CHAPTER 6

BENNETT as REALIST

Thus far we have seen man enclosed within the historical forces and Victorian philistinism. In the interior, man is living in the provincial, complacent, narrow and hypocritical atmosphere, aspiring towards the unknown world: Richard Larch goes to London, Anna to 'Isle of Man', Sophia to Paris, Edwin to London, Hilda Lessways to Brighton, Mrs Earlforward to Madame Tussauds, in pursuit of romance. And, further, although they must aspire for romance, beauty, grandeur, bright career, experience, transcending provincial limitations, it is far from free to do so in their own way; it is because the prevailing philistinism and parental authority set strict bounds to the individual's freedom. Nevertheless, despite all this Bennett's protagonist does rebel fundamentally against his limitations with an instinct for experience, learning and knowledge of the world without and the world within. The Five Towns region with its familiar boundaries serves as the centre of the known world, from where man aspires for the unknown, moves from the province to the capital, finally from the bounded provincialism to the unbounded cosmopolitanism. For a provincial philistine and to his complacent temperament it means a 'stop', or a challenge at man's own peril and subsequently a moral nemesis. But to Bennett's men and women it is a challenge, a frontier to be crossed in order to discover 'What Life Is'—a mystery made known only when a large portion of life has been lived. And, although this mystery does not become absolutely unmysterious, entirely known
or fully explained it does set man in the process of learning — an epistemological possibility of growth, maturity, realization and understanding. Therefore, in Bennett's existential protagonists, as in real life there is every manifestation of the romantic spirit: they are ill content with the known, the attainable and their urge always is to break bounds, however unattainable the aspirations may be.

In this quest, the limits that are set on the provincial man by the prevailing complacency and philistinism are no less than the limits set on man by the eighteenth-century classicism or determinism, heredity and environment in the philosophic (pessimistic) naturalists of the late nineteenth century. In a way, therefore, Bennett's romance is a revolt against philistinism, as is romanticism against classicism. In his deliberate break with the idealistic traditions, in pursuance of individual dreams, Bennett does not adhere to any trodden ideology. Romance, to him, is a broader and healthy attitude towards life; individuals with an inborn romantic urge assert this attitude differently, but this tendency in Bennett's men and women is natural and they take it for granted. This tendency is also manifest in individual's dissatisfaction with static dogmas, rigidity and tautology of religion, codes of conduct and parental authority. Rejection of these codes is the mark of Bennett's romantic spirit.

True, Bennett knows that Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, and, indeed, all romantic writers say Flaubert, Balzac, Dostoevsky, Hardy and Howells, believe that there are fundamental universal
laws of human nature, but even so they can only be discovered in individual's personal manifestations. Bennett's aim is to see life through the point of view of one who lives it or experiences it. The manifestation comes through a gradual process of knowing, learning, experiencing and realizing 'What Life Is'. Absolute knowledge, however, is not possible, but Bennett makes an assessment of individual's sensibility. In him this is a measure of man's capacity to learn in his limited sphere, through pleasure and pain, success or failure, rebellion or accommodation, rejection or acceptance of circumstances of life. This is, again, an existential viewpoint: only a man truly alive can do it. And this with Bennett's— as in his own life and experience—individuals, who have latent capacity for passionate feeling and romance, and who at the same time have enough of the provincial element of restraint, is significant. What is characteristic of Bennett's romanticism is that in him emotion does not become 'emotionalism' or sentiment degenerated to 'sentimentalism', or sex to a naturalist's obscenity.

This chapter underlines the main directions in which the romantic spirit is set out to explore the possibilities of experience, learning, knowledge, understanding, awareness, interestingness in life, mysteries, wonders, adventure, beauty and grandeur. A sum total of these components of life reveals Bennett's realism of life. Here, we may reconsider the format of Bennett's epistemology: it involves the existence of a historical world, of the past and the present of the Five Towns,
and its society conditioned by Victorian philistinism. In part, then, Bennett's men and women are naturalistic beings because of religious and family compulsions and being motivated by complacent, philistine determinism. Their rebellion or a romantic escape is the starting point of their independence, self-help, experience, learning, knowing and realizing 'What Life Is'.

To make our perceptions more comprehensive it seems worthwhile to allude to an exponent of 'epistemology'. Nelson Smith, in his article "Dynamics of Fictional World" has, very succinctly defined some of the terms we have been using — romance, naturalism, realism, and epistemology. His distinction between "fictional world" (a shaped, made up world of characters and mimetic devices) and the "real world" (a world established by real life meaning, with people and their destinies), corresponds to our distinction between 'literary realism' and 'realism in life'. Secondly, although, our present premise does not allow us to apply his terminology — ontology, logic and axiology — however, in view of Bennett's commitments to history, environment, persons, places, naturalism, romance and realism, some correspondence may be identified with Smith's 'epistemology'. "Ontology will consider the persons, objects and events of the world; epistemology will study the way given persons in the world know the objects, events and other persons; the logic will determine how the objects, persons and events are combined in the world; and the axiology will discuss the general value centres of the fictional world." In Smith's
'dynamics', the terms 'naturalistic' and 'realistic' "define the ontology of the world which they evoke."

Such an epistemology stresses in Bennett, not only on acquiring knowledge of the outside, external world but also of the inner world of man's experience. This knowledge is necessary for purposeful and authentic living. In Bennett, a learning man is subjected to various complications, of family, domesticity, parental authority and discipline, religion, love, marriage, circumstances and personal inclinations. Through such complications Bennett 'validates' and 'authenticates' his epistemological realism. The chief strength and originality of Bennett's realism lies in man's learning while passing through the complexities of life that make him better than what he is. "The complications of real life", Frank Norris says, "are infinitely better stronger and more original than anything you can make up."

We may now, therefore, see this epistemological realism in the novels under consideration.

In *Anna of the Five Towns*, the epistemology corresponds to Anna's development, growth and maturity in various phases of her life: her domesticity and humiliations of her miser father, her devotion to Sunday school services, her revival meetings, her sympathy with Willie Price, her love, marriage and business with Henry Mynors. At first we are made aware of her dependence on her father and his authoritarian control over her. Then Anna's limitations, her individual and emotional responses are placed in direct opposition to her religious and moral preoccupations.
Because of her excessive religiosity she cannot understand what she believes. "Enthralled by austere traditions and that stern conscience of hers, she had never permitted herself to dream of the possibility of an escape from the parental servitude. She had never looked beyond the horizons of her present world, but had sought spiritual satisfaction in the ideas of duty and sacrifice" (p.36). Therefore the range of her knowledge is limited. "She has no way of realizing the large possibilities that love and money might seem to offer her." On her twenty-first birthday when she is given to understand that she inherits a legacy (£ 50,000) from her mother who had died years earlier, Anna feels "no elation or ferment of any kind; she had not begun to realize the significance of what had occurred" (pp.43-44). This is because Anna has "seen almost nothing of social life" (p.91).

In the first chapter, "The Kindling of Love", Anna is subjected to romantic experience. She is loved by two men, Henry Mynors and Willie Price. Anna's conscience is stirred to make a decision and start her life and career. Ironically, Anna is 'the Ann of the Five Towns' so her decision of marriage is guided by her narrow vision of life, religion, love, respectability and social gradation. "In the course of the novel we see her stirring into intellectual and emotional awakening", through her romantic adventure, jealousy, knowledge of her own ignorance and realities of her experience.
The "kindling of love" becomes manifest at "The Sewing Meeting" which Anna goes to attend. Henry "talked gaily with Beatrice and Mrs Banks; the group was a centre of animation. Anna envied their ease of manner, their smooth and sparkling flow of conversation. She had the sensation of feeling vulgar, clumsy, tongue-tied; Mynors and Beatrice possessed something which she would never possess" (p.102). That is to say, Anna is ignorant in matters of love. She does not understand, in fact, what happens to her. After the meeting they "walked home almost in silence... she experienced no new sensation. She felt as she had felt on the way down, except that she was sorely perturbed" (p.149). But Henry is a man of the world, has knowledge of its affairs and can give practical shape to his religious convictions.

He knew what he wanted, and confidently asked for it, approaching God with humility but with self-respect. The atmosphere became suddenly fervent, emotional, and devout. Here was lofty endeavour, idealism, a burning spirituality; Anna felt, as she had often felt before, but more acutely now, that she existed only on the fringe of the Methodist society. She had not been converted; technically she was a lost creature: the converted knew it, and in some subtle way their bearing to her and others in her case, always showed that they knew it (p.57).

Anna is attracted by his appearances. Mynors "was perfect that night; the reality of him exceeded her dreamy meditations... she could scarcely believe that from the enticements of a thousand women this paragon had been preserved for her." "Like most of us, she lacked the high courage to grasp happiness boldly... she had not learnt that nothing is too good to be true" (p. 57). Not only romance, there are other "activities of which she was
completely ignorant and would always be completely ignorant."
All such ignorance "bewildered her and gave her a feeling of its unreality" and "a disturbing experience" (p.109). Epistemologically Anna becomes aware of her own ignorance and sets on a path of learning by experience.

In the chapter "The Isle" we find significant changes in Anna, as a result of her romantic experience. During their visit they spend many hours together and return "in a state of deep intimacy" (p.166). Anna starts realizing that "for more than a week she had been 'leading a new life' (p.97) and "felt that events had lifted her to a higher plane than that of love-making. She was filled with the proud satisfaction of a duty accomplished" (p.173). She feels happy because her love affair with Henry offers her an opportunity to escape her father's tyranny, discipline, monotony, austerity, and melancholy of her existence. Life becomes "sweet and beautiful of its kind, and she recalled, with a sort of rapture, hours of companionship... Nothing was ugly nor mean. Beauty was everywhere, in everything" (p.157). Anna is "brave now... she alone had the sagacity to perceive" (p.162). "Never before had she felt so proud, elated and boisterous. Never had the blood so wildly danced in her veins" (p.163). But what is crucial is that Anna must stay between tradition and her individual experience, between Victorian conventions and beliefs accumulated by the generations, on the one hand, and the testimony of her own reactions after her revival meeting and love episode, on the other.
After this experience she is warned by her instincts. "In a flash of insight she perceived . . . her fortitude, her compassion, that had fanned the flame" (p.174). She becomes aware of her "capacity and reliability" (p.17). She is content. She "wished for nothing better than this apparent freedom and irresponsible dalliance. She felt that if Mynors were to be tender, sentimental, and serious, she would become wretchedly self-conscious" (pp.165-66). The next meetings bring an alteration in Anna's feelings for Henry. He "kissed her lovingly. But, beneath the feeling of a reassurance, which by superior force he had imposed on her, there lay a feeling that she was treated like a frightened child who must be tranquillized in the night" (p.187). Anna realizes that she is more than submissive to Henry. And, this means to her a father like authority and control over her. She is not actually free from discipline. The very thought of marriage to Henry shatters her romance.

