

“DEFICIENT IN LOVE-INTEREST”: THE SEXUAL POLITICS OF THE OFFICE IN CANADIAN FICTION (1890-1920)

Sarah Galletly*

University of Strathclyde
sarah.galletly@strath.ac.uk

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Abstract

Using the concerns of the period over female workers’ susceptibility to office romance and sexual harassment as a starting point, this article will explore the depiction of secretaries and stenographers in Grant Allen’s *The Type-Writer Girl* (1897) and Bertrand Sinclair’s *North of Fifty-Three* (1914). It will examine the pressure to gain economic independence and personal autonomy through office work, alongside the need to conform to cultural ideologies, which still argue for women’s destiny to be centred on marriage and children. Did the

working-girl literature of this era support and endorse the image of the independent, hard-working, emotionally fulfilled working woman? Or was women’s clerical labour instead seen merely as another step in their ‘natural’ evolution from girls to mothers? This article will also uncover whether the fictional office was presented as a site of potential female growth and autonomy, or as a hostile and dangerous space where women should escape from as soon as possible for the safety of the home.

Key words: sexual politics, officer, Canada, fiction

* PhD candidate, University of Strathclyde, Scotland.

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Resumen

Con base en las preocupaciones de la época sobre la susceptibilidad al romance y acoso sexual de la trabajadora de oficina, este artículo propone explorar la representación de secretarías y taquígrafas en *The Type-Writer Girl* (1897), de Grant Allan, y en *North of Fifty-Three* (1914), de Bertrand Sinclair. Se mirará la presión para adquirir la independencia económica y autonomía personal a través del trabajo en oficina. También, la necesidad de ajustarse a ideologías presentes en la sociedad, que abogaban un destino predeterminado de matrimonio e hijos para la mujer. Se pregunta si el género de literatura *working-girl* de esos tiempos abogaba la imagen de la mujer independiente, trabajadora y emocionalmente realizada, o si el trabajo de oficina era interpretado como un paso natural hacia una evolución de niñas a madres. Este artículo también cuestiona si la oficina ficcional fue presentada como una ubicación de autonomía y potencial femeninos, o si fue vista como un espacio hostil y peligroso del que debería escapar lo más pronto posible para mantener la seguridad del hogar.

Palabras clave: políticas sexuales, oficina, Canadá, narrativa.

Introduction

Women's work in the public sphere was frequently criticised at the turn of the twentieth century for the manner in which such work allowed women's *bodies* to enter the public sphere, thus leaving them open to sexual advances from male employers or co-workers. Laura Hapke outlines the common beliefs of the period about female workers: "By rejecting the protection of the home they were exposing themselves to advances from co-workers and employers; though their chastity was deemed superior to men's, their inferior powers of judgement would thus place them at constant risk".¹

Through an exploration of Grant Allen's *The Type-Writer Girl* (1897) and Bertrand Sinclair's *North of Fifty-Three* (1914), this article will engage with this debate and highlight two tropes of Canadian fiction in this period: the office romance and the predatory employer. It aims to determine the extent to which this potential sexual threat is portrayed in these novels or whether, conversely, the fictional office acts as a site of employer/employee romance that ultimately removes the female worker from the public sphere and safely reinstalls her at home. By situating these

¹ Laura Hapke, *Tales of the Working Girl: Wage-Earning Women in American Literature, 1890-1925* (New York: Twayne, Publishers, 1992), 9.

novels within the larger context of contemporary debates about the conflict between women's domestic and professional roles, this article will examine the pressures to gain economic independence and personal autonomy through office work, alongside the need to conform to cultural ideologies which still argued for women's destiny to be centred on marriage and children.

Many historians and sociologists have focused on the apparent "feminisation" of the clerical sector at the turn of the twentieth century. However, as Graham Lowe makes clear in his study of the Canadian administrative revolution, "Strictly speaking, stenography and typing jobs were not feminised; almost from their inception they were defined as women's work".²

The clerical sector was one of the fastest growing female professions at the turn of century, expanding from 4,710 female clerical workers to 12,660, between 1891 and 1901, and from 33,723 to 90,577, between 1911 and 1921.³ Although this was a period of mass immigration to Canada, which led to a boom in population size, the sheer increase in numbers over this period emphasises not only that more women were entering the workforce, but that they were actively seeking white-collar

jobs as secretaries and stenographers rather than blue-collar jobs as factory workers or seamstresses. This was likely due to the fact that female clerical wages were relatively high by female worker standards in this period. Indeed, Lowe claims that by 1911, 85% of all stenography and typing jobs were occupied by women.⁴ However, it is also important to remember that these women only earned 53% of the average male clerical salary in 1901; tellingly, female clerical workers were still only earning 58% of male salaries by 1971.⁵

One of the reasons female clerical workers earned significantly lower wages than their male counterparts was because women were deliberately ghettoised into the lowest ranking jobs, which fulfilled the most repetitive and mechanical tasks. Roles such as type-writer and stenographer were centred on the ability to continually copy and take dictation efficiently, without necessarily understanding or engaging with the intellectual content of the work. Female clerical workers rarely had opportunities to be promoted. Due to the assumption that most women would only work for a few years before leaving their jobs to settle down and start a family, it was not deemed worthwhile to train women to

² Graham S. Lowe, *Women in the Administrative Revolution: The feminization of Clerical Work* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1987), 74.

³ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 146.

carry out the more senior and better paid supervisory and managerial office roles. These suited employers could count on a continual, cheap turnover of female employees who would require limited training and pay to carry out the least desirable office roles before leaving to marry. As Meta Zimmeck explains, “[...] providing work suitable for surplus women was not the same thing as opening the door to all forms of work to all women —that is to say, equal opportunity”.⁶

This practice of limited advancement is illustrated in Bertrand Sinclair’s *North of Fifty-Three* (1914); the narrator informs us that the heroine Hazel Weir’s work “[...] consisted largely of dictation from the shipping manager, letters relating to outgoing consignments of implements. She was rapid and efficient, and, having reached the zenith of salary paid for such work, she expected to continue in the same routine until she left Harrington & Bush for good”.⁷

However, it is important to note that Hazel herself feels no sense of injustice in her lack of upward job mobility. She begins the novel engaged to real-estate

agent Jack Barrow, intending to give up her stenography job and spend her days “[...] mak[ing] the home nest cozy”.⁸ Here, Hazel would appear to be internalising cultural expectations about women’s ‘proper’ place being at home. In her study of American office culture at the turn of the twentieth century, Sharon Hartman Strom claims: “[...] working in an office usually meant cleaner, safer, steadier work, and a middle-class environment appropriate for native-born status”.⁹ This would seem to suggest that despite the limited opportunities for advancement and low wages, secretarial work nevertheless provided a safe working environment and gave the worker a certain status not available to them in blue-collar occupations.

One of the reasons why the figure of the female secretary became so prominent at the turn of the century was due to the general consensus that women’s bodies were ideally suited to typewriting. As John Harrison argues in his 1888 typewriting manual, the typewriter “[...] is especially adapted to feminine fingers. They seem to be made for type-writing. The type-writing

⁶ Meta Zimmeck, "Jobs for the girls: The Expansion of Clerical Work for Wome, 1850-1914," in *Unequal Opportunities: Women's Employem in England 1800-1918*, ed. Angela V. John, 153-77. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986.

⁷ Bertrand Sinclair, ed. *North of Fifty-three* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1914). <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/19510/19510-h/19510-h.htm>.

⁸ *Ibid.*, ch. 1.

⁹ Sharon Hartman Strom, *Beyond The Typewriter: Gender, Class and the Origins of Modern American Office Work, 1900-1930* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 275.

involves no hard labour, and no more skill than playing the piano".¹⁰

Typewriting was thus portrayed in the popular culture as a natural follow-on to women's previous associations with nimble fingers bred by both piano training and, of course, their work at the sewing machine. Women –as the weaker sex– were also seen as more malleable and submissive than male clerks, leading contemporary critics to argue that "[...] young women are more contented with their lots as private secretaries, more cheerful, less restless, more to be depended [upon], more flexible than young men. [The young woman is] more willing to do as asked, more teachable... than the young man".¹¹ The repetitive, mechanical roles which female clerks were usually given were similar to the 'light manufacturing' roles women held in the factories: "The traditional association between women factory operatives and repetitive work also facilitated the identification of women with mechanised and routinized clerking. Dressed up with somewhere to go, the factory girl could be put to work doing assembly-line clerical work in the office".¹²

However, as this quotation suggests, there was a certain element of glamour and adventure –and, perhaps most sig-

nificantly, professionalism– attached to the figure of the office working-girl that the working-class factory girl appeared to lack. Thus, despite the often dull nature of their work, the figures of the secretary and the stenographer were still associated with images of adventure, glamour and independence: they were "Dressed up with somewhere to go". Two conflicting images of the female clerical worker thus appear to emerge at the turn of the twentieth century: was she an independent and liberated young woman eager to explore her surroundings and her newly acquired freedom, or was she instead a depressed, intellectually-stunted drudge eager to escape the office through marriage? Or was she instead a hybrid figure: enjoying her independence but still merely biding time until she could begin her "proper" work at home? And which of these different figures were more prominent in the fiction?

1. Earning one's "bread" and the office romance

Grant Allen's *The Type-Writer Girl* (1897) (written under the pseudonym Olive Pratt Raynor) is often cited as one of the archetypal *Type-Writer Girl* novels of the Victorian *fin de siècle*. The novel charts the adventures of young Juliet Appleton,

¹⁰ John Harrison, *A Manual of the Typewriter* (London: Isaac Pitman & Sons, 1888), 9.

