

The Role of Women in Society in 19th-Century Literature
Compared to Contemporary Literature

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Writing this doctoral thesis has become more and more of a personal concern for me over the course of my work. While I initially started out by simply being interested in how feminism evolved, where it started and where it is now, I soon began to realize that there are issues concerning the equality between the genders that are so deeply rooted within society that we do not even recognize them anymore. It starts with telling people your topic and immediately receiving a pitying look, which makes you want to explain yourself and make it clear that you don't hate all men. It ends with being told that this is not a 'man's topic', and therefore is not necessarily relevant. I would therefore like to extend my deepest gratitude to the people who supported me and my thesis from the very beginning all throughout the end:

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Thirdly, to all the incredible women in my life, thank you. Being a girl's girl has never been so easy.

Plagiatserklärung

Von Plagiat spricht man, wenn Ideen und Worte anderer als eigene ausgegeben werden. Dabei spielt es keine Rolle, aus welcher Quelle (Buch, Zeitschrift, Zeitung, Internet usw.) die fremden Ideen und Worte stammen, ebenso wenig, ob es sich um größere oder kleinere Übernahmen handelt oder ob die Entlehnungen wörtlich oder übersetzt oder sinngemäß sind. Folgende Fälle stellen Plagiate dar:

- Einreichen einer Arbeit, mit deren Erstellung eine andere Person beauftragt wurde;
- Einreichen einer fremden Arbeit unter eigenem Namen;
- wörtliche Übernahme von Textpassagen aus Werken Anderer, ohne diese graphisch als Zitat zu markieren und/oder ohne die Quelle an der entsprechenden Stelle im Text kenntlich zu machen;
- Übernehmen von Ideen, Aussagen oder Argumentationen, ohne die Quelle eindeutig kenntlich zu machen;
- Übersetzen von Texten oder Textpassagen, ohne die Quelle kenntlich zu machen.

Ich erkläre hiermit, dass ich diese Arbeit selbstständig verfasst und keine anderen Hilfsmittel als die angegebenen benutzt habe. Die Stellen der Arbeit, die anderen Werken dem Wortlaut oder dem Sinn nach entnommen sind, sind in jedem einzelnen Fall unter Angabe der Quelle als Entlehnung kenntlich gemacht.

Katharina Pohlmann, Juni 2025

Abstract

As up until the end of the 19th century women were underrepresented in literary studies and female writers often had to use a male penname in order to be published, gender studies and female theory play a big role in contemporary literary theory. While in the 19th century women were measured by the contrasting terms ‘Angel in the House’, ‘Fallen Woman’, and, by the second half of the 19th century, ‘New Woman’, women appear to be a lot freer in their life choices in today’s society, and female writers and characters play a much bigger role in contemporary literature. However, despite the freedom women gained through the waves of feminism, one can still see the inequality between the genders in the 21st century, be it in the work force on the example of the gender pay gap or in everyday life where women are blamed for being molested.

It is often claimed that literature functions as a mirror of society. Consequently, this suggests that popular literature either appeals to what society as a whole believes or criticizes something a big part of society finds worth criticizing. The aim of this dissertation is therefore to examine in how far the role of women within society has changed over the last 200 years and whether women are still being classified under the terms ‘Angel in the House’ and ‘Fallen Woman’. For this, bestselling authors of the 19th and of the 21st century will be compared to see what the wider public liked to read in each respective time and whether the way of writing about women has actually changed as much as one would expect. Another important factor to focus on is the changing image of women as well as the situation for women with a multicultural background. The questions to be answered are in how far the portrayal of women in literature has changed, in how far that portrayal aligns with reality, and whether there is any common ground between the different images of women from different cultures.

Zusammenfassung

Da Frauen bis zum Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts in der Literaturwissenschaft unterrepräsentiert waren und Autorinnen oft unter einem männlichen Pseudonym schrieben, spielen Gender- und Frauenstudien auch heute noch eine große Rolle in der Literaturwissenschaft. Der Feminismus, wie wir ihn heute kennen, begann etwa zur Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts zu einer Zeit, in der Frauen in Kategorien gesteckt wurden: benahm sie sich moralisch einwandfrei, war sie ein Engel ('The Angel in the House'); hat sie gegen die Regeln der Gesellschaft verstoßen, galt sie als gefallen ('Fallen Woman'). Die ersten Feministinnen ('New Woman') haben diese Klassifizierung von Frauen angefochten und forderten gleiche Rechte für Mann und Frau sowie ein Selbstbestimmungsrecht für Frauen. Die (patriarchalische) Gesellschaft des 19. Jahrhunderts sah dies als Gefahr – eine Frau, die selbst bestimmen möchte, ob und wie viele Kinder sie zur Welt bringt, würde zum Aussterben der Gesellschaft und damit des britischen Empires führen.

Das erste Kapitel dieser Doktorarbeit beschäftigt sich mit der Entwicklung des 19. Jahrhunderts. Zunächst werden die Begriffe 'Angel in the House' und 'Fallen Woman' anhand von Textbeispielen erklärt. Während Frauen, die gegen gesellschaftliche Normen verstoßen und sich 'unmoralisch' verhalten haben (zum Beispiel, indem sie Sex außerhalb ihrer Ehe hatte, was für Männer nie ein gesellschaftliches Problem darstellte) bereits im 17. Jahrhundert 'gefallen' genannt wurden, ist die erste Aufzeichnung des 'Engels' aus dem Jahr 1847 und wurde in den folgenden Jahren durch Coventry Patmores Gedicht *The Angel in the House* populär. In diesem Gedicht wird nicht nur erklärt, wie sich Frauen zu verhalten haben, um als Engel angesehen zu werden, sondern es bezieht sich auch auf die äußere Erscheinung, die Frauen zu Engeln macht. In einem weiteren Schritt geht das erste Kapitel auf die gesellschaftliche Erwartung ein, dass Frauen heiraten mussten; und dies in der Realität seltener aus Liebe, sondern aus wirtschaftlichen Gründen geschah. In einem letzten Schritt geht Kapitel 1 auf die ersten Feministinnen und die gesellschaftliche Reaktion auf diese 'neuen' Frauen ein. Eine interessante Beobachtung dabei ist, dass Marie Corelli, die zu ihrer Zeit eine der erfolgreichsten Schriftstellerinnen Großbritanniens war, sich in *My Wonderful Wife* der Gesellschaft anschließt und sich, obwohl sie selbst eine unverheiratete,

arbeitende Frau war, über die ‚New Women‘ lustig macht und als potenzielle Gefahr für die Gesellschaft, die sich aber nicht durchsetzen wird, darstellt. Im Gegensatz dazu wird Olive Schreiner (in diesem Fall nicht als Autorin der Kolonialzeit, sondern als Feministin) gestellt: was in *The Story of an African Farm* deutlich wird ist, dass die Probleme bezüglich der Ungleichbehandlung zwischen Mann und Frau, die angesprochen werden, auch im 21. Jahrhundert noch aktuell sind. Das erste Kapitel fungiert daher als eine Art ‚Grundlage‘, anhand derer gezeigt werden soll, wie die ‚Ausgangssituation‘ (für diese Doktorarbeit) war: wie wurden Frauen gesehen, welche Erwartungen an sie gab es, welche Konsequenzen, wenn diese Erwartungen nicht erfüllt wurden, und wie reagierte die Gesellschaft auf die ersten Feministinnen.

Das zweite Kapitel beschäftigt sich mit dem Wiederaufleben des 19. Jahrhunderts aus der Sicht des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts. Dabei werden zwei verschiedene Ansätze gewählt: zum einen durch *Regency Romances* und zum anderen durch neo-viktorianische Literatur. Die Unterscheidung zwischen der *Regency*-Periode und dem viktorianischen Zeitalter wird getroffen, weil die Gesellschaft – und damit auch die Stellung der Frau – in den beiden Geschichtsperioden sehr gegensätzlich war: während der *Regency* war die Gesellschaft weniger streng, was sich auch in der Kleidung der Frauen widerspiegelt, während Frauen im viktorianischen Zeitalter – buchstäblich – in ein Korsett gezwängt wurden. Während sich *Regency* Romanzen hauptsächlich auf die positiven Aspekte konzentrieren und ein farbenfrohes und sehr (ins positive) verzerrtes Bild der Oberschicht des 19. Jahrhunderts zeichnen, übt neo-viktorianische Literatur Kritik, zeigt die negativen Aspekte und Probleme auf und schließt auch die unteren sozialen Schichten mit ein. Obwohl die beiden Ansätze grundverschieden sind, wollen sie im Endeffekt doch auf das gleiche hinaus: die besten Resultate, sei es in einer Partnerschaft, einem Forschungsunterfangen etc., können nur erzielt werden, wenn man zusammenarbeitet und nicht Leute, die genauso fähig sind, ausschließt, nur weil sie ein anderes Geschlecht haben. Sie zeigen aber nicht nur entweder ein historisch falsches, dafür aber romantisches Bild des 19. Jahrhunderts (*Regency* Romanzen) oder kritisieren es ganz offen (neo-viktorianische Literatur), sondern vor allem neo-viktorianischer Literatur zeigt, wo sich die Gesellschaft schon gewandelt und gebessert hat, wo es noch

Handlungsbedarf gibt und welche Konsequenzen es haben kann, wenn nichts passiert.

Das dritte Kapitel beschäftigt sich mit zeitgenössischer Literatur, die im 20. und 21. Jahrhundert spielt. Zunächst gehe ich auf das sich im Laufe des 20. Jahrhunderts ändernde Frauenbild ein. Dafür analysiere ich Jeffrey Archers *Clifton-Saga* und Ken Folletts *Jahrhunderttrilogie*, die beide die – fiktiven – Geschichten verschiedener Familien im 20. Jahrhundert erzählen. Der besondere Fokus liegt hier auf der Darstellung der Frauenfiguren: wie unterscheidet sich die Darstellung zu der des 19. Jahrhunderts, welche Arten von Frauenfiguren gibt es und wie wird die moderne Frau beschrieben? Für diesen ersten Teil des vierten Kapitels habe ich Autoren gewählt, die zu den meistgelesenen britischen Autoren unserer Zeit gehören, in der Literaturwissenschaft aber kaum bis keine Beachtung finden. Das mache ich für den Kontrast zum 19. Jahrhundert: Marie Corelli war die meistgelesene Autorin ihrer Zeit und sie war eine unverheiratete, erfolgreiche und unabhängige Frau. Sie war all das und schrieb trotzdem gegen die ersten Feministinnen, vielleicht, weil sie wirklich der Überzeugung war, dass der Feminismus der Gesellschaft schaden würde und die Ironie nicht erkannte, aber definitiv, weil es der Zeitgeist war. Im 21. Jahrhundert ist die Gesellschaft – wenigstens nach außen hin – überzeugt davon, dass der Feminismus wichtig ist und Männer und Frauen gleichgestellt sein sollten; das heißt, dass männliche Bestsellerautoren heute in einer ähnlichen Position sind, in der sich Marie Corelli zu ihrer Zeit befand. Am Ende dieses Unterkapitels wird die aktuelle und reale Situation der Frauen anhand aktueller Statistiken und Beispielen zusammengefasst.

Danach behandle ich die verschiedenen Frauenbilder in einer sich immer weiter globalisierenden Welt. Dafür werden die Romane von zwei Autorinnen mit Migrationshintergrund analysiert, Monica Ali mit *Brick Lane* und Zadie Smith mit *NW*. Die Erfahrungen von Frauen in einer Welt, die auf Grund der Globalisierung immer diverser wird, spielen eine immer größere Rolle: wie unterschiedlich sind die Frauenbilder verschiedener Kulturen und wie geht eine Frau damit um, wenn diese Kulturen aufeinanderprallen?

Index of Abbreviations and Editions Used

<i>An Offer From a Gentleman</i>	Quinn, Julia. 2001. <i>An Offer From a Gentleman</i> . London: Piatkus.
<i>Be Careful What You Wish For</i>	Archer, Jeffrey. 2014. <i>Be Careful What You Wish For</i> . London: Pan Books.
<i>Best Kept Secret</i>	Archer, Jeffrey. 2013. <i>Best Kept Secret</i> . London: Pan Books.
<i>Brick Lane</i>	Ali, Monica. 2003. <i>Brick Lane</i> . London: Black Swan Books.
<i>Cometh the Hour</i>	Archer, Jeffrey. 2016. <i>Cometh the Hour</i> . London: Pan Books.
<i>Edge of Eternity</i>	Follett, Ken. 2015. <i>Edge of Eternity</i> . London: Pan Books.
<i>Fall of the Giants</i>	Follett, Ken. 2011. <i>Fall of Giants</i> . London: Pan Books.
<i>Fingersmith</i>	Waters, Sarah. 2002. <i>Fingersmith</i> . London: Virago Press.
<i>It's In His Kiss</i>	Quinn, Julia. 2005. <i>It's In His Kiss</i> . London: Piatkus.
<i>Jane Eyre</i>	Brontë, Charlotte. [1847] 2008. <i>Jane Eyre</i> . Ed. Erica Jong and Marcelle Clements. New York: Signet Classics.
<i>Mansfield Park</i>	Austen, Jane. [1814] 2014. <i>Mansfield Park</i> . Ed. Amanda Vickery. London: Vintage Classics.
<i>Mightier than the Sword</i>	Archer, Jeffrey. 2015. <i>Mightier than the Sword</i> . London: Pan Books.
<i>My Wonderful Wife</i>	Corelli, Marie. [1890] 2007. <i>My Wonderful Wife: A Study in Smoke</i> . New York: Elibron Classics.
<i>NW</i>	Smith, Zadie. 2012. <i>NW</i> . London: Penguin Books.
<i>On the Way to the Wedding</i>	Quinn, Julia. 2006. <i>On the Way to the Wedding</i> . New York: Avon Books.
<i>Only Time Will Tell</i>	Archer, Jeffrey. 2011. <i>Only Time Will Tell</i> . London: Pan Books.
<i>Possession</i>	Byatt, A.S. [1990] 2009. <i>Possession</i> . London: Vintage Books.
<i>Pride and Prejudice</i>	Austen, Jane. [1813] 1960. <i>Pride and Prejudice</i> . Ed. J.B. Priestley. London: Penguin Books.
<i>Regency Buck</i>	Heyer, Georgette. [1935] 2004. <i>Regency Buck</i> . London: Arrow Books. E-Book, Epub ISBN: 9781446457498.

<i>Romancing Mr Bridgerton</i>	Quinn, Julia. 2002. <i>Romancing Mr Bridgerton</i> . London: Piatkus.
<i>Sense and Sensibility</i>	Austen, Jane. [1811] 2012. <i>Sense and Sensibility</i> . Ed. Ros Ballaster. London: Penguin English Library.
<i>The Angel in the House</i>	Patmore, Coventry. [1854] 1885. <i>The Angel in the House</i> . 6 th ed. London: George Bell & Sons.
<i>The Duke and I</i>	Quinn, Julia. 2000. <i>The Duke and I</i> . New York: Avon Books.
<i>The French Dancer's Bastard</i>	Tennant, Emma. 2006. <i>The French Dancer's Bastard</i> . London: Maia Press.
<i>The French Lieutenant's Woman</i>	Fowles, John. [1969] 2004. <i>The French Lieutenant's Woman</i> . London: Vintage.
<i>The Sins of the Father</i>	Archer, Jeffrey. 2012. <i>The Sins of the Father</i> . London: Pan Books.
<i>The Story of an African Farm</i>	Schreiner, Olive. [1883] 2016. <i>The Story of an African Farm</i> . Scotts Valley: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.
<i>The Viscount Who Loved Me</i>	Quinn, Julia. 2000. <i>The Viscount Who Loved Me</i> . London: Piatkus.
<i>This was a Man</i>	Archer, Jeffrey. 2017. <i>This was a Man</i> . London: Pan Books.
<i>To Sir Phillip, With Love</i>	Quinn, Julia. 2003. <i>To Sir Phillip, With Love</i> . New York: Avon Books.
<i>When He Was Wicked</i>	Quinn, Julia. 2004. <i>When He Was Wicked</i> . New York: Avon Books.
<i>When William Came</i>	Saki. [1913] 1982. "When William Came: A Story of London Under the Hohenzollerns". <i>The Complete Saki</i> . 9 th ed. London: Penguin Books. 688-814.
<i>Wide Sargasso Sea</i>	Rhys, Jean. [1966] 2001. <i>Wide Sargasso Sea</i> . Ed. Hilary Jenkins. London: Penguin Books.
<i>Winter of the World</i>	Follett, Ken. 2013. <i>Winter of the World</i> . London: Pan Books.
<i>Wuthering Heights</i>	Brontë, Emily. [1847] 2012. <i>Wuthering Heights</i> . Ed. Pauline Nestor. London: Penguin English Library.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research Overview

As up until the end of the 19th century women were highly underrepresented in literary studies and female writers often had to use a male penname in order to be published, gender studies and female theory play a big role in contemporary¹ literary theory. In the 1980s, feminism started to spread over literary theories and created new forms of composite theories, such as Marxist feminism, feminist reader-response criticism, feminist new historicism, and feminist psychoanalysis (Finke 1992: 1). This new development was seen both critically, as feminists feared that this trend would threaten the ability of women to engage in meaningful political action, as well as positively, as it opened up new dialogues and debates among feminist literary critics (Finke 1992: 2). Elaine Showalter, who is regarded as one of the most influential American scholars in the field of female studies (Li and Bu 2016: 967), wrote about female representation in English literature in her landmark study *A Literature of Their Own* (1977):

In the atlas of the English novel, women's territory is usually depicted as a desert bounded by mountains on four sides: the Austen peaks, the Brontë cliffs, the Eliot range and the Woolf hills. This book is an attempt to fill in the terrain between these literary landmarks and to construct a more reliable map from which to explore the achievements of English women novelists. (Showalter [1977] 2009: ix)

Other scholars in the field of female studies, like Kate Millett in her *Sexual Politics* (1979) or Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), spend a great deal of their scholarly work on examining female writers from a feminist point of view and identifying negative stereotypes of women in texts written by men in the 19th century. Martha Vicinus, additionally, concentrates on the double standards women were faced with in the Victorian period and that the ideal woman had no desire for sexual intercourses and neither enjoyed them, for example in *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women* (1977) or as an editor of *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age* (1972). Going in a

¹ The term 'Contemporary Literature' is generally used to describe literature from 1945 onwards. Although this period covers, as of 2025, 80 years, and the image and position of women within society has surely developed in this time span, the aim of this thesis is not to create a new term for literature, and therefore the term 'Contemporary Literature' will be used for literature of the 20th and 21st century.

similar direction, Mary Poovey discussed the problems female authors of the 19th century had to deal with breaking free from the stereotypical expectations they were faced with by society in her *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (1984).

As Finke explains, female oppression has always been perceived as something “natural” or the “result of universal and immutable differences between the sexes” (Finke 1992: 3). Because of this perception, feminist theory and gender studies must be seen as an important topic of research for contemporary literary theory. The importance of gender studies can also be seen in the breadth of topics covered: not only is gender studies divided into women studies, men studies, and queer studies, but each ‘sub-area’ of gender studies can be further subdivided into different directions; exemplary for women studies, one could name feminist theory, multiculturalism, embodiment, social justice, etc.

Feminist criticism therefore concentrates on “the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforce or undermine the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women” (Tyson 2006: 83). According to Tyson, feminist theory holds up a mirror not just to the public, but also the private lives and asks people to reassess their most personal experiences and most entrenched and comfortable assumptions (Tyson 2006: 130). Siegfried Broß, judge of the German Federal Constitutional Court from 1998 to 2010, additionally points out that gender inequality is mainly a problem of society that cannot be come by solely by legislative changes, but mainly through changes in the social consciousness:

Die Gleichberechtigung der Frau ist – solange man in der Geschichte auf Quellen zurückschauen kann – zunächst ein kulturell-gesellschaftliches Problem: Die Stellung der Frau in der Gesellschaft [...] ist zunächst nicht von Normen geprägt, worunter ich in diesem Zusammenhang geschriebene oder ungeschriebene Gesetzesvorschriften verstehe, sondern von der Einstellung der Gesellschaft gegenüber der Frau [...]. Die Entwicklung der Gleichberechtigung der Frau ist deshalb in einer Gesellschaft umso langwieriger und mit vielen Hindernissen gepflastert, wenn das Gefälle ihrer Stellung in Bezug zu der des Mannes sehr groß ist, das heißt, wenn die männliche Vorherrschaft in einer Gesellschaft gleichsam erdrückend ist. Dem kann man nicht allein mit Gesetzesregeln begegnen. Damit kann man das Bewusstsein einer Gesellschaft - selbst bei den unmittelbar betroffenen Frauen - allein noch nicht ändern, allenfalls zunächst geringfügig und dann immer nachhaltiger beeinflussen. Es handelt sich um einen langwierigen Prozess, der in Europa - wenn man genau hinschaut - Jahrhunderte gedauert hat und selbst zu Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts etwa in Deutschland noch nicht als abgeschlossen betrachtet werden kann. (Broß 2010: 1-2)²

One question that needs to be addressed and answered is why feminism and feminist theory in literature are still important. Superficially speaking, in Western societies women have the right to vote, the right to work in whichever field they prefer, and a lot is done to secure that women have access to any sort of education and, consequently, leading positions. However, the internal misogyny is still very much present in society. Every too often, the argument ‘why should I employ her, she will just end up being pregnant and be on maternal leave anyway’ is raised when discussing whether to employ a male or a female candidate. Every too often, it is asked ‘what did you wear, though?’ when a woman reports harassment or rape. The WHO claims in an article from March 25, 2024, that “globally about 1 in 3 (30%) of women worldwide have been subjected to either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime” (WHO: Violence against Women).³ In a relatively recent prominent examples, 33-year-old Sarah

² “The equality of women is - as long as one can look back to sources in history - first of all a cultural-social problem: The position of women in society [...] is first of all not shaped by norms, by which I mean in this context written or unwritten legal regulations, but by the attitude of society towards women [...]. The development of equal rights for women in a society is therefore all the more protracted and paved with many obstacles if the disparity of their position in relation to that of men is very great, that is, if the male predominance in a society is, as it were, overwhelming. This cannot be countered with legal rules alone. This alone cannot change the consciousness of a society - even among the women directly affected - at best it can have a minor influence at first and then an increasingly lasting one. It is a protracted process that has taken centuries in Europe - if you look closely - and even at the beginning of the 21st century in Germany, for example, cannot yet be considered complete.” – translation by K. Pohlmann.