Her second thought often goes to Willie Price, whom she actually loves. Her first gesture that indicates her kindness and pity (turned into love) for Willie Price comes when she burns the forged bill of credit to save him from her father's humiliations. This is the moment of another real crisis in her life. It is now that her feelings and instincts come into a direct confrontation with her religious principles. "Why did she teach? Not from the impulse of religious zeal. Why was she allowed to have charge of a class of immortal souls? The blind could not lead the blind, nor the lost save the lost. These considerations troubled her" (p.57). When she is engaged to Henry she realizes
that she could have been happier with Willie Price.

To Anna in particular it was a unique day, making the apogee of her existence. In the years that followed she could always return to it and say to herself: 'That day I was happy, foolishly, ignorantly, but utterly. And all that I have since learnt cannot alter it —I was happy' (pp.176-77).

Anna's romantic marriage proves to be worse than failure. She now realizes the futility of her choice and decision. But she learns how to face the facts.

She went to bed resigned. ... It was not for nothing that during her life she had been accustomed to infelicity. Experience had taught her this: to be the mistress of herself. She knew that she could face any fact —even the fact of her dispassionate frigidity under Mynors' caresses. (p.212).

All this seems, perhaps, too simple, but it is precisely the way Bennet views life in the process of learning by experience. Anna's final failure in the worldly scale is experiential one, but climaxed when she refuses to involve herself in an independent struggle for love. She realizes it, but at a point of no return. What Bennett suggests is that in any life-like choice of career or decision or judgement individuals cannot always assert therefore they falter and fail. The necessary part of the novel is the tension in the state of Anna's mind. Bennett sees the psychological stress which Anna endures as the result of forces working within her, not identifiable with her own emotional responses to her love with Willie Price. Bennett seems to stress here the elements of conflict and paradox in her character and situation. Through all
these factors we see the evolution of Anna, her maturity and her learning through experience, 'to be the mistress of herself' and strong enough to 'face any fact'. Bennett does not sentimentalize her emotions and feelings for Willie Price. After her marriage she continues learning through new experiences.

Epistemologically, The Old Wives' Tale opens with the two sisters, Constance and Sophia Baines—fifteen and sixteen—"rather like racehorses, quivering with delicate, sensitive, and luxuriant life; exquisite, enchanting proof of the circulation of blood; innocent, artful, roughish, prim, gushing, ignorant, and miraculously wise." At this age, "if one is frank, one must admit that one has nothing to learn: one has learnt simply everything in the previous six months" (p. 7). Thus they "paid no heed to the manifold interest of their situation, of which, indeed, they had never been conscious" (p. 3). But, as in real life, the effect of time and age is working unconsciously upon them. "The beauty of Sophia, the angelic tenderness of Constance, and the youthful, naive, innocent charm of both of them, were transformed into something sinister and cruel" (p. 29). Very soon both the girls are grown up and they feel "as though existence were terrific in its responsibilities" (p. 59). Through such changes, Constance and Sophia learnt not only about themselves but also about other persons who come in their contact.

After Constance's marriage, the couple enjoys honeymoon and married life but she is surprised to notice the change that
has taken place in her mother. "I'm afraid she is not what she was". The change is working not only upon Mrs Baines but upon Constance herself. "Incredible that her mother could have aged in less than six weeks'. Constance did not allow for the chemistry that had been going on in herself" (p.136). The same change is operating upon Mr. Povey, although he is not aware of it: he is "forty next birthday" (p.143). Time and age exercise their influence on the lives of the individuals in a variety of ways. The old John Baines is rendered paralytic, bedridden and becomes an "antique wreck" because he remains "out of touch with life" (p.44). Sophia's contact and discourse with him "aged her, by years. They aged her so that... she felt older than her father himself" (p.45). This change is also evident in the life of Maggie, their domestic servant, who "lived seventeen hours of each day in an underground kitchen and larder, and the other seven in an attic, never going out except to Chapel on Sunday evenings and once a month on Thursday afternoons" (p.8). But we are told that "in the cave she had actually been thinking things over! Constance detected for the first time, beneath the dehumanized drudge, the stirring of a separate... individuality" (p.124). When she comes "home from the land of romance" (p.25), we learn that "A woman was definitely emerging from the drudge" (p.125). Such changes, brought upon the lives of individuals serve a means of knowing and learning about other persons.

Our chief interest is in the 'careers' Constance and
Sophia, their ignorance, growth, maturity, learning and realization. Both the girls leave the school, Sophia intends to become a teacher, her ambition is thwarted and Constance chooses a career to stay at home and work in the shop of her fore-fathers. Sophia, the rebel, has a romantic temperament. When she sees a young man without a name she gives him a secure place in her heart. In a romantic trance Sophia "was not the same Sophia". She "did not know what she was doing . . . . Her soul itself emanated from her in an atmosphere of allurement and acquiescence" (p.64). Seeing Gerald Scales, she thinks that he is "the most perfect man in the world" (p.85). This idea of love offers her an opportunity to escape from the provincialism of the Five Towns and spreads before her the "prospect of eternal bliss!" (p.249). She is "deeply impressed. He was a much greater personage than she had guessed . . . . And then, Paris! meant absolutely nothing to her but pure, impossible, unattainable romance. And he had been there! . . . He had come to her out of another world. He was her miracle. He was almost too miraculous to be true" (p.100). Her "entire attitude towards life was being altered." She realizes that only "in these moments have I begun to live!" (p.66). We are told that Sophia has read Miss Sewell's book, Experience of Life, but she throws her life "chiefly on the flaming fire struck in her soul" by her hero. "'After all', her heart said, "'I must be very beautiful, for I have attracted the pearl of men!" (pp.91,92). This is, in fact, a "feeling of universal unreality which obsessed her" (p.250). Sophia's "extreme ignorance" (p.252) "intensifying to an extraordinary
degree of the obsession of unreality, and the illusion" (p. 250) of true love, delude her to hold "a high opinion of her own common sense" (p. 252). This spell of romance and lack of knowledge and experience force "her to lay her modesty on the alter of his desire". "She fancied in her ignorance that the expression of this sentiment would please him" (p. 251). Although Sophia has "a great deal of what is called 'spirit'" (p. 28), "she had never even heard of the crisis through which her mother... had passed. She was not yet old enough to suspect it" (p. 42). She "had to learn" (p. 251) and experience life. Gerald Scales, "with his worldly experience" and practical knowledge "could feel the secret loyalty of her soul ascending to him" (p. 251). Her "burning response more than restored the self-confidence which he had been losing" (p. 251). He "implied that such ignorance stood alone in his experience." He is delighted at "the clearness of the slate on which he had to write" (p. 262). Sophia's awakening common sense had told her that in yielding to her instinct she was sowing misery and shame for herself; but she had gone on" (p. 293).

Her marriage experience is bitter: she is ignored at first and then deceived and deserted by Scales. Now she realises that all romantic possibilities of her escape are lost to her. She discovers that "With all his captivating charm, he could not be relied upon" (p. 272). Soon she learns that they "hated each other, but in different ways. She loathed him, and he resented her" (p. 294). As soon as Sophia experiences the full
shock of personal disloyalty of her husband, she realizes the tragedy of love and marriage; she has only to see one more delusion and deceptive action to learn that love for her is a tragic thing that she never knew before she experienced it.

But by the time Sophia realizes her folly, Gerald "had vanished from her life as he had come into it" (p.317). Sophia starts learning and it is "infact, the essential her" (p.333). Then she comes to realize that she is "no longer a virgin, but the equal in knowledge of any woman alive" (p.263), she has "lost her illusions too violently and too completely... Gerald had begun and had finished her education" (p.293). Bennett comments in Hardy's tone: "Justice was done. The great ambition of Gerald's life was at least satisfied" (p.288). It is after her dejection, in Paris, that Sophia learns several things — love, loneliness, grief, integrity, self-help, goodness and evil — that have before been only words.

With all her knowledge of the world Sophia becomes "intensely conscious... of a fundamental change in herself under the stress of continuous experience" (p.293). She is "ready to pay the price of pride and of a moment's imbecility with a lifetime of self-repression. It was high, but it was a price. She had acquired nothing but an exceptionally good knowledge... and she had conserved nothing but her dignity" (pp. 293-94). Epistemologically, we can determine the extent of Sophia's knowledge gained through romantic experience. In the beginning, Bennett shows us an ignorant unaware, simple and inexperienced Sophia of the Five Towns. Then, in Paris, "four
years ago . . . the ingenuous and ignorant Sophia had shyly sat.

And now Sophia knew that she, Sophia, knew all that was to be known about human nature. She had not merely youth, beauty, and virtue, but knowledge — knowledge enough to reconcile her to her own misery. She had a vigorous, clear mind, and a clear conscience. She could look anyone in face, and judge everyone too as a woman of the world. (p.321).

Constance, like a 'good' girl, chooses to become an obedient wife and a good mother. She loves and marries Samuel Povey. In comparison with Sophia's romance and marriage, hers was doubtless. "From a practical point of view the match would be ideal: no fault could be found with it on that side" (p.113). It is all in conformity to the Victorian ideals of family and marriage, embracing all customs and duties of married life. Ironically, Bennett remarks about the ideal couple that Samuel Povey's "tremendous self-esteem hid itself so effectually behind such externals that nobody had ever perceived it. Not even Constance quite knew Samuel's secret opinion of Samuel" (p.216). Constance does not step out of the Five Towns; she has a son and loses her husband. His death becomes for her a real experience and "the one reality in the universe" (p.218). Although Constance remains in her narrow confines "she esteemed that she knew what life was, and that it was grim" (p.128). With the passage of time, "beaten, terrorized, smashed and riven" by her bitter, melancholy experience, she realizes, "I know now" what life is (pp. 158,159). "She knew the world as it was" (p.144). "The strangeness of the hazards of life made her thoughtful" (p.220). Samuel Povey lives his life "through the
vast, arid Victorian expanse of years... His eternal
preoccupation with aspects of life and human activity which,
though essential to the divine purpose, but "are not recognized
as such." To him such a realization comes, but too late in life;
and, when it does come he is able to "conceive that life was and
must be life" (p.151). But he does not live long to learn from
his experiences. In his comparison Constance learns from her
experience.

Of course there was always something on her mind,
something that had to be dealt with... skill and
experience which she had acquired. Her life had much in
it of laborious tedium—tedium never-ending and
monotonous... The native ecstasies of her girlhood
had long since departed—the price paid for experience
and self-possession and a true vision of things. The
vast inherent melancholy of the universe did not exempt
her (p.146).

Then, she loses her father and mother. But at the age of forty-
three Constance "learnt that such events are not uncommon in
families and strange sequels to them not unknown" (pp.217-18).
Constance prides in and accepts her experience, that makes her
wise.

Her career seemed to be punctuated by interments. But
after a while her gentle common sense came to insist
that most human beings lose their parents, and that
every marriage must end in either a widower or a widow,
and that all careers are punctuated by interments. Had
she not had twenty-one years of happy married life?... The
sudden thought of their naive ignorance of life,
hers and his, when they were first married, brought
tears into her eyes. How wise and experienced she was
now! (p.217).

At the end of the book entitled "Constance", we are told
that her "preoccupation with petty things of no importance
whatever was worthy of the finest traditions of good motherhood" (p. 244). But she realizes: "I'm a lonly old woman now. I've nothing to live for anymore, and I'm no use to anybody. Once I was young and proud. And this is what my life has come to! This is the end! (p. 246).

