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Emma Shaw[1,*]

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*Correspondence: emma.shaw-4@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk
[1] University of Manchester, UK

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Walking at the Margins in *Lolly Willowes* and *Summer Will Show*

Emma Shaw

Abstract

This article explores the function of walking in two novels by Sylvia Townsend Warner. Rambling in post-Rousseauian nature, Laura Willowes discards the persona of spinster aunt to discover her vocation as a witch. However, the novel's elegiac ending suggests her freedom may be short-lived. Sophia Willoughby's heroic walks amidst the Paris barricades in *Summer Will Show* similarly suggest little possibility of real change. Walking in Warner's fiction offers the prospect of liberation, but in crossing social boundaries her protagonists are ultimately confined to the margins of society.

Keywords Sylvia Townsend Warner; walking; *Lolly Willowes*; *Summer Will Show*; flâneuse

When Laura Willowes realises she has unwittingly 'entered into a compact with the Devil' and become a witch, the narrator of *Lolly Willowes* asks: 'What else had set her upon her long solitary walks […]?'[1] As a child, Laura walks to indulge her passion for botany and, as an adult, to find the 'the clue to her disquiet' and escape the claims of her brother's family, for whom 'Aunt Lolly' is 'indispensable' (*LW* 68, 61). But what seems obvious to the narrator – that only Laura's vocation as a witch could inspire a taste for solitary walks – may be less apparent to the reader.

A no less dramatic transformation takes place in *Summer Will Show* when Sophia Willoughby, the 'well-incomed, dis-husbanded' mistress of Blandamer House, falls in love with her husband's

ex-mistress and joins the Paris revolutions of 1848.[2] Sophia's changing identity, like Laura's, can be traced through her walks. At the start of the novel, she walks her family estate, 'feeling herself with every step deepening her hold upon the earth that she trod upon and owned' (*SWS* 20). Walking affirms her self-proclaimed identity as 'a landowner, and a mother'. Yet, walking in Cornwall to delay her return home, she expresses frustration at 'the long idleness of a woman's life' and acknowledges her 'desire to leave a mark' (*SWS* 53–4). Her longing translates into a fearless revolutionary spirit so that by the novel's end she walks alone in support of the revolution, collecting scrap iron for ammunition and distributing copies of the *Communist Manifesto*. She peruses 'over and over' an advertisement that reads 'Walk without Fear', a phrase that recalls she felt 'something like fear' in Cornwall and signifies her changed outlook (*SWS* 364, 49). Both novels associate walking alone with a liberating transformation in identity which, paradoxically, confines the protagonists to the margins of society: one an impoverished witch and the other in a seemingly lesbian relationship and, thanks to her husband's control of her patrimony, reduced to a 'hymn-singing beggar' (*SWS* 303). I will show how Warner embraces the contradictory message that a woman walking alone conveys in literature as part of a wider strategy of withholding resolution in her novels. As with any discussion of walking, I touch on the precedent activities of the flâneur and finish by looking more closely at two walks in *Lolly Willowes* and *Summer Will Show*.

Critical and popular interest in walking has focused on the flâneur, Charles Baudelaire's idle stroller of the Parisian arcades, later theorised by Walter Benjamin as a hero of modernity to be found, in Benjamin's memorable phrase, 'botanising on the asphalt'.[3] Keith Tester, in a paraphrase of Baudelaire, defines flânerie as 'the observation of the fleeting and the transitory which is the other half of modernity to the permanent and central sense of self'.[4] The flâneur scans the flickering images of the modern cityscape for material to synthesise into his artistic production and, by transforming the ephemera of modernity into art, he comes to understand and define himself. Through the *doing* of walking, the flâneur finds the truth of his *being*.

Janet Wolff's essay, 'The Invisible *Flâneuse*', critiques the idea of a female equivalent, arguing such a figure 'was rendered impossible by the sexual divisions of the nineteenth century'.[5] Even Sophia grudgingly admits that in 1847 'a woman's sphere was the home' (*SWS* 53). A bourgeois woman out walking lacked the flâneur's essential anonymity since her presence alone on the street made her an object of scrutiny.

