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# **The Development of Kitty Coleman in Tracy Chevalier's *Falling Angels***

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## **Introduction**

This essay will deal with the historical novel *Falling Angels* by Tracy Chevalier. The novel, which begins with the death of Queen Victoria in 1901, describes the lives of two middle-class families, the Colemans and the Waterhouses, over a period of nine years. Already from the beginning it becomes clear that these families are different. The Colemans are quite modern and open to new fashions. The Waterhouses, on the other hand, are more reactionary and they cling to the Victorian values. The novel pictures a period of change when traditional values are challenged and gradually replaced by new ideas.

I will focus on the development of the character Kitty Coleman who is an idle, middle-class housewife. Even though she has a wealthy husband and loyal daughter it is quite obvious that she is not content with her life. This paper will show that Kitty is very different from the ideal Victorian woman, which for instance can be noted in her behaviour and in her opinions. Her inability to conform to the role she has been assigned makes her unhappy. It will also be proven that not until she joins the women's suffrage movement is she satisfied with her situation. My thesis is thus that Kitty Coleman does not find a meaning to her life until she can abandon the traditional role of womanhood and enter the larger world of politics, typically dominated by men, where she feels that she belongs.

In order to analyse Kitty's development, incidents that influence her strongly have been identified. After her initial unhappy situation, the most important events concern her love affair with Mr Jackson, her pregnancy leading to an illegal abortion and finally her involvement with the women's suffrage movement. These experiences will be treated as stages of her life and this paper will be structured accordingly.

Before embarking on the analysis of the novel a brief historical background is called for. First, the Victorian middle-class domestic ideal will be presented. According to Barbara Caine, the industrialization in Britain led to "[t]he separation of home from workplace [...] and the withdrawal of middle-class women from productive labour" (540). In other words, when middle-class men started to work outside home their women stayed at home to take care of the family. As a consequence, an idea that men and women belonged to "separate spheres" developed (540).

Karl Ittman argues that the separate spheres were based on the notion that men and women had different abilities and personalities. Men succeeded in the public sphere of business and politics because they were rational, aggressive and intellectual. Women took care of the family, in the private sphere, because they were nurturing and caring beings (142). According to Mary Lyndon Shanley, many Victorians similarly believed that the male and female roles were a result of biology. They thought that “[w]omen’s proper functions were assigned by nature, and it was folly and hubris to try to alter them” (6).

The distinct roles of middle-class husbands and wives meant that they had separate duties to perform. Men supported their families and were concerned with public matters. Women gave birth to and nurtured their children. They were also responsible for managing the household which could include a number of domestic tasks, such as the supervision of cleaning, cooking and sewing (Shanley 5). Furthermore, even though women were considered to be subordinate to men, “they were also charged with the obligation of keeping moral and religious values alive, and of providing a beneficial moral influence for their families” (Caine 540). That is to say, despite their believed inferiority, women were supposed to guide their husband and children in moral issues. It should be noted, however, that for economical reasons, the Victorian domestic ideal was never realized in many families. Philippa Levine claims nevertheless that the ideology of the separate spheres “was highly effective in ordering people’s values according to its precepts” (12-13).

At the same time, many women who were discontented with the fact that they were subordinate to men started to fight for women’s rights. As a result, changes were made to improve the situation for women during the second half of the nineteenth century. Some of these reforms concerned women’s marital status and led to “a destabilizing of gender boundaries” (Tosh 104). John Tosh explains that the patriarchal system in reality remained the same in many families but the support for the traditional values was not as strong as it used to be (108, 119).

Victorian feminists criticized the domestic ideal because it excluded women from the public sphere. One important issue concerned women’s suffrage, i.e. women’s right to vote (Shanley 13). The fight for women’s suffrage, which had started at the end of the nineteenth century, accelerated in 1903 when Emmeline Pankhurst and her

daughter established the Women's Social and Political Union. This organization was radical and the suffragettes became famous for their militant methods. As a consequence, they were met with violent opposition from the police. Despite all the efforts from the suffrage movement it would take until 1928 for all women in Britain to get the vote (Warner 124-127).

