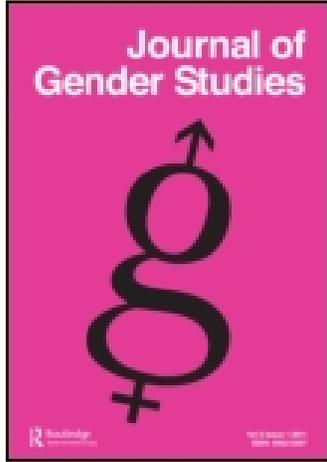


This article was downloaded by: [115.85.25.194]

On: 20 March 2015, At: 02:45

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Journal of Gender Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cjgs20>

Flâneuse or fallen woman? Edwardian femininity and metropolitan space in heritage film

Sarah Edwards^a

^a Department of English Studies , University of Strathclyde , Glasgow, UK

Published online: 05 Jun 2008.

To cite this article: Sarah Edwards (2008) Flâneuse or fallen woman? Edwardian femininity and metropolitan space in heritage film, *Journal of Gender Studies*, 17:2, 117-129, DOI: [10.1080/09589230802008881](https://doi.org/10.1080/09589230802008881)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09589230802008881>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

RESEARCH ARTICLE

***Flâneuse* or fallen woman? Edwardian femininity and metropolitan space in heritage film**

Sarah Edwards*

Department of English Studies, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, UK

(Received 6 June 2006; final version received 13 April 2007)

This article examines Elaine Feinstein's 1984 television dramatisation of Edith Holden's *The Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady* in light of debates about tensions between progressive narratives, and *mise-en-scènes*, in heritage film. I argue that evocations of an Edwardian pastoral idyll relate to late twentieth-century uncertainties about the nostalgic functions of Edwardian women for the 1980s. By analysing the representation of Holden's London years, I observe that tensions between narrative and spectacle produce two subject positions for Holden: *flâneuse* and Victorian fallen woman. The gradual pre-eminence of the latter signals the limits of artistic and sexual autonomy for Edwardian women.

Keywords: *flâneuse*; fallen woman; Edwardian heritage film

Introduction

This article aims to illuminate the nostalgic appeal of constructions of Edwardian femininity in the 1980s. It does so by focusing on one representative figure, Edith Holden, author of *The Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady* (written 1906, published posthumously 1977). I consider why the 1984 television dramatisation of Holden's life employed visual narratives that situated her both as Victorian 'fallen woman' and as female urban spectator or *flâneuse*, when Holden's appeal had been linked to nostalgia for a version of national identity that foregrounds the rural and the Edwardian. During this period, many British 'heritage films' were characterised by similar images of the national past (in, for example, Merchant Ivory's film adaptations of Edwardian literary texts), and were lucrative and popular productions. Holden's bestselling diary spawned multiple lucrative reconstructions of her life: a biography that became the source for the six-hour television drama; and a companion 'book of the series of the book'. Many scholars criticised 'heritage' productions for promoting regressive visions of national identity that commodified the past and mirrored both the entrepreneurial values and the social conservatism of Thatcherism (Hewison 1987, Wollen 1991). But although Holden is cited as an example of these trends, her crucial role in shaping the image and function of Edwardian femininity that dominated these productions' conception of an idealised rural past, has received scant attention (Hewison 1987, p. 30, Samuel 1994, pp. 66, 299).

*Email: sarah.m.edwards@strath.ac.uk

Other scholars have argued that heritage drama displays considerable ambivalence over relationships between class, gender and Englishness. This ambivalence is manifested in a tension between a *mise-en-scène* that depicts a rural, upper-middle-class Englishness and a narrative that questions and undermines this homogenous identity (Higson 2003). The common perception of these dramas as ‘women’s films’ has gendered this debate. Feminist scholars have argued that far from constructing a passive, consumerist gaze (Higson 1993), the focus of these dramas on women’s life stories constructs an identifying female spectator (Monk 1996). These scholars, then, have theorised the construction of Edwardian femininity insofar as it informs the gender politics of the film’s narrative themes. However, they have not analysed the role that Edwardian femininity itself, as signifier, plays in this tension between narrative and spectacle. For example, Hill notes that in *A Room with a View* (1986), the narrative explores a progressive sexual politics when Lucy complains that her lover compares her to paintings. She is shot at mid-distance, surrounded by such objects. But Hill’s subsequent discussion is an analysis of how the objects, as spectacle, reinforce a generalised conservative nostalgia. He does not consider why Lucy, a proto-feminist narrative agent, is photographed as part of this spectacle (Hill 1999, p. 89).

The representation of Holden’s life was marked by anomalies that reveal what was at stake in these representations of Edwardian femininity. Although most heritage films feature ensemble dramas, this dramatisation was dominated by its heroine. Hence, ambivalence over competing meanings at the level of spectacle and narrative were inevitably linked to her. Unlike Merchant Ivory’s favourite author, E.M. Forster, Holden’s work was not a ‘great literary or historical discovery’ (Mabey 1977, p. 14). Therefore, her lack of cultural capital complicated the task of representing her as symbol of past national greatness. The dramatisation then revealed that far from being a country lady, Holden’s family owned a Birmingham paint firm and that she spent the final nine years of her life in central London. Holden’s provincial and urban antecedents created a dichotomy in the film, then, between the narrative of her life and her spectacular role as icon of rural English gentility. Reviewers of the dramatisation consistently registered, but failed to analyse, the unstable viewing position thus generated: the ‘to-ing and fro-ing and flashbacking ... I can’t help wishing it had been organised some other way’ (Last 1984).