³ For full article, see: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>, no author, accessed March 22, 2025. For reasons of simplicity, whenever there is no author named for an online-article or an internet-source, which, for example, often is the case for governmental sites, I will simply add “no author” after the respective link. Otherwise, the author(s) will be named.

Everard went missing on March 3, 2021, when she was simply going home at around 9 pm in London. It was later found out that she had been kidnapped and murdered by a policeman. According to *The Sun* (article from March 8, 2021), the first response from the police was to warn women to “be careful going out alone”⁴ rather than, very blatantly speaking, warning men ‘not to kidnap and murder women’. Asking women to not go out alone is a form of victim-blaming because it implies that any woman who is attacked when she is outside is also at fault as she did not do what the police said. All this shows that feminism – which, in its very core, asks for the equality between the sexes, including the same rights to protection – is still very much a topic that needs to be addressed and that gender studies and female theory may therefore be called one of the most important fields of research in contemporary literary theory. Additionally, the LGBTQ+⁵ community is also facing major problems and lack of rights. According to *businessinsider.com*, a nominee of the 2013 Webby Awards for “Sites or blogs created by individuals, groups, or companies for professional and business-related topics”,⁶ homosexuality is still illegal in 35% of the UN member states and fewer than 30 countries recognize same-sex marriage.⁷ It is therefore important to not exclude the LGBTQ+ community from research that concentrates on gender equality. Although the number of critics concentrating on Queer Theory has risen in recent years, with its most prominent scholar being Judith Butler, it is, however, still a relatively young field of study and a lot of research still needs to be done. While the main topic of this thesis remains feminist theory and the position of women in society, a digression towards the end of chapter 3 will draw on queer literature.

⁴ For full article, see: https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/14269083/sarah-everard-missing-police-warning-clapham/?utm_medium=browser_notifications&utm_source=pushly, Holly Christodoulou, Julia Atherley, Mike Sullivan, and Amir Razavi, accessed March 22, 2025.

⁵ LGBTQ+ stands for “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and all other sexual orientations”. For reasons of simplicity, only the abbreviation LGBTQ+ will be used to describe and include all people of a sexuality outside of heterosexuality in the following.

⁶ See: <https://winners.webbyawards.com/2013/websites-and-mobile-sites/general-websites-and-mobile-sites/business-blogwebsite/147530/business-insider>, no author, accessed March 22, 2025.

⁷ For full article and additional statistics, see: <https://www.businessinsider.com/lgbtq-rights-around-the-world-maps-2018-10?r=DE&IR=T#same-sex-acts-can-still-carry-the-death-penalty-in-at-least-a-dozen-countries-1>, Shayanne Gal and Ashley Collman, accessed March 22, 2025.

1.2 Motivation and Aim of the Dissertation

The 19th century and especially the Victorian period⁸ from 1837 to 1901 are of particular interest as a starting point for this thesis because, as Birch (2008) puts it, it “can give us a clearer understanding of the origins of our present problems, showing how our tangles over education and class, gender and religion took root in the first place” (Birch 2008: 144). King (2005) furthermore claims that contemporary novels set in Victorian times tend to be characterized by their engagement with gender issues (King 2005: 2). This is why a neo-Victorian kind of literature – which the *OED* describes as “resembling, reviving, or reminiscent of, the Victorian era” (*OED* s.v. *neo-Victorian*, adj.) – is popular amongst contemporary writers. According to Llewellyn (2008), neo-Victorian literature is used to rewrite the historical narrative of the Victorian period by representing marginalized voices, new histories of sexuality, postcolonial viewpoints, and other generally different versions of ‘the Victorian’ (Llewellyn 2008: 165). One of these “marginalized voices” are the voices of women. John Fowles’ extradiegetic narrator in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969) also talks about the contradictory view on sexuality and women in the Victorian era:

What are we faced with in the nineteenth century? An age where woman was sacred; and where you could buy a thirteen-year-old girl for a few pounds – a few shillings, if you wanted her for only an hour or two. Where more churches were built than in the whole previous history of the country; and where one in sixty houses in London was a brothel (the modern ratio would be nearer one in six thousand). Where the sanctity of marriage (and chastity before marriage) was proclaimed from every pulpit, in every newspaper editorial and public utterance; and where never – or hardly ever – have so many great public figures, from the future king down, led scandalous private lives. (*The French Lieutenant’s Woman*: 268-269).⁹

According to Kohlke and Gutleben (2011), the interest in Victorian women, marriage, and family dynamics derives from the 19th century belief that the family served as the vaunted microcosm of Victorian society (Kohlke and Gutleben 2011:

⁸ In this dissertation I will use the terms ‘period’ and ‘era’ (synonymously), for example ‘Victorian period/era’ and ‘Regency period/era’. I make the distinction between different eras because society (be it in terms of fashion, morality, or attitudes towards women) underwent a transformation in the 19th century – the differences between the different periods will be explained in this thesis.

⁹ For simplicity, book citations in this dissertation have been combined and breaks have been removed. Emphases, such as italics, are taken from the respective novels unless otherwise indicated. Square brackets either indicate an ellipsis or parentheses for grammatical reasons or reasons of comprehensibility. Additionally, double quotation marks indicate a literal quote, while single spaces indicate my own emphases.

2). Nead (1988), in contrast, claims that the moral condition of the nation does not derive from the whole family, but solely from the moral standards of women (Nead 1988: 92). For this reason, young women were expected to marry a man out of their own social class or slightly above, and most women did so for personal, human reasons as well as economic and social ones (Perkin 1989: 236). However, especially in literature, the view on marriage started to change throughout the 19th century. Poets like Shelley, Byron, and Southey reportedly hated the institution of marriage, as they claimed it gave the partners property rights in each other's persons as well as in other forms of property, and proclaimed to idea of 'free love', which confused the love ideals of succeeding generations of English men and women (Perkin 1989: 207). Exemplary for these beliefs are James Lawrence's Utopian novel *The Empire of the Nairs: or the Rights of Women* (1811), which describes a kingdom in which marriage is foreign to the people and free love is the norm, and Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Queen Mab* (1813), which was, due to its perceived immorality and atheism, prosecuted for seditious blasphemy in 1821 (Perkin 1989: 207-208). These thoughts inspired women like Frances Wright, who was one of the earliest feminists, to fight for equal rights for women in terms of controlling their own property, entering sexual relations, and encouraging birth control practices to restrict family sizes and free women from endless pregnancies (Perkin 1989: 208-209).

Simultaneously to those early efforts for more equality between the sexes, the contrasting terms 'Angel in the House' ("(the type of) a woman likened to an angel presiding over the home; an idealized housewife or homemaker who shows selfless devotion to her husband and children", *OED* s.v. *angel in the house*, n.) and 'Fallen Woman' ("A woman who has lost her chastity, honour, or standing, or who has become morally degenerate; (sometimes) a prostitute", *OED* s.v. *fallen woman*, n.)¹⁰ classified women into 'good' and 'bad' people. According to Suzanne Cooper (2011), this was not only done by men to regain control from the first feminist movements but limiting women to certain roles was part of the much larger

¹⁰ The term 'Angel in the House' was, according to the OED, first quoted in 1847 and was then popularized by Coventry Patmore's poem, which will be analyzed in chapter 2 (https://www.oed.com/dictionary/angel_n?tab=meaning_and_use#1262571140, accessed March 22, 2025). The term 'Fallen Woman' has been first quoted in 1659 to describe women who have "lost their honor" (https://www.oed.com/dictionary/fallen-woman_n?tab=meaning_and_use#1214159840100, accessed March 22, 2025).

Victorian obsession with respectability (Cooper 2011: 90). Having lost one's respectability and being classified as a 'Fallen Woman', for example, meant for women to be shunned, ostracized from society, and left with few other options but to go to the workhouse or work as a prostitute (Kühl 2016: 172). Even though nowadays those terms are 'out-of-fashion', Tyson points out that they still apply to today's society. Exemplary for this sort of behavior, she explains the difference in the perception of men and women being sexually active. While women are described with the negative word "slut", men are being described with the positive word "stud" (Tyson 2006: 91). The goal of this dissertation is therefore to find out in how far the position of women in society has actually changed over the last 200 years and if the 19th century perception and classification of women – Angel in the House, Fallen Woman etc. – still play a role in contemporary literature and society.

1.3 Structure of the Dissertation

In a first step, the terms 'Angel in the House', which derives from Coventry Patmore's poem *The Angel in the House*, 'Fallen Woman', and 'New Woman' will be explained in detail, and the position of women in society in 19th century literature will be examined. A focus will also lie on how women writers saw the institution of marriage in a time in which, as explained in 1.2, several poets and novelists challenged the traditional idea of marriage. What will become obvious is that especially in the first half of the 19th century, it is made very clear that the ultimate goal of a woman was, despite her original beliefs or words, to get married to a – preferably rich – man. This can, for example, be seen in Jane Austen's novels.

Even though critics like Ian Watt (1963) do not count Jane Austen as a writer of the 19th century, but of the 18th century ("The Romantic movement and its Victorian aftermath was in general unlikely to be favorable to Jane Austen's classical sense of order and control", Watt 1963: 3), I count Austen as a writer of the 19th century in this thesis. As Watt indicates, there is an ongoing discussion about the period of Austen's writings, focusing mainly on Romanticism and Augustan. Exemplary, Jocelyn Harris (*A Revolution Almost Beyond Expression: Jane Austen's Persuasion*, 2007) and Marilyn Butler (*Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, 1988) both talk about Austen's *Persuasion* (1817) but come to different conclusions on whether it is part of Romanticism or Augustan literature. Although

there are arguments for both sides, considering narrative situation, style of writing etc., the main reasons for me to include Austen in this thesis as a writer of the beginning of the 19th century, and therefore a writer of Romanticism and the Regency Era, are that a) she was compared to Sir Walter Scott not only by others, like Robert Southey, but by Scott himself (Watt 1963: 3), and b) she not only published all of her novels during the Regency Period, but she was also read and well-liked by the Prince Regent, later King George IV, to whom she – more forced than willingly – dedicated her novel *Emma* (1815). The view on marriage in her novels also differs, which represents the different views in the early 19th century mentioned above: Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) does not want to get married solely for the sake of being married but sees marriage as a partnership based on mutual respect and ends up marrying the man she loves. Elinor in *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), in turn, is willing to accept that she cannot marry the man she loves. However, in contrast to her sister Marianne, who challenged the rules of society, Elinor, who valued the rules, ends up marrying for love.

The Brontë sisters, in contrast, are more openly critical of society in the 19th century. This can be seen in *Jane Eyre* (1847), in which Jane first refuses to be with Mr. Rochester without being married only to be with him on equal terms in the end, as well as *Wuthering Heights* (1847), in which Catherine, despite having a wild and free character, marries for social status and wealth rather than love, which ultimately leads to her downfall.

Naturally, those facts about the above-mentioned novels are known and nothing new to literary criticism, as the works of Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters are among the best-known English novels of all time. However, they also serve as great examples for the perception of women in the 19th century and are therefore used to explain the role assigned to women at that time.

For the new wave of feminism in the second half of the 19th century, a comparison between the prejudices against feminists on the example of *My Wonderful Wife* (1899) by Marie Corelli, a bestselling author of her time, and what feminists actually saw as their reality on the example of *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), which was more politically motivated, will be drawn. Whereas Corelli's novels repeatedly affirm that the 'New Woman' is a "threat of modernity"

that challenges and is therefore a danger to civilization, British imperialism, and, consequently, the empire (Crozier-De Rosa 2009: 416), the latter novel addresses the problems of the time concerning race, gender, and empire in a colonial frame and shows “an acute awareness of the intellectual and cultural mood of 1880s English modernity” (Barends 2015: 101).

Turning to contemporary literature, it seems, superficially speaking, as if the view on women has significantly changed and strong female characters seem to be a lot more normal in literature. It is therefore interesting to see how contemporary writers portray women in novels that take place in the 19th century and novels that take place in modern times in contrast to the perception of women in the 19th century. To cover the whole 19th century, both Regency Romances and neo-Victorian literature will be examined. As for Regency Romances, Julia Quinn’s *Bridgerton* romances¹¹ (2000-2006), which are, also due to the success of its Netflix-adaptation¹², highly successful romances, will be examined, and a comparison to the early Regency Romances on the example of *Regency Buck* (1935) by Georgette Heyer will be drawn. For neo-Victorian literature, Saki’s *When William Came* (1913), Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969), A.S. Byatt’s *Possession* (1990), Sarah Waters’ *Fingersmith* (2002), and Emma Tennant’s *The French Dancer’s Bastard* (2006) are of interest. The interesting aspect about the comparison between literature written in the 19th century and literature written about the 19th century is to see whether the authors attempt to show a realistic view of what women were supposed to be like or whether they speak critically of the 19th century and, consequently, show a different picture of women than actual literature from that time. One point that is especially interesting to see is how *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *The French Dancer’s Bastard* are written in contrast to *Jane Eyre*. *Jane Eyre* was, as mentioned before, understood to be quite a feminist and revolutionary novel for the time and Jane definitely did not have anything in common with an ‘Angel in the House’. *Wide*

¹¹ Section 3.1 will provide a closer definition as well as differentiation between a ‘romance’ and a ‘novel’.

¹² The film-adaptation on the streaming platform Netflix is based on the romances by Julia Quinn. However, changes have been made in the series to appeal to a wider audience. Most importantly, the color-blind casting of the Netflix-series, which is set in a world where one’s skin-color does not matter and people with all skin-colors can be found in each social class, from royalty to the working class, does not apply to the books, which, class-wise, paint a more realistic picture of the time of action than the Netflix series does.

Sargasso Sea, in contrast, tells the story of *Jane Eyre* from Bertha's point of view and is often called the 'feminist response' to Charlotte Brontë's novel, while Emma Tennant tells the story from Adèle's perspective. The differences between what was seen as feminist in the 19th century to what is called feminist nowadays will be examined.

Afterwards, contemporary literature that takes place in contemporary times will be analyzed. In this chapter, the focus will lie primarily on contemporary problems, such as society's expectations for women or the clash of different cultures and the problems that arise from this. For this part of the thesis, Ken Follett's *Century Trilogy* (2010-2014), Jeffrey Archer's *Clifton-Chronicles* (2011-2017), Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003), and Zadie Smith's *NW* (2012) are of interest. While Follett and Archer are both bestselling authors and portray women in the course of the 20th century, Monica Ali and Zadie Smith give voice to immigrant women in the UK. For these novels, it is interesting to see in how far they differ from both best-selling novels of the 19th century and literature attempting to represent the 19th century, and how they bring together different images of women.

While neo-Victorian literature is, based on its definition, more likely to be critical of Victorian beliefs and the perception of women, as Llewellyn describes it as the rewriting of the historical narrative of the Victorian period by representing marginalized voices, new histories of sexuality, postcolonial viewpoints, and other generally different versions of "the Victorian" (Llewellyn 2008: 165), contemporary literature set in modern times expectably aims to show a realistic view on women in contemporary society – even romances, and especially Young Adult romances, which are, as the genre suggests, all about love and romance, have their female main characters choose themselves more and more often (exemplary for this would be Lara Jean in Jenny Han's *Always and Forever, Lara Jean* (2017) or Elle in Beth Reekles's *One Last Time* (2021), who both choose to put themselves first and go to college where they think is best for them rather than following their boyfriends to where they want to go. Both book-series have a successful film-adaptation created by Netflix, which shows that this change of tone when it comes to romances and women in romances is something that appeals to a wider audience).

To find out the differences between the portrayal of women in literature of the 19th century and neo-Victorian literature, the novels of both times will be compared and it will be analyzed if neo-Victorian novels show a realistic view of life for women in the 1800s and in how far those novels are critical. In a further step, it will be analyzed whether a neo-Victorian portrayal of women differs from the portrayal of contemporary women. In this second step, there will not only be given light to women in the course of the 20th century, but, due to the growing globalization towards the end of the 20th century, also to immigrant women in British literature. While both Monica Ali and Zadie Smith have a multicultural background and therefore give a voice to women who are torn between two cultures and different expectations, Jeffrey Archer and Ken Follett are chosen because they are two of the most successful British authors of our time, which implies that they, while not usually being critically acknowledged, appeal to a larger part of society; this, consequently, means that they are of interest for this thesis and its aim to determine the position of women within society in the 21st century. All this is done in order to find out in how far the contemporary perception of women differs from the 19th century perception and whether the ‘old believes’ – Angel in the House, Fallen Woman etc. – still play a role in literature and, consequently, society nowadays. Especially in this last chapter, I will draw on current data concerning gender equality issues. For this, I will mainly look at data from ‘the West’. For the purpose of this thesis, I define the ‘West’ as countries that share the same or similar values when it comes to gender equality, such as, but not exclusively, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Germany, etc. I do not do this to claim moral superiority for these countries or exclude other countries, but because the values of these countries are becoming increasingly similar due to globalization, the open labor market, and a simplified freedom of movement.

Although it is not the main topic of this thesis, I will focus on queer literature in a digression towards the end of chapter 3. The focus in this digression will be on how queer people have been treated in the 19th century and how they are treated today, as well as how queer literature has developed in the past 200 years. While being aware that there has been queer literature throughout the 19th, 20th, and 21st century, the main focus will be on *The Line of Beauty* (2004) by Alan Hollinghurst,

as the novel deals with several problems queer people are faced with, including stigmatization and ostracization, and an analysis of it will be given.

As the title “The Role of Women in Society in 19th-Century Literature Compared to Contemporary Literature” suggests, it is a very broad topic. While I am aware that I am using several different genres and a multitude of primary literature, this is done because the problems women face are incredibly diverse. It is, of course, not possible to cover everything, but by including several novels of different genres, I hope to bring light to different angles of female literary theory and want to show that the problems women face in both history and contemporary society are not unilateral and simple, but eclectic and complex to solve as they root deep within social structures.

1.4 Selection of Authors and Novels

Looking at the selected literature of this thesis, one can see a clear pattern. Each chapter looks at popular, bestselling literature of its time on the one hand, and literature that is widely analyzed in the scholarly world on the other hand.¹³ In chapter 2, the difference between bestselling and critical literature could be described as ‘traditional views’ (Coventry Patmore and Marie Corelli) vs. ‘more progressive views’ (Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters, and Olive Schreiner). In chapter 3, the comparison between bestselling and critical literature is shown on Regency Romances (bestselling) and neo-Victorian literature (critical). In chapter 4, bestselling literature is represented by Jeffrey Archer and Ken Follett, and critical literature by Monica Ali and Zadie Smith. I have chosen these four authors because they offer different perspectives on the role of women in both a social and a cultural context of the 21st century: both Archer and Follett are known for dealing with social and historical topics in their novels, which allows me to analyze the development of female figures in the context of historical progress. Ali and Smith, on the other hand, are famous for focusing on the role of women in a multicultural and globalized world – thus representing the postcolonial perspective on the role of women in an intercultural context. The combination of those four authors, therefore,

¹³ For reasons of simplicity, I will be referring to those authors and pieces of literature that are of great scholarly importance as ‘critical’ and to those that are not as ‘bestselling’. This, however, shall not imply that ‘critical authors’ cannot be bestsellers nor that ‘bestselling authors’ are never subject to scholarly efforts.

allows me to show the complexity of the role of women in contemporary literature: from (in whichever culture) the traditional housewife and mother to an independent feminist. Because there are many different perspectives when it comes to the role of women in modern literature, I would claim that literature cannot be ‘just’ literature that needs to be analyzed as such, but it also reflects actual cultural and social debates about women and their role in society, which therefore needs to be included as well.

The constant comparison between ‘popular’ literature and ‘high-quality’ literature – bestselling vs. critical – throughout the chapters is done deliberately because it allows me to look at different perspectives not only on the role of women, but also on the dynamics of the reception of literature. First and foremost, bestselling literature is, as the name suggests, not only read by an intellectual elite, but by a wider audience. This makes bestselling novels an indicator for the zeitgeist: what is preoccupying society and/or which trends are popular in the time of the novels’ publication? Critical literature, in contrast, tends to demand a critical examination of social problems from its readers. The comparison between those two types of literature, therefore, makes it possible to examine different reactions to social problems – in this case, gender equality – and to question in how far literature serves as a mirror of society. Secondly, I feel like including popular literature into the scientific world promotes the diversity of literary studies: it not only expands the corpus of novels for scholars, but it also offers new opportunities for interdisciplinary research approaches – for example with social sciences. Lastly, I believe that literature in itself is a dynamic construct: History has shown that literature that is seen as, for example, ‘light reading’, ‘funny’, ‘weird’, or ‘unimportant’ in one era can be seen as an important part of literary criticism in another. Excluding a certain type of literature or author from literary studies for aesthetic or intellectual reasons therefore makes, in my opinion, no sense. For these reasons, I decided to include the authors and pieces of literature I chose for my thesis.

1.5 Research Questions

The four research questions this dissertation aims to answer are the following:

1. How do bestselling authors portray women in contrast to more politically motivated and/or critical authors?
2. How realistic are these portrayals of women?
3. Is the classification of women of the 19th century still used?
4. What differentiates male, female, and diverse/queer characters and, respectively, male and female authors?