In the fourth book of The Old Wives' Tale, both the sisters come to realize 'What life Is'. Sophia comes back home and thus the two strands of experience are interwoven. Sophia, rich in her worldly experience, wants Constance to give up the dark, inconvenient house in St. Luke's Square. Constance's obstinacy defeats Sophia's wishes about a home. What is interesting, is an assessment of their learning through experience. We notice significant changes in the attitudes of both the sisters, their knowledge about the world in general and their realization about their own existence in particular. One great proof of Bennett's realism of life is to make his protagonists realize 'What Life 's', as they are growing old and then dying. Here we see both young girls as old women. Sophia's tale has come to this:

Undoubtedly she was a handsome woman. Her hair was greying at the temples, and the skin was withered and crossed with lines. But she was handsome. She was one of those women of whom to their last on earth the stranger will say: 'When she was young she must have been worth looking at!' — with a little transient regret that beautiful young women cannot remain for ever young. Her voice was firm and even, sweet in tone, and yet morally harsh from incessant traffic with all varieties of human nature. Her eyes were the impartial eyes of one who is always judging... Her eyes announced that she had lived and learnt, and that she knew more about life than any one whom she was likely to meet, and that having pre-eminentely succeeded in life, she had tremendous confidence in herself. The proof of her success was... unique... in those eyes (p. 389).
Both the sisters follow different courses of life depending upon their wishes and choices, and learn differently. But when they meet, "considering the difference of their lives, they agreed marvellously in their judgement of things" (p. 470). Now Constance is "in truth a little afraid of Sophia; in thirty years Sophia might have grown into anything, whereas Constance had remained just Constance" (p. 410). Constance, "while recognizing in Sophia a superior in charm, in experience, in knowledge of the world, and in force of personality, she yet with a kind of undisturbed superiority felt sorry for Sophia" (p. 416). What is more interesting is that both the sisters come to a realization before their death at the critical point when neither of them can reverse the decision once made. When Sophia hears the news of Gerald's death. She goes to see him for the last time. When she sees him lying dead, the moment of intense realization comes to her. As she ruminates over the body of Scales she perceives the gradual process of growth, change, decay, destruction of youth, vigour the sense of vanity and meaningless-ness of life:

Sophia then experienced a pure and primitive emotion, uncoloured by any moral or religious quality. She was not sorry that Gerald had wasted his life, nor that he was a shame to his years and her. The manner of his life was of no importance. What affected her was that he had once been young, and that he had grown old, and was now dead. That was all. Youth and vigour had come to that. He had ill-treated her; he had abandoned her, he had been a devious rascal; but how trivial were such accusations against him! The whole of her huge and bitter grievance against him fell to pieces and crumbled. She saw him young, and proud, and strong, as for instance when he had kissed her lying on the bed in that London hotel... and now he was old, and worn, and horrible, and dead.
It was the riddle of life that was puzzling and killing her. By the corner of her eye, reflected in the mirror of a wardrobe near the bed, she glimpsed a tall, forlorn woman, who had once been young and now was old; who had once exulted in abundant strength, and trodden proudly on the neck of circumstance, and now was old. He and she had once loved and burned and quarrelled in the glittering and scornful pride of youth. But time had worn them out. Yet a little while' she thought, 'and I shall be lying on a bed like that! And what shall I have lived for? What is the meaning of it? The riddle of life itself was killing her, and she seemed to drawn in a sea of inexpressible sorrow (p.485).

Constance also ruminates on her life in a similar manner. Her husband's death enriches her experience. The death of Sophia's husband gives her a shock, "that was no conventional, expected shock that she had received" (p.484). But with her learning from experience she is able to accept such shocks calmly.

Constance never pitied herself. She did not consider that fate had treated her very badly. She was not very discontented with herself. The invincible common sense of a sound nature prevented her, in her best moments from feebly dissolving in self-pity. She had lived in honesty and kindliness for a fair number of years, and she had tasted triumphant hours. She was justly respected, she had a position, she had dignity, she was well-off. She possessed, after all, a certain amount of quiet self-conceit. . . . True, she was old! So were thousands of other people in Bursley. She was in pain. So there were thousands of other people. With whom would she be willing to exchange lots? She had many dissatisfactions. But she rose superior to them. When she surveyed her life, and life in general, she would think, with a sort of tart but not sour cheerfulness. 'Well that is what life is (p.516).

Both of them come to realize 'What life is' only when their illusions are shattered — Sophia's by her romance and rebellion and Constance's by her submission — and they come in touch with the realities of life and experience. Precisely, there is in the life of Bennett's individuals an evolution of the knowledge and
understanding of the fact that they have started living. Thus, The Old Wives' Tale reveals a learning process of men and women in relation to the real world, that Bennett has defined or which corresponds to his varied experience.

In the beginning of The Old Wives' Tale, the two sisters, of Edwin's age, have never been "conscious" of their situation. With the passage of time they come in contact with other people and gain knowledge and experience. In Clayhanger, Bennett makes Edwin's maturation a process of knowing and gaining knowledge at the very beginning. The 'situation' in the case of Sophia and Constance may be defined in epistemological terms in the case of Edwin Clayhanger. He emerges from the 'historic school' of the Five Towns, deficient in so many things.

Edwin had the extraordinary wistful look of innocence and simplicity which makes most boys of sixteen. It seemed rather shame, it seemed even tragic, that this naive, simple creature, with his straightforward . . . eager to believe appearances, this creature immaculate of worldly experience, must soon be transformed into a man, wary incredulous, detracting (p. 16).

He "had great potential intellectual curiosity, but nobody had thought to stimulate it" (p. 23). "In that head of his a flame burnt that was like an alter-fire, a miraculous and beautiful phenomenon . . . that flame astoundingly bursts forth, from a hidden, unheeded spark that none had ever thought to blow upon . . . Edwin himself seemed no tabernacle for that singular flame" (p. 27). This flame is partly in his ambition, and partly in his ambition, and partly in "interestingsness of existence" (p. 30). By "timidity, negligence, and perhaps ill-luck, Edwin had thus
arrived at his last day at school with the supreme question not merely unsolved but unattacked" (p.62).

Whatever philosophy of existence we may cite, the environment that shapes Edwin is against him. Now "he felt that not merely his father, but the leagued universe, was against him." With the result that as Edwin puts his first "step into the world", he is impelled to think: "I am on my own, now I have got to face it new, by myself" (p.22). At such a "crucial moment", the only consolation before a man is his 'knowledge' and experience —that Edwin lacks miserably.

Knowledge was admittedly the armour and the weapon of one about to try conclusions with the world, and many people for many years had been engaged in providing Edwin with knowledge. He had received, in fact, 'a good education' —or even, as some said, 'a thoroughly sound education'; assuredly as complete an equipment of knowledge as could be obtained in the county.

He knew, however, nothing of natural history, and in particular of himself, of the mechanism of the body and mind, through which his soul had to express and fulfil itself. Not one word of information about either physiology or psychology had ever been breathed to him, nor had it ever occurred to anyone around him that such information was needful. And as no one had tried to explain to him the mysteries which he carried about with him inside that fair skin of his... the mysteries by which he was hemmed in, either mystically through religion, or rationally through philosophy... And as for philosophy, he had not the slightest conception of what it meant. He imagined that a philosopher was one who made the best of a job, and he had never heard the word used in other sense... Of physical science he had been taught nothing save a grotesque perversion to the effect that gravity was a force which drew things towards the centre of the earth... Of geology he was perfectly ignorant, though he lived in a district whose whole livelihood depended on the scientific use of geological knowledge (pp.22-23).
Precisely, all these "complex forces marshalled against him" (p.35). We infer that "for lack of experience" (p.128), knowledge and initiative, Edwin is bound to fail in the practical world. But we see in the pages of the novel the evolution of a man, starting to live, to feel and to realize 'what life is'. The beginning, as usual in Bennett, is made by an element of romance.

Edwin has never seen a female creature before. When he sees Miss Florence for the first time, "ephemeral images of her were continually forming and dissolving before him. He could come to no conclusion" (p.91). It is only when he meets Janet that he starts feeling that he is living. "She was the woman of the world, and Edwin the raw boy. The harmony and dignity of her movements charmed and intimidated" Edwin (p.170). Janet's "power of emotional sympathy was all-embracing and inexhaustible" (p.169). She "transmitted to him her joy in his joy" (p.171). After this acquaintance Edwin realizes: "'I haven't known what life is! I've/asleep. This is life" (p.170). To him, it marks "in a very deep and spiritual sense, the beginning of the new life... The new house inspired him". Everything looked "marvelous" and "romantic" (p.173). When he "looked back across the seven years of his life in the world", he "condemned them conspiringly" (p.174). A brief interview with Janet gives him extraordinary "courage" and "inspiration" to face "the stress of one immense and complex resolve". This romance turns him to "a new life" and he "frankly accepted" his fate. In this romantic resolve the "shop was no longer provincial it became part of the universal" (p.185). The most dominant spirit working in Edwin
now is a romantic spirit. Edwin "dreamed of a romantic life — he knew not what kind of life, but something different fundamentally from his own". And he "suddenly understood with sympathy the impulse which had made boys run away to sea" (p.131). In the next part of the book entitled "His Love," Janet Orgreave enters the Clayhanger shop and brings "into it with her the new morning weather. She also brought into it Edwin's fate or part of it, but not precisely in the sense commonly understood when the word 'fate' is mentioned between a young man and a young woman" (p.147). Their love does not flourish for certain reasons, but it does set Edwin on a process of taking interest in his life, feeling his thoughts and strive to materialize his romantic dreams.

The mention of Hilda Lessway's name by Janet Orgreave, opens his eyes to a new romantic ideas of "the fine girl." He "pictured" Hilda "as mysteriously superior", "as being more romantic and strange" than Janet (p.186). Edwin "tried in a whisper to be a man of vast experience and settled views" (p.185). He feels that he has remained in his shell as an ignoramus" (p.193), and blind to the "romance of existence in the Five Towns" (p.196). Deep down in his heart he wonders "whether he would ever experience the sensation of feeling authentically grown up" (p.187). The effect of such an idea of romance on Edwin is "immense . . . it intoxicated him; it made him feel that a grand profuseness was the finest thing in life" (pp.197-8). He feels that nothing had "ever before so startled and uplifted him." This romance "constituted the supreme
experience of his career as a human being" (p.210) and opened possibilities of being really interested in life" (p.202).

With the passage of time, we see Edwin making "resolutions", carrying them out and making "the beginning of the new life." We observe him with his "consciousness of being unusually alive" (p.256) and working "faithful execution of his resolves for self-perfecting." This is perhaps because the very thought of Hilda has "given him a new conception of himself."

He had no notion that he was in love. He did not know what love was; he had not had sufficient opportunity of learning. Nevertheless the processes of love were at work within him. Silently and magically, by the force of desire and of pride the refracting glass was being specially ground which would enable him, which would compel him, to see an ideal Hilda when he gazed at real Hilda (p.268).