I suggest that the presence of these competing discourses indicates that as a heritage drama, the production is a complex inter-text, rooted in local and enterprise concerns as well as in literary, pictorial and cinematic traditions. For example, the Heart of England Tourist Board produced a local guide to ‘Holden country’ and conservation in association with Central Television. Conversely, the companion book was not only another lucrative product: as ‘the story of the series’ I consider it as another layer of narrative that attempts to stabilise the conflicting meanings surrounding Edwardian femininity in the film. Hill claims that the heritage film similarly attempts to ‘invest the Edwardian era with a prelapsarian sense of lost elegance and stability’ (Hill 1999, p. 85). I consider, then, the cultural significance of the uses of the Edwardian period as metaphor for Edenic innocence, the meanings ascribed to the ‘loss’ of the rural, and, by implication, to fallen femininity, which I suggest is symbolised by Holden’s death by drowning – or literal fall – in the river Thames in 1920. Why, though, are narratives of Victorian women employed to represent the fall from Edwardian femininity? Why does a metropolitan (rather than simply an urban) location precipitate this ‘fall’? Does the dramatisation’s narrative about the artistic, metropolitan Holden counteract these images to successfully construct an Edwardian *flâneuse*? And to what extent do the creation, and interpretation, of these images by screenwriters, reviewers and fans, demonstrate the ways that the ‘Edwardian lady’ was mobilised to critique and/or stabilise contemporary configurations of class and gender?

Rural and urban space in heritage film

'Heritage film' is a term that has been applied retrospectively to a group of productions made between the 1970s and the early 1990s including *Heat and Dust* (1982), *Maurice* (1987), and *Howards' End* (1992). Television 'costume dramas' share numerous thematic and formal continuities with these films, and also include *Upstairs, Downstairs* (1967), *The Forsyte Saga* (1967), and *Brideshead Revisited* (1981). These productions celebrate national identity through nostalgic evocation of the Edwardian era using structural and thematic motifs that accumulate through inter-textual references. The narrative frameworks commonly identify the ubiquitous rural setting with a state of prelapsarian innocence. Hence, the Edwardian period is often situated in the film's past, as the scene of the protagonists' childhood or a period of crucial identity formation. Thus, as Higson notes, 'the nostalgic perspective is built into the narrative itself', tending to encourage the viewer's own nostalgia for Edwardianism through their identification with the protagonist (Higson 1996, p. 83). For example, the *mise-en-scène* of *The Go-Between* (1971) was a country house during an Edwardian summer. The film used parallel narrations in which the elderly protagonist identified his sexual innocence with this period. Similarly, the Holden dramatisation employs the flashback technique to represent Holden nostalgically visualising the epiphanic summer of 1906 when she wrote her diary.

Furthermore, the filmic spectacle ostensibly represents the protagonist's nostalgic gaze, though Higson suggests that generally 'the vision of the past rapidly becomes the film's central diegesis ... rather than the partial vision of a character' (Higson 2003, p. 83). However, the Holden dramatisation continually oscillates between these perspectives. Its title sequences contain panoramic shots of a Warwickshire landscape of green fields that in its familiar use of pastoral conventions supersedes Holden's personal vision. As Higson notes, the pastoral mode is deployed to signify 'timelessness rather than historicity' in heritage film and indeed, these shots incorporate an essentialist conception of femininity that identifies woman as part of the natural spectacle: Holden is photographed wearing yellow in a cornfield (Higson 1993, p. 113). However, these dominant photographic conventions of a rural, ahistorical Englishness are challenged by techniques that encourage identification with, and posit as the seat of prelapsarian innocence, a woman from the suburban middle classes in Birmingham. When Holden collects specimens for her diary, we observe the largely suburban landscape memorialised by this work through her eyes. Thus, even the spectacle sometimes reinforces the democratising tendencies of this suburban narrative. This was reflected in the Heart of England tourist guide: formerly known as Shakespeare's county, Warwickshire was now re-branded as *The Countryside of an Edwardian Lady*. Photographs of the area were accompanied by a narrative, which privileged Holden's drawings of them.

The evocation of a suburban setting indicates several unusual features of Holden's nostalgic function. Corner and Harvey have identified three genres of heritage film: aristocratic, rustic and industrial dramas, none of which are appropriate for a consideration of the Holden dramatisation (Corner and Harvey 1991, pp. 52–53). The two latter genres are dominated by working-class life; films in the first category conflate upper-class status with rural living, symbolised by the country house (*Howards' End*, *Brideshead Revisited*). These films only foreground urban settings that represent ancient, elite constructions of Englishness, such as the university settings of Oxford (*Brideshead Revisited*) and Cambridge (*Maurice*).

By contrast, this film delineates the Holdens' commitment to an ethic of municipal service as councillors, socialists and philanthropists in a new industrial city.