The first research question will play a role in both 19th century literature and contemporary novels. Marie Corelli as well as Jeffrey Archer and Ken Follett were and are all greatly successful, bestselling authors – Marie Corelli is said to have sold more novels than most of her famous contemporaries, including Arthur Conan Doyle and H. G. Wells, and Archer and Follett count to the most successful contemporary British writers, yet there is barely any scholarly work written about them. The question therefore focuses on whether those authors that are more prominent to a wider audience, yet less relevant to scholars, depict their female characters differently to authors that are more politically motivated – Olive Schreiner, whose *The Story of an African Farm* is regarded as “the first feminist novel”, as well as Monica Ali and Zadie Smith, who want to raise awareness to immigrant women and their situation in the UK. The second research question concentrates mainly on neo-Victorian literature. The question here is whether the portrayal of 19th century women is realistic or whether contemporary authors sugarcoat or, on the other hand, stultify female characters. If an unrealistic picture of women is drawn, which is to be expected because of the definition of neo-Victorian literature given above, the question that needs to be answered is why this is done. Is this done because the common reader has shifted from being male to female and females do not want to read about weak and/or suppressed women? But if so, why write about the Victorian period at all? Research question three tries to find out whether the aspects of the terms used to classify women in the 19th century, namely the Angel in the House and its contrary, the Fallen Woman, are still used in contemporary literature. As mentioned before, the terms are mostly forgotten outside academic circles, yet the most superficial meaning of them – classifying women into good and bad girls – remain. Contemporary literature will therefore be examined as to whether the aspects of the theories introduced in the first chapters of the dissertation, in which the terms are explained with the help of 19th century

literature, are still present. If so, what needs to be examined is whether all female characters are portrayed in a certain way or if it is only done where it makes sense, whether assigning women to certain roles is seen as a natural given and not questioned at all, or whether the novel is aware and critical of the situation. The last research question, consequently, aims to answer the question that moves both feminists and LGBTQ+ activists: where, in fact, are the boundaries between the different genders and what unites them? The comparison between male, female, and queer characters will help to answer this question.

To the best of my knowledge, neither of these research questions mentioned above have been fully answered before. Firstly, there has barely been done any scholarly work about Jeffrey Archer and Ken Follett, especially about Archer's *Clifton-Chronicles*, despite those seven novels being some of his most successful works, and Follett's *Century-Trilogy*, which is only overshadowed by his grand novels of the *Kingsbridge-series*. Secondly, while there is a lot of scientific work about women in 19th century literature, neo-Victorian literature, and contemporary literature, I have barely found any studies that concentrate on how realistic those portrayals actually are. Yet, to my understanding, it is essential for gender equality to examine whether a female character is portrayed realistically or whether an author rather mocks women with their portrayal or just writes what 'sounds good' to an audience or what women expectantly 'want to hear' without meaning it. In that case, a second step would be to examine if and in how far what 'sounds good' has changed from the 19th to the 21st century. Thirdly, while there is a lot of research done about 19th century literature and the classification of women, scholarly work about contemporary literature is free of the terms 'Angel in the House' or 'Fallen Woman', yet the most general belief about 'good girls' and 'bad girls' are still very present in society. The aim of this thesis is therefore to examine in how far contemporary literature deals with the problem of gender (in-)equality – whether it is recognized, ignored, palliated, etc. –, (still) makes use of the outdated classification of women, which conveys a picture of how women are supposed to be like and which, potentially, might be harmful not only to female readers, but to society as a whole, as well as in how far male and female authors differ in their portrayal of women. As this thesis seeks to answer those questions, it aims to offer a new perspective to female theory in literature.

2. Women in 19th Century's Society

As it has been mentioned in the introduction, women in the 19th century were often classified with stereotypical terms and images that were meant to describe their characters. In the most general sense, one can say that if a woman accepted her traditional gender role and obeyed the (patriarchal) rules, she was a 'good girl'; if she did not, she was a 'bad girl' (Tyson 2006: 89). In both contexts, whether she was seen as a good or a bad girl, the woman was objectified by the patriarchy and, accordingly, was meant to be "used" without consideration of her own perspectives, feelings, and opinions unless they conform to those of the patriarchy (Tyson 2006: 91). In Victorian England, rather than calling women good or bad girls, the terms 'Angel in the House' and 'Fallen Woman' were used. While the Angel in the House was the ideal conception of a woman that basically only lives to care for her husband and her children without ever complaining, a Fallen Woman generally signifies a prostitute. However, every woman that has lost her reputation in 19th century society due to sexual relations outside of marriage – even if it was through rape, sexual abuse, or violence – was called a 'Fallen Woman' (Maxwell 2016: 1). By the end of the 19th century, the classification of women was expanded by the New Woman. This term was used to signify the shifts that society was experiencing regarding femininity and feminism, as the New Women started to strive for social change and more equality (Crozier-De Rosa 2010: 239). According to Anne McClintock, historian of British imperialism, women were, like the working class and the colonized, generally seen as inherently atavistic in the 19th century (McClintock 1997: 93). The idea of the New Woman challenged the above-mentioned belief that everyone who was not a white British man was a 'second class person'; despite the resistance against the New Woman movement, it paved the way for the waves of feminism in the 20th century in which, for example, the suffragettes achieved the woman suffrage in Great Britain in 1928. Although the idea of the New Woman gained more and more popularity amongst the population of Great Britain and the Empire, there were naturally also many people who were appalled by the new movement of feminism. In the following, the three terms – Angel in the House, Fallen Woman, and New Woman – will be explained in greater detail.

2.1 The Angel in the House

Man must be pleased; but him to please
 Is woman's pleasure; down the gulf
 Of his condoled necessities
 She casts her best, she flings herself.
 How often flings for nought, and yokes
 Her heart to an icicle or whim,
 Whose each impatient word provokes
 Another, not from her, but him;
 While she, too gentle even to force
 His penitence by kind replies,
 Waits by, expecting his remorse,
 With pardon in her pitying eyes;
 And if he once, by shame oppress'd,
 A comfortable word confers,
 She leans and weep against his breast,
 And seems to think the sin was hers;
 And whilst his love has any life,
 Or any eye to see her charms,
 At any time, she's still his wife,
 Dearly devoted to his arms;
 She loves with love that cannot tire;
 And when, ah woe, she loves alone,
 Through passionate duty love springs higher,
 As grass grows taller round a stone.
 (*The Angel in the House*: 73)

This might just as well be the best-remembered, as well as most notorious part of Coventry Patmore's poem *The Angel in the House* (1854), as it coined the term as well as set a standard women were supposed to achieve in the 19th century. What is interesting is that the 'perfect' woman is, according to Patmore, merely a slave to her husband. Her only pleasure in life must be to please her husband and should he be mad at her, she must not talk back, but wait patiently for him to forgive her. According to Noddings (1991), all Victorian women were supposed as well as expected to internalize and accept this role because it was believed that a graceful and morally inoffensive woman could "inspire men to all good things, even to the divine" (Noddings 1991: 59). An 'Angel in the House', therefore, had to be "modest, unassuming, self-sacrificing, and nurturing" (Tyson 2006: 90) in order for her husband to achieve his life goals. By calling women 'angels' whose duty it is to serve men, it is not far-fetched to assume that Patmore accordingly calls men Gods or God-like figures, as angels serve God and women have to serve men. The purpose of the poem is therefore not necessarily to praise women, but more to belittle them and to show that they are weaker than men and therefore in need of

male protection and guidance. This is in accord with Patmore's claim that "by the church, the second person is represented as the 'glory' of the 'Father', who is Christ's 'Head', as Man is the glory of his Head, Christ, and Woman the glory of Man, who is her head" (Patmore 1893: 53). The fact that men are the "head" of women can also be seen in *The Angel in the House* when the autodiegetic lyrical speaker of the poem, Felix Vaughan, talks about how his marriage with Honoria came about:

I loved his daughter, Honor; I told
My estate and prospects, might I try
To win her? At my words so bold
My sick heart sank. Then he: He gave
His glad consent, if I could get
Her love. A dear, good Girl! She'd have
Only three thousand pounds as yet;
More bye and bye. Yes, his good will
Should go with me; he would not stir;
he and my father in old time still
Wish'd I should one day marry her;
(*The Angel in the House*: 53)

The lyrical speaker clearly talks about an arranged marriage here. While his father and Honoria's father already agreed on the marriage years ago, the lyrical speaker now wants to go through with it. At no point, however, is the opinion of the woman addressed nor is it even considered that she might not agree to the marriage. To the contrary, the narrator ascribes a "light-hearted ignorance of interest in our discourse" (*The Angel in the House*: 54) to her. It is therefore made clear once more that women are weak and are happy to do as they are told without thinking for themselves. However, it is wrong to assume that all women of the Victorian era simply accepted their role as the 'Angel in the House', as, for example, Virginia Woolf, who was born in 1882 and therefore raised in the Victorian period, "killed" the angel and wrote in her *Professions for Women* (1931):

And the phantom was a woman, and when I came to know her better I called her after the heroine of a famous poem, *The Angel in the House*. It was she who used to come between me and my paper when I was writing reviews. It was she who bothered me and wasted my time and so tormented me that at last I killed her. You who come of a younger and happier generation may not have heard of her – you may not know what I mean by *The Angel in the House*. I will describe her as shortly as I can. She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it – in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all – I need not say it – she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty – her blushes, her great grace. (Woolf [1931] 1966: 285)

What is interesting about this passage is that, while Woolf acknowledges her own upbringing and that the rules set for women by society have been holding her back before she decided to “kill the angel”, meaning to no longer let the boundaries set onto her as a woman hold her back, she is also hopeful of the future, claiming that the younger generation might not even know what she is talking about anymore. Another interesting fact is that when Virginia Woolf is talking about purity being the “chief beauty” of a woman, this also shows how Victorian society saw women and what was expected of them: a pure woman had to obviously be a virgin and, once she got married and lost her virginity, she was not supposed to enjoy sexual intercourse with her husband (Tyson 2006: 90). It was believed that women who do enjoy sex cannot be pure and must therefore be ‘fallen’, which will be explained in greater detail in 2.2.

For men, however, this is a different story. Naturally, there is no such term as a ‘fallen man’ for a man who has had sex outside of his marriage. In fact, it has been and is until today very unproblematic for a man to have several sex partners. In *The Angel in the House*, despite talking about the purity and morality women must possess, the narrator also prides himself with how many women he has slept with:

And, in the records of my breast,
Red-letter'd, eminently fair,
Stood sixteen, who, beyond the rest,
By turn till then had been my care:
At Berlin three, one at St. Cloud,
At Chatteris, near Cambridge, one,
At Ely four, in London two,
Two at Bowness, in Paris none,
And, last and best, in Sarum three
(*The Angel in the House*: 23)

One more point that needs to be made about the Angel in the House is that not only an impeccable character, but also the outward appearance played a great role for the perception of women in the 19th century. This is because the teachings of Lavater's physiognomy, the belief that the appearance determines the character of a person, were widely spread. Talking about eyes, for example, it was believed that small eyes mean that a person is narrow-minded and uncouth, whereas big eyes, which were often given to female characters in literature, speak of the person's good character (Tytler 2014: 211-212). Additionally, 19th century authors also paid attention to the color of the eyes. Dark eyes were given to physically or morally strong characters, which were traditionally male, for example Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*, whereas blue eyes, like Harriet Smith's eyes in *Emma*, spoke of a gentle character (Tytler 2014: 212). Furthermore, the hair of a person was supposed to determine their temperament, energy, sensibility, and mental capacity (Tytler 2014: 213). Those beliefs of physiognomy can also be found in *The Angel in the House*, as the lyrical speaker claims that all of the good features of Honoria's character are written in her face:

The best things that the best believe
Are in her face so kindly writ
The faithless, seeing her, conceive
Not only heaven, but hope of it;
No idle thought her instinct shrouds,
But fancy chequers settled sense,
Like alteration of the clouds
On noonday's azure permanence;
Pure dignity, composure, ease
Declare affections nobly fix'd,
And impulse sprung from due degrees
Of sense and spirit sweetly mix'd.
Her modesty, her chiefest grace,
The cestus clasping Venus' side,
How potent to deject the face
Of him who would affront its pride!
(*The Angel in the House*: 33)

As appearance and character were seen rather as an entity than two different features to describe a person, it is clear that the two must be considered when talking about a virtuous woman. To be pure and virtuous, however, also meant to be unaware of one's own beauty: "did any wyes her beauty own / Now wonders how they dare to look / On what belongs to him alone" (*The Angel in the House*: 174). "On what belongs to him alone" finally introduces how the lyrical speaker actually

sees women, as only a few pages later he says: “But what at all times I admire / Is not that she is wise or good, / But just the thing which I desire” (*The Angel in the House*: 179). It is therefore made clear that women are, in fact, not seen as human beings with feelings and emotions, but as a ‘thing’ that must do as she is told, please her husband, and be otherwise morally inoffensive. Moreover, it implies that he basically only wanted her because he can have her and no one else, for example Frederick Graham, Honoria’s cousin, can:

Whether this Cousin was the cause
I know not, but I seem’d to see,
The first time then, how fair she was,
How much the fairest of the three.
(*The Angel in the House*: 28-29).

The polar opposite of the Angel in the House is the ‘Fallen Woman’. Section 2.2 will draw on this in greater detail.

2.2 The Fallen Woman

As it has been mentioned before, a strong contrast to the ‘Angel in the House’ is the idea of the ‘Fallen Woman’. Although the term in Victorian Britain generally signified that a ‘Fallen Woman’ is a prostitute, basically every woman who has lost her reputation in 19th century society due to sexual relations outside of marriage – even if it was through rape, sexual abuse, or violence – was called a ‘Fallen Woman’ (Maxwell 2016: 1). Men would sleep with women they were not married to and call them a Fallen Woman or a ‘whore’ afterwards, and, naturally, they would not marry them or care for their children if they got a Fallen Woman pregnant. According to Suzanne Cooper, this classification of women was done by men not only in order to regain control from the early feminist movements but limiting women to certain roles was part of the much larger Victorian obsession with respectability (Cooper 2011: 90). Having lost one’s respectability and being classified as a Fallen Woman meant for women to be shunned, ostracized from society, and left with few other options but to go to the workhouse or work as a prostitute (Kühl 2016: 172). This strict classification of women arose, according to Nead (1988), from the 19th century belief that the moral condition of the nation derives from the moral standards of women (Nead 1988: 92). Exemplary, this can be seen in women’s clothing. During the Regency Era from 1811-1820, named for the period in which George, Prince of Wales, later King George IV, served as Prince Regent due to his father’s mental

illness, society saw a change due to the prince's lifestyle, involving parties, alcohol, an invalid marriage, and an attempt to deprive his own wife of her rights as Queen Consort.¹⁴ Although women were still not even allowed to talk to a man without a chaperone present, the change within society could be seen in how women started to dress. In the late 18th century, women usually wore massive dresses with huge skirts over a formfitting corset. During the Regency Period, however, the style of dresses changed – influenced by the fashion of the French revolution – to high waists, loose skirts, lighter fabrics, and lower necklines. According to Arietta Richmond, author of several Regency Romances, fashion historians even called the Regency era the “era of nakedness” because the style of women's dresses was so much more revealing compared to the early Georgian and the Victorian Period.¹⁵ The Victorian period, being a lot stricter for the whole of society than the Regency Period, then went back to forcing women into corsets and huge skirts, which indicates that the freedom women at least had in their clothing – which means, being able to move and to breathe properly – was snatched back by a society that was keen on refusing to admit the existence of sex – at least for women.¹⁶ What can be seen, therefore, is that the (end of the) Georgian Era in general, but specifically the Regency Period, was a time of luxury and debauchery on the one hand, but increasing and extreme poverty on the other hand: while the aristocracy celebrated excessive parties, the poverty of the working class grew, which could be another reason for the austerity of the Victorian Period. The difference between those two periods, therefore, can also be seen in fashion and the rules for women: while women were still restricted in what they could and could not do in the Regency Period, those rules were loosened up a little, allowing women to be more comfortable. The Victorian Era, however, was the opposite of its predecessor, with a monarch that was faithful to her husband and did not throw excessive parties, brought the United Kingdom back to its former glory and wealth, but also turned society significantly more prudish, with women going back to wearing a corset – however, as will also be explained in chapter 3, what Victorian society preached

¹⁴ For a complete summary of King George IV's life, see <https://www.britannica.com/biography/George-IV>, written and fact-checked by the editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed March 22, 2025.

¹⁵ See <https://ariettarichmond.com/ladies-clothing-styles-how-was-the-regency-era-different/>, Arietta Richmond, accessed March 22, 2025.

¹⁶ <https://www.britannica.com/event/Victorian-era>, written and fact-checked by the editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed March 22, 2025.

and what they did were two very different things. When it comes to Queen Victoria, for example, it is interesting to note that she was the monarch over a society that claimed that the New Women were not willing to have children and even hated them, thus making them a threat to society, while their Queen, who had nine children in total, openly wrote letters about not particularly liking them or their presence (Pearsall [1969] 2003: 13). Furthermore, Pearsall claims that among the aristocracy, adulterous liaisons and “free love” was accepted throughout the 19th century while the opposite was propagated to the lower social classes (Pearsall [1969] 2003: 20).

Concentrating on what 19th century society preached rather than what they did, Crozier-De Rosa (2010) concludes that any challenge to the traditional role of women in the Victorian Period also served as a threat to the British understandings of nation and empire (Crozier-De Rosa 2010: 238-239). Considering that in the logic of 19th century society, the British had the right to rule because they believed that their strength and civilization wins against the savagery and disorder of the colonized peoples, this makes sense. A new movement which wants to allow half the population of the country to do what they want rather than what is expected of them, for example to not have child after child to secure the next generation of strong British men, would definitely cause disruption; disruption, however, is something they had reserved for the colonies, not England. Following that logic, it therefore makes sense that society of the 19th century saw any challenge to the traditional woman as a threat, and that they used any means possible to undermine the early feminist movements, for example literature. Braun (2015), thus, points out that for female characters in Victorian literature who lost their respectability by having sex outside of their marriage, “an outcast state – from respectable society and perhaps even from God’s grace – is inevitable” and a lonely and early death often follows (Braun 2015: 342). As mentioned above, just as real women in Victorian society, Fallen Women in literature were denied their role of a wife and mother, which, as Braun explains, stood for a woman’s mature community participation in Victorian fiction (Braun 2015: 343). Interestingly, however, prostitution was not illegal or a criminal offense in the 19th century, though one would expect it to be due to the backlash women would receive for being a Fallen Woman. In addition, until 1875, the age of consent was twelve. Until 1885, it was

thirteen, and after 1885 it was sixteen (Leighton 1989: 110). The double standards that have been applied to men and women in 19th century society are therefore very obvious: while women were held to a standard they could hardly achieve, and they were shunned for every minor wrong-doing, men were free to do what they wanted and with whom they wanted (except for openly homosexual acts, which will be explained in the digression in chapter 3), even if it was literal children. The power of the woman, according to Leighton, in contrast lied in the “moral law”, as she was seen as the chief upholder and representer of morality and therefore, no matter if she was a pure Angel in the House or a Fallen Woman, the stage on which the age enacted its own enduring morality play (Leighton 1989: 110-111).

Fallen Women are also prominent figures in 19th century literature, and they very often portray negative characters. This is, according to Todd (2012), because the era of Regency shaped the mindset of the people of the late 18th and early 19th centuries and has made them anxious not only about their own morality, but also the moral state of the Empire (Todd 2012: 197).

A representative example for a Fallen Woman in literature would be Maria in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814), who committed adultery. From the beginning, the omniscient narrator makes it clear that Maria is an unpleasant character, as it is said that “there was no positive ill-nature” in her or her sister Julia (*Mansfield Park*: 22), and that Fanny, the main character of the story, was “mortified by their treatment of her” (*Mansfield Park*: 23). Despite the negative introduction, she appears to be a ‘normal’ young woman of the early 19th century upper class whose only wish it is to get married to a rich, respectable man:

Mr Rushworth was from the first struck with the beauty of Miss Bertram, and being inclined to marry, soon fancied himself in love. He was a heavy young man, with not more than common sense; but as there was nothing disagreeable in his figure or address, the young lady was well pleased with her conquest. Being now in her twenty-first year, Maria Bertram was beginning to think matrimony a duty; and as a marriage with Mr Rushworth would give her the enjoyment of a larger income than her father's, as well as ensure her the house in town, which was now a prime object, it became, by the same rule of moral obligation, her evident duty to marry Mr Rushworth if she could. (*Mansfield Park*: 44)

However, even though she is engaged to Mr. Rushworth, Maria starts flirting with Henry Crawford and develops a very close and even intimate relationship with him. A good example for this is the fact that it is said that she was “pressing her hand to

his heart” (*Mansfield Park*: 206) when Sir Thomas comes home unexpectedly while they were practicing their theatre play, as girls were not supposed to do such things. For her, this is a sign of “peculiar proof and importance” and gives her strength to face her father (*ibid.*). Several pages later, it is said that she is “still feeling her hand pressed to Henry Crawford’s heart, and caring little for any thing else” (*Mansfield Park*: 213). This clearly shows that the feelings she has for Henry are, unlike the ones she has for her fiancé, sincere. Yet, it is also important to bear in mind that flirting, which, in Western societies of the 21st century, is considered to be completely harmless, had a completely different connotation to it in the 19th century. Thus, it is described to be like a disease by Tom: “My friend Yates brought the infection from Ecclesford, and it spread as those things always spread you know, sir” (*Mansfield Park*: 216). Later on in the novel, this “infection” spreads onto Maria and she cheats on her now husband with Henry, as it is said: “[...] for Mrs Rushworth did not appear again, and there was every reason to conclude her to be concealed somewhere with Mr Crawford, who had quitted his uncle’s house [...]” (*Mansfield Park*: 534). Having sex outside of her marriage and, by this, cuckolding her husband, clearly marks Maria as a Fallen Woman. The metaphor of adultery being a disease is carried throughout the novel, and it is made clear that it is believed to be contagious, as Sir Thomas fears Fanny could be “endangered by the society, or hurt by the character of Mrs Rushworth” (*Mansfield Park*: 550). Flirting, which is seen as the infection, led to the outbreak of the disease in Maria, and now she must be kept away from society in order to prevent the infection of more women. According to Litvak (1992), “metaphors of infection lead almost irresistibly to metaphors of seduction” (Litvak 1992: 7). This implies that the theatrical scene is foreshadowing the events that take place by the end of the novel, namely Maria’s adultery. This complies with the late 18th- and early 19th-century-belief that women are especially prone to the seductions of theatres and acting, and must therefore be kept away from such things:

A propensity to imitation is natural to the human mind, and is attended with various effects highly favourable to human happiness. [...] This propensity shows itself with especial strength in the female sex. Providence, designing from the beginning that the manner of life to be adopted by women should in many respects ultimately depend, not so much on their own deliberate choice, as on the interest and convenience of the parent, of the husband, or of some other connection, has implanted in them a remarkable tendency to conform to the wishes and examples of those for whom they feel a warmth of regard, and even of all those with whom they are in familiar habits of intercourse [...] As the mind, in obeying the impulse of this principle, no less than in following any other of its native or acquired tendencies, is capable of being ensnared into errors and excesses; the season of youth, the season when the principle itself is in its greatest strength, and when it has yet derived few lessons from reflection and experience, is the time when error and excesses are most to be apprehended. (Gisborne 1797: 115-117)

From a 21st century point of view, Gisborne's claim that women are more likely to imitate what they see on stage in real life and must therefore be kept away from theatres "to keep them safe" is obviously ridiculous: there is no real, scientific proof that women are in principle more gullible and easier to influence than men. However, it shows what the earliest feminists were fighting against and what prejudices they had to overcome for simply asking to be treated equally – and taking into account the prejudices women still face in the 21st century, one can see that the centuries of keeping women down have not yet been fully overcome.

