The world depicted in *News from Nowhere* is inhabited by a new species of human beings whose personality is harmonious, without any tinge of a neurotic dichotomy between *homo faber* and *homo ludens*. In Morris’s Arcadian utopia the two dimensions coincide. In the new society human activity is regulated by the pleasure principle in so far as compulsion, repression and alienation no longer shape the lives of individuals, who are now allowed to express their true selves and fulfil their needs in full autonomy and awareness. By replacing utilitarian and productive principles with creative and aesthetic ones in the working experience, Morris has found the key to prefigure and represent the total liberation of all human instincts. Once compulsory and alienated work has become pleasure and is synonymous with art, Eros has been freed from the cage of repression and sublimation, thus promoting a new culture where integration has replaced conflict in every sphere. The change is outlined by Old Hammond in Chapter XIV, significantly entitled ‘The Beginning of the New Life’:

“... it [art] has become a necessary part of the labour of every man who produces...The art or work-pleasure, as one ought to call it...sprung up almost spontaneously, it seems, from a kind of instinct amongst people, no longer driven desperately to painful and terrible overwork, to do the best they could with the work in hand – to make it excellent of its kind; and when that had gone on for a little, a craving for beauty seemed to awaken in men’s minds...All this was much helped by the abolition of the squalor which our immediate ancestors put up with so coolly; and by the leisurely, but not stupid, country-life which now grew... to be common amongst us. Thus at last and by slow degrees we got pleasure into our work; then we became conscious of that pleasure, and cultivated it, and took care that we had our fill of it; and then all was gained, and we were happy.” (My italics)

The social transformation has deeply affected the very existence of the new man and the new woman, who, no longer having their “back bent under useless toil”, can fully enjoy “the sensuous pleasures of life”, thus achieving a perfect balance between intellectual and instinctual powers.

In the 1889 lecture entitled ‘How Shall We Live Then?’ Morris had clearly stated the needs required for the total fulfilment of human experience:

... we shall not be happy unless we live like good animals, unless we enjoy the exercise of the ordinary functions of life: eating sleeping loving walking running swimming riding sailing we must be free to enjoy all these exercises of the body without any sense of shame; without any suspicion that our mental powers are so remarkable and godlike that we are rather above such common things.
These propositions, which polemically challenge the cornerstones of Victorian morality, are translated into imaginative and narrative terms in his utopian romance; and William Guest's journey is devoted to learning how they are realized. The emphasis put on them has a double function: to show how deeply the quality of life has changed, and how it is possible to preserve an individualized identity in a classless society.

From the opening chapters, through the eyes of the astonished and awkward 'dreamer' who can do nothing better than plunge into the clear water of the Thames to 'purify' himself from the material and moral pollution of industrial civilization (Ch. II), the reader is shown handsome, healthy, active, self-confident and friendly people, no longer identified by social role and status and no longer conditioned by the 'cash-nexus', living in innocent harmony with nature and with one another. The symbiosis with nature constitutes the overall structure of the text, and the reiteration of details describing the beauty and elegance of people, houses, gardens, clothes and objects conveys the feeling that human life is in harmony with the environment. People are immersed in a 'symphony' of pleasant sights, colours, smells and sounds they actively receive with all their senses. The awakening of the senses is repeatedly stressed to typify the new style of life where the basic and authentic human needs are gratified, in both an individual and a collective way. The detailed descriptions of meals show not only the way people enjoy simple and genuine food but also the joy they feel in being in each other's company, conferring on the occasions the character of a ritual, like the highly symbolic hay-harvest. The new approach to life is epitomized, for instance, in the description of a 'balmy' evening spent at the Hammersmith Guest-house, when all senses are alert and stimulated both by the environment and by the interaction among the people; the act of existing has factually replaced any vicarious experience through reading or escapism (Ch. XX).