As Raphael Samuel observes, heritage culture was not confined to socially conservative visions of English identity but also celebrated ‘municipal nostalgia’ for working and middle-class urban radicalism (Samuel 1994). Many elderly viewers wrote to *TV Times* to describe their nostalgic memories of, for example, the Holdens’ missionary work in the slums. These discourses of local history could encompass proto-feminist imaginings of middle-class Edwardian women. The principal screenwriter, Elaine Feinstein, was already committed to a portrayal of Holden as narrative agent rather than symbolic icon, to a ‘less pretty and stronger’ character (author’s interview with Feinstein in 1998). Critics reacted approvingly to Feinstein’s depictions of Holden exhibiting at the Royal Birmingham Society of Artists. Their remarks often identified the Edwardian period with female intellectual advancement: ‘a strange and never to be repeated era, where ... intelligent women were able to use their talents’ (Marriott 1983, p. 7).

These scenes, however, were meshed with visual images of Holden’s familial and natural sympathies: Holden stands surrounded by her family as her art teachers praise her ‘eye for nature’. Furthermore, producer Patrick Gamble’s decision to construct a 12-part series, one episode representing a calendar month – he felt ‘that the year Edith Holden described in her Nature Notes might be related to the span of her life, its spring, summer, autumn and winter’ – also identified Holden with the cyclical rhythms of nature (Poole 1984, p. 124). By thus fusing a narrative of a progressive, middle-class suburban environment with images of rural, ahistorical Englishness, the drama successfully naturalised Holden’s brand of Edwardian femininity. The ‘Edwardian Lady’ became an icon of Englishness that embodied Middle England’s reforming zeal, which reached its zenith in the Edwardian period.

In 1911, Holden married a sculptor, Ernest Smith and moved to London, where she remained until her death in 1920. Smith was the assistant to Countess Feodora Gleichen, while Holden pursued a children’s book-illustrating career. The representation of her relationship to the metropolis entails a violent disruption of this discourse of Edwardian femininity. Her wedding scene conflates three shifts in Holden’s identity. The move from innocence to sexual experience is indicated as Holden is passed from father to husband; her father’s plea, ‘take care of her, she’s very precious’ indicates the move from family protection in Birmingham to London; and the end of the Edwardian age is signalled by a new structuring device. The London episodes (September–December) are introduced by titles announcing the date and location: for example, ‘1911. London’. This structure replicates constructions of the Edwardian age as a place of prelapsarian rural innocence and timelessness, now broken by sexual awareness, metropolitan existence and historicity.

London, unlike Birmingham, has a representational history that situates it as a world city. Journalists frequently contrasted Holden’s ‘sharing, loving and close-knit family life’ with the ‘teeming city’ of London, echoing numerous past and contemporary descriptions of London as a locus of modernity, alienation and cosmopolitanism (Morley 1980, p. 9, Poole 1984, p. 102). In Edwardian heritage drama, there are few representations of middle-class women in the metropolis. Where it features as a setting, such as in *Upstairs Downstairs*, women are usually located within familial or organisational structures that restrict their public presence to appropriate zones. However, the final episodes of the Holden dramatisation are unique in depicting a woman cast adrift from the Edwardian lifestyle that it helped to popularise. At the narrative level, Holden’s first days in London emphasise her bewilderment at the absence of middle-class provincial rituals. When Ernest proposes sherry at teatime, she exclaims ‘you have no morality at all’. Their flat in Cheyne Walk, once home to Pre-Raphaelite artists, and described by her sister Effie as ‘bohemian’, is the antithesis of middle-class morality. Holden is soon in fragile health, and

complains to Ernest that she feels isolated and claustrophobic, the ‘walls pressing in on her’. The psychosomatic connection with her location is indicated by Ernest’s response: ‘I want you to feel at home in London’. The next section considers the visual strategies that are employed to make Edwardian femininity and metropolitan experience antithetical to each other.

The *flâneur*

The *flâneur* is a theorisation of male urban spectatorship, especially associated with metropolitan experience. In the literature of modernity, the quintessential *flâneur* is Charles Baudelaire as the anonymous, aimless walker in nineteenth-century Paris, observing and recording the ephemeral events and brief encounters of the modern city. Consequently, the *flâneur*’s gaze has been theorised as panoramic and scopophilic, signalling possession of, yet distance from, the ‘teeming city’ (Pollock 1988). The *flâneur* has been imagined as the gaze of anthropology, of imperialism, of the omniscient narrator, of the consumer, who objectifies and categorises both the human and non-human components of the urban landscape (Wolff 1985, Wilson 1992, Nord 1996). In the *flâneur*’s texts, urban woman is *passante* or ‘passing woman’. In Baudelaire’s 1860 poem, ‘A une passante’, woman’s isolated presence in urban space inevitably constitutes her as erotic spectacle, tinged with misfortune and immorality – ‘Full, slim, and /grand /In mourning and majestic grief, passed down /A woman’ – for a female ‘streetwalker’, who abandons the domestic sphere for unstructured roaming, is traditionally a prostitute (Campbell 1952, p. 161). Wilson, however, acutely observes that the *flâneur* is less a description of actual masculine experience than a subject position of threatened authority. This *flâneur* is ambivalent about women’s increased visibility in urban space following the nineteenth-century development of zones that were deemed respectable, such as department stores, and his representations attempt to contain women as ‘petrified, fixed sexual objects’ (Wilson 1992).