Having been exposed to and seduced by the "disease", Maria now must be punished. As mentioned before, the natural punishment for a Fallen Woman was to be shunned and ostracized from society. Maria, despite being from a wealthy family and being married to a rich man, is no exception to this. Her standing in society might even be contributing factor to this treatment, as she brought shame to an otherwise respectable family, and which is why her father is not willing to help her:

Maria had destroyed her own character, and he would not by a vain attempt to restore what never could be restored, be affording his sanction to vice, or in seeking to lessen its disgrace, by anywise accessory to introducing such misery to another man's family, as he had known himself. (*Mansfield Park*: 550)

As Wolf (2004) points out, however, Maria is not the only women who is infected: Mary's moral failure is also made obvious by Edmund in the form of infection spreading (Wolf 2004: 278): "The evil lies yet deeper; in her total ignorance, unsuspectingness of there being such feelings, in a perversion of mind which made it natural to her to treat the subject as she did" (*Mansfield Park*: 539). Not only does Edmund talk about Mary's "perversion of mind", though, but he also names her

“blunted delicacy and a corrupted, vitiated mind” (*Mansfield Park*: 540). The fact that she merely calls what her brother and Maria have done “folly” clearly shows Edmund that Mary, too, is a threat to society:

To hear the woman whom – no harsher name than folly given! – So voluntarily, so freely, so coolly to canvass it! – No reluctance, no horror, no feminine – shall I say? No modest loathings! – This is what the world does. For where, Fanny, shall we find a woman whom nature had so richly endowed? – Spoilt, spoilt! (*Mansfield Park*: 538)

One more scene that shows both Edmund and the reader Mary's spoiled character is when she blames neither her brother nor Maria, but Fanny for the adultery the former two committed:

Why would not she have him? It is all her fault. Simple girl! – I shall never forgive her. Had she accepted him, as she ought, they might now have been on the point of marriage, and Henry would have been too happy and too busy to want any other object. (*Mansfield Park*: 539)

In this scene, the corruption of Mary, who downplays the sins of Maria and Henry and puts the blame on an innocent outsider to the situation, is presented to be more severe than the actual act of adultery. According to Wolf, this is because people who commit adultery are making a personal decision, but condoning adultery is a decision that affects the whole of society (Wolf 2004: 279). Mary, therefore, may also be called a Fallen Woman, as her behavior was inappropriate and violated the moral standards of society. Edmund also does not see her fit to be a wife and mother anymore due to her downplay of clear misconduct and breaks up with her.

Mansfield Park, despite being written and published during the Regency period (1811-1814) and, therefore, in a slightly more open-minded society, very clearly shows that there are more ways to be considered a Fallen Woman than to only have sex outside of marriage, and how society treated such women. Even Queen Caroline, the estranged wife of King George IV, formerly the Prince Regent, had to experience that the mere suggestion of her adultery that has never been proven (Robins 2006: 31) lead to her social exclusion: she was refused the basic standards of common court, as she did not get a chance to defend herself or appeal (Robins 2006: 33) and was excluded from both life at court and from having access

to her own daughter (Robins 2006: 36).¹⁷ What can be seen is that society saw a Fallen Woman as a disease – as ‘angels’ would obviously not do such things – and how it was, therefore, deemed necessary to cut her off from having contact with ‘respectable’ women in order to prevent the disease from spreading. Considering the fact that the novel was written at the beginning of the Regency era, one can clearly see that even in a more open-minded society women did not possess any freedom of choice, and any moral wrong doing was punished harshly by society.

Having talked about how a woman should and should not behave, section 2.3 will draw on female writers and their attitudes towards marriage, society's expectations on women, and the rules women were supposed to follow in the course of the 19th century.

2.3 Women and Marriage in the 19th Century

As it has been mentioned before, women in the 19th century were expected to marry a ‘good’ man from the same social class or slightly above. Their own opinion about who they wanted to marry or if they wanted to get marry at all was, as it is said in *The Angel of the House* and explained in section 2.1, not necessarily taken into consideration. Once young women of the upper and middle classes were in the right age to get married, they were brought out and their parents looked for a suitable husband for them. John Boyd Kinnear, lawyer and member of parliament, also talked about the marriage market in his *The Social Position of Women in the Present Age* (1869), and advised his fellow men

to frequent the fashionable London drive at the fashionable hour, and there he will see the richest and most shameful woman-market in the world. Men stand by the rails, criticising with perfect impartiality and equal freedom, while women drive slowly past, some for hire, some for sale—in marriage—these last with their careful mothers at their side, to reckon the value of the biddings and prevent the lots from going off below the reserved price. (Kinnear 1869: 354)

¹⁷ Interestingly, Jane Austen wrote in a letter to her friend Martha Lloyd about Caroline that she “[...] shall support her as long as I can, because she *is* a Woman and because I hate her Husband – but I can hardly forgive her for calling herself ‘attached and affectionate’ to a man whom she must detest [...]”, printed in Robins 2006, 42. It must also be mentioned that Austen was not alone in her dislike for the King and that, despite the King's efforts to isolate Caroline and destroy her image, she grew more and more popular and when he tried to divorce her and prevent her from being his Queen, more than 800 petitions with close to a million signatures by women were received to protest against the King's actions (Robins 2006: 237).

This quote clearly dehumanizes women. According to Kinnear, women were not perceived as actual human beings, but more like animals that a man could buy at a market. "Some for hire, some for sale" also indicates that, while a man must take his reputation into consideration, women are essentially all the same and can be used for whichever purpose a man wants: for simple pleasure, he can hire a woman, for status and reputation, he needs to buy her. The patronizing tone of the quote is also ironic because when women wanted to be more independent and not focus their whole life on finding a 'good match', they were seen as a threat to society.

As mentioned in section 1.2, marriage was a prominent and important topic in 19th century literature and, while on the one hand it was, of course, idealized, poets like Shelley, Byron, and Southey reportedly hated the institution and idea of marriage, as they claimed it gave the partners property rights in each other's persons as well as in other forms of property, and proclaimed to idea of 'free love', which confused the love ideals of succeeding generations of English men and women (Perkin 1989: 207). This section will sketch how some of the (from the 20th and 21st century point of view) most renowned novels of the 19th century written by women saw marriage and their own roles in society throughout the 19th century.

2.3.1 The View on Marriage in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*

Section 2.2 already drew on Jane Austen and the depiction of Fallen Women in her *Mansfield Park*. Sticking to Jane Austen, two other novels of hers that explain how society saw women and how women saw their own role in society in the early 19th century are *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). Starting with *Sense and Sensibility*, it becomes very obvious that Jane Austen gives a contemporary and (to all appearances) representative view on British society's attitude towards marriage and the role of women in the early 19th century. As already mentioned, women were supposed to get married and, to be the 'angel' – as women were called from the mid-19th-century onward – society expected them to be, were not supposed to challenge the rules of society. Looking at *Sense and Sensibility*, this becomes especially obvious. The two female main characters, Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, are both in the right age to get married and, as their half-brother John throws them out of their father's house after Henry Dashwood's

death, are in need of a husband to take care of them. Elinor, who represents the sense, is aware of what is expected of her and what sort of marriage is possible for a woman in her position. She is therefore convinced that she cannot marry Edward, even though she is in love with him:

Elinor could not help laughing. "Excuse me," said she, "and be assured that I meant no offence to you, by speaking, in so quiet a way, of my own feelings. Believe them to be stronger than I have declared; believe them, in short, to be such as his merit, and the suspicion – the hope of his affection for me may warrant, without imprudence or folly. But farther than this you must *not* believe. [...] and I am very much mistaken if Edward is not himself aware that there would be many difficulties in his way, if he were to wish to marry a woman who had not either a great fortune or high rank." (*Sense and Sensibility*: 21).

In contrast to her sister, she is aware of the place assigned to women and what is expected of her. She knows that a woman is not supposed to brag and talk a lot, but to listen to a man and only give short answers when being asked something. Marianne, who represents the sensibility, on the other hand is also aware of these 'rules' of society ("I have been too much at my ease, too happy, too frank, I have erred against every common place notion of decorum; I have been open and sincere where I ought to have been reserved, spiritless, dull, and deceitful", *Sense and Sensibility*: 48), but chooses to ignore them and be herself, which Elinor addresses sharply:

"Well Marianne," said Elinor, as soon as he had left them, "for *one* morning I think you have done pretty well. You have already ascertained Mr Willoughby's opinion in almost every matter of importance. You know what he thinks of Cowper and Scott; you are certain of his estimating their beauties as he ought, and you have received every assurance of his admiring Pope no more than is proper. But how is your acquaintance to be long supported, under such extraordinary dispatch of every subject for discourse? You will soon have exhausted each favourite topic. Another meeting will suffice to explain his sentiments on picturesque beauty, and second marriages, and then you can have nothing farther to ask." (*Sense and Sensibility*: 47)

This implies a sort of dehumanization of women: to Elinor (and as she represents the sense, thus to society), there is a picture of what a woman must be like, and a woman could either fit into this construct or be considered unfit for being a woman (which can be seen in how Elinor scolds her sister for talking too much and says that she will soon run out of things to say).

While Mrs. Jennings, a widow with two married daughters, tries to arrange a marriage between Colonel Brandon and Marianne, as she had "nothing to do but

to marry all the rest of the world" (*Sense and Sensibility*: 36) and "it would be an excellent match, for *he* was rich, and *she* was handsome" (*Sense and Sensibility*: 36), Marianne refuses to even think about marrying him because he is too old for her: "Colonel Brandon is certainly younger than Mrs Jennings, but he is old enough to be *my* father; and if he were ever animated enough to be in love, must have outlived every sensation of the kind. It is too ridiculous!" (*Sense and Sensibility*: 37). This refusal to do what is expected of her and marry someone she does not love because it makes sense stands in clear contrast to what Coventry Patmore about 40 years later describes to be the reality of women in the 19th century in *The Angel in the House*, but which was already a reality for women in the beginning of the 19th century: instead of being a quiet spectator of her own life, she herself wants to decide what to do with her future. On the contrary, she decides that she wants no one but Mr. Willoughby, who is described to be "uncommonly handsome" (*Sense and Sensibility*: 42) and was to inherit a fortune by an old female relative (*Sense and Sensibility*: 44). Her brother John, in contrast, is very clear in what he expects her to do:

"I will not say that I am disappointed, my dear sister," said John, as they were walking together one morning before the gates of Delaford House, "*that* would be saying too much, for certainly you have been one of the most fortunate young women in the world, as it is. But, I confess, it would give me great pleasure to call Colonel Brandon brother. His property here, his place, his house, everything in such respectable and excellent condition! – and his woods" – I have not seen such timber anywhere in Dorsetshire, as there is now standing in Delaford Hanger! – And though, perhaps, Marianne may not seem exactly the person to attract him – yet I think it would altogether be adviseable for you to have them now frequently staying with you, for as Colonel Brandon seems a great deal at home, nobody can tell what may happen – for, when people are much thrown together, and see little of anybody else – and it will always be in your power to set her off to advantage, and so forth; in short, you may as well give her a chance – You understand me." (*Sense and Sensibility*: 368)

Marianne, however, does not want to be a pawn that is pushed back and forth against her will for his own benefit, as John clearly intends, and pretends to be engaged to Mr. Willoughby. It turns out, however, that, in contrast to what he was expected to be like due to his "youth, beauty, and elegance" (*Sense and Sensibility*: 42), he is not the good person the reader – especially a reader of a time that was concerned with physiognomy – would him expect to be, as he got Colonel Brandon's ward pregnant and left her afterwards ("He had left the girl whose youth and innocence he had seduced, in a situation of the utmost distress, with no

creditable home, no help, no friends, ignorant of his address!", *Sense and Sensibility*: 204). Instead of Marianne, he marries "a woman of great fortune" (*Sense and Sensibility*: 314), as his rich aunt disinherited him after she found out that he impregnated and left a young woman (*Sense and Sensibility*: 315). Marianne, who is said to have been "born to discover the falsehood of her own opinions, and to counteract, by her conduct, her most favourite maxims" (*Sense and Sensibility*: 371), ends up marrying Colonel Brandon, who she originally did not want. Elinor, in contrast, ends up marrying Edward, who was firstly "dismissed for ever from his mother's notice" (*Sense and Sensibility*: 261) and later received the living of Delaford from Colonel Brandon (*Sense and Sensibility*: 276). The conclusion one could draw from this is, therefore, that the girl who respects the rules of society, as Elinor did, ends up getting what she wants and is happy, whereas the girl who challenged the rules of society, which Marianne did, ends up not getting what she wants.

However, there is more to it. While it could be expected that Marianne ends up as a 'Fallen Woman', she does, in fact, become the "patroness of a village" (*Sense and Sensibility*: 371), and "found her own happiness in forming his [Colonel Brandon's]" (*Sense and Sensibility*: 372). This implies that, despite the most superficial doctrine the novel is giving its audience, namely that the rules of society must be obeyed, it subliminally does quite the contrary: Austen tells young women that they should not be afraid to be who they are because, one way or another, they can find happiness. Subliminal criticism of society and the people can also be found in how the omniscient third-person narrator describes the characters of the novel. While introducing Elinor as a young, intelligent woman with "an excellent heart" (*Sense and Sensibility*: 6) and Marianne as "sensible and clever" (*Sense and Sensibility*: 6), their brother John and his wife, who represent the stereotypical members of 19th century upper class, are introduced with blistering irony: "He was not an ill-disposed young man, unless to be rather cold-hearted, and rather selfish, is to be ill-disposed. [...] But Mrs John Dashwood was a strong caricature of himself; – more narrow-minded and selfish." (*Sense and Sensibility*: 5). Furthermore, the narrator is playing with the stereotypical perception of people concerning their physiognomy. The beautiful, good-looking John Willoughby turns out to be the villain, whereas Colonel Brandon, whose face is described to be "not

handsome” (*Sense and Sensibility*: 34), ends up saving both Marianne and Elinor, as he offers Edward the living of Delaford, which enables him and Elinor to live a happy life together.

Another of Austen's famous novels, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), does a similar thing, as, according to Britton (2012), the relationship between Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy is a series of character-studies that culminate in Elizabeth's response to Darcy's portrait (Britton 2012: 525):

“I say no more than the truth, and what every body will say that knows him,” replied the other. Elizabeth thought this was going pretty far; and she listened with increasing astonishment as the housekeeper added, “I have never had a cross word from him in my life, and I have known him ever since he was four years old.” This was praise, of all others most extraordinary, most opposite to her ideas. That he was not a good-tempered man, had been her firmest opinion. Her keenest attention was awakened; she longed to hear more, and was grateful to her uncle for saying, “There are very few people of whom so much can be said. You are lucky in having such a master.” (*Pride and Prejudice*: 250)

Although Mr. Bingley calls Elizabeth a “studier of character” (*Pride and Prejudice*: 42), she is only able to see his true character at this point of the novel when his housekeeper, someone whose opinion the upper class was not likely to pay any attention to whatsoever, praises him. Interestingly, Elizabeth's reluctance of Mr. Darcy only increases when a member of her own class praises him:

“His pride,” said Miss Lucas, “does not offend *me* to much as pride often does, because there is an excuse for it. One cannot wonder that so very fine a young man, with family, fortune, every thing in his favour, should think highly of himself. If I may so express it, he has a *right* to be proud.” “That is very true,” replied Elizabeth, “and I could easily forgive *his* pride, if he had not mortified *mine*.” (*Pride and Prejudice*: 20)

Valuing the opinion of people that stand ‘below’ her over the opinion of her ‘own’ people shows what clearly distinguishes *Pride and Prejudice* from *Sense and Sensibility*. While the latter one can be read as both critical of women who challenge the rules of society and somewhat feminist, *Pride and Prejudice* is a lot clearer on its standpoint. This can, as stated, most clearly be seen in Elizabeth, whose attitude towards all aspects of life are quite revolutionary for the time. Thus, she does not want to be married solely for the sake of being married, and even rejects Mr. Collins when he asks her to marry him: “I am very sensible of the honour of your proposals, but it is impossible for me to do otherwise than decline them” (*Pride and Prejudice*: 107). When Mr. Collins is not willing or able to accept that she said no, as this was

not usually something that happened to men, and thinks that she only wants to ask him again, Elizabeth has no fear of getting more direct in her answer:

“Upon my word, Sir,” cried Elizabeth, “your hope is rather an extraordinary one after my declaration. I do assure you that I am not one of those young ladies (if such young ladies there are) who are so daring as to risk their happiness on the chance of being asked a second time. I am perfectly serious in my refusal. – You could not make *me* happy, and I am convinced that I am the last woman in the world who would make *you* so. – Nay, were your friend Lady Catherine to know me, I am persuaded she would find me in every respect ill qualified for the situation.” (*Pride and Prejudice*: 108)

Being confident enough and daring to say ‘no’ to a man clearly marks Elizabeth as an outsider to the norm. A while later, she does the same with Mr. Darcy and rejects his proposal in marriage. As she is very angry with him in the first place because he broke up her sister Jane and Mr. Bingley and his proposal is not at all romantic, but rather insulting to her, her response, which includes, as Darcy calls it “so little *endeavour* at civility” (*Pride and Prejudice*: 192), clearly shows that Elizabeth is not what the second half of the 19th century society would call an ‘Angel in the House’:

“I might as well enquire,” replied she, “why with so evident a design of offending and insulting me, you chose to tell me that you liked me against your will, against your reason, and even against your character? Was not this some excuse for incivility, if I *was* uncivil? But I have other provocations. You know I have. Had not my own feelings decided against you, had they been indifferent, or had they even been favourable, do you think that any consideration would tempt me to accept the man, who has been the means of ruining, perhaps for ever, the happiness of a most beloved sister?” (*Pride and Prejudice*: 192-193)

This shows Elizabeth’s standpoint in society: taking into account that liberalism is defined as the “support for or advocacy of individual rights, civil liberties, and reform tending towards individual freedom, democracy, or social equality” (*OED* s.v. *liberalism*, n.) and a feminist is defined as “an advocate or supporter of the rights and equality of women” (*OED* s.v. *feminist*, n.), Elizabeth can be called a liberal feminist. She is not appalled by the institution of marriage itself, but she demands the freedom to choose freely who to spend the rest of her life with based solely on her feelings and not on social status, wealth, and the opinion of other people. Her disregard of the conventions regarding marriage can also be seen when her aunt, Mrs. Gardiner, tells her that, just as she is not ‘good enough’ for Mr. Darcy, Mr. Wickham is not ‘good enough’ for her, and Elizabeth ironically states: “Well, then you need not be under any alarm. I will take care of myself, and of Mr

Wickham too. He shall not be in love with me, if I can prevent it" (*Pride and Prejudice*: 146). It is quite obvious that Elizabeth does not want 'any' man, and therefore clearly stands out in society. Likewise, 'any man' does not want her and her unconventional beliefs, as Mr. Collins states: "but if she is really headstrong and foolish, I know not whether she would altogether be a very desirable wife to a man in my situation, who naturally looks for happiness in the marriage state" (*Pride and Prejudice*: 111). What was expected of a woman was to become a 'hidden' person that merges with the personality of her husband (Perkin 1989: 2). Elizabeth, clearly, has no desire or intention to merge with a man and lose her own personality. As she is an 'alien' in society regarding her viewpoint of marriage, she also needs a special man who disregards society just as much as she does. She ends up finding this man in Mr. Darcy, who, in contrast to the 'regular' 19th century-men like Mr. Collins, loves her especially for her unconventionality:

"My beauty you had early withstood, and as for my manners – my behaviour to *you* was at least always bordering on the uncivil, and I never spoke to you without rather wishing to give you pain than not. Now be sincere; did you admire me for my impertinence?" "For the liveliness of your mind, I did." "You may as well call it impertinence at once. It was very little less. The fact is, that you were sick of civility, of deference, of officious attention. You were disgusted with the women who were always speaking and looking, and thinking for *your* approbation alone. I roused, and interested you, because I was so unlike *them*. Had you not been really amiable you would have hated me for it; but in spite of the pains you took to disguise yourself, your feelings were always noble and just; and in your heart, you thoroughly despised the persons who so assiduously courted you. There – I have saved you the trouble of accounting for it; and really, all things considered, I begin to think it perfectly reasonable. To be sure, you knew no actual good of me – but nobody thinks of *that* when they fall in love." (*Pride and Prejudice*: 381)

