" and "the throat" is dehumanizing, and in addition the woman is depersonalised as a figure who stands for all women who had to undergo force feeding. The power of fiction here lies not in its capacity to depart from reality, but in its attention to those aspects of reality which have themselves the power to shock the reader (Lee, 2008). In this sense, the documentary-style of the novel reinforces the

impact on the reader by both educating the ignorant and recontextualising historical events of which many were already aware (Lee, 2008).

Another technique which Colmore uses in *Suffragette Sally* is her focus on the life-changing sacrifices made by women of all ages and classes made in honour of their dedication. Critic and author Carolyn Christensen Nelson states that *Suffrage Sally* "demonstrates the impact of the call to participate in the suffrage movement on their personal lives, particularly on their relationships with men" (Paul, 2020). Throughout the course of *Suffrage Sally*, Nelson's observation is certainly true, as readers witness the decay of Lady Hill's, Edith's, and Sally's respective romantic relationships. In Lady Hill's case, she is presented as betraying her family-in-law's pride in their title. As she transitions from making peaceful speeches to participating in demonstrations and even being arrested and sent to prison, her husband, Lord Henry Hill, is indecisive over what his reactions should be as she makes this progression. To the reader's relief, he later confides how "just as far as you go I shall have to go too" (Colmore, 1911). Conversely, both Edith and Sally's partners are highly critical of their increased involvement in the campaign. Edith rejects Cyril Race, after reading in the news that he was one of the MPs who voted against sending the Bill enabling tax-paying women to vote to the Grand Committee. Despite previously confessing their love towards each other, she upholds her personal beliefs and exhibits a strong sense of loyalty to the Suffragettes. Comparably, Sally's fiancé Joe Whittle breaks things off with her after her first jail sentence for becoming more militantly active. Although she does not attempt to disregard her sadness, she remains resolute. This is also seen when she purposefully gets released from her job as a housemaid for the wealthy Bilkes family after clashing with Mr Bilkes on the grounds of women's rights. All three women take risks and make sacrifices, showcasing an unwavering loyalty and resilience in the cause of enfranchisement and thereby evoking sympathy in, and gaining understanding from, Edwardian readers.

In summary, Colmore powerfully captured the spirit of women who chose to identify with the plight of their sisters – women who would not enjoy their lives while their sisters were suffering (Leonard, 1985). As outlined by *Votes for Women* writer the anonymous M.D.H, who reviewed the novel after its release, "The general public will probably say that this book is exaggerated - that such scenes as are depicted could not have happened in civilised England. But the women in this movement know that the incidents are only too real, that the scenes are only too familiar, and knowing, they thank Miss Colmore for what she has done" (M.D.H, 1911) As identified, and similar to a technique deployed by Sinclair, Colmore presents her readers with an entirely new perspective and crucially gives an authentic voice to Suffragettes. It is undoubtedly a prime example of Suffrage fiction as propaganda, persuading and inspiring the reader to realise the dedication and sacrifice these women made.

It is clear that novels discussing Suffrage were influential in engaging and educating their readers to become more aware and respectful of the Suffragettes. However, it is also important to acknowledge a caveat to this argument in that literary fiction simultaneously had the capacity to encourage opposition. Even though most opposing arguments would be classed as prejudice today, these reactions included the contention that married women were already represented by their husbands and that some, perhaps many, women did not even want the vote (Rees, 2002). As a product of such views, in July 1908, Mary Augusta Ward - also known as Mrs Humphry Ward, founded the Women's National Anti-Suffrage League (WNASL) (Bush, 2007). Ward was already a successful fiction writer; her most popular work, *Robert Elsmere*, sold a quarter of a million copies within the first few months of publication (Edwards L. , 2024). Another two of her novels, *The Testing of Diana Mallory* and *Delia Blanchflower,* were used as platforms to criticise the suffragettes. However, Ward's public appearances paled in comparison to the energetic and captivating suffragist speeches that were drawing worldwide attention (Edwards L. , 2024). She ultimately lost the battle, and the suffrage movement successfully secured the right for women in the UK to vote in 1918.

Conclusion

This essay endeavoured to reveal the underestimated and overlooked influence that popular fiction books played in the British Suffrage campaign. Contrary to historical and popular representation of Suffragists and Suffragettes as hysterical and lawless, the works of fiction inspired by this movement, whilst being popular in their day, have tended to be ignored or marginalized because of their subtlety. That said, the notable recent resurgence of historical fiction addressing this time period and transformative political movement, including well-reviewed and popular novels by the likes of Lissa Evans and Margaret Dickinson, indicates scope for further study. Whilst is it unrealistic to promote literary fiction as a main factor in the Suffrage movement's success, this does not mean it should be undervalued. As it does in relation to any political issue, fiction naturally has limitations, as articulated in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*: 'At any rate, when a subject is highly controversial [...] One can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold. One can only give one's audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions" (Woolf, 1928). Despite being articulated at a slightly later date, Woolf's logic was harnessed by Forster, Sinclair and Colmore alike. It is difficult to find evidence for intangible ideas such as changing attitudes but what one can be sure of is the provocative nature of these novels. The authors' rhetoric means that readers who are committed, indifferent or even antagonistic to the suffrage movement are forced to open their minds and think about the words on the page in front of them. This essay began by challenging the metonym 'deeds not words' as an oversimplification of the British suffrage movement. It has been plausibly proven that words can, and very often did, inspire such deeds in the first place, helping Suffragettes achieve their goal.

Word count = 4024

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