### **Initial Situation**

Kitty Coleman cannot relate to the female ideal of the Victorian period. Regarding the separate spheres for men and women discussed above, I would like to argue that Kitty is not happy in her private sphere. Already when she returns from her honeymoon she is dissatisfied with her lot (70). The fact that Kitty feels trapped in her home is clearly reflected by her own words:

He kissed me goodbye in my new morning room - which I had chosen to be at the front of the house, overlooking the street rather than the garden, so I could keep an eye on the world outside – and left to catch his train to work. I watched from the window as he walked away, and felt the same kind of jealousy I had suffered when seeing my brother go off to school. When he had gone round the corner, I turned and looked at the still, quiet room, [...], and I began to cry. I was twenty years old, and my life had settled into a long, slow course over which I had no control. (70)

Kitty suffers since she is not allowed to enter the public sphere. She also dislikes being dependent on her husband. After having been married a number of years she is even more depressed and is desperate for something exciting to take place:

I feel so flat this morning. [...] I secretly hoped that the change in the century would bring a change to us all; that England would miraculously slough off her shabby black coat to reveal something glittering and new. It is only eleven hours into the twentieth century, but I know very well that nothing has changed but a number. (5)

The new century does not lead to any immediate changes for Kitty. To relieve the boredom of her everyday life she reads books and newspapers (5, 75). By reading she educates herself and follows what happens in the outside world. Moreover, she spends a lot of time in her large and beautiful garden (46).

Kitty is also unhappy in her marriage. Her husband Richard has not turned out to be what she hoped before they married. In Kitty's view, he is too ordinary and conventional. Furthermore, she feels that she cannot live up to his expectations. She cannot be "the lively wife who thinks the world [is] a reasonable place and he [is] a reasonable man" (70). According to the Victorian domestic ideology, a wife was supposed to provide her husband with a happy home that functioned as a sanctuary, a shelter from the turbulence and the competition of the outside world. This ideal woman was referred to as "the Angel in the House" after the title of a poem by Coventry Patmore (Christ 146). It is obvious that Kitty is not an ideal wife and she does not manage to create an idyllic home. On the contrary, Richard is also frustrated with their relationship. He believes that he has given Kitty a good life and he cannot comprehend why she "is being so difficult" (6). They do not communicate with each other and Kitty does not tell Richard why she is discontented (6). I find it hard to understand why she does not explain her feelings to her husband. She probably thinks that he would not share her opinions and that he would not listen to her. When they married, Kitty expected him to adopt her modern ideas, but now she has realised that his traditional beliefs are deeply entrenched and that he will not change (120). As it is, both of them are quite miserable.

Kitty's role as wife involves motherhood. The following account demonstrates that she does not enjoy being a mother:

Maude's birth was a shock from which I have not recovered. When I [...] first held her in my arms I felt as if I were nailed to the bed, trapped by her mouth at my breast. Of course I loved her – love her – but my life as I had imagined it ended on that day. It fed a low feeling in me that resurfaces with increasing frequency. (69)

It is obvious that Kitty sees her daughter as an obstacle. After Maude's birth she feels even more separated from the public sphere which makes her feel sad. With her attitude regarding maternity, Kitty differs from many Victorian middle-class women. To the Victorians, children were essential and they played a central part in family life (Ittman 148). As a consequence, motherhood was considered to be women's most important task (Branca 74). Kitty, by contrast, does not want to have any more children. Her doctor gives her advice how to avoid getting pregnant. For this, she has to pay him "in

the flesh” (69). She never tells Richard about her decision and he never suspects anything (69). Her choice to have only one child can be compared to the fact that middle-class women gave birth to 3.5 children on average at the end of the nineteenth century (Tosh 105).

According to Patricia Branca, the Victorians also believed that a mother should be closely connected to her children since they had special needs which only she could satisfy (108-109). Kitty, however, is not intimately related to Maude. This becomes obvious the night when the Colemans go with the Waterhouses to see a bonfire on the Heath (67). That night Kitty witnesses the close relationship between Mrs Waterhouse and her daughter Lavinia and she realizes that “there is clearly an affection between them that [she] cannot muster with Maude” (69). When they leave the bonfire Kitty takes her daughter’s hand. Maude is startled by this unexpected gesture of intimacy and cannot hide her astonishment. At the same time she feels “guilty for having such a response” (71). After having walked with her mother for a few minutes Maude escapes to her friend Lavinia and Kitty is relieved (71).