While having established Elizabeth as a liberal feminist and her beliefs as alien to society in general, the question remains how the rest of the characters of the novel view the institution of marriage. For Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, it is quite obvious. As Perkin puts it, "marriage was the life plan of most women, and the single state a fate to be avoided like the plague" (Perkin 1989: 3). Naturally, therefore, parents wanted to marry off their daughters to a good and wealthy man to make sure they were financially secured. For most women, in addition, marriage meant "release from a childlike and humiliating dependence on the parental home" (Perkin 1989: 3). Mrs. Bennet wants exactly that: find a suitable marriage for her daughters, as she tells her husband right in the beginning of the novel: "'My dear Mr Bennet,' replied his wife, 'how can you be so tiresome! You must know that I am thinking

of his marrying one of them”” (*Pride and Prejudice*: 4). When Elizabeth rejects Mr. Collins, she tries to force her into the marriage (“I will speak to her about it myself directly. She is a very headstrong foolish girl, and does not know her own interest; but I will *make* her know it”, *Pride and Prejudice*: 111) and threatens to never talk to her again if she does not marry him (*Pride and Prejudice*: 112). Mr. Bennet, in contrast, does not insist on his daughters to be married under any circumstances and even shows admiration for Elizabeth’s desire for freedom and the right to choose her own husband on various occasions – the fact that this happens more than once throughout the novel signifies that, just as Elizabeth is not like other girls, Mr. Bennet is not like other men:

“[...] they are all silly and ignorant like other girls; but Lizzy has something more of quickness than her sisters” (*Pride and Prejudice*: 5)

“An unhappy alternative is before you, Elizabeth. From this day you must be a stranger to one of your parents. – Your mother will never see you again if you do *not* marry Mr Collins, and I will never see you again if you *do*” (*Pride and Prejudice*: 113)

“Lizzy,” said her father, “I have given him my consent. He is the kind of man, indeed, to whom I should never dare refuse any thing, which he condescended to ask. I now give it to *you*, if you are resolved on having him. But let me advise you to think better of it. I know your disposition, Lizzy. I know that you could be neither happy nor respectable, unless you truly esteemed your husband; unless you looked up to him as a superior. Your lively talents would place you in the greatest danger in an unequal marriage. You could scarcely escape discredit and misery. My child, let me not have the grief of seeing *you* unable to respect your partner in life. You know not what you are about.” (*Pride and Prejudice*: 377)

Typical for the “other girls” Mr. Bennet is talking about is Charlotte. The completely different perception of life and the possession or lack of self-respect between her and Elizabeth becomes obvious when Charlotte tells Elizabeth that she is engaged to Mr. Collins only three days after he was rejected. Elizabeth thinks of this match as being “unsuitable” and finds the picture of them being together “humiliating” (*Pride and Prejudice*: 126). She also shows no understanding of Charlotte’s wish to get married whatsoever:

“I see what you are feeling,” replied Charlotte, - “you must be surprised, very much surprised, - so lately as Mr Collins was wishing to marry you. But when you have had time to think it all over, I hope you will be satisfied with what I have done. I am not romantic you know. I never was. I ask only a comfortable home; and considering Mr Collins’s character, connections, and situation in life, I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair, as most people can boast on entering the marriage state.” [...] And to the pang of a friend disgracing herself and sunk in her esteem, was added the distressing conviction that it was impossible for that friend to be tolerably happy in the lot she had chosen. (*ibid.*)

These very traditionalist ideas of marriage, namely that “connections and situation of life” will make a happy marriage, stand in a strong contrast to Elizabeth’s liberal feminist views. That she is an exception even in her own family concerning those liberal ideas, though, can be seen when she calls Charlotte’s marriage with Mr. Collins “unaccountable” (*Pride and Prejudice*: 137) in front of her sister Jane. When Jane tries to defend Charlotte and talks about “Mr Collin’s respectability, and Charlotte’s prudent, steady character” (*ibid.*), Elizabeth gets angry with her:

“To oblige you, I would try to believe almost any thing, but no one else could be benefited by such a belief as this; for were I persuaded that Charlotte had any regard for him, I should only think worse of her understanding, than I now do of her heart. My dear Jane, Mr Collins is a conceited, pompous, narrow-minded, silly man; you know he is, as well as I do; and you must feel, as well as I do, that the woman who marries him, cannot have a proper way of thinking. You shall not defend her, though it is Charlotte Lucas. You shall not, for the sake of one individual, change the meaning of principle and integrity, nor endeavour to persuade yourself or me, that selfishness is prudence, and insensibility of danger, security for happiness.” (*Pride and Prejudice*: 137)

In contrast to what “the other girls”, including Charlotte Lucas and her own sisters, believe to be the purpose of marriage, Elizabeth is convinced that marriage should be based on mutual respect, friendship, and, most importantly, love. Chang (2014), accordingly, states that “Elizabeth’s feminist views boldly challenge [the recognized] societal rules and reinforce her independence.” (Chang 2014: 78). Sturrock (2014) claims that through both Elizabeth and the omniscient narrator, who tells most of the story from Elizabeth’s point of view, Jane Austen illustrates her own view of what she believed marriage to be based on: respect and esteem (Sturrock 2014: 23). Jones, accordingly, wrote that, though Austen never married or had children, she “became an increasingly critical observer of the marriages which came to her notice. She recognized that affection, friendship and respect were fundamental elements of any workable relationship”, and, further, that “no Austen heroine marries for money: affection is always part of the equation” (Jones 2009:

5). This implies that Jane Austen's view on marriage was, like the one of her fictional character Elizabeth, a liberal one, and she opposed the traditionalist beliefs of society in the early 19th century.

Interestingly, though, *Pride and Prejudice* was not perceived negatively by the public after its publication, but critics praised it and especially the female heroine Elizabeth immensely. *The British Critic* (1813), for example, wrote that the novel is "far superior to almost all the publications of the kind which have lately come before us" (*The British Critic* February 1813: 189), and called Elizabeth a heroin that "is supported with great spirit and consistency throughout" (*The British Critic* February 1813: 190). Similarly, *The Critical Review* called the novel "superior to any novel we have lately met with in the delineation of domestic scenes. Nor is there one character which appears flat, or obtrudes itself upon the notice of the reader with troublesome impertinence" (*The Critical Review* 1813: 324). This implies a hypocrisy in the society of the early 19th century: on the one hand, they wanted women to behave in a certain way and limited them to certain roles – Jane Austen did publish her novels anonymously, after all, and simply put "written by a lady" on *Sense and Sensibility* and "written by the author of *Sense and Sensibility*" on *Pride and Prejudice* –; on the other hand they celebrated a novel that depicts a liberal feminist as one of the "most superior" novels of their time. This also shows the conflict within society, which was torn between the customs of the Georgian era they would go back to in the Victorian era, and more open-minded conventions during the Regency era. In the following section 2.3.2, further criticism of the rules of society in the 19th century by contemporary female writers concerning marriage and the difference between Regency novels that are influenced by the Georgian era and Victorian literature will be explained on two other very famous novels: *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë (1847) and *Wuthering Heights* (1847) by Emily Brontë. This is important, as the Victorians pioneered the emancipation of women and male privilege and domination began to be eroded (Perkin 1989: 2), which finally led to the appearance of the New Woman, which will be explained in 2.4.

2.3.2 The Brontë Sisters and Criticism of Society's View of Women and Marriage in *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*

As mentioned before, the first wave of feminism started to spread all over Great Britain and the Empire in the course of the 19th century, and more and more women started to write novels, three most famous of those being the Brontë sisters, who, nevertheless, published their novels under a male pseudonym – whereas Austen had, while not publishing under her given name, decided to publish as “A Lady”. Having explained how society saw the institution of marriage and the role of women in the beginning of the 19th century and how one of today's most famous authors of that time, Jane Austen, established her views on such, this section will now turn to the mid-19th century. With the help of *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë and *Wuthering Heights* (1847) by Emily Brontë, the change of tone in criticism of society will become obvious.

Starting with *Jane Eyre*, it is, from the very beginning of the novel, established by Jane, who simultaneously functions as the autodiegetic narrator of this fictional autobiography, that she is different to the average woman. Unlike the heroines in the novels discussed before, Jane did not have a happy childhood, which is made noticeable not only on the very first page, but also in the tone of the novel:

The said Eliza, John, and Georgiana were now clustered round their mama in the drawing-room: she lay reclined on a sofa by the fireside, and with her darlings about her (for the time neither quarrelling nor crying) looked perfectly happy. Me, she had dispensed from joining the group; saying, “She regretted to be under the necessity of keeping me at a distance; but that until she heard from Bessie, and could discover by her own observation that I was endeavouring in good earnest to acquire a more sociable and childlike disposition, a more attractive and sprightly manner, - something lighter, franker, more natural as it were – she really must exclude me from privileges intended only for contented, happy, little children” (*Jane Eyre*: 6)

Jane is clearly marked as an outsider already in her childhood. Not only is she excluded from the physical affection Mrs. Reed shows her own children, but she is also verbally abused by John (“bad animal”, *Jane Eyre*: 8; “you rat!”, *Jane Eyre*: 9) and does not even receive an answer when she asked what she did wrong: “Jane, I don't like cavillers or questioners: besides, there is something truly forbidding in a child taking up her elders in that manner” (*Jane Eyre*: 6). For Jane, being disliked, excluded, and abused without even knowing why defies any logic:

Why was I always suffering, always brow-beaten, always accused, for ever condemned? Why could I never please? Why was it useless to try to win any one's favour? Eliza, who was headstrong and selfish, was respected. Georgiana, who had a spoiled temper, a very acrid spite, a captious and insolent carriage, was universally indulged. Her beauty, her pink cheeks and golden curls, seemed to give delight to all who looked at her, and to purchase indemnity for every fault. John, no one thwarted, much less punished; though he twisted the necks of the pigeons, killed the little pea-chicks, set the dogs at the sheep, stripped the hothouse vines of their fruit, and broke the buds off the choicest plants in the conservatory: he called his mother "old girl," too; sometimes reviled her for her dark skin, similar to his own; bluntly disregarded her wishes; not infrequently tore and spoiled her silk attire: and he was still "her only darling". I dared commit no fault: I strove to fulfil every duty; and I was termed naughty and tiresome, sullen and sneaking, from morning to noon, and from noon to night. (*Jane Eyre*: 14)

Clearly, Jane is punished for every minor misconduct, while her cousins, who, according to Jane's statements about them, their characters, and their behavior, would normally be shunned by society, apparently cannot do any wrong in their mother's eyes. Only years later, as an adult, Jane finds out that there was, in fact, nothing wrong with her as a child that led to her aunt's dislike of her person, but Mrs. Reed was simply jealous of the relationship Jane's mother had with her uncle, Mr. Reed ("I had a dislike to her mother always; for she was my husband's only sister, and a great favourite with him", *Jane Eyre*: 235), which made her hate Jane, too, after her parents' death: "I hated it the first time I set my eyes on it – a sickly, whining, pining thing" (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, Jane has learned from an early age on that she is 'different' to other children and therefore carries this belief into her adult life and is clearly distinguished from the other female characters, who act accordingly to their social status and to society's expectations and values. This difference can most clearly be seen in her approach to physiognomy, which was, as established in 2.1, an important part of 19th century society's depiction of other people, especially women, as they believed that the outward appearance determined the character and the morality of a person. Jane's 'otherness' to the 'normal' 19th century woman becomes clear in the reaction of the female characters to the first appearance of Mr. Mason. On the one hand, there are Louisa Eshton and Mary Ingram, who are immediately fond of him without having yet talked to him:

These last were discussing the stranger: they both called him "a beautiful man." Louisa said he was "a love of a creature," and she "adored him" and Mary instanced his "pretty little mouth, and nice nose," as her ideal of the charming. "And what a sweet-tempered forehead he has" cried Louisa, - "so smooth – none of those frowning irregularities I dislike so much: and such a placid eye and smile!" (*Jane Eyre*: 193-194)

Clearly, they have, based solely on his looks, figured that Mr. Mason is a good person with a flawless character without having talked to him once. Jane, in contrast, does quite the contrary and decides, again after having barely met him, that there must be something wrong with him:

On closer examination, you detected something in his face that displeased; or rather, that failed to please. His features were regular, but too relaxed; his eye was large and well cut, but the life looking out of it was a tame, vacant life – at least so I thought. The sound of the dressing-bell dispersed the party. It was not till dinner that I saw him again: he then seemed quite at ease. But I liked his physiognomy even less than before: it struck me as being, at the same time, unsettled, and inanimate. His eye wandered, and had no meaning in its wandering: this gave him an odd look, such as I never remembered to have seen. For a handsome and not an unamiable-looking man, he repelled me exceedingly: there was no power in that smooth-skinned face of a full oval shape; no firmness in that aquiline nose, and small, cherry mouth; there was no thought on the low, even forehead, no command in that blank, brown eye. (*Jane Eyre*: 193)

Interestingly, Jane finds everything Louisa and Mary find attractive rather repulsive. Even though society saw, as mentioned before, large brown eyes as an indicator that a man is morally strong and has a good character, Jane notices nothing like that at all in Mr. Mason. This can be interpreted as a call to individualism and for young women in society to realize that it is quite alright for them to like different things that may go against the 'standards' of society. This individualism Jane possesses concerning the perception of other people can also be seen in her first encounter with Mr. Rochester:

Something of daylight still lingered, and the moon was waxing bright: I could see him plainly. His figure was enveloped in a riding cloak, fur collared, and steel clasped; its details were not apparent, but I traced the general points of middle height, and considerable breadth of chest. He had a dark face, with stern features and a heavy brow; his eyes and gathered eyebrows looked ireful and thwarted just now; he was past youth, but had not reached middle age; perhaps he might be thirty-five. I felt no fear of him, and but little shyness. Had he been a handsome, heroic-looking young gentleman, I should not have dared to stand thus questioning him against his will, and offering my services unasked. I had hardly ever seen a handsome youth; never in my life spoken to one. I had a theoretical reverence and homage for beauty, elegance, gallantry, fascination; but had I met those qualities incarnate in masculine shape, I should have known instinctively that they neither had nor could have sympathy with anything in me, and should have shunned them as one would fire, lightning, or anything else that is bright but antipathetic. (*Jane Eyre*: 115-116)

This scene perfectly describes how Jane is basically the opposite of what women were supposed and expected to be like. While it was expected of women to please men as best as they could, Jane not only openly admits that she does not think she

is anywhere pretty enough to be able to please a handsome man, but she herself feels reluctance to the thought of doing so. As, in contrast, she does not find Mr. Rochester attractive at all, this is the only reason she is willing to help him after his riding accident. Again, the beliefs of physiognomy teach that usually quite the contrary is the case: if a person is beautiful, other people find them more trustworthy and are more likely to help them, whereas if someone is considered to be unattractive, they are less likely to receive help. Thus, this scene again implies the request for women to not blindly follow the beliefs society presets, but to form their own picture of what they want. Accordingly, Jane's attitude towards marriage is completely different to the one expected of women in the 19th century. Once she realizes that Mr. Rochester's reasons to marry Miss Ingram were not sincere, but "he was going to marry her, for family, perhaps political reasons; because her rank and connections suited him" (*Jane Eyre*: 189) and that "she could not charm him" (*ibid.*), she decides to not stay quiet and watch, but to do something about it:

If she had managed the victory at once, and he had yielded and sincerely laid his heart at her feet, I should have covered my face, turned to the wall, and (figuratively) have died to them. If Miss Ingram had been a good and noble woman, endowed with force, fervor, kindness, sense, I should have had one vital struggle with two tigers – jealousy and despair; then, my heart torn out and devoured, I should have admired her – acknowledged her excellence, and been quiet for the rest of my days: and the more absolute her superiority, the deeper would have been my admiration – the more truly tranquil my quiescence. [...] "Why can she not influence him more, when she is privileged to draw so near to him?" I asked myself. "Surely she cannot truly like him; or not like him with true affection. [...]" (*ibid.*)

While she claims to feel no jealousy of Miss Ingram because, even though she is beautiful, she has an ugly character, Jane also admits that she, as she senses no love from either side, does not want to stay quiet and out of their relationship. Although she is right and Mr. Rochester never intended to marry Miss Ingram but only wanted to make her jealous, and though she later wants to leave rather than seeing the two of them together, she here basically admits that she was willing to become a 'homewrecker', as the potential marriage between Mr. Rochester and Miss Ingram does not seem right to her. This is also one of the scenes in which the homodiegetic narrator seems somewhat unreliable, as Jane tries to convince the reader that she feels no jealousy towards Miss Ingram, as she feels morally and temperamentally superior to the latter one, yet her thoughts are circling around Miss Ingram and how she herself would be much better for Mr. Rochester:

Because, when she failed, I saw how she might have succeeded. Arrows that continually glanced off from Mr. Rochester's breast and fell harmless at his feet, might, I knew, if shot by a surer hand, have quivered keen in his proud heart – have called love into his stern eye, and softness into his sardonic face: or, better still, without weapons a silent conquest might have been won (*ibid.*)

When he finally asks her to marry him, Jane again contradicts the typical Victorian woman. Instead of being over-the-top happy, she makes several reservations about a marriage between them:

“It can never be, sir; it does not sound likely. Human beings never enjoy complete happiness in this world. I was not born for a different destiny to the rest of my species; to imagine such a lot befalling me is a fairy tale – a daydream.” (*Jane Eyre*: 262)

“Oh, sir! – never mind jewels! I don't like to hear them spoken of. Jewels for Jane Eyre sounds unnatural and strange; I would rather not have them.” (*Jane Eyre*: 263)

“No, no, sir! Think of other subjects, and speak of other things, and in another strain. Don't address me as if I were a beauty; I am your plain, Quakerish governess.” (*ibid.*)

“And then you won't know me, sir; and I shall not be your Jane Eyre any longer, but an ape in a harlequin's jacket, - a jay in borrowed plumes. I would as soon see you, Mr. Rochester, tricked out in stage-trappings, as myself clad in a court-lady's robe; and I don't call you handsome, sir, though I love you most dearly: far too dearly to flatter you. Don't flatter me.” (*ibid.*)

I laughed at him as he said this. “I am not an angel,” I asserted; “and I will not be one till I die: I will be myself, Mr. Rochester, you must neither expect nor exact anything celestial of me – for you will not get it, any more than I shall get it of you: which I do not at all anticipate.” (*Jane Eyre*: 264)

Although marriage was, according to Simone de Beauvoir ([1949] 2009), seen as a woman's only means of survival and the only justification of her existence (de Beauvoir [1949] 2009: 503), Jane is reluctant to accept his proposal at first. The question is, therefore, why she would think about refusing a marriage with a wealthy man who she even happens to be in love with. An important factor is that Jane, though she is at least partly a member of the upper class as she is related to the Reed family, does not feel like she belongs to Mr. Rochester's class and, according to Ayyildiz (2017), therefore does not feel like she deserves to climb social classes at this point of the novel:

[...] the status, rights and duties of women cannot be generalized since they varied according to the social class they came from. It indicates that social class determines the traditional ways of women's lives because the Victorians believed that each class has its own standards and people were expected to conform to the roles of their classes (Ayyildiz 2017: 147)

Another important factor for Jane's reluctance is that she wants to establish her own identity and individuality. As Shapiro (1968) claims, already the opening scene functions as Charlotte Brontë's protest of "prejudging and imposing an identity on someone, so that his individuality is lost" (Shapiro 1968: 685). Simone de Beauvoir, furthermore, explains that by marrying a man, a woman becomes his "vassal", as she takes his name, joins his religion, integrates into his social class and world, and, literally, becomes his "other half" (de Beauvoir [1949] 2009: 506). Naturally, considering that Jane is struggling with society's rules and expectations for women, she cannot like the thought of giving up her own identity to become a part of someone else. Even though Jane does not have what Tanner (1984) calls the means to establish a conscious self, namely she has no family, no friends, no ties, and no house, her identity can be seen in that

Jane Eyre has to write her life, literally create herself in writing: the narrative act is an act of self-definition. Given her social position the only control she has over her life is narrative control. She is literally as in control of herself as she is of her narrative (Tanner 1984: 15)

Although she does not have either of the things that would make her feel secure and give her the possibility to form a confidence in herself, it might just as well be the fact that she had to endure abuse from firstly her aunt and her cousins and later from Mr. Brocklehurst at Lowood Institute to make her realize her self-worth and increase her self-confidence as to where she is not willing to accept any more abuse from anyone, even her employer: "I don't think, sir, you have a right to command me, merely because you are older than I, or because you have seen more of the world than I have; your claim to superiority depends on the use you have made of your time and experience" (*Jane Eyre*: 136). The same goes for when Jane finds out that Mr. Rochester is, in fact, already married and decides to leave him, as she does not want to be solely his mistress. Although he is threatening her ("Jane! Will you hear reason? [...] because, if you won't, I'll try violence", *Jane Eyre*: 307), she is keeping her cool and rejects him in favor of her self-determination and bodily autonomy: "'Oh, Jane, this is bitter! This – this is wicked. It would not be wicked to love me.' 'It would be to obey you.'" (*Jane Eyre*: 321). This self-confidence Jane built up for herself ultimately allows her to be the first heroine in English literature to cross the borders of class- and gender separation. A first indicator of overcoming typical gender norms is that, in contrast to the stereotypical love-story of the 19th

century in which a man saves a woman and they fall in love, the roles are reversed in *Jane Eyre*, as Jane saves Mr. Rochester firstly from his riding accident as mentioned above, and then later from a fire:

He held out his hand; I gave him mine: he took it first in one, then in both his own. "You have saved my life: I have a pleasure in owing you so immense a debt. I cannot say more. Nothing else that has being would have been tolerable to me in the character of creditor for such an obligation: but you, it is different; - I feel your benefits no burden, Jane." (*Jane Eyre*: 153-154)