In News from Nowhere ample space is devoted to illustrating the satisfaction of "the common needs of mankind" in order to revaluate those aspects of life disregarded in Morris's time, "in which the prevailing feeling amongst intellectual persons was a kind of sour distaste for the changing drama of the year, for the life of earth and its dealing with men" (Ch. XXXII). Though people in the new society seem to prefer outdoor activities and manual jobs, nevertheless they are free to choose their occupations. They usually alternate physical exertion with mental work: Dick's friend, who is a weaver and studies mathematics, takes over Dick's job as a boatman for a while (Ch. II); Boffin, the Dickensian dustman, writes "reactionary novels" (Ch. III); and an anonymous young man stays "at home to get on with some literary work" instead of going out into the fields (Ch. XXIV). In opposition to Edward Bellamy, who in his Looking Backward conceived a highly structured and rationalized society, Morris envisions a holistic community where individual autonomy is preserved.

Throughout Morris's utopian romance, life is shown as an integrated whole: between mankind and nature, between mind and body, between individual freedom and collective welfare.

When we come to consider the condition of women and the sexual roles and love-relationships between the sexes in the new society, we must face some crucial issues which so far have been only marginally discussed in critical literature. The prevailing opinion is that Morris, though a progressive thinker in such matters, nevertheless could not dissociate himself from the traditional patriarchal values as regards women's
identity and their social role. Undoubtedly in News from Nowhere there are some contradictions and ambiguities on the subject, and it might be fruitful to examine how they operate in the text on both the narrative and speculative levels.

The most innovative feature shown in the relationships between the sexes lies in the way they communicate; there is no separatedness between private and public ‘discourses’: men express their emotions as much as women do, and women participate in communal events and discussions with interest and competence. It seems every individual has undergone a process of osmosis between female and male qualities, which allow both men and women to interact on the basis of gender-free psychological assumptions.

Women share with men health, beauty, self-confidence and a direct and friendly way of address:

... they were so kind and happy-looking in expression of face, so shapely and well-knit of body, and thoroughly healthy-looking and strong. All were at least comely...They came up to us at once merrily and without the least affectation of shyness (Ch. III).

Since the “family tyranny” no longer dominates women’s life, they are free to make choices in the working, emotional and intellectual spheres. Philippa and her daughter prefer to devote themselves to sculpture rather than join the hay-harvest (Ch. XXVI); Clara goes back to her husband without shame for herself or blame from others after her love-affair ends (Ch. IX); Ellen, though very active in the fields, is the most impressive intellectual voice in the text. She embodies at the utmost that vitality and that interest in life which constitute the essence of the new ethos. She voices it when arguing with her grandfather, who admires the literature of the past:

“Books, books! always books, grandfather! When will you understand that after all it is the world we live in which interest us; the world of which we are a part, and which we can never love too much?” (Ch. XXII).

In the dialogues between Old Hammond and William Guest in Chapters IX and XII, it is made clear that the structural and ethical bases of the family have been completely overturned in respect to those of the Victorian period; thus the freedom of women and the equal status of both sexes are by now shared common-sense beliefs:

“The men have no longer any opportunity of tyrannising over the women, or the women over the men; both of which things took place in those old times. The women do what they can do best, and what they like best. This is such a commonplace that I am almost ashamed to state it” (Ch. IX).

If so, why is it that housework and all ministering occupations are attended to only by women? As Paul Meier puts it, “women seem, of their own accord, to have chosen house-keeping as the natural occupation of their sex”]. The most obvious answer lies in the text itself, where Old Hammond tells William Guest that at home “everybody likes to be ordered about by a pretty woman: why, it is one of the pleasantest forms of flirtation” (Ch. IX), which sounds like a way to discard the problem. Furthermore Old Hammond tells the Norwegian story called “How the Man minded the House” (Ch. IX), which seems to suggest that female skill in housework is not culturally determined but has a biological origin. It is true that
William Guest, the authorial projection of William Morris, reacts with uneasiness to his interlocutor’s tale (“...his manner of treating this latter part of the question seemed to me a little disrespectful”), and gives the impression he does not share his assumptions. On the other hand, if Old Hammond is Guest’s double¹², this episode points out the writer’s uncertainty on the subject.