It is noteworthy that accounts of both the ‘ambivalent’ and the ‘consumerist’ nature of the *flâneur*’s gaze echo, respectively, criticisms of heritage film’s tensions between progressive narrative and spectacle, and its use of spectacle to represent the past through a collection of objects or culturally resonant images. I deploy this model of *flânerie* as a starting-point for theorising the gaze of late twentieth-century heritage film: specifically the nature of the anxieties about narratives of Edwardian femininity and metropolitan space that its modes of filming Holden reveal, and the use of spectacle for stabilising this relationship. I then consider whether competing pro-feminist narrative discourses ever constitute Holden as *flâneuse*. In his 1863 essay on *flânerie*, Baudelaire characterised the *flâneur* as a ‘Painter of Modern Life’. Holden’s iconic status was founded on her paintings of Edwardian suburban life, so could her filmic iconography also contain the role of painter of metropolitan life? The dramatisation deviated from heritage film’s traditional modes of filming in several ways. It was apparently an example of the heritage ‘women’s film’, with its ‘central romance plot ... emphasis on the domestic’ (Higson 2003, p. 23). Yet it frequently constructed Holden as the object of an erotic gaze. In the London episodes this eroticisation of Holden intensified, as the number of close-ups increased. Higson has noted that heritage films are usually characterised by long and medium shots that emphasise setting (Higson 2003, p. 172). Hill similarly observes a ‘pictorial rather than dramatic use of visual techniques ... which characteristically exceed narrative or expressive requirements’ (Hill 1999, p. 80).

However, scenes of Holden’s nights in London combine extensive use of close-ups with evocations of specific pictorial discourses in long takes that undoubtedly exceed

narrative requirements. She is frequently photographed with the characteristic tresses and pallid complexion of a Pre-Raphaelite model. The implications of using this representational style with these filming techniques are twofold. First, the introduction of lengthy takes of Pre-Raphaelite images of illness and urban isolation within the London context emphasise the connection between Holden's unhappiness and her location.¹ Secondly, the extensive close-ups mirror the Pre-Raphaelite positioning of woman as erotic spectacle and invite a voyeuristic, even sadistic, consumption of Holden's suffering. This gaze constructs Holden as *passante*.

Passante or flâneuse?

The implicit construction of Holden as *passante* threatens to undermine the narrative element of the film that reconstructed her subjectivity. Feminist critics have attempted to locate the *passante's* subjectivity to form a model of female urban spectatorship, and I propose that the proto-feminist narrative discourses attempt the same. However, the *flâneuse* is a tentative and problematic figure. She cannot simply replicate the *flâneur's* sense of entitlement to urban roaming, or his scopic gaze, as she is constantly liable to be reconstituted as sexual object herself. Even the essential aimlessness of *flânerie* is modified by her awareness of physical danger and a sense of trespass, due to shifting but ever-present prohibitions on women's occupation of urban space. According to Bowlby, then, the *flâneuse's* texts are disruptive, as they problematise normative male perspectives (Bowlby 1992); Nord similarly claims she is an inherently transgressive Figure (Nord 1996).

Yet a representation of Holden as transgressive *flâneuse* would be as threatening to her role as Edwardian Lady, as the image of *passante*. Instead, the drama constructs a metropolitan gaze for Holden that I will term 'disoriented *flâneuse*'. Unlike the *flâneur*, she cannot see London as a panoramic whole, nor construct an identity in relation to it. However, Holden's street walking does disrupt this familiar perspective to provide instead the gaze of the vulnerable woman walker, whose aimless wandering signals her displacement from familial and municipal structures. Unusual close-ups of material objects such as heavy turnstiles indicate that cities were not designed for small women; series of panoramic mid-shots of sky and street convey Holden's isolation in a vast urban landscape. The use of flashback increases to produce fragmented scenes dominated by Holden's memories. While reading her diary, Holden's memories of rural scenes from 1906 are superimposed and occupy two minutes of a three-minute scene. Despite living in London for nine years, then, Holden still constructs her identity in relation to her Edwardian past.²

These structures inevitably limit the reconstruction of Holden's artistic vision. The tension between narrative and spectacle is heightened in scenes that attempt to depict Holden as metropolitan female artist. For example, one scene that depicts Holden as Pre-Raphaelite art object is immediately preceded by a book launch that foregrounds her artistic gaze. In the Birmingham episodes, however, I suggest that Holden's diary bridges these opposite subject positions to successfully constitute her as another, hitherto neglected, type of *flâneuse*: suburban artist. Thomas has observed that *flânerie* was possible for women in enclosed, semi-public urban areas such as parks that mirrored domestic structures (Thomas 2006). Although the 'private', female-centred, semi-rural suburb has often been contrasted with the male, public, urban sphere, Holden's use of sub-urban space re-directs attention to its urban affiliations. These episodes are structured around Holden's oscillation between the private space of home and her walking and

cycling around suburban lanes, where she randomly observes and records local phenomena for her diary. These spaces are coded as ‘public’ by anonymous encounters with other walkers and by panoramic, light-filled shots that contrast with muted interiors.