¹¹ "Pernin's Monthly Stenographer" s. d., 1883. Leah Price and Pamela Thurschwell, *Literary Secretaries/ Secretarial Culture* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2005), 46-47.

¹² Strom, *Beyond The Typewriter*, 174.

who is forced to make her own living in Victorian London following the death of her father. She begins working as a typewriter girl and, inevitably, ends up falling in love with her employer, Mr. Blank, whom she dubs her personal 'Romeo'. However, Allen's novel strays from the traditional office-romance with its ending: Juliet refuses to marry her Romeo once she hears he is engaged to another woman; instead, she decides to return to the employment market.

Grant Allen (1848-1899) was born near Kingston, Ontario, spending his childhood in Canada. At the age of 13, he moved to the United States with his parents, studied for his degree at the University of Oxford, taught in Jamaica for several years and, finally, he settled in England in 1876. He was a prolific novelist and journalist; his fiction covers a wide range of genres, from crime and mystery to more science-based narratives. He is perhaps best known today for the controversial New Woman novel *The Woman Who Did* (1895).

Although Allen never returned to Canada (much like Sara Jeannette Duncan) and is largely considered an English author by adoption, he still holds a place in Canadian literary history, even garnering a short biography in Carl Klinck's *Literary History*

of Canada (1976). Similarly, in a 1900 book review of an Allen memoir, one *Canadian Magazine* reviewer commented: "If Grant Allen was not a Canadian, in the strict sense, the associations of his family with this country, and his own birth here, entitle us to a special interest in his personality".¹³

Allen's novel opens rather abruptly with the admission: "I was twenty-two and without employment".¹⁴ From its very beginning, the novel thus makes it clear how necessary is Juliet's work to both her physical and economic survival in London. The struggle to find employment is made even more stark when Juliet explains to the reader: "I did not then know that every girl in London can write shorthand, and typewriting as an accomplishment is as diffused as the piano... however, a type-writer I was, and a type-writer I must remain".¹⁵

Indeed, there are several points in the novel when she struggles to pay her rent or even buy herself a meal. One of her main marketing tools to potential employers is the fact that she owns her own typing machine, so when she is forced to pawn it in order to pay her rent, the extent of her poverty and the *need* to work become even more evident. As she announces early in the novel on acquisition of a new post: "I could earn my own bread-butter doubt-

¹³ Edward Cloud, "Review of the Grant Allen: a memoir". *The Canadian Magazine* 15 (4) (1900): 380.

¹⁴ Grant Allen, *The Type-Writer Girl* (Mississauga: Broadview Press, 2004), 23.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

ful. In the *Struggle for Life* I had obtained a footing".¹⁶ Nevertheless, despite Juliet's perilous position, constantly on the verge of utter poverty, her humour and the active imagination she regularly exhibits in her narrative prevent the story from being read like a social-realist novel of the mid-nineteenth century. It is read instead more as a "[...] mock-heroic journey towards employment".¹⁷

The position that allows Juliet to earn her bread is at a small law firm called Flor & Fingelman. She responds to a newspaper advertisement for a "Shorthand and Typewriter (female)".¹⁸ However, this position is notable less for the job itself –at which she only lasts four days before quitting– than for the portrayal of the interviewing process:

"How many words a minute?" he asked after a long pause.

I stretched truth as far as its elasticity would permit. "One ninety-seven", I answered with an affectation of the precise accuracy. To say "two hundred" were commonplace.

[...]

The pulpy youth ran his eyes over me as if I were a horse for sale... "That's good enough", he said slowly, with a side-glance at his fellow-clerks. I had a painful suspicion that the words were intended rather for them than for me, and that they bore reference more to my face and figure than to my real or imagined pace per minute.¹⁹

A common concern of the period was the manner in which women's bodies were being made *public* through their desire to obtain work and how this left women open to the perils of the male gaze. This sense of being visually appraised, much as slaves once were, is continued in the chapter when she is brought to Mr. Fingelman, whom Juliet refers to as *Ahasuerus*: "He perused me up and down with his small pig's-eyes as if he were buying a horse, scrutinising my face, my figure, my hands, my feet. I felt like a Circassian in an Arab slave-market. I thought he would next proceed to examine my teeth. But he did not".²⁰

As Victoria Olwell has argued in her work on Allen's novel: "She is constrained to feel that she is not alienating and selling labour –words per minute or hours per week– but that she is sinking bodily into

¹⁶ Ibid., 32.

¹⁷ Pamela Thurschwell, "Supple Minds and Automatic Hands: Secretarial Agency in Early Twentieth-Century Literature", *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 37(2) (2001): 155-68.

¹⁸ Allen, *The Type-Writer Girl*, 28.

¹⁹ Ibid., 28.