In addition, it is clear that Kitty does not satisfy her daughter’s special needs. An example of this is when Maude starts her periods. Maude finds this experience painful and embarrassing. She clearly needs her mother, but since Kitty is not there to comfort and help her, the maid Jenny has to come to her assistance. Maude is disappointed with her mother but she does not talk to Kitty about it (231-237). This also shows that they do not have a close relationship. Maude actually has a better relationship with her father than with her mother. He pays more attention to her and he often takes his daughter star-gazing. Maude “thrives on his attention” (68).

As mentioned before, women were responsible for the upbringing of their children. In Ittman’s view, many Victorians thought that a mother should spend as much time as possible with her children to nurture them (148, 158). Similarly, Branca states that the Victorian mother was supposed to “devote a great deal of her time and energy” to discipline and educate her children (111-112).

Kitty, however, does not spend much time with her daughter. When Maude is an infant she has a nanny who takes care of her. When the nanny leaves, Kitty is supposed to look after her daughter, but she prefers to read books and work in the garden so Maude is most often in the hands of the cook, Mrs Baker, or the maid, Jenny

(53). Maude is also frequently at Lavinia's house (112). Kitty knows that she is neglecting her daughter and sometimes she feels guilty. Then she thinks that she ought to "be with her more – read to her, help her with her sewing, bring her into the garden [and] take her into town" (69). Unfortunately, she rarely does. Instead, Kitty devotes less and less time to Maude.

Besides taking care of her husband and children, the Victorian woman had other domestic duties. One important task was the employment of servants. The middle-class "wife decided upon the household help required, drew up job descriptions, advertised, interviewed, hired, supervised, paid, and fired" (Langland 46). Here we find another aspect of life where Kitty digresses from the stated ideal. She is not interested in household matters and therefore does not take those issues seriously. She hires the cook, Mrs Baker, only because of her name since she cannot resist "the frivolity of the reason" (82). Kitty is lucky, however, regarding Mrs Baker. She is "a thrifty, able cook who instinctively understands certain things so that [Kitty does] not need to spell them out" (83). Such qualities are highly valued by Kitty who does not like to supervise her servants. The maid Jenny, on the other hand, is "more of a trial" (83). She is restless, laughs a lot, speaks her mind and sometimes she can be insolent. Jenny does, nevertheless, have a good heart. Kitty likes her and keeps her despite her obvious shortcomings. By doing so, Kitty irritates her mother-in-law, Mrs Coleman, who detests Jenny (83). Mrs Coleman believes that Jenny cannot be trusted and "would have shown her the door in an instant" (93) if she had been in Kitty's situation. It is clear that Mrs Coleman functions as a contrast to Kitty in the novel. She has traditional and old-fashioned ideas about how to run a household which are very different from those of her daughter-in-law. According to Mrs Coleman, Kitty does not pay attention to what is going on in her home and is therefore doing a bad job (93).

Mrs Coleman and Kitty do not only disagree about household issues. Another subject on which they have different opinions concerns the monarchy. Mrs Coleman is, unlike Kitty, an admirer of the Queen. When Queen Victoria died in 1901 she had reigned for 63 years and was a national icon. She stressed the importance of family and influenced the moral and religious values of the time. Her ideas regarding "pure family morality" earned great respect among the British people (McDowall 144-145). The death of Queen Victoria led to period of mourning which affected the whole nation. In



the novel all adults wear black clothes, no one goes to work and all the shops are closed (377). Kitty does not share these sad feelings. She “despise[s] the sentimentality of the age” (68) and is looking forward to a change in leadership. Hence Kitty is “terribly excited to hear the Queen is dead” and has “to work very hard to appear appropriately sober” (16). However, by putting on a blue dress instead of a black one she manages to make a statement (8).

To paint a more complete picture of Kitty’s character some of her personality traits will now be pointed out. First of all, it is obvious that Kitty has certain characteristics that normally were ascribed to men at that time. Earlier I mentioned that men were considered to be intellectual while women were supposed to be caring. As discussed above, Kitty is not a nurturing mother. Instead, she enjoys reading and educating herself. She also spends a lot of time thinking and likes people she can “have a proper conversation with” (4). Kitty is, for instance, bored with Mrs Waterhouse, who mainly talks about her own family (113). The fact that Kitty speaks her mind annoys her husband. He thinks that she “is always saying things she shouldn’t” (20). Actually, Richard does not manage to control his wife. As will be discussed later, she is both head-strong and manipulative. Consequently, she is not the submissive wife that Richard would have wanted. Finally, Kitty also prides herself on being modern and open-minded (4). This is for instance reflected in her taste in interior decoration. Her house is light and fashionable, thus very different from Mrs Waterhouse’s dark and traditional Victorian home (47).