Hence, the women in Baudelaire's poems and essays are the marginal or debased figures the flâneur encounters out walking, notably prostitutes, lesbians, old women and widows, while the alluring subject of Baudelaire's poem, 'The Irreparable', is addressed as 'witch'.[6] This Journal recently published translations of nine poems by Baudelaire made by Warner in 1959, and her letters reveal a keen interest in French literature from the 1920s onwards, suggesting her likely familiarity with Baudelaire's gendered and perhaps misogynistic ideas around walking when she wrote *Lolly Willowes*.[7]

Laura's early botanising, however, takes place not on the asphalt but in 'forsaken green byways' and by 1922, when she links her solitary walks to her witchy nature, a woman walking alone was unremarkable (*LW* 28). Laura, like countless others, 'strained against her [domestic] moorings' while working on the Home Front, and thereafter the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919 improved access to education and the professions and, consequently, women's visibility in public life (*LW* 60). While Laura and Sophia are not flâneuses, flânerie provides a useful structure through which to understand their walks. The flâneur gleans material from the street to produce his art while they turn their gaze inward to make the object of production the self.

In her pioneering book, *Literary Women*, Ellen Moers writes: 'A whole history of literary feminism might be told in terms of the metaphor of walking.'[8] Women writers use walking, Moers suggests, to engage in a feminist critique, since walking tests an ideology that conflates women's spatial freedom with violations of sexual convention, as is apparent from the extended senses of straying, wandering and roaming down a path that ends with tramps and streetwalking. A female character walking alone tramples over historic restrictions on women's mobility in an expression of literary feminism.

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* offers an example. Early in the novel, Elizabeth Bennet crosses three miles of fields to visit her ailing sister and arrives with tousled hair and a petticoat six inches deep in mud. While the narrative suggests the walk demonstrates her spirited independence, the loathsome Bingley sisters draw attention to Elizabeth's 'wild' and 'blowsy' appearance, her dirty underclothes and a lack of decorum in walking 'alone, quite alone'.[9] Their comments point to an impropriety that verges on sexual indecency. A 'blowze', after all, is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) as a 'beggar's trull', the lowest form of prostitute. Walking by herself threatens to soil Elizabeth's reputation as readily as her petticoat yet intimates her daring and willingness to defy social mores.

Warner's engagement with Austen's work is apparent from the pamphlet on Austen written for the British Council and the frequent allusions to Austen's characters in her novels. Sophia Willoughby, for example, shares the married name of Sophia Grey, another wealthy heiress who is married for money by John Willoughby in Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*. Warner's Frederick Willoughby, likewise, brings 'a dowry of debts' to his marriage (*SWS* 27).

More pertinently, after Sophia's children die of smallpox, contracted at a lime kiln where they inhale the fumes in a traditional cure for whooping cough, Sophia returns to the kilnman at night, reasoning with a perverse logic born of grief that 'he robbed me of my children, he shall give me others' (*SWS* 94–5). Arriving at the kiln, the lantern light falls 'on her ringed hand, and […] muddied hem'. Sophia is still married, despite banishing her errant husband from Blandamer, and the muddied hem invites a comparison between the shocking purpose of Sophia's walk and Lizzie Bennet's more innocent defiance. Warner subverts a Baudelairean tradition that reads solitary female walkers as pariahs and overlays it with another in which women writers show female characters challenging their condition through the practice of walking.

Lolly Willowes and *Summer Will Show* lend themselves to feminist readings as novels of liberation. Terry Castle describes *Summer Will Show* as a 'novel of liberation'[10] and Jan Montefiore pinpoints Minna's story of the pogrom that kills her parents as 'liberat[ing] the listening Sophia both emotionally and politically'.[11] The narrator declares Sophia 'was released' only when Minna donates their last £25 to a collecting box marked 'For the Polish Patriots', freeing her, as a good communist, from the oppression of wealth (*SWS* 213–14). Jacqueline Shin claims witchcraft is 'an allegory for the liberation of […] women from everyday oppression'[12] while Vike Martina Plock and Alex Murray note Laura 'becomes liberated' in the shop on Moscow Road where she buys the entire stock of mop-headed chrysanthemums.[13] The narrator holds back until the following May to announce 'she was released' as Laura smells the first cowslips of summer (*LW* 123).