²⁰ Ibid., 31.

the status of property”²¹ Allen appears to be making the impropriety of such encounters clear, emphasising the threat many type-writer girls faced: being judged less on their ability and more on their physical appearance. Whilst such tactics were highly discriminatory, the real peril of such hiring practices stems more from the potential risk of sexual harassment which the female office worker faced. However, Juliet is portrayed as being keenly aware of such threats, leaving her post when she begins to fear her employer’s interest is moving beyond the merely professional: “He had not yet ventured anything rude to me, but I scented prospective rudeness in the way he watched me come in and out –the way he beamed on me benignly, with his small pig’s-eyes”²²

The other reason why Juliet leaves her post at Flor & Fingelman, after only a few days, is due to her sense of boredom. Much of the recent criticism on this text has focused on the increased mechanisation and commodification of female labour at the turn of the twentieth century. This concern is hinted at early in the novel when Juliet remarks: “So I continued to click, click, click, like the machine that I was...”²³ Even

once she is settled in her new post at Mr. Blank’s publishing house, she still describes her own labour in commodified terms: “A table was set for me in Romeo’s own room. I feared to invade that sanctum. ‘Am I to sit right here?’ I asked. He smiled and answered: ‘Right there.’ So I took my place under protest. Thenceforth, I was part of the furniture of his study”²⁴ However, Juliet appears happy to lower herself to the status of furniture –even initially questioning her eligibility to take on such a role– when it is for someone she admires (her Romeo), suggesting a certain double standard at work within the text and perhaps even within the experience of female clerical workers themselves in this period.

It is important to note that it is not until half-way through Allen’s novel that the “love-interest” emerges. This allows Allen to have Juliet comment self-reflexively on her own narrative: “‘This story,’ you say, ‘is deficient in love-interest’. [...] My dear critic, has anybody more reason to regret that fact than its author? I have felt it all along. Yet reflect upon the circumstances. Ten thousand type-writer girls crowd London today, and ‘tis precisely in this that their life is deficient [in] love-interest”²⁵

²¹ Victoria Olwell, “The Body Types: Corporeal Documents and Body Politics circa 1900,” in *Literary Secretaries/ Secretarial Culture*, eds. Leah Price and Pamela Thurschwell (Hampshire, Ashgate, 2005), 48-62.

²² Allen, *The Type-Writer Girl*, 35.

²³ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 85.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 73-74.

Juliet therefore seems to be suggesting that every type-writer girl is merely biding her time until she meets her own love-interest, the man who will make her truly fulfilled. It could also be seen as a reflection by Allen on how romance narratives affected readers' expectations of their own lives. Juliet is awaiting her own love-interest because novels (such as the one she exists in) nearly always provide them. For Juliet, this process begins when she finds an advertisement for a "Lady type-writer, with good knowledge of shorthand".²⁶ Contrasting this with the previous application for a type-writer (female), she explains to the reader: "My theory is that a type-writer girl should call herself a type-writer girl; but that an advertiser should do her the courtesy to speak of her as a Lady Type-writer, or something of the sort: certainly not as a (parenthetical) female".²⁷

The gender politics at work here are especially intriguing, suggesting that working-girls saw the necessity of diminishing their status and respectability by referring to themselves simply as *girls*, but holding those employers who did them the honour of calling them *ladies* in higher esteem than those who did not. Perhaps due to their status as working women, they felt themselves unworthy of the title of ladies? Or perhaps,

as Juliet discovers, referring to oneself as a *girl* conveyed a sense of modesty and propriety that had great appeal to their (largely male) employers? Finally, it is important to note how Juliet's narration clearly differentiates the hiring tactics of Mr. Blank from those of Mr. Fingelman, emphasizing how she "[...] was aware that he was unobtrusively observing my dress and appearance, not as Ahasuerus had done, like a cross between an Oriental monarch and a horse-dealer, but like a gentleman of keen insight, accustomed to take things in at a glance without disconcerting the object of his scrutiny".²⁸ Thus, by treating her with a level of respect in both his observations and his advertisement for a lady, Mr. Blank is set up for the reader as both a good employer and also an appropriate potential suitor.

Given the romantic relationship that grows between Juliet and her employer, the trend of referring to personal secretaries (a role Juliet fulfils to a large degree when she takes up her new post *inside* her employer's private office) as "office wives" becomes oddly appropriate, especially given that, unknown to her, he is already engaged to another woman. Pamela Thurschwell refers to this trend:

²⁶ Ibid., 64.

²⁷ Ibid., 75.

²⁸ Ibid., 76.