Their meeting at the Orgreave's house and their discourse bind them together. To Edwin, Hilda has "the quality of a heroine of high adventure" and seems "inexpressibly romantic and touching" (p.270). "Every curve of her features seemed to express a fine arrogant acrimony and had truculence. At any rate she was not half alive; she was alive in every particle of herself" (p.225). She "had the air of being a miracle" (p.269) which "robbed him of judgement" (p.271); "he was not in control of his intelligence" (p.281). Hilda Lessways seems to Edwin an "amazing, incalculable woman; wrapped within fold after fold of mystery" as Edwin stands before the "professed devotee of poetry" his "past life sank away, and he began a new life on the impetus of that supreme and final emotion" (pp.286-7).
'It has happened to me', —this thing that is at the bottom of everybody's mind! I've kissed her! I've got her! She's marvellous marvellous! I couldn't have believed it. But is it true! Has it happened? . . . By Jove! . . . He saw himself married . . . And he thought of his father and of vexations . . . She, Hilda, with her independence and her mystery, had inspired him with a full pride of manhood. And he discovered that one of the chief attributes of a man is an immense tenderness (p.289).

After this experience Edwin speculates on his past and discovers himself. He is now, "one of those who learn quickly, by the acceptance of facts." (p.295).

Their relationship flourishes, fades, revitalizes and is shattered. They are engaged but she goes away, gets married to another man, has a son by the bigamous, George Gannon. In the chapter "The Marriage", Edwin's illusions of romance, beauty, faithfulness and existence are shattered. He comes in touch with the reality of his life. It "could be said of Edwin that he fully lived that night. Fate had at any rate roused him from the coma which most men called existence" (p.301). Till this day Edwin has "lived in a dream and illusion of ultimate perfection" (p.306). And all these years all that "he lacked was faith" (p.308). In romantic moments whenever he admires her he passionately deems her above all women. "It was part of her mystery. What could he do? His curse was that he had no initiative" (p.282). "The problem was insoluble, for he was intellectually too honest" (p.279) and "unremittingly conscientious" (p.365) to admit that "originally he had been mistaken" (p.279) because of his ignorance of the ways of the world. So now he has "to resume the thread of his daily life"
All that romance was not real; it was not true; it had never happened. Such a thing could not happen to such as he was. . . . He could not reflect. When he tried to reflect, the top of his head seemed as though it would fly off. . . Cannon! She was with Cannon somewhere at that very instant. . . Cannon! She might at that very instant be in Cannon's arms (p.301).

Bennett writes that by "a single urgent act of thought he would have made himself a man, and changed imperfection into perfection. He desired — and there was real passion in his desire — to do his best, to exhaust himself in doing his best, in living according to his conscience" (p.26). Edwin does not reason thus but he has learnt some lesson and is aware of fundamental mysteries of love. And "now the reality had swept down upon him with no warning, and he was overwhelmed" (p.526).

To this is added a shock of his father's death, that brings the responsibility of situation upon him. He is expected now to act, somehow, on his own initiative. His conflict with his father is over and he is now independent to make his own decisions. He fights "against the gloomy influence, but uselessly. The inherent and appalling sadness of existence enveloped and chilled him" (p.362). To his romantic disappointment is added his domestic crisis. Thus before he comes to be called a man of the world he has to cross several hurdles. With the passage of time Edwin learns the meaning of love, life and his existence. His father's death proves to be "an experience tremendous and supreme." "He knew now what the will to live was. He saw life naked, stripped of everything unessential. He saw life and death together . . ."
something about reality" (.406). In another chapter "His start in Life" Bennett tells us that Edwin starts understanding the "proof of his incompetence in the art of life". Edwin asks himself again and again that he must change his attitude and "must turn over a new leaf" (p.420) but he lacks confidence, initiative, and consistency in efforts. We notice that Edwin has an instinct for experience and firm will to live. He asks himself: "'Am I happy? ... I must hold an inquisition upon my whole way of existence. I must see where I stand. If ever I am to be alive, I ought to be alive now. And I am not at all sure whether I am" (p.422). In another chapter "Adventure" Edwin is shown "deciding the hazard of life", overcoming it and realizing that "his existence had not been wasted in idleness" (p.443); he has gained "consciousness" of his existence (p.436). He has started looking into the facts. This is in accordance with Bennett's view of life. That is, man should look "facts in the face" because he will "have to look them in the face sooner or later, and the sooner the better" (p.459).

When they meet after a long interval Edwin finds Hilda "a profoundly changed woman"; her face is "married by anxiety and grief and time, the face of a mature woman, with no lingering pretention to girlishness" (p.446); her "existence seemed shallow, purposeless, infantile, compared to his" (p.451). He is "proud of himself" for he has "fantastically surmised circumstances" he looks at her "like a conqueror" (p.460). But deep down in his heart he has tremendous sympathy and love for her. He feels that she suffered because "she acted foolishly ... because of
her tremendous haughtiness." However, he "felt that she had been profoundly wronged by destiny, and that gentleness must be lavished upon her" (p.461). At this point, we see, both of them suffer partly because of their ignorance, lack of initiative, and different temperaments, partly because of their training in different environments, under different circumstances beyond their control. It is only with an inordinate amount of suffering that they come to know the meaning and importance of love. It is towards the end of the novel that Edwin comes to learn 'what life is'. He makes "the discovery" and realizes: "What a fine thing life is!" Edwin has "no real desire to change it" (p.522).

It is now that Edwin, with his experience and sufferings comes to understand Hilda better than before.

Amazing, incalculable, woman, wrapped within fold after fold of mystery! He understood better now, but even now there were things that he did not understand; and the greatest enigma of her treachery to himself ... she had chosen just that moment, just that crisis, to reveal to him that sinister secret which by some unguessed means she had been able to hide from her acquaintance. Naturally ... she would be compelled to conceal somehow the fact that she was the victim of a bigamist and her child without a lawful name! The merest prudence would urge her to concealment so long as concealment was possible. ... Her other friends deemed her a widow; Janet thought her the wife of a convict; he alone knew that she was neither wife nor widow. Through what scathing experience she must have passed! (p.519).

Edwin is moved by the sympathetic figure of Hilda. He recalls his own sufferings in her absence, when his thoughts have gone back to her. All this experience leads him to his cognition as a whole man, who can shoulder responsibilities.

After a whole decade his nostrils quivered again to the odour of her olive skin. Drowning amid the waves of
her terrible devotion, he was recompensed in the hundredth part of a second for all that through her he had suffered or might hereafter suffer. The many problems and difficulties which marriage with her would raise seemed trivial in the light of her heart's magnificent and furious loyalty. He thought of the younger Edwin whom she had kissed into rapture, as of a boy too inexperienced in sorrow to appreciate this Hilda. He braced himself to the exquisite burden of life (p. 528).

In *Hilda Lessways* Bennett traces Hilda's growth, maturity, understanding of life and her experiences in three different settings—Potteries, Brighton and London. It shows the woman's side of experience as against man's side of experience in *Clayhanger*. In his journal entry Bennett conceives it "as portraying the droves of the whole sex, instead of whole masculine droves... the multitudinous activities of the whole sex, against a mere background of masculinity." According to Lucas, in Hilda's "case fate is the stifling provincial life which she suffers with her fussy, inefficient, pious mother," as Edwin suffers with his efficient, experienced and practical father.

The first book of *Hilda Lessways*, entitled "Her Start in Life", sets the epistemological limits of her ignorance, desires, and inexperience. Hilda is twenty-one, a woman, but she can not understand that she is a woman. She starts her school at the age of eight, but emerges, like Edwin, deficient in many things: "books had not furnished her with what she wanted, and her faith in their promise was insecure." She can not escape to any other vocation except teaching, but till this age she has not learnt much.
Further, there was no economical reason why she should work. In 1878 unless pushed by necessity, no girl might dream of a vocation; the idea was monstrous; it was almost unmentionable. Still further, she had no wish to work for work's sake. Marriage remained. But she felt herself a child, ages short of marriage. And she never met a man. It was literally a fact that, except . . . a few tradesmen, the vicar, the curate, and a sidesman or so, she never even spoke to a man from one month's end to the next. . . . Her mother did not seek society, did not appear to require it. Nor did Hilda acutely feel the lack of it. She could not define her need. All she knew was that youth, moment by moment, was dropping down, inexorably behind her. And, still a child in heart and soul, she saw herself ageing, and then withered. . . . If the passionate strength of desire could have done the miracle, time would have stood still in the heavens while Hilda sought the way of life (p. 12).

Hilda, in addition to all these deficiencies of knowledge and art of life "did not know that she had the most precious of all faculties, the power to feel intensely" (pp. 12-13), "passion for proving to herself how strong she could be" (p. 25). She is "undeveloped." "Years must go to the understanding of her. She did not understand herself. She was not even acquainted with herself. Why? She was naive enough to be puzzled because she felt older than her mother and younger than her beautiful girlish complexion, simultaneously" (p. 31). But this is not the whole view of Hilda's life and existence. She has an instinct for romance, beauty, adventure and interestingness in life. She is "mourned about the future" because "she saw no hope" (p. 22). She "hated sentimentalism" (p. 21) and somehow "she enjoyed the experience" (p. 20). She has read Victor Hugo. So she desires to climb up "into the unknown, towards the redoubtable and the perilous" (p. 25). Like Sophia, Hilda also goes "away in far realms of romance" (p. 46) and meets Edwin. After this meeting Hilda "is emotionally swung away from his cool agnosticism and is understandably furious with his difference, which can look like indifference."
Hilda finds Edwin submissive; whereas George Cannon's "influence was tranquillizing" (p. 29). After this meeting she learns that her first "adventure was over and over too soon and too easily" (p. 45) Cannon "formed in her mind the image of an ideal" man and in the "midst of her wondrous adventure" (p. 40) "the whole future seemed to be drenched in romance" (p. 29).

Hilda "experienced almost exactly the intense excitement of reckless and supercilious child in quest of its dinner" (p. 24).

Hilda's first sight of George Cannon parallels Sophia's glimpse of Gerald Scales. To Hilda, with her passion for Victor Huge, the presence of the first man who is sitting before her "instantly became real" and seemed to indicate, sharply and incontrovertibly, that orderliness, that inexorable efficiency, which more than aught else she admired in the external conduct of life. The spectacle satisfied her, soothed her, and seemed to explain the attractiveness of Mr. Cannon (p. 49).

Then she also discovers works of Victor Huge in Cannon's office, which serve as a "corroboration" of her "strange seductive hues of romance." Cannon also "shared the glory of Victor Huge" (p. 50) with her. The result is that Hilda is "impressed, mystically, by the strangeness of the secret relation between herself and this splendid effective man" (p. 53). For the first time she "marvelled at what life was" (p. 53). She sees romance all over and everywhere. She is "no longer in a nameless trouble. She no longer wanted she knew not what, she knew beyond all questioning that she had found that which she had wanted" (p. 58). Another significant change
that occurs in Hilda is that she is now "tingling with keen, rosy life, and with the sense of youthful power". She has the deep, unconscious conviction of the superiority of youth to age" (p.76). She learns what love is, only when the spell of romance is over and when she comes in touch with the "realities of experience" (p.67). At the moment she is extremely "happy" because she is "young and fragile and inexperienced, and she so much older, and more powerful, and more capable" (p.72). In such a romantic trance she "seemed more content to remain in ignorance and nourishes no "desire to discover other topics" (p.74). Hilda "impulsively agrees to marry George Cannon because she is sexually excited by him. Her last contact with Edwin had been at the celebrations, when he had been at his most diffident, and least sexually aggressive." 