In this sense, Warner engages with a paradigmatic tale of 'enclosure and escape', familiar from another standby of feminist criticism: Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*.[14] Gilbert and Gubar's analysis of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* provides the overarching metaphor with which they describe the response of nineteenth-century women writers to the limiting representation of female literary characters as either angel-in-the-house or monster. While Jane is oppressed by the

domestic confines of a woman's lot, her mad double, Bertha Rochester, is physically confined in the attic of Thornfield Hall. Jane's fantasy of an 'escape-into-wholeness' or of a unified self is made possible only by fleeing Thornfield on foot and by Bertha's subsequent death. Laura and Sophia similarly reject domesticity to embrace a marginal existence as a witch and lesbian revolutionary respectively. *The Madwoman in the Attic* builds on Ellen Moers's insight that nineteenth-century women writers repurpose the Gothic tropes of Ann Radcliffe and her contemporaries – madness, doubles, confinement, the supernatural, revolution, sexual difference and so on – to feminist ends.[15] The uncanny doubling of Laura/Lolly has been read in a variety of ways but, since only the supernatural allows Laura to 'escape' her duality for 'a life of one's own', her predicament echoes the Gothic tradition (*LW* 196).

Gillian Beer notes that Warner's 'narratives never rest content with their initial project'.[16] The optimism implied by critical claims of liberation is undermined by the text. Although Beer considers that Laura, uniquely in Warner's work, makes a 'successful escape' following her 'happy and unpunished bargain' with Satan, Laura's bargain is 'unpunished' only in the sense that Satan has yet to call in the debt since, as Ren Draya points out in her 'darker analysis' of the final scene of *Lolly Willowes*, Laura's freedom may be short-lived.[17] Claire Harman recounts that Warner's publisher asked her to extend the ending beyond the point when Laura buries the apple bag because the original gave 'too strong an intimation of death'.[18] Satan's exclamation 'Dead!', as Laura smacks at a midge, sets off 'waves of startled thought […] rocking the shadows of familiar things', Satan then picks up his 'shears', such as might cut the thread of life, and Laura asks, 'Is it time?', before burying the bag and attempting to say 'good-bye' (*LW* 199–200). Laura's 'liberation' merely exchanges one 'dreadful kind of […] immortality' – the domestic drudgery of women – for another where Satan is 'Master' (*LW* 194, 198). Elsewhere in Warner's work, Beer notes, the idea of 'escape is investigated rather than celebrated'. Her narratives oblige the reader to accept 'the impossibility of hopes provoked' or in Minna's words, 'with what desolation of spirit one beholds the dream made flesh' (*SWS* 146). Speaking in February 1848, before the alliance between the workers and bourgeoisie broke down, Minna addresses not just the failed uprising but, more generally, the disappointment that inheres in the realisation of any dream.

It is tempting to understand Laura's walks in search of her 'own secret' in terms of the Romantic legacy bequeathed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (*LW* 68). In *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, Rousseau advocates

solitary walking as productive of selfhood: 'These hours of solitude and meditation are the only ones in the day when I am completely myself and my own master […] the only ones when I can truly say that I am what nature meant me to be.'[19] He represents walking as a gateway to self-knowledge. Yet Jacques Derrida's well-known critique of Rousseau points to the absences that define Rousseau's subjectivity; culture and society hover as ghostly supplements within Rousseau's idea of nature and solitude, undermining the notion that he has mastery over a singular unified selfhood.[20] Although Warner gestures towards the idea of walking as transformative, the transformation is never absolute in the manner Rousseau suggests. Walking, in her fiction, produces a selfhood that is fragmentary and non-coinciding as revealed by the walks discussed below.