When adding together all the evidence above, it can easily be concluded that Kitty is not a typical Victorian woman. The role as housewife does not suit her and therefore she does not feel fulfilled. She longs for the outside world.

### **Love Affair with Mr Jackson**

The local cemetery, where both the Colemans and the Waterhouses have their family graves, has an important part to play in the story. Maude and Lavinia are fascinated with the place and want to go there as often as possible to explore. On one occasion when Kitty accompanies the girls, she meets the superintendent, John Jackson. The attraction between them is immediate:

Mr Jackson glanced at me and I smiled at him. He bowed for the fourth time, muttered something about having a great deal to do, and rushed off, quite red in the face. Well, I thought. Well. (88)

Kitty becomes very interested in Mr Jackson and she often goes to the cemetery to look for him. He is very friendly and they spend a lot of time talking (119-120). There are several reasons for her feelings and behaviour. Maybe her most important motive is that Mr Jackson is very different from her husband. He has certain qualities that Richard does not possess. Kitty can for instance talk to Mr Jackson “about all sorts of things – about the world and how it works, and about God and how He works. He asks [her] opinions, and does not laugh at them, but considers them” (120). Mr Jackson obviously respects her and treats her like an equal. I also believe that Kitty falls for him because he dares to stand up to her mother-in-law. One example of this is when Mrs Coleman gets into a dispute with Mr Jackson regarding cremation. She claims that cremation is illegal but is contradicted by him. He manages both to win the argument and to silence her. In Kitty’s view, that moment is “immensely satisfying” (88) and she is deeply impressed by his firm treatment of Mrs Coleman. The last reason why Kitty falls in love with Mr Jackson could be that she is “not accustomed to being turned down” (120). Although Mr Jackson enjoys spending time with Kitty and is attracted to her, he does not want to get romantically involved because “[h]e is a truthful man, a religious man, a principled man [and] a moral man” (120). Kitty, on the contrary, wants to have a sexual relationship. When she confronts him and tells him what she wants he rejects her (121).

In this context it is important to observe what the Victorians thought about sex and adultery. It has already been mentioned that the ideal wife was supposed to be a moral guide to her family. According to Martha Vicinus, women were taught that they were asexual and therefore morally superior to men (xiv). John Miller similarly writes that the Victorians had “an attitude that placed the woman in the role of being the passive receptacle of male lust” (41). In other words, sexual desire was something a female person should not have. The married woman who departed from the norm by committing adultery was condemned by society, not least by other women. Her family’s reputation was destroyed and she was considered to be a “fallen woman”. Adultery was believed to be “the most unforgivable sin” (Vicinus xiii-xiv).

As can be seen above, sexuality is yet another area where Kitty does not conform to the accepted standard of behaviour. She is insulted by Mr Jackson's rejection and does not visit the cemetery for a while. It is, however, impossible for her to stay away so she goes back to see him, "but not as often and without the heightened expectations" (121). To her regret he treats her like a sister and she has to accept that his principles are more important to him than she is. When two years have passed Mr Jackson finally changes his mind and agrees to be Kitty's lover. This is after he has almost been killed in an accident at the cemetery (129-135). Kitty is happy about his decision and "at last the heaviness that has resided inside [her] since [she] married [...] lift[s]" (143). When they meet at the cemetery to make love for the first time she does not hesitate despite the obvious risks:

The half-moon was still low in the sky, but above me stars had appeared, and I saw one fall, as if to remind me of the consequences in store. I had seen and felt the signs inside me that day, and I had ignored them. I had had my joy at last, and I knew I would pay for it. I would not tell him, but it would be the end of us. (144)

Kitty's worst fears become a reality when she gets pregnant after that single romantic meeting. As a consequence, her love-affair with Mr Jackson ends almost immediately after it has begun. She never tells him about her pregnancy. Instead, she stops going to the cemetery.

To conclude, Kitty gets involved with Mr Jackson because he is very different from her husband, in that he listens to her and takes her seriously. They discuss matters that are not related to her everyday life. Their meetings are also a way for her to experience something exciting and to escape her confinement to home. Finally, the relationship with Mr Jackson enables her to play a different role than that of mother and wife.