However, the limits of *flânerie* for Holden are also signalled by filmic structures. She is often photographed in mid shots by large windows and mirrors, which reflect the bright, spacious exteriors while simultaneously framing her. This twin imagery of liberation and enclosure recurs in constructions of the Edwardian period. Pippa Guard, the televisual Holden, in an interview for a woman’s magazine, initially suggested that Edwardian women possessed greater autonomy than contemporary women: they were ‘becoming educated and liberated ... and could make their own decisions about what liberation meant’. By contrast, apparently dictatorial post-modern media are in reality characterised by a lack of stable meaning and certainty: ‘there was no television and newspapers telling them how a liberated woman should behave’. Guard then characterises Holden’s move to London by loss of this ‘liberation’ – ‘she roamed the countryside freely and then gave it all up to marry’. The exclusion of the possibility of ‘free’ metropolitan roaming from Guard’s portrait of Holden indicates the limits of Edwardian women’s ‘liberation’. As LeMahieu notes, nostalgia often functions by justifying, but also diluting, contemporary feminism (LeMahieu 1990, p. 249). Holden as artist/diarist merely extends her domestic role as chronicler of her environment and is available for modest eroticisation as angel of the suburban house, framed in its windows. The fact that Holden’s ‘roaming’ was largely undertaken in a Birmingham suburb does not problematise Guard’s image, as sub-urbia is also imagined as a rural enclosed space. This is epitomised by Holden’s suburban – or Edenic – garden. Guard then recommends her account of Holden as a contemporary feminine identity, when she claims Holden ‘was the sort of woman most of us could identify with’ (McCormack 1984, pp. 12–13).

Edwardian woman’s link to domestic and rural subjects means that the metropolitan artist *flâneuse* is untenable. Although Countess Gleichen discourses on the impossibility of having children when one has ‘to fight’ as a woman artist, Holden’s anguished smile indicates that she thinks more of her middle-aged barren state than of her artwork; and this is underscored by the placing of this scene in autumnal ‘October’. This traditional linking of woman’s life and work to natural cycles conflates the natural with both the Edwardian and the prelapsarian. The vocabulary employed by the companion book invokes both contexts through nostalgic reference to Holden’s Edwardian environment and its negation in London: ‘when most of London had hurried home for the night ... she loved to discover unspoilt pockets of country in the teeming city ... the trodden grass and planned avenues of trees seemed more precious to her, because they grew in town’ (Poole 1984, pp. 102–103). Although Holden thus gravitates towards the metropolitan park, a space for *flânerie*, Poole’s narrative marks its fallen state. Even her short description embodies a narrative progression from an ‘unspoilt’ state (conflated with the rural) to a ruined (‘trodden’) and artificial (‘planned’) existence. Similarly, an article on the likely conservation benefits of the dramatisation bemoaned that ‘wildlife parks’ were no substitute for children who had ‘never seen flowers’ (Bonner 1984, no p.n.). Both Holden’s metropolitan existence and the 1980s are imagined as life after the fall and banishment from the garden, characterised by decline and sterility.

The postlapsarian theme of sexual knowledge is also invoked to condemn Holden’s aspirations as metropolitan artist. The drama depicts Holden copying specimens at Kew Gardens. In the companion book, Poole employs a sensual vocabulary to describe Holden’s productive relation to these ‘exotic palms and tropical fruits’. This garden is ‘warm, and smelt damply of earth, their [the plants’] light was greenish and mysterious’,

and ‘she found them exciting after the tame English species she had patiently copied’. This brief description constructs an entirely new relationship between Holden and the natural world. In the metropolitan botanical garden, neither nature nor Holden is ‘tame’ and ‘patient’, as both were in the prelapsarian Edwardian garden (Poole 1984, p. 114). The implicit link between forbidden fruit and sexual temptation is strengthened by its place in the narrative, for this scene is the prelude to Holden’s death.

Fallen woman?

Elaine Feinstein claimed that director Dirk Campbell’s vision of Holden’s symbolic function was drawn from a more historically specific context: from Victorian archetypes of femininity, or ‘ethereal Pre-Raphaelite beauty’ (author’s interview with Feinstein in 1998). His deployment of these Victorian motifs ensures that the image of sexualised *passante* increasingly merges with discourses of the explicitly sexual ‘fallen’ woman.³ The narrative of Victorian fallenness meshes with the Edenic framework, while also offering images from a contiguous and culturally familiar era that resonated with several aspects of Holden’s life. Like Holden and Eve, the fallen woman led a life of ‘rural’ innocence until she responded to sexual temptation. In Victorian literature and painting, this betrayal often caused a flight to London.⁴ At a symbolic level, the opposition between rural innocence and urban sin was often marked by a visual contrast of darkness and light.⁵ Indeed, ‘September’ is organised around oppositions between the honeymoon locations of rural, sunlit Scotland, and London scenes shot in evening darkness.

The iconography of the Victorian fallen woman also constructed a range of relationships to the urban environment. These relationships were determined by the fallen woman’s moral status, whether she was perceived as deserted victim or sexual rebel. The production team draw on both conceptions of female character to illuminate Holden’s relationship to the metropolis. In the companion book’s narrative, Ernest practically abandons Holden: ‘light-hearted excursions . . . had somehow slipped away, now she was married’; he was ‘forced to work long hours in the studio . . . but she missed his company’ (Poole 1984, pp. 105–106). However, an alternative narrative assigns Holden greater responsibility for her fate. Ernest’s youth and apprentice status are repeatedly emphasised in film and book, hinting that Holden has chosen passion over prudence. The theme of familial loyalty is invoked to condemn the agency Holden has demonstrated by choosing between country and city, family and lover. Thus when Ernest, like a callous lover, turns away from her pleadings to leave, Holden cries, ‘mother, tell me what to do. Have you deserted me because I left father?’