[...] the tricky disappearing act of the ideal secretary at the *fin de siècle* was two-fold: to feminise the office, making it seem more like the domestic space of the home – a place apart from the strains of work; and, simultaneously, to make herself look like an unmarking medium, a straightforward conduit for the words and thoughts of her employer, while in reality functioning to edit and improve those words and thoughts.²⁹

This was one of the central tensions faced by secretaries in this period (and still, in part, today); the struggle to appear insignificant and passive whilst still playing an active role in *editing* their employers' words, so that they were fit for public consumption. The position of the private secretary or stenographer inside their employer's office was also significant, as it left them even more vulnerable to sexual harassment (as Bertrand Sinclair's *North of Fifty-Three* highlights) or, in the case of *The Type-Writer Girl*, the opportunity to develop an employer/employee romance. However, it is important to note that even the novel's heroine is shown to be aware of the potential impropriety of their relationship and that it is only made possible due to her reduced status as a type-writer girl:

Poverty emancipates. It often occurred to me how different things would have been had my dear father lived and had I remained a young lady. In that case, I could have seen Romeo at intervals only, under shelter of a chaperon; as it was, no one hinted at the faintest impropriety in the fact that the type-writer girl was left alone with him half the day in the privacy of his study.³⁰

Nevertheless, although their relationship is able to develop into an inappropriate employer/employee romance due to the "improper" proximity they share for large periods of the working day, Allen's heroine is also keen to emphasise that it is this admiration for him that helps make her a better employee: "I wrote rapidly and well – more rapidly, I think, than I had ever before done, and I knew why: he was a Romeo."³¹ Although her affection makes Juliet a better worker, it is also important to remember that if such a romance had been fulfilled (the narrative ending with their marriage instead of their separation), she would still have been forced to give up her role, transitioning from "office wife" to actual wife and mother.

The novel's ending – "For I am still a type-writer girl – at another office"³² –

²⁹ Thurschwell, "Supple Minds", 158.

³⁰ Allen, *The Type-Writer Girl*, 86.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

³² *Ibid.*, 139.

has received a variety of different critical responses. On a more positive comment, critics have claimed that it is “[...] an ending truly liberated from the dictates of conventional romance”,³³ and that “Juliet is ultimately a victor in the struggle for life, but despite being the fittest to survive ... because of her ethics she chooses not to be one of the women who carry on the race”.³⁴ However, less hopeful critics have instead seen the novel as an example of “[The] culturally-shared anxieties about the loss of modern women’s ability to bear children because of the dangers of excessive education”; Allen’s heroine ends the novel: “[...] smart and sassy, but significantly single”.³⁵ Here, Price and Thurschwell appear to be relating Allen’s novel back to his earlier piece *Plain Words on the Woman Question* (1889), which claimed that “Both in England and America, the women of the cultivated classes are becoming unfit to be wives and mothers. Their sexuality (which lies at the basis of everything) is enfeebled and destroyed”.³⁶

However, I would argue that throughout the novel Allen appears especially

keen to emphasise Juliet’s potential domestic ability and suitability for motherhood: she worries about the dust at Flor & Fingelman’s;³⁷ criticises the anarchists’ gardening skills,³⁸ and even tries to reform their kitchen during her brief stay, which increases her “[...] vogue among the men of the Community”.³⁹

In fact, her decision to forsake her Romeo, who offers to break his engagement to his fiancé, is largely based around her maternalistic desire to protect the young girl from heartbreak: “You shall not wrong that child! ... Much as I love you, Romeo, not even for my sake will I allow you to wrong her. She is right and we are wrong; the years must count ... I will not allow you to wrong her”.⁴⁰

It can thus be argued that Allen’s treatment of the “office-romance” formula is far from one-dimensional. Whilst Mr. Blank clearly offers a more positive authority figure than the lecherous Mr. Fingelman, the romantic relationship that blossom between Juliet and Romeo is far from professional, especially given his status as an engaged man. However, it is

³³ Arlene Young, *Culture, Class and Gender in the Victorian Novel* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 146.

³⁴ Clarissa J. Suranyi, *Introduction to The Type Writer Girl* (Mississauga: Broadview Press, 2004), 16.

³⁵ Price and Thurschwell 2005, 9.

³⁶ Allen, *The Type-Writer Girl*, 457.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 132.

important to note that it is Juliet –not her employer– who corrects such inappropriate behaviour, breaking her ties with Mr. Blank so he can fulfil his duty to another woman. This said Juliet’s Romeo is not demonised in the novel, he is instead (much like the heroine herself) characterised as being caught up in circumstances and familial obligations he cannot fully control. It is also unclear whether Allen leaves Juliet significantly single, without a Romeo, and thus without a way to fulfil her reproductive potential (as expressed in *Plain Words*), or such a decision instead of allow him to offer an alternative future for the Type-Writer Girl, outside the confines of the conventional romance genre.

It is also important to remember that this love-interest does not even enter the narrative until almost half-way through the novel; its early focus remains solely on the adventures and perils of the city for those in search of employment. Allen obviously had great affection for the urban working-girl, even if he did enjoy poking fun at her; he even admitted in *Plain Words*: “[Whilst the] ‘self-supporting spinster’ [was] ‘a deplorable accident of the passing moment’, his contemporary society ‘ought to remove all professional barriers, to break down the absurd jealousies and prejudices of men, to give her fair play, and if possible

a little more than fair play, in the struggle for existence”⁴¹

Thus, even if Juliet Appleton does ultimately dream of the “St. George who will come to rescue [her]” from her day-to-day struggle and the fact that she remains fully prepared to “face the dragons”⁴² that one must overcome in the life of a *fin de siècle* type-writer girl, still make her an enjoyable literary figure, as well as one ripe for continued critical debate.