Love? It is an absolute fact that the name of 'love' did not in the first eternal moments even occur to her. And when it did she gave it but little importance. She had to admit that she had not consciously thought of George Cannon with love — at any rate with love as she had imagined love to be. Indeed, her immediate experience would not fit any theory that she could formulate. But with the inexorable realism of her sex she easily dismissed inconvenient names and theories, and accommodated herself to the fact. And the fact was that she overwhelmingly wanted George Cannon, and, as she now recognized, had wanted him ever since she first saw him. The recognition afforded her intense pleasure. She abandoned herself candidly to this luxury of an unknown desire. It was incomparably the most splendid and dangerous experience that she had ever had. She did not reason, and she had no wish to reason. She was set above reason... She was perfectly aware (p.235).

The point is that her sexual experience she has at the threshold of her youth gives an impetus to her understanding of love, life and enjoyment of experience. Bennett calls her choice
of marrying Cannon, a "submission with the glory of triumph" (p.235). She "desired the experience to last for ever" (p.102).

And this is the truth, reported here, of feminine experience. She thinks she has "accomplished an act of faith" and as a result of which her life becomes grand "unique", "romantic and beautiful" (p.101). She becomes "self-conscious" and now "acknowledged that she had lacked faith in life" (p.233) and that "her absurd conscience had been in the wrong" (p.101). In the chapter "Hilda's World" we are made aware of several educative changes that take place. Hilda realizes: "I'm young; I'm mature. I've had a lot of experience, and I'm not a fool. I'm strong — I could stand anything!" She put her shoulder back, with a challenging gesture. The pride of life was hers" (p.171). In presence of George Cannon "she had never before felt so sure of herself, so adult and experienced, as she felt then" (p.175).

Hilda also "had a peculiar sensation of being more intimate with him than she had ever been before" (p.201). With the passage of time Hilda learns more and more about herself and about Cannon. She finds that he has lost for her "the romantic allurement of the strange and the unknown" And the "faculty which he possessed, of uprooting himself and uprooting others, put her in fear of him" (p.202). Thus the realities of prosaic marriage to Cannon bring her dreams, romance and adventures to a hault. She thinks that her destiny is fixed now. Her gains and losses are obvious; "she has had money, freedom, and ambition, and somehow, through ignorance or through lack of imagination or opportunity, had been unable to employ them" (p.256).
Already she was disappointed with her marriage. Amid the fevers of bodily appetite she could clearly distinguish the beginning of lassitude; she no longer saw her husband as a romantic and a baffling figure; she had explored and charted his soul, and not all his excellence could atone for his earthliness. She wondered grimly where and under what circumstances he had acquired the adroitness which had charmed...her. She saw in front of her a vista of days and years in which ennui would probably increase and joy diminish. And she put her shoulders back defiantly, and thought: 'Well, here I am anyhow! I wanted him, and I've got him. What I have to go through I shall go through!' (p.258).

But the real disaster and the "moment of confusion."

begin when she learns that she is bigamously married. The chapter "Some Secret History" that reveals Cannon's marriage and the fact that his previous wife is still alive, brings the real catastrophe of Hilda's romance and marriage. "The catastrophe had indeed happened to her, and she could not deal with it! She did not feel even tragic...She had read of such catastrophes in the newspapers, but the reality of experience nonplussed her. I ought to do something', she reflected. 'But what?' " (p.266).

This is how the romantic illusions are shattered by the realities of experience. Hilda's anguish is similar to that of Sophia's. Both, romantic, adventurous and full of spirit when placed in a challenging situation, choose the path of self-help.

But despite the shock, despite her extreme misery, despite the anguish and fear in her heart and the immense difficulty of the new situation into which she was thus violently thrust, Hilda was not without consolation. She felt none of the shame conventionally proper to a girl deceived. On the contrary, deep within herself, she knew that the catastrophe was a deliverance. She knew that fate had favoured her by absolving her from the consequences of a tragic weakness and error (pp.273-74).
Hilda's catastrophic adventure does not impair "her instinct for experience." On the contrary, it "strengthened it. The very failure of the one excited her towards another" (p. 292). This sets her on a process of assessment, learning and realization of 'what life is'. She "put on the serious judicial air of an authentic adult woman" (p. 238). Now "confident in herself" she put "trust in life" (p. 236). She discovers that she was ignorant, inexperienced and artless; whereas Cannon "was mature. He was a man of the world. He had every experience. He knew how to love" (p. 247). But now Hilda also gains "toughness and competence, emotional enthusiasm, intellectual curiosity, and a sense of adventure." 11

Years pass, Edwin endures the shock given to him by Hilda. Hilda also separates from her bigamous husband and starts running a boarding house at Brighton. Her dilemma now is that she is neither a widow nor a married woman — she has an illegitimate child. Like Sophia she has her tale of various phases of life — its illusions, enlightenment, frustration, and struggle, especially with her own feelings. George Cannon's glory parallels Gerald Scales' satisfaction of his "ambition." Sophia's experience differs in that she does not become a mother. In Paris, she meets Chirac when she is facing sentimental disappointment, but she does not intend to belong to him by way of marriage. Hilda, passing through this phase of life feels desolated. "'I am nobody's!' . . . . She scorned herself for being nobody's. To belong utterly to some male seemed to be the one tolerable fate for her in the world"
At this juncture she meets Edwin. Hilda also hears that George Cannon, her husband, her son's father, is in jail. This brings a new realization to her. When the novel ends she is ruminating upon her life, romance and marriage.

She began to perceive what life really was, and the immense importance of hazard therein. Nevertheless, without frailty, without defection, what could chance have done? She began to perceive that this that she was living through was life. She bit her lips. Grief! Shame! Dillusion! Hardship! Peril! Catastrophe! Exile! Above all, exile! These had to be faced, and they would be faced. She recalled the fiercest verse of Crashaw, and set her shoulders back. There was the stuff of a woman in her. . . . Only a little while, she had seen before her a beloved boy entranced by her charm. She had now no charm. Where now was the soft virgin? . . . And yet, somehow, magically, miraculously the soft virgin was still there! And the invincible vague hope of youth, and the irrepressible consciousness of power, were almost ready to flame up afresh, contrary to all reason, and irradiate her starless soul (p.327).

In these two novels of the trilogy, Clayhanger forms the background of Hilda Lessways. Hilda comes in the dull, thwarted and grim life of Edwin, imparts a brief moment of romance and passion and disappears, leaving him to work and live in the printing shop. Edwin, after separating from Hilda, settles into an ordinary life, achieves supremacy over his father and then, suddenly, meets Hilda. Epistemologically, at the beginning of These Twain we are told that Edwin's "inner experiences were part of his great interest in life, part of his large general passion" (p.13). At times, Edwin is surrounded by "the melancholy of existence" because "the lives of the people both within and without the houses seemed to be woven of futility and sorrow, that the menace of eternity grew intolerable" (p.407). Edwin's contact
with the incomplete and imperfect world decides the starting point of his learning. Hilda, beaten by fate and circumstances, hurt by ten years of knowledge of marriage and cruelty of life, is glad to find security in Edwin's arms. She too "passed through painful, shattering ecstacies of bliss, hours unforgettable, hours which she knew would never recur, and yet she was left sated and unsatisfied." (Hilda, p.254). In Edwin and Hilda we find a tremendous change as compared to what they are shown — ignorant, imperfect, inexperienced — in the beginning. Bennett's epistemology lies in "recording of incomplete lives which he either will not properly show to be incomplete or which he suggests would be complete if they were lived elsewhere." In the chapter "Evening At Bleakridge" (in Hilda), she meets Edwin once again and the following chapter "A Rendezvous" binds them together in intimacy once again. After this meeting their romance is revived. "The zest of living was reborn in her. The morrow beckoned her, golden and miraculous. The faculty of men and women to create their own lives seemed divine, and the conception of it enfevered her" (Hilda, pp. 292-93). Till now "she, too, groping among the commonplaces, with her heart set upon a wider experience, till a moment comes when her story coincides with and is complementary to that of Clayhanger." Deep down in her soul Hilda is "groping after a purpose and a fulfilment of herself." When she reviews her past relationship with Edwin the whole history of her romance and adventure revolves in her mind.

She regarded — surreptitiously — his face, with a keen sense of pleasure. It was romantic, melancholy, wistful, enigmatic — and, above all, honest . . . .
At their past meeting, during the Sunday School Centenary, he had annoyed her; he had even drawn her disdain, by his lack of initiative, and male force. He had profoundly disappointed her. Now, she simply forgot this; the sinister impression vanished from her mind. She recalled her first vision of him in the lighted doorway of his father's shop. Her present vision confirmed that sympathetic vision his timid and yet bellicose eye. And she reposed on his very apparent honesty as on a bed. She knew, with the assurance of perfect faith, that he had nothing dubious to conceal and that no test could strain his magnanimity (Hilda, pp. 289-90).

When the third novel of Clayhanger trilogy — These Twain — opens, Edwin is thirty six years of age, married only a few months "under peculiar circumstances." When he enters his house, he is not as lonely and melancholy as before because he is accompanied by a mature woman "with a boy aged ten to prove it." He is "startled," perhaps, to discover that he has "brought into his house — not a woman, but a tripartite creature — woman, child, and sibyl. This quite surprises him and makes him "self-conscious" (p. 13).

Her presence there on the landing of the stairs was in the nature of miracle. He had wanted her and he had got her. In the end he had got, and nothing had been able to stop him — not even the obstacle of her tragic adventure with a rascal and a bigamist. The strong magic of his passion had forced destiny to render her up to him mysteriously intact, after all. The impossible had occurred, and the society had accepted it (p. 26).

It may be argued that it is not the dominance of sexual feelings in Hilda that brings her back to Edwin but there is another reason behind their convergence: they lack the type of experience, knowledge and understanding needed to bind them.
together. The Hilda of *Hilda Lessways* is not as credible as
the Hilda of *These Twain*. Similarly, Edwin of *Clayhanger* is
not as worthy of experience and understanding as Edwin of *These
Twain*. By the time self-consciousness comes to them they have
parted with each other. But now, in *These Twain*, when they
marry and settle down to a routine life, they have some
understanding of themselves, their experience and life. But in
the course of the novel we see they remain apart in many ways.
Drabble regards *These Twain* a "conjunction of these two unlikely
people, and of their discovery of one another in the state of
marriage. They do not of course, ever manage to discover or
understand each other: they remain apart, baffled, flung
emotionally from row to reconciliation to row again, in a
perpetual battle." It may be pointed out that Bennett's aim
is not to resolve their contradictions by idealizing the
institution of marriage, in a traditional way; he aims to see
them as they are.