In other heritage dramas of the 1980s, the London *passante* appeared frequently in Victorian adaptations: Nancy in *Oliver Twist* (1985) and Martha in *David Copperfield* (1986). Why, then, was a fallen state identified with the Victorian period? It is noteworthy that Holden’s narrative of decline was written and filmed in 1982–83, when Margaret Thatcher was similarly lamenting Britain’s apparently ‘irreversible’ decline and first recommended the resurrection of ‘Victorian Values’ to counteract it. Thatcher’s narrative of Victorian history idealised many images associated with Holden and Edwardian culture, including ‘traditional’ family and the self-made provincial entrepreneur. She similarly identified the Victorian era with ‘stability’ and ‘primal bliss’ (Samuel 1992, p. 18). However, Thatcher had few affinities with the public service ethic or the conservation efforts that informed representations of Holden. Furthermore, Victorian women were invoked in negative opposition to ‘liberated’ Edwardian femininity: Guard claimed Holden’s generation were ‘emerging from the Victorian yoke’ (McCormack

1984, pp. 12–13). An awareness of Victorian societal inequalities, then, means that considerable scepticism and dissent about Thatcher's brand of national identity can be inferred within this heritage culture. Instead, the Edwardian era was represented as the locus of both tradition and progress.

In the film, then, Holden's transgression of Edwardian values is indicated as narrative and spectacle gradually fuse to locate her as Victorian fallen woman. Holden's decision to move to London is reduced to sexual motivations that limit her characterisation to abandoned victim or defiant lover. The next section considers how the manner of Holden's death informs these representations and how and why it forecloses attempts to reconstruct her as Edwardian *flâneuse*.

Women, suicide and the Thames

Holden drowned in the River Thames in 1920. Members of Holden's family, friends and latter-day fans remain divided over whether her death was an accident or suicide. The screenwriters' reconstruction of Holden's death is based on the coroner's report, which recorded a verdict of 'found drowned'. This, however, was a common euphemism for female suicide (Anderson 1987, p. 345). The screenplay invokes this discursive context to highlight the ambiguity of this phrase, when Holden's sister protests 'what does that mean?' It employs several representational contexts to denote female suicide, only to deny their validity at the narrative level. Thus a symbolic visual narrative of the fallen woman's suicide is set against a documentary account based on evidence from Holden's inquest that recorded a verdict of accidental death. Despite the radically different imports of these accounts for Holden's characterisation, though, both narrative and spectacle draw on Victorian representations of fallen female character that are constructed in opposition to the Edwardian ideal. Evocations of setting, point of view and the transformation of symbols ultimately define this ideal through Holden's transgression from it.

The screenwriters construct Holden as victim of a tragic accident through their characterisation of her sisters, who are shocked by the coroner's questions about whether Holden was 'disturbed in her spirits' and claim that the idea of suicide is 'absurd'. However, the film's visual strategies undermine this narrative discourse of accidental death. The symbolism of water shifts as metropolitan images of decline and fall accumulate. Initially water has life-giving connotations. In 'October', Holden smiles by a Warwickshire stream, as she reads from her diary, 'give to me the life I love'. The following scene depicts her wedding. In this context, the current represents life and progress, and the bridge the transition between virginity and marriage.

In the London episodes, however, water assumes deathly connotations and the symbolism of the bridge shifts. Nicoletti notes that the bridge is often perceived as a liminal space between life and death, and Holden's final day is marked by pauses on an unidentified Thames bridge (Nicoletti 2004).⁶ When a woman drowned in the Thames, connotations of suicide were heightened, as this was the traditional climax to the fallen woman's decline. Poole also invokes the Thames as symbol of Holden's decline. A photograph of the river is accompanied by text imaging a 'lonely and afraid' Holden beside it: 'she would stand in a reverie ... it seemed that success, beauty – even love – were sooner or later borne away on the flood' (Poole 1984, pp. 106–107). Poole firmly endorses the verdict of accidental death, and places this passage in the context of Holden's unhappiness at family deaths, seemingly to reinforce prior images of displacement. However, a sequence of images that portrays a depressed Holden musing on drowning and the Thames combines with the film's visual strategies to reinforce suspicions of suicide.

These shifts accomplish the increasing objectification of Holden. The symbolic use of water in earlier episodes serves definite narrative functions. Shots of the couple rowing on a loch are part of a *mise-en-scène* that connotes togetherness, but this is subordinate to the narrative, which features Holden expressing her thoughts about marriage. However, the prelude to, and depiction of, her death represents her ultimate reduction to anonymous *passante*. The final episode expends 20 minutes on the last uneventful hours of Holden's life, which involve only breakfast and a walk to Kew. The constant pauses on bridges serve purely pictorial functions. Although Holden is dressed in contemporary fashion, her relationship to the historical moment of 1920 is absent, as we only view occasional flashbacks to her past. Here, the drama employs the characteristic heritage film technique of privileging spectacle over narrative to dissociate Holden from Edwardian femininity. It does so by its use of Pre-Raphaelite motifs to depict Holden's death.

The association of fallenness, female suicide and the Thames had a substantial literary and pictorial tradition in the Victorian era, and received its 'characteristic formulation' in Pre-Raphaelite painting (Nochlin 1988, p. 57). The Pre-Raphaelites' commitment to both realistic and symbolic detail resulted in many paintings of the fallen woman that eroticised her misery and thus adopted the voyeuristic perspective of the *flâneur*. Several paintings depicted her in the bleak, minutely depicted surroundings of Westminster/Waterloo/Blackfriars Bridge at night.⁷ Bridges also served as framing devices that objectified the ostensible subject as a Magdalen or Eve figure. Similarly, the film's use of bridges extends its earlier deployment of framing devices to locate Holden within Pre-Raphaelite pictorial traditions. So, discourses that reconstructed Holden as Edwardian *flâneuse* are limited by the adoption of narrative structures and imagery that locate her as *passante* and ultimately, as Thames suicide.