2. Female "office units" and the lure of the Canadian wilderness

Bertrand Sinclair’s novel *North of Fifty-Three* (1914) follows the journey of young Hazel Weir from her stenography job in the Eastern city of Granville to her eventual settling *out West* in the Canadian wilderness and marriage to the woodsman, Roarin’ Bill Wagstaff. Unconventionally, they met when Bill essentially kidnaps Hazel after she gets lost in the woods. He refuses to take her back to the nearby settlement but tells her she can come with him to his home further north. After a winter, she is released by him, but, unsurprisingly, while she was his captive, she falls in love with him and also develops great affection for the wilderness, ultimately turning her back on civilisation to raise a family with him and live off the land.

⁴¹ Grant Allen, "Plain Words on the Woman Question," *Fortnightly Review* 52, (1889, October: 448-58.

⁴² Allen, *The Type-Writer Girl*, 26.

Bertrand Sinclair (1881-1972) was born in Scotland and moved with his family to Saskatchewan when he was only eight. However, at the age of fifteen he moved further south, spending seven seasons working as a cowboy in Montana. He returned to Canada in 1912, living briefly in Vancouver (where he wrote *North of Fifty-Three*), before finally settling in Pen-der Harbour, B.C.

Western Canada remained a central focus of his literature throughout his lifetime, as did his idealisation of the pioneering labourer who worked in harmony with the Canadian wilderness. Nevertheless, Lindsey McMaster says: "[...] few of these works feature female characters as prominently as does *North of Fifty-Three*, and none of them sold so well.⁴³ Indeed, the novel was so successful that it was even made into a silent film in 1917.

Sinclair's work is studied here to offer a contrast with Allen's novel. The heroine of *North of Fifty-Three* works as a stenographer at the tale's opening, seeing her work merely as a form of necessary drudge-work to support her until she can marry her fiancé Jack Barrow, a real-estate agent. For this reason, there is very little of the sense of adventure and independence we associate with Juliet Appleton's quest to earn her daily bread and seek out her future 'Romeo' at this novel's start.

Sinclair's narrative instead seems to focus on highlighting the negative, materialistic traits of urban office-work, when compared to the (in his mind at least) far *nobler* roles men and women held in the less hospitable environments of the West: hunting, prospecting and generally providing a safe home environment to raise their children in. However, before this can be accomplished, Sinclair has to characterise the urban office as a place of economic corruption and sexual depravity, something he achieves through the character of Mr. Bush, Hazel's predatory employer. Although Hazel could be seen as naive in her unwillingness to understand her employer's true intentions, her response to them suggests that by the early twentieth century readers could expect their heroines to fend off these workplace advances themselves, without needing to be rescued by a man.

In a vocational guide for young women published in 1910, Sarah Louise Arnold outlines the main distinction between the secretary and the stenographer:

The ability to deal easily and pleasantly with the various persons with whom one is brought in contact is indispensable to the secretary. Invariably courteous, gentle, cheerful, tactful, sunny, courageous, optimistic, she creates the atmosphere of the

⁴³ Lindsey McMaster, *Working Girls in the West: Representation of Wage-Earning Women* (Vancouver: BC press, 2008), 8.

office... While serving as stenographer, she is merely the channel for the message, and her own personality for the time being is lost in the impersonal act.⁴⁴

Thus, as Arnold outlines, the personal secretary was required to convey a certain amount of “personality” that was not necessary for the more mechanical work of the low-grade stenographer, whose sole purpose was to act as a “channel” for the transmission of information within the office. Sinclair draws on this perception of stenography as an “impersonal” profession from the very opening of his novel when characterising urban female employment:

Dressed in a plain white shirt waist and an equally plain black cloth skirt, Miss Hazel Weir, on week days, was merely a unit in the office force of Harrington & Bush, implement manufacturers. Neither in personality nor in garb would a casual glance have differentiated her from the other female units, occupied at various desks... The measure of her worth there is simply the measure of her efficiency at her machine or ledgers. So that if any member of the firm had been asked what sort of a girl Miss Hazel Weir might be, he would probably have replied—and

with utmost truth—that Miss Weir was a capable stenographer.⁴⁵

Hazel is thus immediately dehumanised, reduced to the status of an undifferentiated office “unit” during her working hours, her worth measured only by her efficiency. When asked what “sort” of girl she is –a question that could bear upon many differing character traits—, she is again defined only by her professional status as a ‘capable stenographer’. By presenting the workplace as a site of female disempowerment –Hazel is only one of many similar “units”– from its very opening, the novel portrays Hazel’s work as something that must be endured, without any redeeming benefits for one’s personal well-being and, ultimately, something to be escaped for the more appealing professions of wife and mother.