After some time we find their romance on the decline. We
may call it the entrance of realism of life after the romantic
adventures. This realism of marital life emerges from their
perpetual quarrels, incompatibility of temperaments, and Hilda's
instinct for making discoveries.

She thought she knew him, but she was always making
discoveries in this branch of knowledge. Now and then
she was so bewildered by discoveries that she came to
wonder why she had married him, and why people do marry
—really! The fact was that she had married him for the
look in his eyes. It was a sad look, and beyond that it
could not be described. . . . She had married him for
his sentiments not for his goodness of heart. Some points in him she did not like... She often detested his terrible tidiness, though it was a convenient failing (p.78).

On the other hand, Edwin also makes certain "resolutions about his temper" (p.121). He wonders: "How strange it is that I should be living with this woman! What is she to me? What do I know of her?" (p.122). But, he has learnt from his past experience that "'right living' means the acceptance of injustice and the excusing of the inexcusable" (p.121). The responsibilities of married life baffle both of them; the alliance seems to dwindle; it does not snap at once. Edwin's "self-consciousness" clashes with the "self-consciousness" of Hilda. And Edwin "without quite knowing it" becomes "jealous of all Hilda's past life up to her marriage with him" (p.157).

They loathe each other—a situation similar to Sophia and Gerald Scales' marital conflict. Hilda, being impulsive, asks: "Was she incapable of learning from experience?" (p.166). Edwin, "feeling ridiculously like a lecturer, mumbled words of exposition" (p.187). A breach "definitely existed between Edwin and herself and the idea of either maintaining it or ending it on foreign ground was inconceivable" (p.222). And Hilda's "knowledge of the possibilities of human nature thenceforth enlarged" (p.210) it.

At the same time, "she felt that he would never really understand. She felt all her weakness and all his strength but she was determined" (p.237). On the other hand, Edwin, "bored
disgusted, shamed, and stricken, yielded himself proudly and submissively to the horror of the existence" (p.243). Edwin feels that he "must live more nobly — yet, more heroically — than he had been living; that all irritable pettiness must drop away from him, and that his existence in her regard must have simplicity and grandeur" (p.250). But it does "not occur to her that he had made a tremendous resolve which has raised him above the Edwin she knew" (p.257). With his increasing experience, it is impossible "to imagine any future period when all would not be wrong. Perfection was a desolating thought. Nevertheless the struggle towards it was instinctive and had to go on" (p.259). Their "separate pasts, each full of grief and tragedy, converged terribly upon him" (p.274). His own mind is "engaged upon the enigma of his existence" (p.319). We may ask

Why? Were they not equal? No, they were not equals. The fundamental unuttered assumption upon which the household life rested was that they were not equals. She might cross him, she might momentarily defy him, she might torture him, she might drive him to fury, and still be safe from any effective reprisals, because his love for her made her necessary to his being; but in spite of all that his will remained the seat of government . . . In the end, she had to incline. She was the complement of his existence, but he was not the complement of hers. She was just a parasite, though an essential parasite. Why? . . . The reason, she judged, was economic, and solely economic. She rebelled. Was she not as individual, as original, as he? Had she not a powerful mind of her own, experience of her own, ideas of her own? Was she not of a nature profoundly and exceptionally independent? (pp.281-82).

In the beginning their marriage means a revival of romance, "a marvellous rejuvenating experience" (p.312), but the seeds of breach are sown by both of them. Hilda is "astonished and
outraged, despite all her experience" (p.291). She "slowly perceives" with all her "apprehensiveness" the "eventualities" and "pessimism" of her temperament and futile discoveries life must begin" (p.287).

The hint of such a baffled marriage is towards Bennett's own married life. Swinnerton identifies the conflict of the tempaments of Edwin and Hilda with Bennett and Marguerite. "There is no doubt", says Swinnerton, "in my mind that the character of Hilda Lessways, in Clayhanger was enigmatic, changed in These Twain into something very like Marguerite. The conflict between Edwin and Hilda in the latter book could well have been an echo of scenes" from his own life. And Drabble points out that if "one has good cause to suspect that it was worse, that the novel is an idealization, an attempt to come to terms with an even grimmer reality . . . the relationship is intensely real." Fair conclusion would be, to say, that it is a book written out of experience. Both of them are equally responsible for their marital conflict, with one exception that Edwin is inexperienced in matters of marriage. But he has every right to make his resolutions and discoveries.

Hilda's understanding of life comes from her realization of her satisfaction and dissatisfaction, her romance, adventure, marriage, separation and her reunion. As a living being she asks all existential questions from herself.

She had nothing against Edwin. Yet she had everything against him, because apart from his grave abiding love for her, he possessed an object and an interest in
life, and because she was a mere complement and he was not. She had asked herself the most dreadful of questions: 'Why have I loved? Why do I go on living?' And had answered: 'Because of them', meaning Edwin and her son. But it was not enough for her, who had once been violently enterprising, pugnacious, endangered, and independent. For after she had watched over them she had energy to spare, and such energy was not being employed and could not be employed. Reading - a diversion! Fancy work - a detestable device for killing time and energy! Social duties -ditto! Charity - hateful! She had slowly descended into marriage as into lotus valley. And more than half her life was gone (p.287).

This passage marks the change in Hilda's thoughts, her understanding of and reflection upon life after the frustration of first marriage. She is a pathetic creature but capable of understanding life and its doings. But, by the time this understanding comes 'more than half her life was gone'. And it explains Bennett's realism of life. Lucas observes that Bennett and Wells "seem at one in this. They both know, so it feels, how radical a sacrifice the married woman must make for the sake of her marriage, how deeply she must resent social organisations calculated to confirm her in sense of being complementary, existing for someone else's purpose." In the context of the realities of life, Baker explains that these are but "minor episodes in the greater, the marital conflict, Hilda and Edwin suffer agonies from the friction and opposition of their two wills, till he makes 'the great discovery of all his career'." Edwin's great discovery lies in his final realization that happiness lies in the acceptance of all, of justice and injustice and admittance that "marriage must be a mutual accommodation." He is now always ready to "accommodate". But Hilda, inspite of her experience is "unjust", therefore he fails "to excuse
such injustice as hers." In the chapter "The Discovery" Edwin finds "the vast folly of marriage", but he admits that facts are facts, and they're extremely interesting" (p.402). He also realizes the value of liberty, knowledge and experience. About Hilda he knows that "on previous occasions he had invented excuses for her conduct, but they were not convincing excuses. They were compromises, between his intellectual honesty and his desire for peace. They were, at bottom, sentimentalism" (p.414).

And then there flashed into his mind, complete, the great discovery of all his career. It was banal; it was commonplace; it was what everyone knew. Yet it was the great discovery of all his career. If Hilda had not been unjust in the assertion of her own individuality there could be no merit in yielding to her. To yield to a just claim was not meritorious, though to withstand it would be wicked. He was objecting to injustice, as a child objects to rain on a holiday. Injustice was a tremendous actuality! It had to be faced and accepted. (He himself was unjust. At any rate he intellectually conceived that he must be unjust though honestly he could remember no instance of injustice on his part). To reconcile oneself to injustice was the master achievement. He had read it; he had been aware of it, but he had never really felt it till that moment. ... He was awed, thrilled by the realization. He longed ardentely to put it to test. He did put it to the test ... in yielding it seemed to him that he was victorious (pp.414-15).

Towards the end of the novel Edwin "clearly realized" (p.141) that he "wasn't clever enough to be a husband", although "he profoundly knew that he had advanced a stage, that he had acquired new wisdom and new powers and that no danger in the future could equal the danger that was past." "I know now where I am!" (p.141). But it has "taken him years to discover where he was. Why should the discovery occur just then?" (p.415). Precisely, this is 'What Life is'.

According to Me Callough, the feelings of Edwin and Hilda "are contradictory, being both disillusioned and romantic, and the point of view of the author is characterized by extreme flexibility. His realism, instead of being ruthless like that of Maupassant, reflects a marked tendency to concession and compromise." 19 We find at the end that they are trying to make adjustment by reviving their romance. They realise that they "have to live together, and again all comes down to practical relationship of normal people, "fundamentally the same, Bennett holds "for all people in all places." 20 The only hope left in their contradictory wills is the 'romance of existence'. Hilda nourishes "the delicious thought that she had power over him, that she was shaping the large contours of his existence." To Edwin "the greatness of the adventure of existence with this creature", looks "unique" and all this leaves "no room in his heart for a regret " (p.430). Thus they continue living together.

In Riceyman Steps, the epistemological limits are stated in the beginning. Earlforward "never asked the meaning of life for he had a lifelong ruling passion" for saving money; "all that he knew about existence" is that "there were plants with large green leaves" (p.24). Elsie, twenty-three years of age, a widow, "childless, after two nights of marriage and romance with a youth" (p.19), works and stays in Earlforward's house. She "never asked the meaning of life" from him because she is "dominated and obsessed by a tremendous instinct to serve" (p.21). Earlforward has only material needs that even Elsie can "not guess, nor come
within a hundred miles of guessing, that he was subject to dreams and ideals and longings" (p.21). Elsie, "everybody's slave", is in love with Joe, who disappears from her life. But "she knew her power and divined that she must use it" (p.54). Her romantic episodes enrich Mrs Arb's knowledge and experience of men and women and eventually help to bring her and Earlforward together. Mrs Arb has lost her husband and has "been withering up ever since." She realizes: "It's no life, being a widow at my age!" (p.27). The individual worlds of Mrs. Arb and Mr. Earlforward are of loneliness and despair, with the difference that "she had already been married once, whereas he was innocent; he had to learn" (p.78) what marriage means. In the years of her widowhood and loneliness Mrs Arb is "overwhelmed by a sudden and final sense of the folly, the tragedy, of solitary existence for a woman like her. She had wisdom, energy, initiative, moral strength, but there were things that women could do and things that women could not do; and a woman who was used to a man needed a man for all sorts of purposes, and she resolved passionately that she would not live alone another day longer than she could help" (p.40). On the other hand, Earlforward, "from the plenitude of his inexperience of women" (p.61), "had not been even moderately interested in any woman, and for over a decade not interested at all; he had been absorbed in his secret passion" (p.91).

Both of them are misers in their own right. What is interesting is that both of them are attracted towards each other at the first glance. Earlforward is attracted by her
"because she had life, energy, downrightness, masterfulness."

"Her welcoming smile inspired him, as alcohol would have inspired him had he ever tested it. He was lifted to a higher plane of existence" (p. 26). Mrs Arb is "experienced", and has "learnt from experience. . . . Best of all, she was original; she had a point of view. She could see" (p. 28). He is highly impressed by her personality. "All the time her body made little movements. Her glance varied, scintillating, darkling. She was a masterful woman, but masterful in a broad-minded, genial manner." "What a woman! What a woman! She was rapidly becoming the most brilliant, attractive, competent, and comfortable woman on earth; and Mr. Earlforward was rapidly becoming a hero, a knight, a madman capable of sublime deeds. He felt an heroic impulse such as he had never felt" (pp. 28, 29). And Mrs. Arb after her husband's death finds herself with income but no home and "no masculine guidance or protection" (p. 31). Mr. Earlforward's "demeanour" suddenly "lightened her horizon." This attraction at the first glance brings them together.