### **Pregnancy and Abortion**

The pregnancy is a severe blow to Kitty. As discussed above, she does not want to have any more children. Furthermore, she is afraid that Richard will find out about her condition (319). Since they do not share a bed he would understand that she has been with another man. Abortion seems to be the only solution but she does not know where

to go or who to ask for advice (168). As a result, her situation becomes desperate. It is finally Jenny who comes to Kitty's rescue. She is also pregnant but is even worse off by being an unmarried servant without security and influence. When Kitty's mother-in-law learns about Jenny's predicament she is horrified and believes that her actions have brought disgrace on the family. Thus, Mrs Coleman dismisses Jenny and Kitty is too weak and worried for her own sake to argue (151-155). However, without telling her mother-in-law she makes a deal with Jenny. In exchange for the address to a midwife who performs abortions Kitty lets Jenny come back to work after her baby is born (167-171).

Having an abortion during the nineteenth century was difficult since it was prohibited by law. It was also considered to be morally wrong and was highly criticized. Despite these facts, the number of abortions increased at the end of the century, not least among married women. One explanation for this was the emergence of more sophisticated medical equipment, which made the procedure more secure and less frightening to women (Sauer 91-93).

Kitty goes through with her abortion without considering the legal and moral aspects. She is nevertheless deeply affected by it, both physically and mentally, and it takes her a long time to recover. No one, except Jenny, knows about the real reason for her medical condition. They are all told that she suffers from pneumonia (185). During this period Kitty changes dramatically. She becomes listless, absent-minded and loses most of her strength (185). When Kitty does not manage to take care of her household Mrs Coleman immediately steps in. Jenny's position is filled with a succession of temporary chams, but they all turn out to be incompetent. Consequently, the maintenance of the house is neglected (209, 216).

Richard does not suspect what his wife has done. She avoids him and he does not pay much attention to her. A lot of his time is spent at the local pub. Thus, their relationship is even less close than before (175-177). Maude, on the other hand, misses her mother. Kitty completely ignores her and does not know what her daughter is doing. Maude is too ashamed of her mother's strange behaviour to bring Lavinia to her home. Instead, she goes to her friend's house almost every day after school (181-183, 187).

Not only Kitty's behaviour has changed, but also her appearance, which is illustrated by Mr Waterhouse in the following account:

I looked up Swain's Lane and saw Kitty Coleman, walking along slowly with her head bowed, kicking at her skirts. I thought her a peculiar sight, given it was twilight and she was alone and didn't seem to be walking anywhere in particular. 'Evening, Mrs Coleman,' I said, raising my cap. [...] She didn't seem to notice, though – she just stared at me like I was a ghost. I was taken aback by her appearance. Richard had mentioned she'd been ill and was not looking her finest. But it was more than that. Her looks were plainly gone, I am sorry to say. (175-176)

Kitty, who used to be very pretty, has let herself go. Since she is totally disoriented Mr Waterhouse takes her home. After having left her by her door he wonders whether she had realised who he was (177).

Shortly after the episode above, Mrs Waterhouse visits Kitty in her home and "[feels] terribly guilty for not having gone there sooner." She is also shocked "to see the lifeblood sapped from someone once so vital" (184). Even though they have not been friends before Mrs Waterhouse sympathises with Kitty and would like to help her. Kitty explains her emotions to Mrs Waterhouse:

'I have spent my life waiting for something to happen,' [...]. 'And I have come to understand that nothing will. Or it already has, and I blinked during that moment and it's gone. I don't know which is worse – to have missed it or to know there is nothing to miss.' (186)

Kitty feels hopeless and her statement is permeated by sadness.

To sum up, the love-affair with Mr Jackson ends tragically with an abortion. After that experience Kitty goes to pieces. She is completely lost and not even her family can reach her. At this point, Kitty has given up her quest for a meaningful existence.

### **The Suffrage Movement**

A few months after the abortion Mrs Waterhouse manages to persuade Kitty to go with her and the girls to a public library opening in the neighbourhood. Maude, who thinks that her mother needs to get out of the house, has asked for Mrs Waterhouse's assistance (187). At the library ceremony Kitty meets a woman called Caroline Black. She is a well-known suffragette who, without being asked, gives a speech regarding votes for women. Kitty is very fascinated and smiles for the first time in a long while

(188-194). After having listened to Miss Black, she knows that “nothing [will] ever be the same” (195).