Part 3 of *Lolly Willowes* marks a shift in form from realism to fantasy, reflecting Laura's transition from spinster aunt to witch. After 20 years as an 'inmate' in her brother's household, Laura renounces her 'existence' as put-upon Aunt Lolly to embark on a life of her choosing in a village with the unlikely name of Great Mop (*LW* 7, 196). However, shortly after her 'release' amid the cowslips, Laura's nephew, Titus, moves to Great Mop. In 'despair and rebellion' Laura goes for a walk, only for Titus to call after her, 'Where are you off to, Aunt Lolly? Wait a minute and I'll come too', once again interpellating her as 'useful and obliging and negligible' Aunt Lolly (*LW* 130, 137).

In London, Laura seeks 'the clue to her disquiet' in places of transition or dislocation, where people move from one place to another, or one world to the next – city churches, burial grounds, Paddington Station and London's docklands (*LW* 67–8). She absents herself mentally from her brother's home on 'rambles in the strange places of the mind': 'while her body sat before the first fires [of autumn …], her mind walked by lonely sea-bords, in marshes and fens, or came at nightfall to the edge of a wood' (*LW* 112). She is split between her physical presence as Aunt Lolly and Laura, who explores an inner landscape; 'she walked there alone, mistress of it' because like Rousseau she seeks mastery over her identity. When she finds an existential home in Great Mop, she feels 'nothing could ever again disturb her peace', but Titus's arrival threatens her mastery and returns her to 'a state of Aunt Lolly' (*LW* 106, 51).

Laura walks out of the village with Titus's voice echoing in her ears and finds herself alone in a field. Jennifer Nesbitt notes the repetition and alliteration with which Warner draws attention to the 'field, a field of unusual form, for it was triangular', arguing that 'landscape [in *Lolly*

Willowes] is a structuring agent in subjectivity'.[21] Although she claims that 'country walks in fields […] do not arouse hermeneutic suspicion', whereas Nesbitt reads 'setting as a sign system saturated with political meanings', I argue that walking is the necessary heuristic which extracts meaning from landscape.

The second sense of 'triangle' given in the *OED* refers to its symbolic use in magic, citing Reginald Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584). The triangle acts as a threshold between the mortal and supernatural worlds through which Satan and his demons may be summoned or 'brought into a triangle'. As Laura walks 'up and down, turning savagely' when she reaches the edge of the field, she mimics the ancient custom of beating the bounds, walking the boundaries of a parish while praying for protection from encroachment by neighbours (*LW* 129). As she walks the triangular field, Laura silently bargains for protection from Titus's inroads on her territory, offering up all 'the green meadows', 'hill tops' and 'beech woods' in exchange for solitude in 'this dismal field' (*LW* 131). Except Laura's solitude is peopled by everyone she sought to escape: 'The field was full of complacent witnesses. Titus had let them in. Henry and Caroline and Sibyl, Fancy and Marion and Mr Wolf-Saunders stood round about her' (*LW* 137). Just as Rousseau is consumed in *Reveries* by bitter reflections on society while seemingly alone in nature, Laura's well-meaning relatives define her solitude. By tracing a triangle, Laura's walk creates meaning from 'the sign system of setting', summoning Satan to restore her mastery over a divided self and restructure her subjectivity.

In *Summer Will Show*, Warner represents Sophia's fragmented consciousness through form. The novel opens in 1847 with Sophia about to walk to the lime kiln with her children. However, the pluperfect clause in the first sentence shifts the narrative back 21 years: 'It was on this very day – the thirteenth of July – and in just such weather that Sophia Willoughby had been taken to see the Duke of Wellington' (*SWS* 3). Sophia, as a child, waits on the drive of Blandamer before setting off to see the duke with her parents. Warner waits until the next page to alert the reader with a jolt of awkward syntax that the adult Sophia is observing her child-self in memory: 'Now, down the same drive, walked she, Sophia Willoughby' (*SWS* 4). The coincidence of place, weather, date and time – 'ten o'clock precisely' – emphasises the division in Sophia, as the child of 1826 proceeds down the drive with the 'landowner and mother' of 1847. Mention of the duke anticipates a further divide between Sophia, the wealthy 'landowner' whose parents knew the hero of Waterloo, and the communist revolutionary of the

following year. Her children, named Damian and Augusta after their grandparents, echo the ghostly presence of the originals and before long will, likewise, exist only in memory. The sense of stability and continuity that a family estate passing through the generations should convey is undercut by uncanny doublings and ghosts from Sophia's past and future. From the first, she is produced on the page as a divided subject.