However, although she jokingly refers to herself as a “pore wurrkin’ gurl”,⁴⁶ in the novel Hazel is portrayed as being reasonably well-off. She has no dependents and easily lives within her means; the lack of parental influence allows her to be free to choose her own future husband.

In fact, the narrator is keen to emphasise that whilst emancipated from the office realm: “Miss Weir then became an entity

⁴⁴ Sarah Louise Arnold, “The College Woman as Secretary,” in *Vocations for the Trained Woman*, ed. y Agnes F. Perkins (Boston: Educational and Industrial Union, 1910), 203-204.

⁴⁵ Sinclair, *North of Fifty-Three*, ch. 1.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

at which few persons of either sex failed to take a second glance".⁴⁷ It is only when one of her employers, Andrew Bush, sees her *outside* the offices of Harrington & Bush walking with her fiancé that he takes notice of her and offers her a more privileged role as his personal stenographer. As the narrator notes, "There was an air of quiet in the private office, a greater luxury of appointment, which suited Miss Hazel Weir to a nicety".⁴⁸ However, it is with Hazel's removal from the public sphere of the stenography pool to Mr. Bush's "private office" where she leaves herself open to one of the most common threats at the office: sexual harassment.

Early, into her new post as Bush's private stenographer, Hazel notices signs of his affection when he starts bringing flowers to the office for her benefit: "Hazel accepted the tribute to her sex reluctantly, giving him no encouragement to overstep the normal bounds of cordiality. She was absolutely sure of herself and of her love for Jack Barrow".⁴⁹ Thus, given her status as an engaged woman, Hazel feels herself safe from the potential threat that Bush's romantic gestures might have on a more emotionally susceptible employee, but is equally keen not to encourage Bush in any way for risk of causing office gossip or

scandal. Nevertheless, despite her lack of responsiveness, it is not long before Bush feels compelled to admit his feelings to her by asking her to marry him one afternoon without any forewarning:

Perhaps I've surprised and confused you by my impulsiveness, [he continued] but I've had no chance to meet you socially. Sitting here in the office, seeing you day after day, I've had to hold myself in check. And a man only does that so long, and no longer. Perhaps right now you don't feel as I do, but I can teach you to feel that way. I can give you everything—money, social position, everything that's worth having—and love. I'm not an empty-headed boy. I can make you love me.⁵⁰

Unlike the slow-burning and mutually assured office romance of Juliet and her Romeo, Bush's advances are wholly one-sided. He concedes the impropriety of such a proposal by admitting he has been unable to meet her "socially", and that he had tried his best to hold such feelings "in check". However, most telling in this exchange is his apparent awareness that his affections are *not* shared but that he can convince her to see him differently—to *make* her love him—. In fact, he is so sure he can win her

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid. ch. 2.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

over that he even tries to kiss her, causing Hazel to act rashly to assert her unwillingness to give in to his advances:

He kissed her; and Hazel, in blind rage, freed one arm, and struck at him man fashion, her hand doubled into a small fist. By the grace of chance, the blow landed on his nose. There was force enough behind it to draw blood. He stood back and fumbled for his handkerchief. Something that sounded like an oath escaped him.

Hazel stared, aghast, astounded. She was not at all sorry; she was perhaps a trifle ashamed. It seemed unwomanly to strike. But the humour of the thing appealed to her most strongly of all. In spite of herself, she smiled as she reached once more for her hat. And this time Mr. Bush did not attempt to restrain her.⁵¹

In successfully fighting off such advances, Hazel epitomises the image of the working-girl as a woman who could fight her own battles when the need arises. She is shocked by her own actions but does not regret them, even finding the “humour” in them. Nevertheless, despite Hazel’s assertion of female independence in fending off Mr. Bush’s advances, the office itself is painted in Sinclair’s novel as a site of potential

female vulnerability to male sexuality. It is thus still presented as a place that the female worker should escape from as soon as possible, ideally for the safety of the home.

Due to her skills and experience, Hazel is swiftly able to secure a stenography post at another local firm. However, when Mr. Bush becomes injured in a horse-riding accident and later dies, he leaves her a large sum of money which causes great public interest and suspicion as to the nature of their working relationship.

Female propriety and innocence were still greatly valued at this time, a woman’s name being one of her most prized possessions, and also something easily tarnished through slander and gossip. Bush asserts earlier in the novel: ‘If you drive me to it, you will find yourself drawing the finger of gossip. Also, you will find yourself unable to secure a position in Granville. Also, you may find yourself losing the—er—regard of this—ah—fortunate individual upon whom you have bestowed your affections; but you’ll never lose mine’⁵². His claim seems to hold true, as Hazel’s new employers soon dismiss her without any explanation and her fiancé Barrow disbelieves her reassurances that there was no relationship between her and Bush. Despite her claims of innocence she is shunned by the local

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

community and many of her friends, finally deciding to start afresh out West.