After having inherited a fortune from her uncle ("Mr. Briggs, being Mr. Eyre's solicitor, wrote to us last August to inform us of our uncle's death; and to say that he had left his property to his brother the clergyman's orphan daughter", *Jane Eyre*: 391) and having found out that St. John and his sisters are actually her cousins ("It seemed I had found a brother: one I could be proud of, - one I could love; and two sisters, whose qualities were such, that, when I knew them but as mere strangers, they had inspired me with genuine affection and admiration", *ibid.*), Jane has finally done what seems impossible in the 19th century: she has overcome the boundaries of the low social class she feels she belongs to and is no longer solely a penniless orphan, but a wealthy young woman with a family that has already supported her in her strive for independence by helping her find a job. This newly found independence allows Jane to overcome another boundary: gender separation. Jane rejects St. John's marriage proposal not once, but twice, and even more so when he is trying to pressure her into accepting by trying to convince her that it is God's will that they get married and go on a missionary journey to India together:

"You cannot – you ought not. Do you think God will be satisfied with half an oblation? Will he accept a mutilated sacrifice? It is the cause of God I advocate: it is under His standard I enlist you. I cannot accept on His behalf a divided allegiance: it must be entire." "Oh! I will give my heart to God," I said. "You do not want it." (*Jane Eyre*: 413)

Instead of being intimidated by St. John or the thought of being alone for the rest of her life, Jane realizes that, in contrast to what society teaches women, her male cousin does not stand above her: "I was with an equal – one with whom I might argue – one whom, if I saw good, I might resist" (*Jane Eyre*: 414). This realization, combined with the knowledge that, just as she does not love St. John more than a brother, he does not love her ("[...] and has no more of a husband's heart for me than that frowning giant of a rock [...]", *Jane Eyre*: 412), allows Jane to speak up

and make it abundantly clear that she is not interested in a master-servant-like marriage that St. John proposes, in which he orders and she does what she is told to do:

“It is what I want,” he said, speaking to himself; “it is just what I want. And there are obstacles in the way: they must be hewn down. Jane, you would not repent marrying me; be certain of that; we *must* be married. I repeat it there is no other way; and undoubtedly enough of love would follow upon marriage to render the union right even in your eyes.” “I scorn your idea of love,” I could not help saying, as I rose up and stood before him, leaning my back against the rock. “I scorn the counterfeit sentiment you offer: yes, St. John, and I scorn you when you offer it.” (*Jane Eyre*: 415-416)

Having refused St. John's proposal, Jane has now stood up to every male character that had an impact on her life: her cousin John Reed and Mr. Brocklehurst, who may as well function as the stereotypical representatives of a patriarchal society in which women do as they are told and do not dare to talk back, as well as Mr. Rochester and St. John, who try to lure her into a marriage in which they order and Jane obeys. This clearly shows that she has overcome the gender separation and, as men cannot tell her what to do or how to live her life, is truly equal to them. This equality shows itself when Mr. Rochester, now blind, one-handed, and broken, asks her to marry him again:

“Ah! Jane. But I want a wife.” “Do you, sir?” “Yes: is it news to you?” “Of course: you said nothing about it before.” “It is unwelcome news?” “That depends on the circumstances, sir – on your choice.” “Which you shall make for me, Jane. I will abide by your decision.” “Choose then, sir – *her who loves you best*.” “I will at least choose – *her I love best*. Jane, will you marry me?” “Yes, sir.” “A poor blind man, whom you will have to lead about by the hand?” “Yes, sir.” “A crippled man, twenty years older than you, whom you will have to wait on?” “Yes, sir.” (*Jane Eyre*: 452)

The fact that Mr. Rochester is openly giving Jane the choice of whether she wants to marry him or not foreshadows their marriage life: they live as equals and are perfectly happy together: “I am my husband's life as fully as he is mine. No woman was ever nearer to her mate than I am: ever more absolutely bone of his bone, and flesh of his flesh” (*Jane Eyre*: 459). Charlotte Brontë's message, therefore, clearly is that society cannot determine the fate of women and that marriage should not be based on a contract or a master-servant-relationship, but on mutual love and respect. Although these beliefs, combined with the first heroine of a novel that overcomes the boundaries of class and gender, were revolutionary for the time written, literary critics perceived the novel as a masterpiece, which became an immediate success.

George Henry Lewes, for example, praised the novel's realism, claiming that "reality – deep, significant reality – is the great characteristic of the book" (Lewes 1847: 691). He goes on by calling Jane a "creation" and pointing out that, by telling a story from the governess's point of view, a new approach to female writing might be found (Lewes 1847: 692). Although the novel was published under the male name Currer Bell, Lewes notes that the author is "evidently a woman" (Lewes 1847: 690) but that, "man or woman, young or old, be that as it may, no such book has gladdened our eyes for a long while" (Lewes 1847: 691). Interestingly, while male critics mostly praised the novel, it was a female critic, Elizabeth Rigby, who tore the novel to pieces, claiming that "the characters and events, though some of them masterly in conception, are coined expressly for the purpose of bringing out great effects", with the hero and heroine so "singularly unattractive that the reader feels they can have no vocation in the novel but to be brought together" (Rigby [1848] 1849: 501). About Jane, Rigby goes on by claiming that "almost every word she utters offends us, not only with the absence of these qualities, but with the positive contrasts of them, in either her pedantry, stupidity, or gross vulgarity" (Rigby [1848] 1849: 503) and calling her "an unregenerate and undisciplined spirit" (Rigby [1848] 1849: 505). In general, she calls *Jane Eyre* an "anti-Christian composition", filled with a "murmuring against the comforts of the rich and against the privations of the poor, which [...] is a murmuring against God's appointment" and a "combination of such genuine power with such horrid taste" (Rigby [1848] 1849: 501). The main problem Rigby seems to have with the novel is that "the popularity of *Jane Eyre* is a proof how deeply the love for illegitimate romance is implanted in our nature" (Rigby [1848] 1849: 503). Therefore, she clearly calls overcoming the boundaries of social class and gender, as well as implementing an own female identity and challenging the rules society gave women, morally wrong and unacceptable.

Likewise critical of society and the rules set for women, yet completely different in its setup, is Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847). In contrast to *Jane Eyre*, in which the heroine of the novel is simultaneously the autodiegetic narrator, the narrative situation of *Wuthering Heights* is a lot more complex. Although there are two 'main' narrators, namely Mr. Lockwood for the present narration and Nelly Dean for the past narration, the focalization shifts to other

characters at certain points, for example in Catherine's diary entry (*Wuthering Heights*: 21ff.) or Isabella's letter to Nelly (*Wuthering Heights*: 145ff.). This gives one the impression that, as the two main characters may not be 100% reliable as, for example, Nelly tells a story that has happened 20 years ago, the story should stand on its own and the reader should make up their own minds about it. What Tanner finds interesting about choosing Mr. Lockwood as one of the main narrators is that he is a figure "who is in all crucial respects her [Emily Brontë] opposite – male, emotionally etiolated, and a product of the modern city" (Tanner 1984: 9). As such, Lockwood is not able nor willing to establish a female identity as it has been the case in *Jane Eyre*. His inability to empathize with other characters, especially women, can most clearly be seen in how he describes them:

While enjoying a month of fine weather at the sea-coast, I was thrown into the company of a most fascinating creature, a real goddess, in my eyes, as long as she took no notice of me. I "never told my love" vocally; still, if looks have language, the merest idiot might have guessed I was over head and ears: she understood me, at last, and looked a return – the sweetest of all imaginable looks – and what did I do? I confess it with shame – shrunk icily into myself, like a snail, at every glance retired colder and farther; till, finally, the poor innocent was led to doubt her own senses, and, overwhelmed with confusion at her supposed mistake, persuaded her mamma to decamp. By this curious turn of disposition I have gained the reputation of deliberate heartlessness, how undeserved, I alone can appreciate. (*Wuthering Heights*: 6)

Not once does he talk about the "woman" or the "girl" he fancied, but he uses all sorts of terms, such as "fascinating creature", "goddess", or "poor innocent" to describe her. Cory (2006), therefore, claims that women seem "at times little more than ciphers" to Lockwood, and are dehumanized due to the absence of naming and description (Cory 2006: 13). While Lockwood is aware that he is "perfectly unworthy" (*Wuthering Heights*: 6) of finding love on the one hand, he does not seem to understand that it is his inability to see women as human beings and not as mere objects that prevents him from finding a wife on the other. That he sees himself standing high above women can also be seen in that, when he finds Catherine's diary, he does not simply read it, but claims that he needs to "decypher her faded hieroglyphics" (*Wuthering Heights*: 21) – meaning that he, as a man, must give meaning to the words of a woman. After waking from his nightmare and explaining to Heathcliff what he has seen, Lockwood, despite having the three names Catherine Earnshaw, Catherine Heathcliff, or Catherine Linton to choose

from, again decides to not name her, but link her to the supernatural by calling her “fiend” and “minx” and talking about her “wicked soul”:

“If the little fiend had got in at the window, she probably would have strangled me!”, I returned. “I’m not going to endure the persecutions of your hospitable ancestors again – Was not the Reverend Jabes Branderham akin to you on the mother’s side? And that minx, Catherine Linton, or Earnshaw, or however she was called – she must have been a changeling – wicked little soul! She told me she had been walking the earth these twenty years: a just punishment for her mortal transgressions, I’ve no doubt!” (*Wuthering Heights*: 28-29)

Simone de Beauvoir explains this male way of describing and referring to women as the “myth of woman”, which she describes as follows:

It is thus true that woman is other than man, and this alterity is concretely felt in desire, embrace, and love; but the real relation is one of reciprocity; as such, it gives rise to authentic dramas: through eroticism, love, friendship, and their alternatives of disappointment, hatred, and rivalry, the relation is a struggle of consciousnesses, each of which wants to be essential, it is the recognition of freedoms that confirm each other, it is the undefined passage from enmity to complicity. To posit the Woman is to posit the absolute Other, without reciprocity, refusing, against experience, that she could be a subject, a peer (de Beauvoir [1949] 2009: 315)

She goes on by explaining that what is most anchored in the mindset of men about the “myth of woman” is the “feminine mystery”, which gives them an easy explanation for anything that, for them, is inexplicable: “the man who does not ‘understand’ a woman is happy to replace his subjective deficiency with an objective resistance; instead of admitting his ignorance, he recognizes the presence of a mystery exterior to himself” (de Beauvoir [1949] 2009: 317-318). Clearly, this exact concept applies to Lockwood, who is disturbed by his nightmare and the experience that he cannot explain and therefore turns to assigning women to the “dangerous supernatural”. For this reason, Newman (1990) claims, Lockwood also appropriates both Catherine’s and Nelly’s story as his own and, therefore, suppresses a female identity:

The role of onlooker, the conventional position of the masculine spectator with respect to the feminine spectacle, is in this novel precisely the situation of the narrator – specifically, of the narrator as voyeur defending himself against the threat of the feminine by objectifying a woman, by telling her story, writing it down in his diary, and seeking in his oblique way to make it – and her – his own. (Newman 1990: 1034)

Although one could argue that Newman’s argument is somewhat farfetched, considering that, despite having an undeniable problematic relationship with

women, Lockwood, after all, stems from the imagination of a woman, suppression, or someone supposedly standing above someone else, is a prominent topic in *Wuthering Heights*. One indicator for one standing above the other is the relationship between Catherine and Heathcliff. Before finding and bringing home Heathcliff, Catherine's father asked her what he should bring her as a gift, to which she answered she wanted a whip: "Hindley named a fiddle, and then he asked Miss Cathy; she was hardly six years old, but she could ride any horse in the stable, and she chose a whip" (*Wuthering Heights*: 38). What is interesting about Heathcliff is that he is described as a "dark-skinned gypsy" (*Wuthering Heights*: 5), which, by using an insulting language that, at the time of the composing of the novel, was meant to show the difference between the 'acceptable' class and the 'declassed' part of society (and which is a term that the 21st century has accepted to be politically and morally wrong to use), indicates clearly that he is not only standing below Catherine socially, but also marks him as racially different to Catherine and the English upper middle class. This assumption is underlined by the fact that Catherine's father found him in the streets of Liverpool in the 1770s, which between 1763 and 1776 became the leading English city partaking in slave trade (von Sneidern 1995: 171), and that Heathcliff is referred to as "it" rather than "he": "Not a soul knew to whom it belonged, he said, and his money and time, being both limited, he thought it better to take it home with him [...]" (*Wuthering Heights*: 39). Although Catherine never receives the whip, as her father lost it, and it was meant for riding a horse, talking about a whip and a dark-skinned boy within two pages clearly indicates a master-servant-relationship between Catherine and Heathcliff, which is strengthened by the fact that Catherine was "spitting at the stupid little thing" (*Wuthering Heights*: 40) on their first encounter. Despite their differences in race, status, and social class, the two of them develop a lively friendship, which eventually turns to love and in which Catherine always indicates that, despite being friends, she sees herself as standing above Heathcliff:

Cathy, catching a glimpse of her friend in his concealment, flew to embrace him; she bestowed seven or eight kisses on his cheek within the second, and, then, stopped, and drawing back, burst into a laugh, exclaiming: "Why, how very black and cross you look! And how – how funny and grim! But that's because I'm used to Edgar and Isabella Linton. Well; Heathcliff, have you forgotten me?" (*Wuthering Heights*: 57)

In this friendship, one can see that Catherine is not the perfect woman she was expected to be – which, after Coventry Patmore coined the term a couple years later, would be called an ‘Angel in the House’ – in order to find a suitable husband. Although she would naturally stand above an orphan from the streets of Liverpool, she definitely would not have been expected to give him “seven or eight kisses”, as well as girls were not supposed to “burst into a laugh” or yell out what was going through their minds. This speaks for the wild and free character Catherine, who is described as a “wild, hatless little savage” (*Wuthering Heights*: 56), has. As the reader would, therefore, expect Catherine to not accept the rules of society set for women, is it all the more surprising when she decides that she wants to marry Edgar Linton:

“Why do you love him, Miss Cathy?” “Nonsense, I do – that’s sufficient.” “By no means; you must say why?” “Well, because he is handsome, and pleasant to be with.” “Bad,” was my commentary. “And because he is young and cheerful.” “Bad, still.” “And, because he loves me.” “Indifferent, coming there.” “And he will be rich, and I shall like to be the greatest woman of the neighbourhood, and I shall be proud of having such a husband” (*Wuthering Heights*: 84)

She is very clearly doing what society wants women to do. She is marrying a rich man, not because she loves him, but because it is expected of her. Her former disregard of the rules of society can be seen in her trying to justify her desire to marry Edgar, talking about how handsome and cheerful he is, until she finally admits to Nelly that she, in fact, only marries him for his money and his position within society. This confession of hers finds its climax when she admits that she does not love Edgar, but Heathcliff, but cannot and will not marry him because her reputation in society is more important to her than her happiness: “it would degrade me to marry Heathcliff, now; so he shall never know how I love him” (*Wuthering Heights*: 86). This decision, however, ultimately leads to her downfall. As he runs off after he heard that Catherine loves him but will not be with him, she bursts into “uncontrollable grief” (*Wuthering Heights*: 94) and becomes “dangerously ill” (*ibid.*). Upon Heathcliff’s return, it once again shows that Catherine, despite her supposed wild character, is not willing to go against society’s expectations. This cannot only be seen in her saying “I am an angel” (*Wuthering Heights*: 107), but also in that she, despite being overly ecstatic about Heathcliff’s return, is not willing or even considers leaving her husband. Clearly, she wants “the best of both worlds”: her husband, her unborn child, and the social status and wealth that goes with them

on the one hand, and Heathcliff and the deep, sincere love she has for him on the other. That is why she reacts very jealous when Isabella admits that she has feelings for Heathcliff, and insults her when Isabella states what is obvious to the reader:

“Oh no,” wept the young lady, “you wished me away, because you knew I liked to be there!” “Is she sane?” asked Mrs Linton, appealing to me. “I’ll repeat our conversation, word for word, Isabella; and you point out any charm it could have had for you.” “I don’t mind the conversation,” she answered: “I wanted to be with – “ “Well!” said Catherine, perceiving her hesitate to complete the sentence. “With him; and I won’t be always sent off!” she continued, kindling up. “You are a dog in the manger, Cathy, and desire no one to be loved but yourself!” “You are an impertinent little monkey!” exclaimed Mrs Linton, in surprise. (*Wuthering Heights*: 109)

Interestingly, it is Isabella Linton, who is thought to be the ‘perfect girl’ that does as she is told growing up, who actively takes control of her own life. She firstly marries Heathcliff against her brother’s wishes and commands because she is in love and later, when Heathcliff mistreats and abuses her and she finds out that he only married to for revenge on her brother, she decides to go against everything society expected women to do, and runs away from him, calling him “a lying fiend, a monster, and not a human being” (*Wuthering Heights*: 162). Catherine, in contrast, is not able to take action and do what is best for her, and ultimately dies in childbirth, not before asking for forgiveness from Heathcliff, who summarizes what consequences it had that she chose money over love:

“You teach me now how cruel you’ve been – cruel and false. *Why* did you despise me? *Why* did you betray your own heart, Cathy? I have not one word of comfort – you deserve this. You have killed yourself. Yes, you may kiss me, and cry; and wring out my kisses and tears. They’ll blight you – they’ll damn you. You loved me – then what *right* had you to leave me? What right – answer me – for the poor fancy you felt for Linton? Because misery, and degradation, and death, and nothing that God or Satan could inflict would have parted us, *you*, of your own will, did it. I have not broken your heart – *you* have broken it – and in breaking it, you have broken mine. So much the worse for me, that I am strong. Do I want to live? What kind of living will it be when you – oh God! would *you* like to live with your soul in the grave?” “Let me alone. Let me alone,” sobbed Catherine. “If I’ve done wrong, I’m dying for it. It is enough! You left me too; but I won’t upbraid you! I forgive you. Forgive me!” “It is hard to forgive, and to look at those eyes, and feel those wasted hands,” he answered. “Kiss me again; and don’t let me see your eyes! I forgive what you have done to me. I love *my* murderer – but *yours*! How can I?” (*Wuthering Heights*: 175)

The deep love between them becomes obvious once more: Heathcliff can forgive Catherine the pain she has caused him, but he cannot forgive her the pain she has caused herself by choosing Edgar as a husband instead of him, even though she

loved Heathcliff. Shortly after, her daughter, also named Catherine, is born and “two hours after the mother died” (*Wuthering Heights*: 178). Doing what is expected of her rather than doing what is best for her therefore clearly led to Catherine’s downfall. What is interesting to note about the novel is that Nelly Dean, who functions as the moral instance of society, is presented to be more simple-minded, which again can be understood as an insult to society and its rules. Nelly’s ‘moral voice of society’ can be seen in several instances, most prominently in how, as mentioned above, she originally reacts to Heathcliff, a dark-skinned orphan from the streets of Liverpool, to be brought home to Wuthering Heights to be raised with her master’s children, and in how she reacts to Catherine and Isabella going against what is expected of women. Shortly before Catherine dies, she faints, to which Nelly thinks: “‘She’s fainted or dead,’ I thought, ‘so much for the better. Far better that she should be dead, than lingering a burden, and a misery-maker to all about her’” (*Wuthering Heights*: 177). To Isabella, who ran away from her husband after he severely mistreated her, she says, despite knowing about the abuse: “‘Hush, hush! He’s a human being,’ I said. ‘Be more charitable; there are worse men than he is yet!’” (*Wuthering Heights*: 186). Therefore, what she does is not sympathize with the woman that is dying and the woman that has been abused, but with the men around them, as she is asking the women, despite all, to please their husbands and, if they cannot or do not want to do so, thinks it is better for them to die than to cause the husband “more misery”.

The younger Catherine and Hareton, lastly, represent the hope for a brighter future in which the tragic story of the older Catherine and Heathcliff does not repeat itself. There are similarities in the love-story between Catherine and Heathcliff and Catherine and Hareton. Like her mother was not particularly fond of Heathcliff when they first met, the younger Catherine also dislikes Hareton in the beginning, as she connects him with Heathcliff, the loss of her property, and the marriage with Linton she was forced into: “‘I won’t have them, now!’ she answered. ‘I shall connect them with you, and hate them’” (*Wuthering Heights*: 322) / “‘He’s just like a dog, is he not, Ellen?’ she once observed” (*Wuthering Heights*: 332). Hareton’s position, though he was born into a wealthy family, can also be compared to Heathcliff’s when he was brought to live with the Earnshaw-family, as he was kept illiterate and uneducated and was brought up in poor circumstances. Yet the cousins

slowly grow fond of each other, until even Heathcliff notices and wants to halt their relationship, claiming “your love will make him an outcast, and a beggar” (*Wuthering Heights*: 342). Clearly, he is basically repeating the older Catherine’s words “it would degrade me to marry Heathcliff” (*Wuthering Heights*: 86) here, though he does it not out of respect of society, but out of revenge to the Earnshaws and Lintons. Yet, after Heathcliff’s death, Catherine and Hareton decide to get married after all and leave *Wuthering Heights* behind: “‘They are going to the Grange, then?’ I said. ‘Yes,’ answered Mrs Dean, ‘as soon as they are married; and that will be on New Year’s day.’” (*Wuthering Heights*: 359). After all the misery in the past, even Nelly, who, as mentioned before, represents the traditional beliefs of society, is happy for Catherine and Hareton, who bring about a changed view on marriage and partnership and do what Catherine and Heathcliff were not able to do:

You see, Mr Lockwood, it was easy enough to win Mrs Heathcliff’s heart; but now, I’m glad you did not try – the crown of all my wishes will be the union of those two; I shall envy no one on their wedding-day – there won’t be a happier woman than myself in England! (*Wuthering Heights*: 337)

The novel clearly criticizes society and the rules it set not only for women, but also for men. The two main points it makes are that, firstly, society is not a closed entity, but, against the common beliefs, one can change their position within. This can, above all, be seen in Heathcliff, who starts off as a clear outsider and ends up being a rich man who is in possession of both *Wuthering Heights* and *Thrushcross Grange*. Secondly, Emily Brontë clearly criticizes the pressure to live up to society’s expectations, as it is unhealthy for both women and men. Catherine’s downfall and Heathcliff’s revenge that put both the Earnshaw and the Linton family into misery shows this clearly. In contrast to her sister’s *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights* was, however, not particularly praised by the critics. *The Examiner* (1848), for example, called it “a strange book” and said the story was “wild, confused, disjointed, and improbably” (*The Examiner* 1848: 21). *The Spectator* (1847) said about the novel:

An attempt to give novelty and interest to fiction, by resorting to those singular “characters” that used to exist everywhere... the incidents and persons are too coarse and disagreeable to be attractive, the very best being improbable, with a moral taint about them, and the villainy not leading to results sufficient to justify the elaborate pains taken in depicting it. (*Spectator* 1847: 17)

Yet, *Wuthering Heights* is counted among the classics of English literature in the 21st century, and Emily Brontë is named amongst the most influential female British writers. The postpartum success of the novel can also be seen in the success of Kate Bush's 1978 song *Wuthering Heights*, which was named the fifth-greatest song of the 1970s by Pitchfork in 2016.¹⁸ In the song, Kate Bush draws on how Catherine's ghost finally comes to take Heathcliff's soul home with her, who, in the novel, is said to have died with an open window and a smile on his face (*Wuthering Heights*: 357). In the chorus of the song, it says: "Heathcliff! It's me, Cathy, I've come home. I'm so cold, let me in your window" (Kate Bush, *Wuthering Heights*, EMI 1978). This shows that, though the novel did not appeal to its own time, the message it delivered was one for the ages.