Violet Arb starts contemplating marriage, and with this mission in her mind, one day during Henry's absence, visits his shop and hopes to gain some impression of the man from his house. His short, trimmed beard, red lips and his fresh complexion have already impressed her. As she makes her entrance, and surveys his second hand bookshop, she learns step by step from the appearances, that eventually lead not only to the inner room but to the inner realities of the man. As "she peered . . .
The dreadful den expressed intolerably to Mrs. Arb the pathos of the existence of a man who is determined to look after himself (p.71). She also learns "that the contrast between the master and his house was tragic" (p.91). And finally, when she has surveyed the whole house, she begins to understand the man and his character. Virginia Woolf's remark that Bennett has "given us a house in the hope that we may be able to deduce the human beings who live there" seems ridiculous. We may point out that Mrs. Woolf sees the house from a distance; she does not go within. Mrs. Arb goes within the house and learns about the man and his life — his whims, passions, self-centred individuality and the whole existence.

Whatever he is, his meeting with Mrs. Arb Violet results into a romantic intimacy, and "having developed gradually through weeks, was starting on point of bursting into a new phase" (p.73). He decides instinctively but out of his inexperience to marry Arb Violet, who has already resolved to materialize her dream to get married to him, but "women were women, men are men. The Arb-Earlforward affair was crucial for both parties" (p.72). Violet, in order to know the "secrets of a man's personal existence" (p.73) "desired as much information as possible before coming to a decision" (p.72). "The sense of danger with her, as with nearly all women, was intermittent. The man was in love with her. He was in her hands. What could she not do with him? Could she not accomplish marvels? Could she not tame monsters? And she understood his instincts; she shared them" (p.75). This leads to their union by
marriage and makes Earlforward happy. He thinks Violet (now Mrs. Earlforward) is a "miraculous creature, so gentle, submissive and girlish... 'What a woman! What a wife!' She had every quality: the nobility of her motives and the startling efficiency of her methods." (p.83).

She was happy — not as the... bride had been happy, but still happy. She knew that she could comprehend Henry just as well as she had comprehended the later Mr. Arb. It reminded Violet that security and sagacity and affectionate constancy could not be the sole constituents of a satisfactory existence. Grace fancifulness, impulsiveness, some foolishness, were needed too. She saw the husband, the house, and even the business, as material upon which she had to work, constructively, adoringly, but also wilfully, and perhaps a bit mischievously... and yet it had changed Violet's mood... They were happy together; they were bound to be happy together. As for her, she would be happy in yielding her will to his, in adopting all his ideas, and in being even more royalist than the king. Her glance fell. She experienced a sensuous pleasure in the passionate resolution to be his disciple and lieutenant (p.104,117).

Violet accepts him for all his miserliness, for she thinks she understands his "motives", his fineness" and "chivalry of his motives" (p.106). She is "ready to pay for it with all her possible future happiness." (p.144). After this when they go for honeymoon to Madame Tussaud's, his "secret passion fought against his love. He turned pale; he could not speak; he was himself amazed at the power of his passion. Full of fine intentions, he dared not affront the monster" (p.94). According to Hepburn, Bennett reveals here the "crisis in his existence, when his sexual needs override his psychological predisposition. In the battle between his two needs he destroys himself. In other words, the novel is not a life, with anecdotes, of a miser, it is
specifically a crisis in a miser's life when his miserliness fails him. Secondly, Bennett develops an "ironical contrast between the exterior of Earlforward's appearance, behaviour, and shop and the interior of his soul."²²

Mrs. Earlforward knows that her husband is a miser to the last pint. But the real crisis begins when she realizes that her relationship with him is lukewarm. To it are added several marital truths. In the beginning, only her "instinct for tidiness and order had combated" his miserliness and lack of interest and taste (p. 129), but later on, her "soul was heavy with apprehensions. She saw herself helpless in a situation growing ever more formidable" (p. 130). The whole crisis comes to a burning point when his physical weakness, slackness and coldness in love disappoint her. He becomes a symbol of spent up force, incapable of making love. The climax of their temperamental and sexual clash is given in the following passage:

She pulled off her mantle and threw it to the floor.... Why? How many wives would do it? There isn't another in dreadful Clerkenwell that you're so fond of, I swear! You're the stingiest man in London .... You think I can't see through you and your excuses! ... 'I'm a slave, same as Elsie is a slave. More than Elsie. She does get an afternoon off. But me? When? Night and day! Night and day! Love? A lot you know about it! Cold by day and cold by night! and so now you know! I've often wanted to tell you, but I wouldn't because I thought it was my duty to struggle on. Besides, I didn't want to upset you. Well, now I do want to upset you! (p. 144).
Henry's physical weakness dissatisfies her more. He is lying in the bed and asks Violet to come to him. "Why should I come back to bed?" she asked angrily, her voice thickened and obscured by sobs. "What do you want me to come back to bed for?" (p. 216). Violet knows that she has "uttered the deciding word of her fate. She trembled with apprehension and felicity" (p. 75).

"In her rage she had put facts into words, and thereby given them life, devastating life. In two minutes she had transformed the domestic interior from heaven into hell. She had done something which could never be undone" (p. 145). Earlsforward realizes for the first time that "certain conjugal problems are not to be solved by reason, and that if he wishes to survive the storms of a woman's temperament he must be a traitor to reason and intellectual uprightness. . . . he had been fool enough to believe that she was worthy to be his partner in the grand passion of his life. Well, he was wrong. He must count her in future as the enemy of his passion, and plot accordingly" (pp. 150-51). But things are decided by "her long experience of marriage against his inexperience" (p. 151). Her thoughts go back to her past when she was not married to him.

She was happy then, and expectant of happiness. She was girlish then, exuberant, dominating, self-willed, free. None could withstand her. A year ago! The change in twelve months suddenly presented itself to her with a sinister significance; but she imagined that the change was confined to her circumstances, and that an unchanged Violet had survived (p. 176).

In the chapter "Violet's Victory", her attitude towards Henry Earlsforward changes because of his cold sexuality. She finds that "he was a bit frightened of trouble in the bed" (p. 213).
And, on her part, Violet saw in Henry a man not of any age, simply a man: egotistic, ruthless, childish, naughtily, illogical, incomparable, the supreme worry of her life; a destroyer of happiness; a man indefensible for his misdeeds... 'My first husband was not very polite, and I've known the time when he's laid his hand on me, knocked me about—yes, and more than once. I was young then. Disgusting, you'd called it. And I've never told a soul before; not likely. But what I say is I'd sooner be knocked about a bit and know what my man's really thinking about them lived with a locked-up, cast-iron safe like you! ... There's worse thing than a blow, a woman knows it' (pp. 215-16).

Earlforward fights against the whole world with the weapon of his passion and obstinacy. "He had no weapon of defence except his irrational obstinacy: but it was sufficient, and he knew it was sufficient, against the entire organized world" (p. 230). We know that there is "not only his obstinacy and his stupidity—there was his brutality" (p. 233) too. But he thinks otherwise:

And his mind, he thought, was surprisingly clear and vigorous. He had ideas on all sorts of things... Rising out of the bed for a moment he found that he could stand without difficulty, which was yet another proof of his theory that people ate a vast deal too much... slipping back into it with a certain eagerness, he began to concert plane, to recognise and resume his existence" (p. 262).

Their romantic experience at the mature age, which develops into a relationship and results into marriage, is not to be doubted. Through this romance some illusion is formed between the two; they are set on a learning process; they think about each other, come in contact and get married. When their illusion is shattered they find the actual conditions of life are different. Only at the last hours does Earlforward really begin to realize that his "splendid fortitude, his superhuman courage to recreate
his existence over the ruins of it and to defy fate, were broken down. Life was bigger, more cruel, more awful than he had imagined" (p.285).

And when Earlforward dies, ironically, the "safe was open and there was a bag of money on the floor" (p.292). That is all to the effects of miserliness. Both of them disappear with their conflicts and clashes of married life. Elsie is "apprehensive about future dangers and her own ability to cope with them" (p.303) but she cannot put her apprehensions into action. When Mrs Earlforward is reduced to sunken woman, subject to some kind of neurosis which even Dr. Raste cannot diagnose, Elsie understands the psychosomatic nature of Mrs. Earlforward's death: "Owing to under-nourishment, change of life. No children" (p.289).

In the secluded, alienated, frustrated life of Henry Earlforward, widowed years of Arb Violet, Elsie is the only living creature "who every morning breathed the breath of life into the dead nocturnal house, and revived it, and turned it once again from a dark, unresponsive, meaningless and deathlike keep into a human habitation." And as she walks "the house seemed to resume life under her tread" (p.119). Elsie has "one positive pleasure in life. She knew she was wicked; she knew she was a thief; she did not defend herself by subtle arguments" (p.192). She loses her lover, Joe, after two nights of married life; she has no child, no hope, still she has some hope to live. "Eating is my only joy now. All else is vain, but eating is real" (p.203). Elsie has "in her the instincts of fancy and romance" (p.206). And there is one Dr. Raste in the novel, who has "nothing to learn
about the strange possibilities of human behaviour, discovered that he had been mistaken" (p.211) when he finds Elsie giving her diagnosis of Mrs. Earlforward’s illness. When the novel ends Elsie is still alive with her ambition to eat as much as she can. What makes this novel remarkable is, according to Drabble, "its accuracy, its compassion, its feeling for the working-class life its physical detail. There is nothing in it that has much bearing on Bennett's own personal life: it is objective, and yet done with a fine sympathy."

III

Epistemologically Bennett's men and women of the new generation as compared with the complacent old generation, begin with a dash for life and end with a realization of 'what life is'. They fight the battle of their choices, confront with the realities of life, and strive to materialize their dreams. Their protest against the social and religious conditions and parental tyranny makes them self-sufficient. The romance of existence in such conditions makes their lives glorious and interesting. They realize — although, ironically, too late in life — that they are living, thinking and they know for themselves 'what life is'. Bennett's irony is evident in the fact that the pragmatic aims of his own life become known to his men and women when they have lived a considerable part of their lives. It serves as the starting point for making an assessment of their transition to a new way of thinking and living.
In his first novel, *A Man from the North*, which sets "the key for his subsequent realistic novels," Bennett depicts the hero's raw experience. Richard Larch leaves his native town in the North not because he is mature and has taken the right decision but because he has an instinct for becoming a writer. This novel is an autobiographical version; therefore, Richard Larch like his creator does "not look back... with the characteristic Victorian self-satisfaction." Thus, precisely, like any social climber Bennett survives his youthful experiences, his wanderings, disappointed dreams and appalling realities of life. Anna seeks to preach the virtues of morality, religion, Church meetings, revivals, honesty, sobriety, charity, frugality, combined with romance and business. Her major shortcoming is that she is incapable of exercising her religion, affecting her romantic choice and making practical decision. She is reduced to painfully simple terms, for she fails to realize that the practical decisions are more important than the hypothetical religion, that prevents her from realizing her romance and attain happiness. In this novel, the initial emphasis is predominantly placed on prescribed limits—a study of parental authority—but what Anna realizes after experiencing life is different. Bennett's statement of theme at once precludes the experiential complexity in her and the necessary requisite to her experience as an individual. Anna struggles with a difficult and lonely moral decision for which she has no precedent, except her intrinsic conviction that for a woman life means renunciation. Anna's final decision to surrender to the world in which she loves is experiential one, but climaxed when she refuses to involve herself in an independent struggle for love. This is
because the naive Anna of the Five Towns has learnt no artifice to enable her to appear other than what she is.