In fact, before writing *News from Nowhere*, Morris had expressed more radical views about the organization of domestic labour, positively declaring that women would not be really free unless men would be willing to take part in housework:

The domestic arts: The arrangement of a house in all its details, marketing, cleaning, cooking, baking and so on; sewing with its necessary concomitant of embroidery and so forth... whoever was incapable of taking interest and a share in some part of such work would have to be considered diseased; and the existence of many such diseased persons would tend to the enslavement of the weaker sex.¹³

Since Morris failed to translate these propositions into fiction, it is plausible to postulate the presence of ambivalent drives in his mind, a discrepancy between his rational beliefs and his emotional and/or aesthetic inability to imagine an interchange of domestic roles. A complementary explanation can be found in the writer’s possible concern about the response of his reading public, who might be more shocked by the questioning of deep-rooted female and male domestic identities than by the proposal of unconventional sexual morality¹⁴. In a way it is as if what holds good for Morris is just the reverse of Northrop Frye’s definition regarding the dilemmas faced by the utopian writer:

... [he] has to struggle with the anxieties suggested to him by his own society, trying to distinguish the moral from the conventional, what would be really disastrous from what merely inspires a vague feeling of panic, uneasiness, or ridicule.¹⁵

Another relevant aspect for understanding the position of women in Nowhere can be traced in Old Hammond’s revaluation of maternity expressed from the vantage point of a renewed society, where “all the artificial burdens of motherhood are done away with”:

“... the ordinarily healthy woman ... respected as a child-bearer and rearer of children, desired as a woman, loved as a companion, unanxious for the future of her children, has far more instinct for maternity than the poor drudge and mother of drudges of past days could ever have had; or than her sister of the upper classes, brought up in affected ignorance of natural facts, reared in an atmosphere of mingled prudery and prurience.” (Ch. IX)

This speech might sound like a mere glorification of a sort of motherhood, which – however different in quality from the hypocritical Victorian ideology of maternity – has acquired new dignity both socially and morally, but the implications of Old Hammond’s words go deeper. Motherhood, in fact, is now considered not only as a natural biological event for the reproduction of the species but also as a creative act based on love and pleasure and for this very reason producing beauty:

“... a child born from the natural and healthy love between a man and a woman, even if that be transient, is likely to turn out better in all ways, and especially in
bodily beauty, than the birth of the respectable commercial marriage bed, or the
dull despair of the drudge of that system ... Pleasure begets pleasure.” (Ch. IX)

Now, if we consider that the conception of work as pleasure leads to the notion that
creative activity has become a kind of biological aim for mankind, there arises a
significant analogy between motherhood and unremunerated work as creative
processes of equal relevance, as can be inferred from Old Hammond’s remarks:

“The reward of labour is life ... the reward of creation. If you are going to ask to
be paid for the pleasure of creation, which is what excellence in work means, the
next thing we shall hear of will be a bill sent in for the begetting of children.”
(Ch. XV)

From this it follows, paradoxically, that women are more privileged than men in the
acts of creation, since there will always be procreation, and in addition they can
perform working activities too, while men must face a possible shortage of work
("... there is a kind of fear growing up amongst us that we shall one day be short of
work. It is a pleasure which we are afraid of losing"; Ch. XV).

It has been rightly pointed out that in News from Nowhere “sexuality is seen as
an explosive area of human relationships” 12. In fact there are examples of misery and
disruption caused by dislocated erotic drives, though they are exceptions in an
otherwise harmonious and peaceful community.

The family having undergone a radical change by assuming a voluntary and open
dimension, marriage is now a question of free choice:

“... families are held together by no bond of coercion, legal or social, but by mutual
liking and affection, and everybody is free to come or go as he or she pleases.”
(Ch. XII)

The consequence is that sexual behaviour is no longer based on a set of dogmatic
norms, but this extreme tolerance does not prevent the occurring of situations in
which the individual causes or endures disappointment, deep sorrow or even violence.
The complex and inordinate nature of sexual relations is explicitly admitted in Old
Hammond’s statement:

“We do not deceive ourselves, indeed, or believe that we can get rid of all the trouble
that besets the dealings between the sexes.” (Ch. IX)

William Guest’s encounters with women and his one-sided attraction to them loom
in the text as patterns of dislocated and frustrated desire, suggesting on one hand the
transient and erratic character of love and, on the other, its centrality in human life.
His disappointment in his relations with women may be explained in terms of his
being an alien in the society he visits. However, his unfulfilled love-relationship with
Ellen has deeper implications; she is an ideal within an ideal society, and his frustration
indicates the long process ahead before mankind can reach both. Ellen’s symbolic
significance of a further temporal dimension is conveyed by her being “strangely
interesting” and inscrutable, as Guest points out:

... of all the persons I had seen in that world renewed, she was the most unfamiliar
to me, the most unlike what I could have thought of. (Ch. XXVII)
The stories concerning the people living in the utopian world dramatize the possible negative consequences deriving from the free play of human feelings. Clara and Dick’s case is emblematic of how their separation, caused by her love for another man, did not imply her social disgrace as it would have in the past; moreover the sorrow that the situation brought about was not sharpened by legal questions or personal retaliations from her husband (Ch. IX). The happy ending of this story is counterbalanced by the tragic episode told by Walter Allen concerning the unintentional crime committed by a man provoked by another man out of jealousy (Ch. XXIV). As it seems this is not an isolated case since, earlier on in the text, Dick’s comment on the unreasonable character of love is followed by the account of a similar disaster:

“... only a month ago there was a mishap down by us, that in the end cost the lives of two men and a woman, and, as it were, put out the sunlight for us for a while.” (Ch. VI)

In such mournful events the cause of disturbance is imputed to the beauty and charm of women. Ellen herself acknowledges the dangerous appeal of her looks when explaining why she lives in a secluded place:

“... even amongst us, where there are so many beautiful women, I have often troubled men’s minds disastrously.” (Ch. XXVIII)

The recurrent, though mild, emphasis on the alluring nature of femininity suggests that Morris’s imagination is intrigued, unconsciously or not, by the figure of the femme fatale.

The presence of destabilizing elements, all belonging to the sexual spheres, cannot be easily reconciled with the generally idyllic atmosphere of Morris’s utopia. Bearing in mind biographical data which might have contributed to the overall conception of love and of the relationships between the sexes, we must consider the two principles governing the whole structure of News from Nowhere, which is not devised as a static and uniform Eden: dynamism and variety. The combination of these two structuring dimensions serves the purpose of showing how the uniqueness of the individual self can be preserved in an egalitarian and free society. Now, though diversity in the satisfaction of the basic human needs such as in food, clothes, housing or in the choice of social, working and intellectual activities is not disruptive, the gratification of sexual impulses is more problematic, because timing and reciprocity are unpredictable components in the free interplay of individual drives and feelings. Finally – and here we go back to Morris’s personal experience – News from Nowhere is both a dream and a vision: if the latter prefigures his political and rational beliefs, the former retains the anxieties and hopes of his emotional life.

NOTES


2 On this point I agree with Robert E. Lougy’s statement: “... the art of the new world is not an escape from the reality to the pleasure principle, but rather a

The overall assumptions of my article are inspired by Herbert Marcuse’s Eros and Civilization (New York, Vintage Books, 1962).

William Morris, Collected Works (New York, Russell & Russell, 1966), Vol. XVI. Hereafter indications of the chapters will be given in brackets in the text.

According to Raymond Williams’s classification of utopian fiction, News from Nowhere belongs to type c, “the willed transformation, in which a new kind of life has been made possible by human effort”. ‘Utopia and Science Fiction’, in Problems in Materialism and Culture (London, Verso, 1980), p. 196.


See Vita Fortunati, La letteratura utopica inglese (Ravenna, Longo, 1979), pp. 139-44.


In his review of Bellamy’s utopian novel, Morris writes that “he [Bellamy] has his mind fixed firmly on the mere machinery of life”, and expresses his belief “that variety of life is as much an aim of a true Communism as equality of condition, and that nothing but an union of these two will bring about real freedom”. May Morris ed., William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist (Oxford, Blackwell, 1936), Vol. 1, p. 503 and p. 507.


The identification of Guest with Hammond is alluded to in Chapter IX by the classic device of the mirror: “... his face, dried-apple-like as it was, seemed strangely familiar to me; as if I had seen it before - in a looking glass it might be, said I to myself”.


As Edward P. Thompson points out, “the Socialist movement of the 'eighties and 'nineties, with its sense of sudden liberation from all bourgeois conventions, was a period rife both in speculation and in unconventional practice in sexual relations; naturally there were muddles and naivities enough, but the atmosphere was healthy in so far as secretiveness and hypocrisy were replaced by open advocacy of unorthodox behaviour”. William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary (London, Merlin Press, 1977), p. 705.


Michael Wilding, op. cit., p. 89.