Novels like the above-mentioned ones paved the way for the first big wave of feminism and the New Women, who ultimately brought about the suffragettes who fought for equal rights for women. The following subchapter will explain the New Woman and the problems she faced in detail.

2.4 The New Woman

As it has been previously mentioned, it was believed in the 19th century that the moral condition of the nation derives from the moral standards of women (Nead 1988: 92) and that any challenge to the traditional role of women also served as a threat to the British empire itself (Crozier-De Rosa 2010: 238-239). Additionally, Shula Marks (1990) claims that men of the British middle and upper classes drew strong similarities between the colonized countries and their 'counterparts' in the home country, meaning the working class, women, and children, and made them the "Other" (Marks 1990: 115). By this, men of the British middle and upper classes clearly placed themselves well above women, children, and the working class. While it has been shown before that the literature of the 19th century grew more and more critical of the rules society set and the hierarchy men of the middle and upper classes developed, the same naturally went for society itself. While literature that portrayed strong, white, and 'manly' men who fought to keep the empire alive and/or brought civilization and help to the colonies, such as the works by George

¹⁸ For the whole list, see <https://pitchfork.com/features/lists-and-guides/9935-the-200-best-songs-of-the-1970s/>, no author, accessed March 22, 2025.

Alfred Henty or, most famously, *King Solomon's Mines* by Henry Rider Haggard (1885), were famous and well read, there was also a counter-development of literature that portrayed strong female characters. This development in literature and society was due to the 'New Woman' – signifying the shift the society was facing regarding femininity because of the 'new' women, meaning women that were striving for greater emancipation for the female sex by the end of the 19th century (Crozier-De Rosa 2009: 419). According to Ledger (1997), the New Woman was "a feminist activist, a social reformer, a popular novelist, a suffragette playwright, a woman poet; she was also often a fictional construct, a discursive response to the activities of the late nineteenth-century women's movement" (Ledger 1997: 1), while Sanders (1996) called the New Woman "well-educated, critical of marriage, anxious for sexual and economic freedom, but also neurotic and self-destructive" (Sanders 1996: 56-57). Of course, the New Women were not the first feminists, considering that, for example, already in the 18th century Mary Wollstonecraft pleaded for equal rights for men and women in her own works. However, only by the end of the 19th century and with the help of the New Woman, the idea that men are not *per se* superior to women and that everyone, therefore, should have equal rights, started to catch on to a broader public. Naturally and shown in how the New Woman was perceived and are characterized by critics like Ledger and Sanders, while some liked this new development, others were appalled by it. To show the difference between the two groups, this section will introduce both sides by drawing on Marie Corelli's *My Wonderful Wife* (1890), which makes fun of the New Woman, on the one hand, and Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), which is said to be one of the first feminist novels, on the other. The question this section aims to answer is how bestselling author Marie Corelli, who is said to have sold more novels than her male contemporaries combined (for more on this, see section 2.4.1), portrays women and the problems concerning the New Woman society faces in contrast to a more politically motivated author like South African novelist Olive Schreiner, who only gained success through her *The Story of an African Farm*.

2.4.1 Marie Corelli's *My Wonderful Wife*

Marie Corelli is often said to be the first English bestselling author. According to Masters (1978), half of her novels were world-wide bestsellers and for several

years, over 100.000 copies of her books were sold annually (Masters 1978: 6). By this, she exceeded her contemporaries that are much better known to a broader audience in the 21st century, such as Arthur Conan Doyle, H. G. Wells, or Rudyard Kipling. However, not all critics thought her to be a great novelist; exemplary, Grant Allen in the *Spectator* called her “a woman of deplorable talent who imagined that she was a genius, and was accepted as a genius by a public to whose commonplace sentimentalities and prejudices she gave a glamorous setting” (Scott 1955: 263). Nevertheless, she was very popular not only amongst the common people, but, indeed, also amongst royalty. According to Masters, besides Queen Victoria, the Empress of Austria, the Tsarina of Russia, the Queen of Italy, the Maharajah of Kartarpur, the British Prime Ministers Gladstone and Asquith, as well as Australian Prime Minister Billy Hughes all read and admired her novels, and King Edward VII even invited her to his coronation (Masters 1978: 7). While, as Moody (2006) claims, Corelli's popularity derived from her ability to “engage with the new pseudosciences, cultural interest in psychic research, and the technological application of research from the scientific establishment in her articulation of a belief in resurrection” (Moody 2006: 190), she, in fact and in contrast to her modern ideas concerning sciences, was not a fan of the New Woman; she much rather was appalled by those women and continued to show the traditional perception of women in her novels. This becomes especially obvious in her *My Wonderful Wife: A Study in Smoke* (1890). Told from the husband's – that is, William Hatwell-Tribkin – perspective in a first-person narration, the problem he faces with his wife Honoria, who turns out to be a New Woman, might seem ridiculous or even satirical from a 21st century perspective; however, they spoke to the general public of the late 19th century that despised the ‘woman question’ and, consequently, the New Woman. Although William initially is proud of Honoria and calls her a “glorious girl” (*My Wonderful Wife*: 5), she is in the very first sentences of the novel presented as a witch that casts a spell on an innocent man:

She was really a wonderful woman! I always said so! She captivated me with a smile; she subjugated my frail and trembling soul with a glance. She took such utter possession of me from the very moment I set eyes on her that I had no longer any will of my own (*ibid.*)

Simone de Beauvoir's theory about the “feminine mystery”, as explained in 2.3.2, also applies to Corelli's novel. As William does not understand Honoria and her

“radical” ideas concerning feminism and equality, he from the beginning presents her as a mysterious figure that bewitches ordinary men, and as alien to society. This is underlined by the fact that later on in the novel, when William has had enough of his wife, he calls her a “freak of nature” (*My Wonderful Wife*: 74) and a “mischievous demon of misrule” (*My Wonderful Wife*: 103), again implying that Honoria is, in fact, not human. The fact that he, once married, starts complaining about Honoria’s hobbies as if he only then realized who she was and even calls their marriage “an error” (*My Wonderful Wife*: 93) also suggests that she somehow tricked him into marrying her. However, William knew all along that Honoria liked to go hunting with her friends, as in the very beginning of the novel he proudly introduces her to the reader by saying that “she had just come back from the Highlands, where she had ‘brought down’ a superb stag with a single unerring shot from her gun” (*My Wonderful Wife*: 5). While he did know exactly who Honoria was and what she liked to do, for example to smoke and to hunt, he expected her to stop being herself and just miraculously change her behavior and character overnight. She, in contrast, is having none of it, as she claims that “we are the equals of man. What he can do, we can do as well, and often better; we are his companions now, not his slaves” (*My Wonderful Wife*: 21). What is interesting is that even when William tries to convince Honoria to give up her habits, which is quiet early on in their marriage when he still admires her and compliments her appearance, he still dehumanizes her by calling her a “creature”:

“[...] and, besides this, Honoria, it is *not* a nice thing for a woman, especially an English woman. It is all very well for ugly Russian matrons and withered old Spanish gypsies, but for a young, bonny, fresh creature like you, Honoria, it is not the thing, believe me! Moreover, it gives you a masculine appearance, which is not at all becoming. I am in earnest, my dear! I want my wife to be above all things womanly, and now we are married I can tell you frankly I hope you will never take a *gun* in your hands again. It was very plucky of you to show that you *could* shoot, you know, Honoria. I admired your spirit, but, of course, I always knew you only did it for fun. A woman can never be an actual follower of sport, any more than she can become a practiced smoker, without losing the beautiful prestige of modesty and dignity with which Nature has endowed her.” (*My Wonderful Wife*: 19)

To this, however, Honoria answers “I have never heard a better bit of sentimental palaver than that! Willie, you *are* a goose!” (*ibid.*). This “creature” Honoria represents is obviously not willing to change when her husband has known her character and who she was as a person all along and still married her. By repeatedly stating that Honoria is different, crazy, mysterious, and not a human being,

however, it is ensured that the reader does not actually think about what is happening, but simply accepts that William must be right, and Honoria must be wrong. The same is done to Honoria's mother, Mrs. Maggs, who, despite making valid points, as, for example, that for problems in a marriage "both are to blame, it is never all on one side" (*My Wonderful Wife*: 72), is presented to be a fool that one rapidly grows sick of and about who William thinks he "passionately yearned to shake her into some semblance of actual vivacity" (*My Wonderful Wife*: 67). Interestingly, while Honoria's 'manly' behavior is repeatedly criticized not only by William, but by pretty much everyone in the novel except for Honoria herself and her friends, it is at no point mentioned by any character that William, in return, acts as women were expected to behave in the 19th century. While Honoria appears to be coldhearted, unemotional, and, as a result of this, unwilling to raise her voice and fight, which are attributes assigned to man in the 19th century, William complains a lot, is obsessed with appearances, and gets cranky when, on his wedding day, he is not the center of attention:

I know nobody looked at or thought of *me*. I was the least part of the ceremony – the bride was everything; the bride always *is* everything. And yet the bridegroom is an absolute necessity; he is wanted, is he not? The affair would not go on well without him? Then *why* is he, as a rule, so obstinately ignored and despised by his friends and relatives at his own wedding? (*My Wonderful Wife*: 11)

While this scene is clearly supposed to be humorous and satirical, there are several scenes in the novel that discuss the position of women in a serious tone. While most of the scenes seem rather ridiculous from a 21st century point of view, as they talk about women dressing how they want, women working, or a somewhat risky topic of women not wanting to have children, they also show what a broader society of the late 19th century feared about the New Woman. While Honoria, for example, calls the institution of marriage a "mistake" (*My Wonderful Wife*: 48) and directly says that they both want a change (*ibid.*), William – somewhat desperately – pleads for her 'womanly' side to come through to make it all right. What can be taken from this pleading, however, is that to him, women are not individuals with different characters, but all women are expected to be the same and are, therefore, generally to blame for a failing marriage if they are not acting how they are supposed to act. While he knows Honoria's character and knows that she is not "soft and sweet", he nevertheless asks her to show him "the *womanly* side of your nature – the

gentleness, softness, and sweetness that are in your heart, I am sure, if you would only let these lovely qualities have their way” (*My Wonderful Wife*: 49). He then goes on by explaining how the behavior of the New Woman is not only hurting him as her husband, who is overshadowed by his wife, but the nation as a whole and how women, in order to secure the safety of the nation, have to be like in one of the key scenes of the novel:

I suffer, Honoria, I really suffer, when I see and hear *you*, my wife, aping the manners, customs, and slang parlance of men. It is surely no disgrace to a woman to be womanly; her weakness is stronger than all strength; her mildness checks anger and engenders peace. In her right position, she is the saving-grace of men; her virtues make them ashamed of their vices, her simplicity disarms their cunning, her faith and truth inspire them with the highest, noblest good. [...] but, believe me, no good can come of this throwing down of the barriers between the sexes; no advantage can possibly accrue to a great nation like ours from allowing the women to deliberately sacrifice their delicacy and reserve, and the men to resign their ancient code of chivalry and reverence. [...] It will be a bad, a woful day for England when women as a class assert themselves altogether as the equals of men [...]. (*My Wonderful Wife*: 49-50)

He later on repeats this argument to himself, claiming

When women voluntarily resign their position as the silent monitors and models of grace and purity, down will go all the pillars of society, and we shall scarcely differ in our manners and customs from nations we call “barbaric”, because as yet they have not adopted Christ’s exalted idea of the value and sanctity of female influence on the higher development of the human race (*My Wonderful Wife*: 63).

Again, the New Woman is dehumanized here as an abnormality that goes against the doctrines of the Church and that lowers the position of British society to a society on one level with their “barbaric” colonies. According to William, women are “infinitely his [men’s] superior in delicate tact, sweet sympathy, grand unselfishness, and divinely awful purity” (*My Wonderful Wife*: 53), while men are superior in physical strength and intelligence in general, as “her brain is too quick, too subtle, too fine, to hold of the useful quality of that dogged and determined patience which distinguishes so many of our greatest inventors and explorers” (*ibid.*). In other words, he is suggesting that, by nature, women have no choice other than being the Angel in the House, while men form and shape the world to their will. Honoria, in contrast, understands that the times are changing and that there is nothing men like William can do about it, as she claims “I’m a result of the age we live in, and you don’t quite like me!” (*My Wonderful Wife*: 55).

To show that the “result of the age we live in” is, in fact, not positive but dangerous to society, the big guns need to be brought in. As Axel Dammler, a German communications scientist and youth researcher, claimed to “Der Tagesspiegel” (03.09.2007): “Kleine Tiere und Kinder ziehen immer. [...] Kinder sind generell ein emotionaler Türöffner - auch für Erwachsene: Wenn sie nett und süß daherkommen, geht das direkt ins Herz“.¹⁹ The concept of bringing children into the game to propagate one’s own opinion can also be found in *My Wonderful Wife*. After William finally convinced Honoria to have a baby with him in hopes of her turning her whole character around once she sees the baby’s cute little face, she is not bonding with her son. To the contrary, she even claims herself that “he screams if I touch him, and rolls right over on his back and makes the most horrible faces at me when I look at him. [...] Can’t lay a finger on him without bruising him black and blue” (*My Wonderful Wife*: 42). By the end of the novel, it is said by the narrator that “my boy goes to school now – a bright little chap, who up to the present has never seen his mother since his unreflective infancy” (*My Wonderful Wife*: 124). By appealing to the reader’s pity for the child and presenting the New Woman as a deadbeat mother who is unwilling and unable to care for her child, but rather hurts and almost kills them before leaving them for good, clearly suggested that British society is bound to go extinct if the beliefs and the movement of the New Woman keep spreading.

To show how much better the traditional way of living with women being the Angel in the House, Corelli introduces Honoria’s sister Georgie and her fiancé, the Earl of Richmoor. Georgie is described to look “just now the very picture of sweet maidenhood and modesty” (*My Wonderful Wife*: 80), and Honoria even admits that her sister would have been a better wife for William, as “she would have sat on your knee, cuddled in your arms, curled your hair with her fingers, and kissed you on the tip of your nose” (*My Wonderful Wife*: 51). She is able to fix William a “delicious cup [of tea], aromatic in odor and tempting to look at” (*My Wonderful Wife*: 79), and she takes care of Honoria’s and William’s son like it was nothing

¹⁹ *Der Tagesspiegel* about advertisements, 03.09.2007: <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/wirtschaft/kinderschokolade-werbung-kleine-tiere-und-kinder-ziehen-immer/1032242.html>, no author, accessed March 22, 2025.
“Small animals and children are always attractive. [...] Children are generally an emotional door opener – even for adults: If they come across as nice and sweet, it goes straight to the heart.” – translation by K. Pohlmann.

(*My Wonderful Wife*: 78). By being all this, namely the perfect woman and Angel in the House, she is able to marry an Earl and become a Countess herself. The intention of including Georgie is clear, as the message her character sends may simply be translated as “if you are a good girl like Georgie, you can marry an Earl. If you are a bad girl like Honoria, you only get to marry a William Hatwell-Tribkin”. However, she as well as the Earl of Richmoor remain rather dull characters who are very stereotypical – Georgie as the Angel in the House and Richmoor as the perfect gentleman and husband – and therefore do not offer much depth as well as room to sympathize with. By the end of the novel, the narrator tells the reader that

But all the same, *my* wife is notorious, and the young Countess of Richmoor is *not*. Georgie never gets into the papers at all, except when she is mentioned in the list of ladies at the queen's Drawing-room; Honoria is always in them, in season and out of season. (*My Wonderful Wife*: 124)

While, on the one hand, this implies that Georgie lives a scandal-free life, this part also gives the reader the impression that the traditional way of living and the Angel in the House are now ‘out of fashion’ and a thing of the past, as no one cares about the angel anymore, but rather pays attention to the New Woman. In a last attempt to restore ‘order’ to society, William – and in that respect, Corelli herself – pleads to the reader:

It is all very well to tell me that Spanish women, and Russian women, and Turkish women smoke. Let them do so if they like; they are nothing to us, nor we to them; but for Heaven's sake let us ward off that vulgarity from our sweet, fair English women, who are the pride of our country, and the prettiest and freshest to look at in the whole world! (*My Wonderful Wife*: 125)

Again, the argument that is made is that women are the “pride of the country” and if they are ‘going downhill’, so will society. The irony that Corelli on the one hand was a successful, unmarried writer herself, yet condemned and ridiculed women who are trying to make a career and be independent from men, is, however, not completely lost on the author. Nevertheless, she lets William make a clear distinction between a ‘real’ female writer and the New Woman writers, as Honoria is a writer, too. It is clear that in those scenes, it is more likely Corelli herself talking rather than William, as William is a traditionalist, yet claims that “I am a great believer in woman's literary capability” (*My Wonderful Wife*: 31). Even though the publisher “had paid her [Honoria] well for it [her book]” (*My Wonderful Wife*: 30),

which implies that her publication was a success, William calls her writing a “fraud” (*My Wonderful Wife*: 31), as she “had no real love for literature; she called all the ancient classic writers ‘old bores,’ and all the works of the after-giants, such as Shakespeare, Byron, Shelley, Walter Scott, Dickens, or Thackeray, ‘stuff and rubbish’” (*ibid.*). On the other hand, the female writer that is not a part of the New Woman movement is distinguished from the New Woman writer and, consequently, defended:

But there is no necessity for her to part with her womanly gentleness because she writes. No, for it is just that subtle charm of her finer sex that should give the superiority to her work – not the stripping herself of all those delicate and sensitive qualities bestowed on her by Nature, and the striving to ape that masculine roughness which is precisely what we want eliminated from all high ideals of art. (*My Wonderful Wife*: 32)

While it is safe to assume that in this scene Corelli herself talks, the next part gets interesting, as she talks about “one of the sweetest and most womanly women I ever met is rapidly coming to the front as a most gifted and brilliant writer” (*ibid.*). This writer is not mentioned once before or after this scene and is never actually named, yet it is said that

She neither smokes nor keeps late hours; she does not hunt, or fish, nor shoot; she dresses exquisitely; her voice is “low and sweet” as “Annie Laurie’s,” and the roughest man of her particular circle – one who has been called the “Ursa Major” of literature – becomes the softest and most courtly *preux chevalier* in her presence, much to the relief and satisfaction of all his and her friends (*ibid.*),

which leaves the reader to assume that Corelli is, in fact, talking about herself here. She goes on by complaining about the New Woman writers, who “mixes up her rights and privileges with those of the coarser sex” (*My Wonderful Wife*: 33), and demands that those women “should be altogether debarred from entering into the profession of literature” (*ibid.*). Yet, she keeps defending literature and female writers, just not the New Woman writers, from “the London clergymen and others” (*My Wonderful Wife*: 32), as she claims:

Literature of itself does not unsex a woman; its proper influence is a softening, dignifying, and ennobling one; therefore if, in that calling, a woman proves herself unwomanly in her speech, manners, and customs, you may be sure the unsexing process was pretty well completed before she ever took up the pen. (*My Wonderful Wife*: 33)

Very clearly, she distinguishes between female writers like herself, who she describes to be very professional as a writer, but who also know their place as women, and the New Woman writers, who she describes to be rather trashy. As a consequence of being trashy and not a writer to be taken seriously, Honoria – and, consequently, the New Woman writers in general – are and, as the novel suggests, deserve to be exposed to mockery by the public. This can most clearly be seen during Honoria's lecture, where not only "the whole place rang with laughter" (*My Wonderful Wife*: 114) about her suggestion that women should be allowed to dress like men rather than forcing themselves into uncomfortable and inconvenient corsets and dresses, but she is also met with sexism and misogyny by a male member of her audience:

"I'm not 'inebriated,' my gel," he observed, cheerfully; "but I'll leave this hall at once with a good deal more pleasure than I came into it. Why, it riles me all the wrong way to hear you going on like this about equality in clothes and such-like nonsense! Go home, my gel, go home and get into a pretty gown and fal-lals; take two or three hours to fix yourself before your looking-glass if you like, and when you've rigged yourself up as sweet and pretty as you can be, see if you don't make more way with the ruling of man than you ever will prancing on a platform! That's all *I* want to say. I'm off home, and apologize for interrupting the performance! Good-night!" (*My Wonderful Wife*: 117)

The audience compliments his suggestion that, as a woman, Honoria should not talk in front of men but rather go fix herself to look pretty with "smiles and encouraging glances" (*ibid.*), implying to the reader that he was not insulting her, but that he was telling the truth and, again, Honoria was in the wrong. While one could wonder why Honoria's tour was so successful and even expanded to other continents when the audience is only making fun of her, but think her ideas ridiculous, it is implied that she is, in fact, praised by the media in form of the *Daily Telegraph* and, therefore, the general public. This goes hand-in-hand with Corelli's own experience with the media, as she herself, despite her immense success, was not praised by the media but called "a woman of deplorable talent who imagined that she was a genius, and was accepted as a genius by a public to whose commonplace sentimentalities and prejudices she gave a glamorous setting" (Scott 1955: 263). It therefore makes sense for her to portray the media as someone who supports only the 'trashy New Woman writer' rather than 'actual female literary geniuses', as it is implied that the *Daily Telegraph* criticized William for not being with Honoria any longer (*My Wonderful Wife*: 126) and it is directly said that the *Daily Telegraph* "advocated smoking for

women as a perfectly harmless and innocent enjoyment, tending to promote pleasant good-fellowship between the sexes" (*My Wonderful Wife*: 16).