The third-person narration slips into free indirect discourse a paragraph later: 'How little the place had changed!', creating a perspective that hovers between Sophia's inner consciousness and the narrator's objective commentary, before Sophia wrests control altogether to shift the narrative into the first person: 'But I … I am changed indeed.' The repeated 'I' attempts to unify this instability, before 'changed' acknowledges the absent 'I' that she was. The narration returns repeatedly to Sophia's performance of herself as a singular and stable subject. She likens herself to the chestnut trees, believing that like them she is rooted in the estate, and claims, 'I admire them, and I am glad to resemble them […] I live for my children' (*SWS* 9). The greater her claim to 'suzerainty' and 'absolute sway', to feel herself 'deepening her hold upon the earth', the more fractured she appears, defined by the absent child she was and the revolutionary she is yet to become.

Walking in these novels unsettles the social and domestic structures that confine Laura and Sophia and reveals their conflicted sense of self. But liberation from the conventions that bind society together carries a consequence. However, when the alternative course espoused by Sophia's great-aunt Léocadie, the pragmatic survivor of three revolutions, is to 'take to spinning', the traditional occupation of women everywhere, the price, Warner suggests, may be worth paying (*SWS* 182).

Notes

1 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Lolly Willowes or The Loving Huntsman* (London: Virago, 2012), pp. 142, 146. Subsequent references in the text are abbreviated to *LW*.
2 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Summer Will Show* (London: Virago, 1994), p. 53. Subsequent references in the text are abbreviated to *SWS*.
3 Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Verso, 1997), p. 38.
4 Keith Tester (ed.), 'Introduction', in *The Flâneur* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 7.
5 Janet Wolff, 'The Invisible *Flâneuse*: Women and the Literature of Modernity', *Theory, Culture and Society* 2 (1985), p. 45.
6 Charles Baudelaire, 'The Irreparable', in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, trans. C. S. Thompson (Lincoln, NE: Writers Club Press, 2000), pp. 117–18.
7 Sylvia Townsend Warner, 'Nine Translations from Baudelaire (1959)',

Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society 2016, pp. 20–34.

8 Ellen Moers, *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (London: Allen, 1977), p. 130.

9 Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 36.

10 Terry Castle, 'Sylvia Townsend Warner and the Counterplot of Lesbian Fiction', *Textual Practice* 4 (1990), p. 227.

11 Jan Montefiore, 'Listening to Minna: Realism, Feminism and the Politics of Reading', *Paragraph* 14 (1991), p. 205.

12 Jacqueline Shin, '*Lolly Willowes* and the Arts of Dispossession', *Modernism/Modernity* 16.4 (2009), p. 709.

13 Vike Martina Plock and Alex Murray, 'Re-Visiting Sylvia Townsend Warner', *Literature Compass* 11 (2014), p. 727.

14 Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: Women Writers and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd edn (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. xi, 336.

15 Moers, *Literary Women*, p. 126.

16 Gillian Beer, 'Sylvia Townsend Warner: "The Centrifugal Kick"', in Maroula Joannou (ed.), *Women Writers of the 1930s: Gender, Politics, and History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 77.

17 Ren Draya, 'Some Musings on *Lolly Willowes*', *Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society 2001*, p. 23.

18 Clare Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Biography* (London: Minerva, 1991), p. 62.

19 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, trans. Peter France (London: Penguin, 1979), p. 35.

20 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp. 147–8.

21 Jennifer Poulos Nesbitt, 'Footsteps of Red Ink: Body and Landscape in *Lolly Willowes*', *Twentieth Century Literature* 49 (2003), pp. 449–50.

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Note on contributor

Emma Shaw is a doctoral candidate at the University of Manchester. Her research examines the function of walking in the work of women writers in the first half of the twentieth century.