

The Comedy of Manners and Character

- Critics have always classified *The Little Ottleys* as a Comedy of Manners, yet none have reflected on their choice of categorisation. Theatrical genre reflects several stylistic choices including the profusion of dialogue.

- Dialogue is vital to Levenson's humour, but also to her presentation of characters and their inner selves. They are revealed purely through speech and action, rather than via a mediating narrator, and are profoundly influenced by experience and societal pressures (much like in a play). Their identities are never static, but constantly evolving.

- Levenson satirises the foibles of human nature: Bruce, Lady Cannon and Madame Frabelle

“Let the poor child be called Asparagus if he wishes it, and let him feel he has got his own way.”

superficially appear to be exaggerated comic creations, yet all three are recognisable. None are malicious, merely egocentric, melodramatic and eccentric. The novels take a light view of human faults.

- Levenson's portrait of Edith considers the strain on the individual from social and cultural pressures. Encourages putting personal fulfilment before social responsibility.

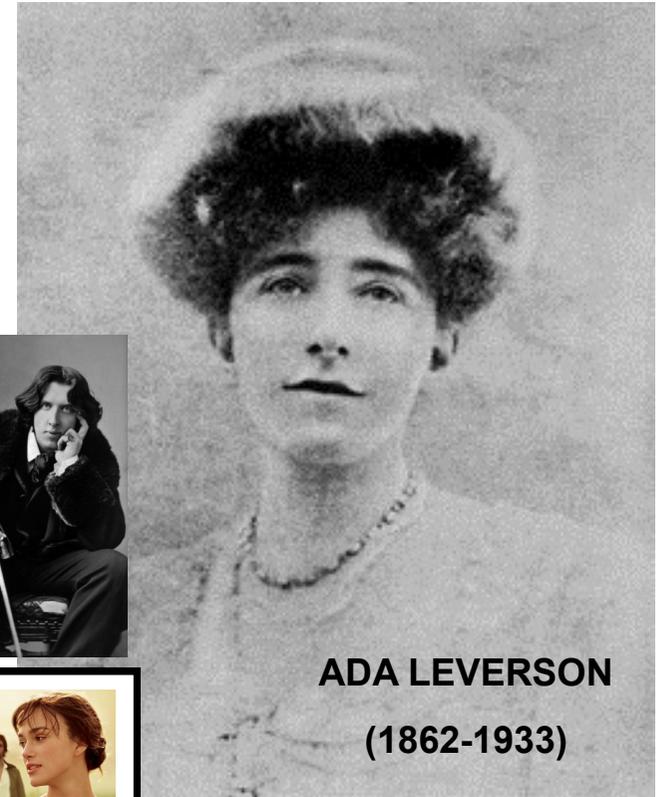


Changing the Subject: Genre and *The Little Ottleys*

Who?

- Widely known as Wilde's friend the 'Sphinx'.

- A writer in her own right: wrote short stories and parodies of the decadents for *The Yellow Book* and *Punch* in the 1890s, turned her hand to journalism at the turn of the century, and finally became a successful novelist in the early twentieth century.



ADA LEVERSON
(1862-1933)

The Marriage Problem Novel and Romantic Relationships

- Ellen Moers argues that, in *Pamela*, Richardson 'made novel synonymous with love story'. That legacy can still be seen today (chic lit etc).

- 3 traditional fictional representations of marriage:

- 'the courtship plot'
- 'the comic wedlock plot'
- 'the tragic wedlock plot'

- Late 19th century sees a vogue for problematizing the social institution of marriage and the way that it has been represented in fiction (Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, James' *The Golden Bowl*).

- The trilogy can be viewed as a series of Marriage Problem Novels which subvert the traditional tropes of the Romance genre and critique the social and literary ideal of wedlock. Instead of ending with happy marriages, they pick up where Victorian novels would have finished.

- Biographical context of Levenson's own marriage is a minor consideration.

- None of the couples in the novels are happily married: Edith + Bruce, Hyacinth + Cecil, Sir Charles + Lady Canon.

- Giving expression to marginalised voices (lesbian, Anne Yeo) further problematizes the ideal of 'love marriages'.



Why?

- Transitional literature:

Angel in the House — New Woman
Victorian — Edwardian
Decadent — Modernist

- Hybrid genre - viewing the novels through the lenses of different genres yield new interpretations previous critics have missed.



The Novel of Manners and Society

- Milne: Novels of Manners typically depict 'the effect wrought by time and circumstance upon a society'. They are less concerned with character than their theatrical counterparts. Austen is a prime example of the genre, which tends to focus on the upper echelons of society.

- This is particularly apt for Edwardian/Georgian era. Class mobility was increasing, the aristocracy declining, suffrage brought about new rights for women, and WW1 changed everything. It was a society in transition. The trilogy has often been criticised for being too 'of their time', yet I believe this is one of their most important strengths.

“When you've been up against it, and seen life and death pretty close, you realise what utter rot it is to live so much for the world”

- Like Edith Wharton in *House of Mirth*, Levenson examines the relationship between 'manners' and morals, criticising the way in which these codes of politeness do not encourage ethical behaviour but instead urge people to hide their misdemeanours. Takes a harsh view of artificiality.

- WW1 has a huge effect on the characters in *Love at Second Sight*. It brings home the brevity of life and the importance of living, compelling people to act in their own best interests.



The Little Ottleys Trilogy

- Comprises of *Love's Shadow* (1908), *Tenterhooks* (1912), and *Love at Second Sight* (1916).

- The three novels follow the lives of Edith and Bruce Ottley, charting the 'long deterioration' of their marriage (Beauman).

- Levenson's novels have received far less critical attention than her decadent parodies and biographical connections to Wilde. Seen not to fit comfortably into any one tradition and therefore ignored.