In *The Old Wives' Tale*, Bennett tells us that the "foundation of her Sophia's character was a haughty moral independence, and this quality was what she most admired in others" (p. 320). But her moral differs from that of Anna, in that she has read the Book of Experience and her decisions are experiential. The genesis of the novel lies in the personal experience of Bennett. Evidently, as a realistic novel Bennett "got hold of the greatest of all themes—the agony of the older generation in watching the rise of the younger." This is also because Sophia's conduct is characterized by a spirit of revolt, romance, adventure, decision, independence, self-help, adjustment, learning and experience—all these factors prepare her for life. When Sophia grows old she realizes the extent of her knowledge, understanding and experience. In the early stage of her romance with Gerald Scales, her first adventure changes the conception of her life:

She was drunk; thoughts were tumbling about her brain like cargo loose in a rolling ship. Her entire conception of herself was being altered; her attitude towards life was being altered. The thought which knocked hardest against its fellows was, 'Only in these moments have I begun to live (p. 66).

And here is Hilda in a similar romantic situation and having real emotions that alter her conception of existence:

She thought how wonderful it was that she, the shaking little girl who yesterday had run off with fourpence to buy a meal at a tripe-shop, should be the cause of this emotion in such a man. She thought: 'My life is marvellous'. She was dizzied by the conception of the capacity of her body and soul for experience (*Hilda Lessways* p. 165).
Sophia has the comfort of her individual will to follow her romantic dictates; her instinct for experience, romance, and adventure is irrevocable. Bennett, therefore, concerns himself with the profounder problems of Sophia's existence and her strife to come to grips with life itself. Thus, to Bennett, realism means seeing life through the simple fact of human experience, which makes it significant. When Sophia is in Paris, her adventurous spirit and "the vein of iron in her Five Towns ancestry and training begin to show through" her learning to face life as it comes. Her experience in Paris modifies every aspect of her person and enriches her understanding of life. The robust woman of the Five Towns, who wrestles with the problems of existence, becomes a thinking woman. Epistemologically, Sophia not only comes to know about places, persons and things, but also gains knowledge of human heart, behaviour and nature. Bennett himself has stayed in Paris; therefore, as Desmond Mac Carthy says he is "gathering himself together for his finest achievement." The difference between Anna and Sophia is evident: the inner urgency for love in Anna is also peculiarly intense but she does not want to experience it and so remains unable to escape the boundaries of the Five Towns. She accepts her own moral responsibility for her situation; whereas Sophia accepts an experiential responsibility. And now Sophia knows "all that was to be known about human nature. She could look anyone in the face and judge everyone too as a woman of the world (p.321). And, finally, when she has lived her life, learnt and gained knowledge, we are told:

Her eyes announced that she had lived and learnt, that she knew more about life than anyone whom she was likely to meet and that having pre-eminently succeeded in life she had tremendous confidence in her (p.389).
On the other hand, Constance "is not really wise and experienced." And either way, "where in the novel itself can we find the necessary evidence of her wisdom and experience." Constance remains in her narrow confines still "she esteemed that she knew what life was, and that it was grim" (p.128). She is not as experienced and knowledgeable as Sophia, but "she knew the world as it was, and in learning it" she shows a gradual change in her life. When "strangeness of the hazards of life made her thoughtful" (p.220) she realizes "I know now, what life is" (p.159).

Of course there was always something on her mind, something that had to be dealt with... skill and experience which she had acquired. Her life had much in it of laborious tedium - never-ending and monotonous... the naive ecstasies of her girlhood had long since departed - the price paid for experience and self-possession and a true vision of things. The vast inherent melancholy of the universe did not exempt her (p.146).

On the other hand to her husband, Samuel Povey, who lives his life "though the vast, arid Victorian expanse of years", preoccupied with "aspects of life and human activity", such a realization comes but too late in life; and, when it comes he is able to "conceive that life was, and must be, life" (p.151).

In Clavhanger, the full meaning of Edwin's existential view of life begins to disclose itself rather late. But, all this has epistemological consequences. Edwin becomes convinced not merely that his formal education, his father and the whole universe have maligned him, but also realizes that he has not made sincere efforts and put a thought into his activities, to change imperfection into perfection. He should have learnt
earlier 'how to spend on twenty four hours a day' to 'make life yield maximum'. He learns from his mistakes and discovers an unshakable faith, which is forged in his experience. Edwin Clayhanger reveals the predicament of modern man. In a modernist's terminology, he "is 'thrown-into-the-world' — meaninglessly, unfathomably. . . . The only 'development'. . . . is the gradual revelation of the human condition." Then, in addition to portraying the interconnectedness of external and internal worlds, this novel shows Edwin's existential triumph. More important is the epistemology of Edwin's learning, knowledge and his realization of 'what life is'. The novel as a whole "creates the scenes that he witnesses, the customs of his country, the stances he takes. What he sees is what he is; what he determines in part what he sees and how he sees it." Thus, in Bennett, we find a significant shift from the "fragmentary manner of the realistic tradition" to the empirical one. The greatest experiential discovery of Edwin's life is the acceptance of everything good and bad, just and unjust — "Injustice was a tremendous actuality! It had to be faced and accepted." (Clayhanger, p.414). Thus when his worldly understanding is enlarged he "braced himself to the exquisite burden of life" (p.528).

Hilda too suffers the full gamut of human misery. She is also ignorant before she meets Edwin and falls in love with him. They separate, left continually alone, learn the value of love, meet again and become lovers again, reasonably through their experience and understanding of life. They do not end their
perpetual antagonism but show a marked tendency to compassion and compromise. Like Sophia's, Hilda's life also has existential meaning; she makes her own choice, experiences emotional and moral set-backs and lives her life. Thus she creates her own world, becomes intelligent and a practical woman by virtue of her romance, adventure, and experience. Ironically enough, even when she has been through too much, she does not really understand 'what life is'. When such a realization comes she begins "to perceive that this that she was living through was life" (Hilda Lessways p.327).

The three novels of the trilogy are "subordinated to the main theme, that of growing up." Edwin, Hilda and then both of them grow in terms of learning, knowledge, experience and understanding of 'what life is'. In These Twain, both of them grow through the institution of marriage. Having given them empirical training Bennett brings them together once again, when this union of 'these twain' comes, Wagenknecht comments that "it is startling to see the girl we had hitherto considered so formidable, now different, shrinking, tortured as she seems to herself, as she appears to the author of her being. Such a commentary on the relativity of all human judgements of personality, English fiction had not, I think, hitherto achieved."

Bennett's other individuals have solid human traits and they also learn from their mistakes, success, failure, confidence, diffidence, deception, freedom, discipline, love hatred, resistance, reconciliation, anger, tolerance loss, gain, achievement, realization, discovery and practical understanding
of life. Bennett lets them pass through a variety of experiences and gain solid knowledge of persons, places, things, love and life. Epistemologically, Bennett's realism is of the ignorant, unaware, inexperienced, immature, imperfect and incomplete lives. Bennett also depicts how the ignorant suffers, and how the clever and wise flourish in adapting to new situations and circumstances. Bennett's pragmatic approach to life—to make it better, beautiful, romantic, interesting and worthliving in all its drabness and realities of existence—is summed up in the words of Osmond Orgreave, a wise, intelligent and experienced man in Clavhanger:

Spend and gain! And, for a change, gain and spend! That was the method. Work till sheer exhaustion beat you. Plan, scheme, devise! Satisfy your curiosity and your other instincts! Experiment! Accept risks! Buy first, order first, pledge yourself first; and then split your head first in order to pay and to redeem! When chance aids you to accumulate, let the pile grow, out of mere perversity, and then scatter it royally! Play heartily! Play with the same intentness as you work! Live to the utmost instant and to the last flicker of energy (p.190).

The recurrent note of Bennett's realism of assessment is this realization, which is a "slow-growing and penetrating sentiment that comes only with a sense of the continuity of lives encountered at recurring periods over a longer course of years. It is likely to run strongest at times when death puts its full stop to the career of some one of the characters and causes the others to regard their lives in the perspective of the generations." But "the truly important" Bennett, according to Lucas, "is the one who throughout the pages of his novels
has shown us that life is much more various, bewildering and fulfilling than any one person can know, the Bennett who comes near to achieving that absolute realism which he found and cherished in Chekhov, and as a result of which he created one of the finest of twentieth-century novels.\textsuperscript{35} In all his novels, Bennett shows an interest in romance and experience, Bennett's close relationship to and synthesis of both the romantic and the realistic elements enable him to express his epistemological concerns; he also secures, thereby, a harmonious development for the English realism.
1  Western Humanities Review, XXII (Winter 1968), 35-46


3  Lucas, Arnold Bennett, p.40.

4  Ibid., p.40.

5  Page references in the text are from Everyman's Library Edition.

6  Bennett, Journals (20 Octb., 1910), pp.335-36.

7  Lucas, Arnold Bennett, p.148.

8  Ibid., p.147.

9  Ibid., p.149.

10 Drabble, Arnold Bennett, p.182. Drabble also comments on Hilda's marriage that it is not possible to identify Hilda with Marguerite "in her inconsequential, rash, solitary behaviour" (p.181). Their marriage is a "strange cross-breeding in which the similar traits — domestic toughness and competence, emotional enthusiasm, intellectual curiosity, a sense of adventure — in no way destroy the precision of the portrait. There is no too much of the French woman about Hilda, despite her 'olive skin and black eyes and hair', she is 'dramatic, dangerous, threatening', but she is deeply rooted in Bennett's own world" (p.183).

11 Drabble, p.183.

12 Lucas, Arnold Bennett, pp.163-64.

13 Scott-James, "Arnold Bennett", p.93.

15 Arnold Bennett: A Last Word, p.19.
21 "Mr. Bennett and Mrs Brown", p.332. Hepburn's comment that Bennett is "playing at being the photographic realist that the public, including Virginia Woolf, assumed him to be". See James G. Hepburn, "Some Curious Realism in Riceyman Steps", p.119.
23 Arnold Bennett, p.279.
24 Swinnerton, Arnold Bennett, p.12.
25 Pound, Arnold Bennett, p.20.
26 John Wain, "The Quality of Arnold Bennett", p.129.
29 Lucas, p.112.
31 Hepburn, Art of Arnold Bennett, pp.81-82.
32 Wain, "The Quality of Arnold Bennett", p.129.
35 Arnold Bennett, p.116.