Before long, Kitty makes friends with Caroline Black and joins the Women’s Social and Political Union, WSPU. As mentioned before, this group fought for women’s right to vote in government elections. They tried to gain support for their cause by holding public meetings, signing petitions, handing out campaign material and organizing demonstrations (Turner 603). Kitty becomes totally absorbed in the organization. She goes to meetings and talks about politics all the time. To be able to participate in as many WSPU activities as possible she even buys a bicycle (226). Furthermore, her morning room is filled with banners, pamphlets and newspaper cuttings (234). An interesting question that can be raised here is why Kitty gets so involved. Caine provides one possible answer by pointing out that many women thought that suffrage would not only give them political rights, but it would also put an end to their domestic seclusion. In other words, women’s prospects outside their home would improve (538). In accordance with this, Branca claims that the suffrage movement was “a reaction against boredom,” that these women were tired of their domestic role and wanted more meaningful occupations (10). By engaging in the cause Kitty deals with her own situation. For the first time in her life she is working and she believes that she is doing something useful.

Kitty’s transformation during this period is profound. She is pulled out of her depression but does not return to her old self. Instead, she becomes much more radical and is “in an excited state, her eyes glittering, her cheeks flushed as if she were at a ball and had not stopped dancing once” (225). She also takes control of her household again by reinstating Jenny and dismissing the temporary char, which infuriates Mrs Coleman (216).

Richard does not share his wife’s opinion concerning women’s suffrage. He does not take the suffragettes seriously, thinking that their cause is useless. When they announce their meetings by writing in chalk on the pavement outside his house he even throws buckets of water after them (192, 241). At first, he does not know how deeply engaged Kitty is. The reason for this is that she does not discuss suffrage issues with him and is only involved in activities with the WSPU during daytime when Richard is working. Moreover, since he never enters her morning room he does not see her

propaganda material (233-234). To him, Kitty's commitment to the movement is "a harmless hobby, to be dabbed in between tea parties" (241). The fact that Richard never goes into his wife's room shows that he is not interested in her doings, which will have serious consequences. Since he does not ask any questions Kitty is able to carry on with her activities without being disturbed. Mrs Coleman, however, who also is critical of the suffrage movement, realises what is going on after having attended one of Kitty's meetings. She decides to warn her son but changes her mind:

The moment I saw him [...] I knew I would not say a word to him [...] about Caroline Black. He was glowing, even after a day at work, and I was reminded of how he looked when he and Kitty had returned from their honeymoon. So that is how it is, I thought frankly. She has taken him into her bed again so that she can do what she likes outside of it. She is no fool, my daughter-in-law. [...] I do not like to play games, and as I looked at my son now, I knew that she had outplayed me. (217-218)

Kitty wants to keep Richard in the dark, which is not difficult since he is rather naïve and easily manipulated. To serve her own purpose, she even makes love to him. Thus, for a short period, their relationship is much more intimate than it was before.

Maude is also affected by her mother's political engagement. Kitty is always busy and, as before, Maude spends most of her time at Lavinia's house. Thus, Mrs Waterhouse almost regards her as her own daughter (226). The irony of the situation is that in the absence of her mother, Maude is driven closer to the Waterhouses. This means that she is subjected to their old-fashioned ideas, including their opposition to the suffragettes. At home, Maude constantly has to assist her mother in for instance serving tea at meetings or taking messages when Kitty is out. She therefore starts to dislike the WSPU (224). Since her mother is not looking after her, Maude starts to go to the cemetery and other places alone (232).

Kitty's actions become increasingly drastic. One day when she goes to Parliament Square with other suffragettes to try to enter the House of Commons she is arrested. The police treat her brutally which results in severe bruising. The next morning she has to appear in court and is sentenced to six weeks in prison (242-243). These incidents correspond closely to actual events. As discussed earlier, the WSPU was famous for its radical methods and eventually a pattern emerged. The suffragettes would

march to Parliament, where they demanded to see a politician. When they were not allowed entrance they refused to go away. Then, the police normally had to use physical force to remove the women and many of them were arrested. The suffragettes usually pleaded guilty to the charge of “obstructing the police in the execution of their duty,” thereby choosing imprisonment rather than a fine (Wingerden 79).