However, even out West, in the remote post of Cariboo Meadows, B.C., issues surrounding Hazel's dubious reputation persist. When she is kidnapped by Roarin' Bill Wagstaff, her first worry is again for what the locals will make of her being alone in the woods with a man: "If we wander around in the woods much longer, I'll simply be a sensation when I do get back to Cariboo Meadows. I won't have a shred of reputation left... You're a man, and it's different with you. You can't know what a girl has to contend with where no one knows her".⁵³

However, it could also be argued that through losing every shred of her reputation, Hazel becomes emancipated from the social mores that she associates with her previous urban lifestyle. Bill takes her North into the Canadian wilderness, where such matters of reputation and scandal become irrelevant, allowing her to reconstruct her identity and femininity along new lines.

During his attempted proposal, Mr. Bush claims: "I've never failed in anything I ever undertook, and I don't care how I fight, fair or foul, so that I win".⁵⁴ At the

time, readers were supposed to find such behaviour despicable, especially his later plot to ruin Hazel's name by leaving her his inheritance.

Nevertheless, as modern readers we cannot ignore the fact that Sinclair's intended romantic hero, Bill Wagstaff, all-but-kidnaps the novel's heroine under the assumption that he is attracted to her and that, given time, she will reciprocate his feelings. Although he does not actually argue: "I can make you love me"⁵⁵ like Mr. Bush, his tactics and endgame are ultimately the same. However, unlike Mr. Bush, he states: "I'm going to play the game my way. And I'll play fair. That's the only promise I will make".⁵⁶ Thus, as readers we are meant to forgive Bill his crude romancing tactics due to his determination to "play fair" and never force himself upon Hazel.

Whilst such wooing methods might seem misogynistic to modern readers (as does his tendency to refer to Hazel as "little person",⁵⁷ Sinclair justifies Bill's roughness through the narrator's declaration: "In her heart every woman despises any hint of the effeminate in man. Even though she may decry what she is pleased to term the brute in man, whenever he discards the dominant, overmastering characteristics of the

⁵³ Ibid., ch. 8.

⁵⁴ Ibid., ch. 1.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., ch. 8.

⁵⁷ Ibid., ch. 11.

male she will have none of him. Miss Hazel Weir was no exception to her sex”.⁵⁸ Thus, for all her apparent independence and feistiness in physically repelling unwanted suitors and travelling across Canada on her own to find work, we are supposed to believe that Hazel ultimately desires to be dominated and made subordinate to a man, ideally her future husband.

Despite her initial post as a stenographer, and her ability to defend herself physically (when required), Hazel Weir’s ultimate destiny would appear to be highly conservative and firmly entrenched in a pioneer narrative, which still placed the highest value on women’s roles as wives and mothers. In her study of the Canadian pioneer woman, Elizabeth Thompson argues that many authors felt the need to “[...] rewrite and revise the definition of a feminine ideal so that it [became] compatible with a backwoods, Canadian setting”.⁵⁹

However, in the case of Sinclair’s novel I would argue that the author felt the need to deliberately reinforce the culturally prescribed feminine ideal: a woman with the ability to be independent and self-sufficient, but who willingly chooses to be subservient to her husband and prioritise her role as a mother. Hazel’s work in the novel as a stenographer is merely a step-

ping stone to her eventual profession as a mother, the polluting influence of the Canadian office—as evidenced through Bush’s sexual harassment—, portrayed as a space to be escaped from as soon as possible for the more gratifying and cleansing environment of the Canadian North.

These novels would thus appear to suggest that the fictional office could act as a site of potential female agency and economic independence, but that this could only be achieved through the denial of women’s inherent maternal instincts. In Sinclair’s novel, from the outset, the office is perceived as a space to be endured only until the protagonist can be reinstalled into her rightful place—at home—.

Conversely, whilst the failed office-romance of Allen’s *The Type-Writer Girl* might appear to suggest that women *could* choose to centre their lives around employment, instead of the household, Juliet tellingly ends the novel “[...] still [as] a type-writer girl—at another office”,⁶⁰ forsaking her Romeo less out of a desire to work, than an unwillingness to hurt another woman (Romeo’s fiancé). However, whilst his decision to deprive his heroine of a man might seem a form of eugenic plot-manoeuvring to appease a still largely

⁵⁸ Ibid., ch. 7.

⁵⁹ Elizabeth Thompson, *The Pioneer Woman: A Canadian Character Type* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1991), 24.

⁶⁰ Allen, *The Type-Writer Girl*, 139.

conservative readership (suggesting women like Juliet are still an aberration rather than the norm), Allen's obvious affection for the working-girl perhaps suggests that

her time was drawing nearer, even if at the *fin de siècle* a woman's decision to choose employment over marriage and a family remained unthinkable.

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