Holden's drowning seems influenced by Millais's portrait of Ophelia.⁸ These works appear to reverse the equation of the cityscape with fallenness and night, and thus with Holden's possible suicide. Both depict a prelapsarian spring scene dominated by foliage, sunshine and birds. Yet this naturalism contains a symbolic vocabulary. Both depictions equate femininity with nature, as both women are dressed in green. However, the conjunction of spring with death indicates their unnatural state. Holden's 'fall' into the river is repeated several times in slow motion, allowing the viewer's/*flâneur's* gaze to linger on her suffering body, as the portrait of the dying Ophelia details her beauty.

The final scene of the drama confirms Holden's death as a visual narrative of the fallen woman's progress. A portrait of Holden dissolves to form an image of her framed by a window as she 'returns' to comfort her husband. Holden's image mirrors her appearance in 1906, the year that she wrote the diary before her fateful move to London. She is now a disembodied muse, literally a portrait who comes alive. Holden's death was a necessary penance. The baptismal death by drowning, and the identification of Holden with the Edwardian period, signal her redemption.⁹

But as Holden was a historical individual, this account sanitises and romanticises her death and confirms a suicide narrative that the drama ostensibly seeks to quash. The conception of female character implied by the narrative of fallenness hampers recovery of Holden's metropolitan subjectivity. As Anderson observes, a fall from virtue was organised around a narrative trajectory of weakness, temptation, fall, guilt, punishment (Anderson 1993, p. 7). This 'rhetoric of fallenness' indicated that woman lacked the autonomy of the masculine subject, or *flâneur*. She lacks agency beyond the act of resisting or succumbing to sexual sin. Thereafter, she has 'lost her character' and her life follows a predictable narrative course. Holden's, and the fallen woman's, fall into the river

is a symbolic re-enactment of their sexual fall, and of Eve's original fall. This narrative ultimately destroys the embryonic discourses of Holden as *flâneuse*.

Conclusion

It seems paradoxical that the 'Edwardian Lady' should be discursively linked to fallen women and suicide. Yet it was the inevitable ending to a film whose primary commitment was not to the life story of the historical agent Edith Holden, but to the absorption of her story into a larger cultural narrative that identified the Edwardian period with Eden. Within this schema, woman engenders the fall from innocence, leading to expulsion from the garden. This expulsion is represented so violently, because elements of Holden's life – her abandonment of the suburban garden for the metropolis and an unsuitable man, her mysterious death – threatened to de-stabilise this myth of lost stability.

Holden, then, was a primary site for the ambivalence surrounding the meanings of Edwardian femininity in the 1980s. Tensions between narrative and spectacle in heritage film are heightened in representations of Edwardian women. Traditionally, women are situated uneasily in filmic structures that position them both as narrative agents and as spectacular objects. In a genre where English landscape and identity are foregrounded, woman's symbolic role as embodiment of nation further complicates attempts to portray individual women.

I conclude with an example that demonstrates the appeal of Holden's mediating persona as suburban *flâneuse* both for the politics of heritage and wider culture. In 1987, the *London Evening Standard* depicted another *flâneuse* and provincial businessman's daughter, Margaret Thatcher, entering a Marks and Spencer's store in central London and emerging with 'Edwardian Lady' bedlinen. As Thatcher attempted to feminise her anomalous role as Prime Minister by conflating the governance of the (public) nation with (private) housekeeping, so she softens her panoptical urban gaze with occupations of semi-public, feminised metropolitan space, as a variant of the suburban *flâneuse*. The presence of the camera also contains her. This icon's urban roaming ranged further than Holden's, but remained encircled by images of domesticity (Passmore 1987).

I suggest that Thatcherism's implicit, sometimes explicit, insistence that female individualism should be bounded by familial identities, can partially explain Edwardian women's popularity as 'role models'. The Edwardian era is similarly invested with a 'mediating' role between a repressive past and an occasionally unsettling modernity. Holden, reproduced in affordable Marks and Spencer designs, mobilised a range of progressive environmental, local and women's interests that are not always sufficiently recognised. However, these were absorbed into the overwhelmingly white, Edenic narratives that could not contain Holden's departure to London. The film, and its reception, is a palimpsest of conflicting perceptions, which nonetheless locate Edwardian woman as the site of our own origins.

Notes

1. Holden's hair and apparel resemble Dante Gabriel Rossetti's portraits of Jane Morris, including 'Proserpine' (1873–77) (Marsh 1995, p. 144).
2. A contemporary example of a disoriented *flâneuse* is New Yorker Carrie Bradshaw, when she wanders through Paris, in *Sex and the City* (HBO 2004).
3. A 'fallen woman' had engaged in extra-marital sexual activity. Narratives of fallen women therefore encompassed tales of seduction and the lives of streetwalkers (Anderson 1993).

4. Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 'Found' (1854–81) depicts a country girl against Blackfriars Bridge, symbolising the division between city and country, virginal past and fallen present (Marsh 1995, p. 84).
5. William Holman Hunt's 'The Awakening Conscience' (1853) represents the fallen woman's redemption by a light-filled window (Marsh 1995, p. 83).
6. Cf. Thomas Hood's poem about prostitutes, 'The Bridge of Sighs' (1844).
7. Examples include G.F. Watts, 'Found Drowned' (1848–50), modelled on Hood's poem; H.K. Browne ('Phiz'), 'The River', an illustration for Martha in Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* (1849); in *Oliver Twist* (1838) the prostitute Nancy predicts her death by drowning from London Bridge.
8. John Everett Millais, 'Ophelia' (1852) (Marsh 1995, pp. 136–137).
9. Gates observes that drowning evoked female imagery of tears and childbirth, and a Christian framework of baptism, making this death an appropriate metaphor for the fallen woman's redemption (Gates 1988, p. 135). George Eliot's Maggie Tulliver (*The Mill on the Floss*, 1860) is a disgraced Victorian woman whose death by drowning is imaged as re-birth, a role played by Pippa Guard in a 1978 BBC production. Guard's casting had significant inter-textual resonance, for she had played several Victorian fallen women, including *Maria Marten* (BBC 1980) and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (BBC 1982).

Notes on contributor

Dr Sarah Edwards is Lecturer in English Studies at the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, UK. She completed her doctorate on Edith Holden. Recent publications include a chapter in Ann Kaloski *et al.* (eds) *The Feminist Seventies* (2003), and articles in *Life Writing* and *The Journal of Popular Culture*. She is writing a book about Edwardian revivalism and nostalgia in the late twentieth century.

References

- Anderson, A., 1993. *Tainted souls and painted faces: the rhetoric of fallenness in Victorian culture*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Anderson, O., 1987. *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Bonner, N., 1984. Pippa's new serial will wake us up. *Northampton Chronicle and Echo*, 24 February.
- Bowlby, R., 1992. Walking, women and writing: Virginia Woolf as *flâneuse*. In: I. Armstrong, ed. *New feminist discourses: critical essays on theories and texts*. London: Routledge.
- Campbell, R., 1952. *Poems of Baudelaire*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Corner, J. and Harvey, S., 1991. Mediating tradition and modernity: the heritage/enterprise couplet. In: J. Corner and S. Harvey, eds. *Enterprise and heritage: crosscurrents of national culture*. London: Routledge.
- Feinstein, E. and Campbell, D., 1984. *The country diary of an Edwardian lady*. Central Television.
- Gates, B.T., 1988. *Victorian suicide: mad crimes and sad histories*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Hewison, R., 1987. *The heritage industry: Britain in a climate of decline*. London: Methuen.
- Higson, A., 1993. Re-presenting the national past: nostalgia and pastiche in the heritage film. In: L. Friedman, ed. *British cinema and Thatcherism*. London: University College.
- Higson, A., 2003. *English heritage, English cinema: costume drama since 1980*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hill, J., 1999. *British cinema in the 1980s: issues and themes*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Last, R., 1984. Gilding the lily. *Daily Telegraph*, 1 March.
- LeMahieu, D.L., 1990. Imagined contemporaries: cinematic and televised dramas about the Edwardians in Great Britain and the United States, 1967–1985. *Historical journal of film, radio and television*, 10 (3), 243–256.
- Mabey, R., 1977. A fastidious pen. *The Times*, 16 June, 14.
- Marriott, V., 1983. Did Edith fall or was she pushed? *Oldham Chronicle*, 21 July, 7.
- Marsh, J., 1995. *Pre-Raphaelite women*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- McCormack, M., 1984. The country diary of an Edwardian lady. *Annabel*, March, 12–13.
- Monk, C., 1996–97. The heritage film and gendered spectatorship. *Close up: the electronic journal of British cinema*, 1. Available from: <http://www.shu.ac.uk/services/lc/closeup>.

- Morley, J., 1980. Who was that Edwardian lady? *Daily Express*, 5 September, 9.
- Nicoletti, L.J., 2004. Downward mobility: Victorian women, suicide, and London's 'Bridge of Sighs'. *Literary London: interdisciplinary studies in the representation of London*, 2 (1). Available from: <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal>.
- Nochlin, L., 1988. *Women, art and power and other essays*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Nord, D.E., 1996. *Walking the Victorian streets: women, representation and the city*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Passmore, J., 1987. Maggie shops early with a £600 spree. *London Evening Standard*.
- Pollock, G., 1988. Modernity and the spaces of femininity. In: *Vision and difference: femininity, feminism and the histories of art*. London: Routledge, 50–90.
- Poole, J., 1984. *The country diary companion: the story of the Central Independent Television series*. Exeter: Webb and Bower.
- Samuel, R., 1992. Mrs Thatcher's return to Victorian values. *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 78, 9–29.
- Samuel, R., 1994. *Theatres of memory: past and present in contemporary culture, vol. one*. London: Verso.
- Thomas, G.M., 2006. Women in public: the displays of femininity in the parks of Paris. In: A. D'Souza and T. McDonough, eds. *The invisible flâneuse? Gender, public space and visual culture in nineteenth-century Paris*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Wilson, E., 1992. The invisible flâneur. *New left review*, I (91). Available from: <http://newleftreview.org>
- Wolff, J., 1985. The invisible flâneuse: women and the literature of modernity. *Theory, culture and society*, 2 (3), 37–46.
- Wollen, T., 1991. Over our shoulders: nostalgic screen fictions for the 1980s. In: J. Corner and S. Harvey, eds. *Enterprise and heritage: crosscurrents of national culture*. London: Routledge.