When Richard finally realises that Kitty is truly a suffragette, he is furious with her for humiliating him and disgracing the family name (241). He does, nevertheless, hope that their life will return to normal again when Kitty has “learned [her] lesson” in prison (267). However, Richard is deeply disappointed when he visits his wife during her imprisonment. Even though she has lost a lot of weight and looks unhealthy she has no intention of giving up her fight (264). Instead, she explains that she feels stronger since prison “has made [her] into a rod of iron” (267). Moreover, she tells her husband that “nothing [she has] done in [her] little life has had any significance whatsoever until [she] joined the WSPU” (268). When Richard gets home he goes directly to his wife’s morning room where he sees all her material relating to the suffrage movement. He does not hesitate to burn it all (270).

Maude becomes anxious when she learns that Kitty is going to prison. Among other things, she worries about what will happen to her when her mother is gone. Kitty, who knows that she should console her daughter, cannot bring herself to show any emotions. Rather than comforting Maude, she tells her to collect money for the cause by asking friends and neighbours for donations (243-244). In this situation it is apparent how cruelly Kitty is using her daughter to achieve her own goals. Maude is even more depressed after her conversation with her mother than she was before. Since she hates to work for the suffrage movement by now, she only manages to raise a small amount of money, which makes her feel guilty (265).

When Kitty gets out of prison both Maude and Richard avoid her. This does not discourage Kitty who is just happy that she has “grown a thick skin” (275). She soon gets involved in organising a huge demonstration which is to take place later that summer. A lot of work is required, such as getting hold of speakers, talking to the police and making banners. Hence Kitty feels that she is not only “planning a battle [but] an entire war” (275). It is interesting to note that this march actually occurred in 1908. With almost 500 000 participants from all across England, it was “the largest political



meeting in the history of the world” (Wingerden 83). Richard obviously disapproves of Kitty’s engagement but she uses blackmail to be able to do what she wants. She tells him that she will begin to give speeches at public meetings if he does not allow her to work for the movement. Richard, who is deeply concerned about their reputation and his mother’s feelings, has to give in (274). As a result, he feels powerless and is angry with himself for not having any authority over his wife. It is easy to see that Kitty is not only stronger than Richard, she is also cunning. Despite his strong objections, she always gets her own way. His desperation drives him to ask Mr Waterhouse for advice how to handle Kitty. Mr Waterhouse cannot help his friend but encourages Richard to believe that “it’s just a phase [his] wife is going through” and “[p]erhaps the suffrage movement will die out” (274). Thus, instead of dealing directly with his problems, Richard hopes that they will go away by themselves.

Kitty, who has taken on too many assignments to be able to complete them all without help, enlists Maude to sew banners even though she knows that her daughter, like herself, is a useless seamstress (277). She claims that she wants to involve Maude because she is “fighting for something on [her] behalf” (276), namely her right to vote. The real reason may be that since Kitty hates sewing she does not want to do the work herself. When being confronted with “the most impossible pile of banners to sew,” Maude panics and asks Lavinia for assistance (285). Thus, the two friends spend a number of afternoons sewing. Kitty is most often not at home and does not even express her gratitude for all the work they do (286). In this context it is interesting to observe that sewing was an important skill that women were supposed to possess at that time (Branca 24). Maude, however, has inherited her disinterest in needlework from her mother.

To make her appearance in the demonstration more impressive, Kitty has secret plans concerning her dress. She wants “to celebrate [her] liberation from both [prison] and [her] despair with a liberating costume” (275) and is therefore going to be dressed as Robin Hood. The costume consists of a green tunic, a cap and green boots. Since the tunic is very short, her legs will be completely bare. Kitty also intends to lead a white horse on which Caroline Black is riding in a full suit of armour, impersonating Joan of Arc (299-300). Dramatic costumes, like these, were used by the suffragettes in many processions. To win public attention they often created theatrical spectacles, using

lots of symbols. By being inventive and unpredictable, their performances were sensational. It should be added that Joan of Arc was the mascot of the suffragettes. (Warner 125).

When the day Kitty has been waiting for finally comes, the demonstration turns out to be an exhilarating experience:

For most of the march I felt as if I were walking through a dream. I was so excited that I hardly heard a thing. [...] Nor could I really see anything. I tried to focus on faces along the route but they were all a blur [...] It was easier to look ahead towards our destination, whatever that would be. What I did feel sharply was the sun and air on my legs. After a lifetime of heavy dresses, with their swathes of clothes wrapping my legs like bandages, it was an incredible sensation. (301)

It is obvious that Kitty is happy when she is not restricted by traditional rules of social behaviour. A woman's dress represents the constraints of family life to her and by dressing like a man she feels free. She does not worry about the fact that everyone is staring at her naked legs in amazement and horror.

Quite unexpectedly, the march ends in disaster for Kitty when someone in the audience sets off fireworks. The loud noise scares the horse that she is leading and, as a consequence, it kicks her in the chest. Despite the accident, she refuses to leave the procession, arguing that she is "fine, just a bit breathless" (310). She is, however, severely injured and her condition deteriorates rapidly. When she gets home at the end of the day, a doctor is sent for. The doctor explains that Kitty is dying from internal bleeding which makes Richard furious. He blames Caroline Black for not having taken her home earlier. Miss Black, on the other hand, defends herself by saying that nothing could have stopped Kitty from finishing the march (317-321). It can be pointed out that if Kitty had not been so fanatic and stubborn, she might have survived. As it is, she contributes to her own death.

When seeing Kitty on her deathbed, Maude cannot put her feelings into words. She does not know what to say to her mother and, consequently, they end up talking about the garden. Not even during these last moments do they express any affection for each other. Maude finally leaves her mother without saying good-bye (327-328). Before dying, Kitty reflects on her relationship with her daughter:

All her life Maude was a presence at my side, whether she was actually there or not. I pushed her away, yet she remained. Now I was holding on to her hand and I did not want to let go. It was she who had to let go of me. When she did at last, I knew I was alone, and that it was time for me to depart. (330)

In the end Kitty is regretful, but now it is too late. Since she never manages to get close to either her daughter or her husband she dies lonely.

Kitty's life ends in tragedy, but her struggle for equality was not in vain. After her death it becomes clear that she has deeply influenced her daughter, despite the fact that she was not an attentive mother. Maude is for instance not certain whether she will get married and have children. What she does know is that she wants to go to university to learn a profession. Furthermore, like her mother, she defies Richard when it suits her interests. Finally, her physical resemblance to Kitty becomes more and more obvious as she grows up.

To summarize, Kitty finds what she has been looking for when she comes in contact with the suffrage movement. She gets the opportunity to work for something she believes in but in the process she uses her husband and daughter. Richard, who is rather weak, cannot stop his wife from following her convictions and Kitty dies fighting for the cause. It is notable that both times Kitty tries to change her life, i.e with the love affair and her political engagement, the outcomes are disastrous. However, in both cases she is aware of the risks.

## **Conclusion**

Tracy Chevalier describes Kitty Coleman as a bored, Victorian housewife who is searching for something meaningful to do. Kitty feels confined in her home and does not enjoy taking care of her family. Regarding this issue as well as many others, she differs from the ideal Victorian woman. She engages in an extramarital affair with Mr Jackson since he treats her like an equal and listens to what she has to say. By seeing him she also gets away from her daily routines. Their relationship ends in catastrophe when Kitty gets pregnant and has to undergo an abortion. This experience leads to a period of deep depression. Ironically, it is the traditional and conservative Mrs Waterhouse who brings Kitty to the library ceremony where she meets the suffragette

Caroline Black. After this meeting Kitty changes utterly because she has found something worth fighting for and, consequently, a purpose in life. Now, she stops at nothing to reach her goals and refuses all compromise. She is even prepared go to prison to make her voice heard.

Kitty argues that her struggle is for Maude's sake since she wants her daughter to have more options in life than she has had. This is questionable since their relationship is never close and Kitty often neglects Maude. It is clear that Kitty is very egoistic and therefore treats Maude cruelly at times. She does, nevertheless, have a major impact on her daughter's choices in the end. Kitty's relationship with her husband is also problematic. One reason for this is that they are so different from each other. Furthermore, they make no efforts to communicate and do not try to understand each other. Kitty actually uses the fact that Richard never takes an interest in what she is doing. It is also quite obvious that Richard is afraid of conflicts. He does not want to upset his mother and avoids confrontations with Kitty. The dysfunctional relationship between Kitty and Richard may be a conscious move by Tracy Chevalier to create authenticity. Although many couples at that time shared their lives and thoughts, a distant kind of relationship like this one was probably more common then than it is nowadays.

*Falling Angels* was written only a few years ago but the story is set in the early twentieth century. The novel is realistic and it very well describes the life conditions of the middle class during that time. In the essay I have highlighted some of the episodes which correspond closely to actual events. It is obvious that the author has a considerable knowledge of the Victorian and Edwardian periods, which makes the novel very interesting to read.

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