The main characters, William and Honoria, are clearly exaggerated and supposed to be satirical, as William is over-the-top hysterical, and Honoria bears the same name as the 'Angel in the House' in Coventry Patmore's poem discussed in section 2.1 yet differs from the angel in every aspect possible. However, it is implied that Corelli sees those characters as a possible future of English society if the New Woman prevails. While she is clearly trying to show that this must not happen by ridiculing Honoria and showing her sister Georgie as the Angel in the House, the end of the novel, in which Honoria is famously known in several countries, travels the world, and is still called "wonderful" (*My Wonderful Wife*: 126), implies the opposite: Why would a woman want to sit at home doing nothing all day if she could fulfill her dreams and still be considered wonderful? While William does claim that he "cannot live with her" (*ibid.*), she does become a successful businesswoman, which, as she mentions several times throughout the novel, is all she ever wanted. While the author and the narrator are repeatedly intending to assure the reader that the New Woman is a threat to society, what can also be taken from the novel is that a woman can find happiness outside of marriage and be successful and wonderful by doing so. This discrepancy is explained by Annette Federico (2000), who claims:

My Wonderful Wife is a provocative text to study against Corelli's notions of feminine writing, for it is written almost on the pattern of New Woman fiction, with a male narrator, lengthy dialogues on social questions, a feminist protagonist, and a failed marriage (Federico 2000: 113)

She goes on by explaining that Corelli "self-consciously tried to articulate a specifically feminine aesthetic in opposition to both patriarchal literary values and the New Woman novel and that this was tied to her belief in the sanctity of literature and the moral influence of woman" (Federico 2000: 114). The question that needs to be raised, therefore, is where this inconsistency in Corelli's writing comes from. Superficially speaking, one could claim that it stems from a hypocrisy rooted inside of her, as she demands respect from the patriarchy as a female writer yet is not willing to give that respect she demands for herself to other female writers. However, that would be too easy, as it also needs to be considered when she was

writing and who she was writing for. As Richard D. Altick explains in his *The English Common Reader* (1957), the 19th century witnessed great change in English society. Due to the industrial revolution, a great deal of the population moved from farms and from villages to the cities, which were unprepared to accommodate that many people, which resulted in moral and physical degradation of the “lower classes” (Altick 1957: 84). However, the working class was no longer willing to accept this treatment and demanded social, economic, and political rights, which included the right to access literature and be able to read (Altick 1957: 84-85). Naturally, the upper and middle classes were not fond of this development and wanted to preserve the “hallowed structure”, the traditions that allowed them to feel superior to everyone who was not like them (Altick 1957: 85). Previously, it was mentioned who Corelli was read by. Although critics did not praise her, she was well read by aristocracy and royalty, which must have given her the impression that she was, in fact, not a writer for the working class, but indeed for the upper middle and upper classes. Taking into account what Altick says about wanting to preserve traditions and considering that the New Woman goes very much against those traditions, the intention of writing *My Wonderful Wife* becomes clear. While it is possible that Corelli herself simply had a deep dislike of women who smoked, hunted, dressed like men, and overall demanded equal rights for themselves, it is very clear that she was, while writing about scientific progress in other novels on the one hand, writing a story about preserving traditions for an audience that wanted to preserve traditions on the other hand.

The next section, in contrast, will focus on the New Woman writer in form of Olive Schreiner and her *The Story of an African Farm* (1883). In contrast to Corelli, Schreiner was very much fond of the New Woman movement and wrote what is nowadays considered one of the first feminist novels. Before publishing *The Story of an African Farm*, Schreiner did not yet have an audience she needed to please, as it was her first novel, and was free to write what she believed to be right. Section 2.4.2 will draw on this in greater detail.

2.4.2 Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*

As mentioned above, Olive Schreiner did not yet have an audience to impress or satisfy before publishing *The Story of an African Farm* in 1883, as it was her first

published novel. Yet, she had to deal with the problem that she was an outsider, not only in one, but in two regards. Firstly, she was obviously a woman writing about feminist topics which, as discussed in section 2.4.1, was not particularly popular among the middle and upper class of British society. While she published the first edition of her novel under a male pseudonym, Ralph Iron, the second edition from 1891 was published under her real name. Secondly, she was born in South Africa, which made her an outsider to British society, as, according to Boehmer (2005), there has been a notion in Great Britain due to propaganda in response to dissatisfaction with the colonial policy that anyone in the UK, no matter their background or social status, was part of an elite and therefore better than anyone from the colonies, in this case, South Africa (Boehmer 2005: 31). Despite these obstacles, *The Story of an African Farm* became an immediate success and is considered to be one of the first feminist novels to ever be published in English. However, leading critics of feminist theory, such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, also criticize the novel, calling it a “story of contradictions” and, furthermore, claiming that “while Schreiner argues for female freedom, she cannot seem to represent such freedom effectively in the life of her heroine” (Gilbert and Gubar 1989: 52). This is because Lyndall, one of her female heroines, fails to overcome the issues Schreiner saw, according to Brandon (1990), as central to the Woman Question, namely “the issue of economic independence and the escape from what she [Schreiner] termed ‘parasitism’” (Brandon 1990: 57). Gilbert and Gubar define parasitism as follows: “For, according to Schreiner, the parasite drains life from the independent organisms upon which she feeds and thereby reduces men to instrumentality while simultaneously diminishing her own chance of autonomous survival” (Gilbert and Gubar 1989: 60). In the following, this criticism will be analyzed.

The story, told by a heterodiegetic narrator, deals with several problems, such as feminism or the Woman Question, religion, premarital sex and pregnancy, colonialism, and even draws on transvestism. Starting as what J.M. Coetzee calls a “plaasroman”, a farm novel (Coetzee 1986: 1), the novel soon turns out to be a coming-of-age story. The novel follows three characters, Lyndall, Em, and Waldo, from their childhood years into their adult lives. In the first part, when the characters are still children, their roles are introduced. Em represents the ‘old, traditional’ way

of living. She is to inherit the farm from her stepmother, Tant Sannie, when she is grown and has a very fixed idea of what her adult life shall look like:

“Ah, no,” said her companion. “I suppose some day we shall go somewhere; but now we are only twelve, and we cannot marry till we are seventeen. Four years, five – that is a long time to wait. And we might not have diamonds if we did marry” (*The Story of an African Farm*: 12)

For her, it is very clear that once she is old enough, it is her duty and, due to the way she says it, her destiny to get married, go where her husband goes, and do what he says. Any sort of rebellion or ‘other-thinking’ is strange to her, as Lyndall replies “And you think that I am going to stay here till then?” (*ibid.*), and Em says “Well, where are you going?” (*ibid.*). Very clearly, her future is set out for her – grow up, get married, inherit the farm – and she does not see that life could also be different. Waldo and Lyndall, however, are presented very differently to Em. For them, the gender roles are somewhat reversed, which is an indicator to signify that times and therefore the stereotypical gender roles of the 19th century are changing. Waldo is presented as a rather weak and depressed boy, who cries a lot and, as a consequence of trying to hide his emotions as they seem ‘unmanly’, “his physical heart had pain also; it seemed full of little bits of glass, that hurt” (*The Story of an African Farm*: 10). His emotionality causes both a disruption and an ecstasis of his faith, and even causes him to tumble into what seems like a depression, as he claims:

“Oh God!” He cried, “I cannot wait; I cannot wait! I want to die; I want to see Him; I want to touch him. Let me die!” He folded his hands, trembling. “How can I wait so long – for long, long years perhaps? I want to die – to see Him. I will die any death. Oh, let me come!” (*The Story of an African Farm*: 31)

Lyndall, in contrast, is presented as a much stronger character. She values education and independence, places science, which stands for progress, over religion and tradition, and is not afraid to stand up for what she believes in. Even though she is a girl and Tant Sannie does not let her go to school, she intends to go there and claims that “I shall make her [Tant Sannie]” (*The Story of an African Farm*: 13) let her go to school. Getting an education is important to her, as “There is nothing helps in this world [...] but to be very wise, and to know everything – to be clever” (*ibid.*). She furthermore claims that she needs this education because she does not want to be dependent on anyone, not even her cousin Em, but she wants to make it in the world on her own:

"I do not want your sheep," said the girl slowly; "I want things of my own. When I am grown up," she added, the flush on her delicate features deepening at every word, "there will be nothing that I do not know. I shall be rich, very rich; and I shall wear not only the best, but every day, a pure white silk, and little rose-buds, like the lady in Tant Sannie's bedroom, and my petticoats will be embroidered, not only at the bottom, but all through." (*ibid.*)

Additionally, Lyndall is, from childhood on, not willing to take any abuse from men, nor is she willing to show respect to people who are not showing her respect in return. This can be seen in how she reacts to Bonaparte Blenkins' way of teaching the girls, as he not only does not answer her questions about science, but also insults her by both belittling her and by not telling her the truth:

"You see," said Em, hopelessly turning the leaves, "whenever he talks she looks out at the door, as though she did not hear him. Today she asked him what the Zodiac were, and he said he was surprised that she should ask him; it was not a fit and proper thing for little girls to talk about. Then she asked him who Copernicus was; and he said he was one of the Emperors of Rome, who burned the Christians in a golden pig, and the worms ate him up while he was still alive. I don't know why," said Em plaintively, "but she just put her books under her arm and walked out; and she will never come to his school again, she says, and she always does what she says. And now I must sit here every day alone," said Em, the great tears dropping softly. (*The Story of an African Farm: 37*)

Lyndall is very clearly different to what 'normal' children, especially girls, were supposed to be like at the time written. She is not interested in what girls were supposed to be interested in, namely finding a husband, getting married, and starting a family, but much rather focuses on herself and her education. She is also strong enough to withstand the obstacles and people standing in her way to meet her goals. This 'otherness', however, is perceived as something supernatural by Tant Sannie and Bonaparte Blenkins, who try to hold her back, and who are, consequently, afraid of her and do not dare to punish her:

She had struck Lyndall once years before, and had never done it again, so she took Em. "So you will defy me, too, will you, you Englishman's ugliness!" she cried, with one hand she forced the child down, and held her head against her knee; with the other she beat her first upon one cheek, and then upon the other. For one instant Lyndall looked on, then she laid her small fingers on the Boer-woman's arm. With all the exertion of half its strength Tant Sannie might have flung the girl back upon the stones. It was not the power of the slight fingers, tightly though they clinched her broad wrist – so tightly that at bedtime the marks were still there; but the Boer-woman looked into the clear eyes and at the quivering white lips, and with a half-surprised curse relaxed her hold. The girl drew Em's arm through her own. "Move!" she said to Bonaparte, who stood in the door, and he, Bonaparte the invincible, in the hour of his triumph, moved to give her place. (*The Story of an African Farm: 48*)

This scene carries the notion of Lyndall 'bewitching' the adults. This theme of Lyndall being a witch is carried along several more times, for example when Lyndall tries to get herself and Em out of their locked room by setting the window on fire and says that she does not care whether she burns the whole house down (*The Story of an African Farm*: 49) or when she claims that she had trained a bird to kill Bonaparte: "That was Hans, the bird that hates Bonaparte. I let him out this afternoon; I thought he would chase him and perhaps kill him" (*The Story of an African Farm*: 57). What actually drove Tant Sannie and Bonaparte, as well as the teachers at the boarding school Lyndall attends later on in the novel, to obey her and her wishes, though, is that she is, unusual enough for her time, a strong woman who knows what she wants and how to get it. At that boarding school, she was not willing to learn the things girls were meant to learn – music, sewing, and embroidery –, but buys herself books and newspapers and educates herself. Following her return to the farm, one of the most crucial scenes regarding feminism, in which Lyndall discusses the position of women in society with Waldo over several pages, takes place. Interestingly, several of the points Lyndall is making in a novel that was published in 1883 are still valid in the 21st century.

The ten most important observations Lyndall makes about women, their position in society, and how men see them are the following – listed not as facts, but as Lyndall's opinion:

1. Men are only interested in women and their struggles when there is something 'strange' or 'mystical' about them: "If women were the inhabitants of Jupiter, of whom you had happened to hear something, you would pore over us and our condition night and day; but because we are before your eyes you never look at us" (*The Story of an African Farm*: 123)
2. Society does not wish for intelligent women, but only wants them to look pretty: "The less a woman has in her head the lighter she is for climbing. I once heard an old man say, that he never saw intellect help a woman so much as a pretty ankle" (*The Story of an African Farm*: 124)
3. The only time men and women are treated equally is right after being born and in death: "We were equals once when we lay new-born babes on our

nurses' knees. We will be equals again when they tie up our jaws for the last sleep" (*The Story of an African Farm*: 125)

4. Men claim to be gentlemen towards all women and help them out chivalrously, yet they are hypocrites and only help women when there is something in it for them: "'And they tell us we have men's chivalrous attention!' she cried. 'When we ask to be doctors, lawyers, law-makers, anything but ill-paid drudges, they say – No; but you have men's chivalrous attention; now think of that and be satisfied!'" (*The Story of an African Farm*: 125) / "There were nine of us in that coach, and only one showed chivalrous attention – and that was a woman to a woman. I shall be old and ugly, too, one day, and I shall look for men's chivalrous help, but I shall not find it." (*The Story of an African Farm*: 126).
5. By being oppressed by men, women grew more powerful: "We are not to study law, nor science, nor art, so we study you. There is never a nerve or fibre in a man's nature but we know it. We keep six of you dancing in the palm of one little hand" (*The Story of an African Farm*: 127)
6. Gender should not determine one's ability for a job, but one's intelligence should: "The surest sign of fitness is success" (*ibid.*)
7. Society holds women to a much higher standard than men and, consequently, treats women unfairly: "I wonder how many men there are who would give up everything that is dear in life for the sake of maintaining a high ideal purity." (*The Story of an African Farm*: 128)
8. Men claim that the New Woman is a threat to society and that those women will ruin everything, including humanity, because they feel attacked in their masculinity by strong women who want to have a say in their own lives, yet they do not see how men and women being equals would benefit their relationship rather than ruining it:

“And then, when they have no other argument against us, they say, ‘Go on; but when you have made woman what you wish, and her children inherit her culture, you will defeat yourself. Man will gradually become extinct from excess of intellect, the passions which replenish the race will die.’ Fools! [...] They ask, What will you gain, even if man does not become extinct? – you will have brought justice and equality on to the earth, and sent love from it. When men and women are equals they will love no more. Your highly-cultured women will not be loveable, will not love. Do they see nothing, understand nothing? [...] Then when that time comes,” she said lowly, “when love is no more bought or sold, when it is not a means of making bread, when each woman’s life is filled with earnest, independent labour, then love will come to her, a strange, sudden sweetness breaking in upon her earnest work; not sought for, but found. Then, but not now –“ (*The Story of an African Farm*: 129)

9. It does not make sense that the moral state of women supposedly makes up the moral state of society when all humans are built the same: “[...] but all things are in all men, and one soul is the model of all. [...] And sometimes what is more amusing still than tracing the likeness between man and man, is to trace the analogy there always is between the progress and development of one individual and of a whole nation; or, again, between a single nation and the entire human race.” (*The Story of an African Farm*: 132)
10. Men do not understand women and make no effort to do so: “Men are like the earth, and we are the moon; we turn always one side to them, and they think there is no other, because they don’t see it – but there is.” (*The Story of an African Farm*: 133)

As it has been stated, it can be seen that several of Lyndall’s observations are still valid in the 21st century. Society, for example, still holds women to a much higher standard than men. As mentioned in the introduction, Lois Tyson, who is a professor of English and a feminist theorist at Grand Valley State University, USA, explains this operating on a double standard when it comes to men and women on a simple example: According to her, when it comes to being sexually active, women are described and judged with the negative word “slut”, while men are being described and praised with the positive word “stud” (Tyson 2006: 91). While this may very well be seen as just a subjective perception and it can hardly be scientifically proven, there are studies that show that show the double standards in the perception of men and women. Exemplary, a study by the University of Arizona has shown that in a working environment, even something as mundane as humor is perceived differently when it comes to men and women. While the test subjects perceived

humor expressed by men as more functional than humor expressed by women, humor expressed by women was perceived as more disruptive than humor expressed by men, which leads to the conclusion that humorous men are assigned a higher perception of status. Humorous women, in contrast, are assigned a lower status and are, consequently, perceived to be unprofessional (Evans *et al.* 2019: 1082). Keeping the focus on the working environment, another example for the ongoing validity of Lyndall's remarks would be that women, despite having theoretical access to every job they want, are a lot less likely to be found in leading positions than men. According to Grant Thornton, one of the world's leading auditing companies, 30% of the positions in senior management in the European Union are filled with women, while it is even slightly less, namely 29%, globally in 2020 (Grant Thornton 2020: 5). More specifically, the comparison of percentages in different leading positions shows the great inequality between women, mentioned first in the following bulleted list, and men:

- Chief Executive Officer (CEO)/Managing Director (MD): 20% – 80%
- Chief Operating Officer (COO): 18% – 82%
- Chief Financial Officer (CFO): 30% – 70%
- Chief Information Officer (CIO): 16% – 84%
- HR Director: 40% – 60%
- Chief Marketing Officer (CMO): 17% – 83% (Grant Thornton 2020: 6)

What can be seen is that even in the position women are most likely to hold, they are still greatly outnumbered by men. While a lot has been done already to ensure gender equality at the workplace, for example by gender equality laws and by introducing equal opportunities officers as well as a female quota in companies, these numbers show that, though being on the right path, there is still a lot of work to be done. The fact that Olive Schreiner recognized and addressed these points in the 19th century already, yet almost the same problems exist in the 21st century shows why feminism is still an important topic, as gender equality has not yet been achieved.

In contrast to Marie Corelli and her *My Wonderful Wife*, in which, as explained previously, she attempts to satirically show how reversed gender roles lead to a disruption of society, a reversal of roles is done quite naturally in *The Story*

of an African Farm. Despite being the only man in the house in the beginning of the novel, Otto is left powerless and has no control over his life. He neither has his own house nor his own land, and when Tant Sannie sends him away from the farm because of Bonaparte's intrigues, he does not put up a fight, but simply does as he is told: "All anger and excitement faded from the old man's face. He turned slowly away and walked down the little path to his cabin, with his shoulders bent; it was all dark before him." (*The Story of an African Farm*: 48). Tant Sannie, in contrast to her own words, is clearly the one in charge in the beginning of the book and expects everyone to do her bidding. While she claims that "if a woman's got a baby and a husband she's got the best things the Lord can give her" (*The Story of an African Farm*: 206) and accuses every woman who does not marry of being a "sinner against the Lord" (*ibid.*), as, according to her, "if the beloved Redeemer didn't mean men to have wives what did He make women for" (*ibid.*), she on the other hand acts like a businesswoman who negotiates the best deal for herself when it comes to her land and her farm. Additionally, cross-dressing plays a role in the novel. While in *My Wonderful Wife*, Honoria dresses like a man during her speeches and gets made fun of, it is Gregory Rose in *The Story of an African Farm* who dresses up as a nurse to care for the dying Lyndall (*The Story of an African Farm*: 188). Coming back to Gilbert and Gubar's statement that has been mentioned before, namely that Schreiner's novel is a story of contradictions and that she is not able to represent freedom effectively in the life of her heroine (Gilbert and Gubar 1989: 52), what can be seen in the scenes of Gregory dressing up as a woman are contradictory to what has been said in the novel before. While Lyndall claims in her monologue that women can do exactly as men do, her doctor says about the disguised Gregory that "she is the most experienced nurse I ever came in contact with" (*The Story of an African Farm*: 190). This may be read, however, as if women can, in fact, not do as men do and that men are even better at a 'woman's job' than women are. While the scenes of Gregory dressing up as a woman may also suggest that there are not that many differences between men and women after all and that the different genders should therefore not be treated this differently, the scene also leaves the notion that, in contrast to what the novel promoted prior to that, men are, indeed, better than women. The greatest contradiction, however, is concerned with Lyndall's death. Her death scene is connected to something mystical, just as her life had been throughout the novel, which suggests that the world was just not ready for

someone like Lyndall and she, therefore, can only find the freedom she was looking for in death:

Slowly raising herself on her elbow, she took from the sail a glass that hung pinned there. Her fingers were stiff and cold. She put the pillow on her breast, and stood the glass against it. Then the white face on the pillow looked into the white face in the glass. They had looked at each other often before. It had been a child's face once, looking out above its blue pinafore; it had been a woman's face, with a dim shadow in the eyes, and a something which had said, "We are not afraid, you and I; we are together; we will fight, you and I." Now tonight it had come to this. The dying eyes on the pillow looked into the dying eyes in the glass; they knew that their hour had come. She raised one hand and pressed the stiff fingers against the glass. They were growing very stiff. She tried to speak to it, but she would never speak again. Only the wonderful yearning light was in the eyes still. The body was dead now, but the soul, clear and unclouded, looked forth. Then slowly, without a sound, the beautiful eyes closed. The dead face that the glass reflected was a thing of marvelous beauty and tranquility. The Grey Dawn crept in over it and saw it lying there. Had she found what she sought for – something to worship? Had she ceased from being? Who shall tell us? There is a veil of terrible mist over the face of the Hereafter. (*The Story of an African Farm*: 199)

This, however, stands in contrast to what Lyndall tried to promote previously. She was not simply waiting for things to change, but she tried to bring change about herself. She actively came up to Waldo to discuss women's position in society and, by the eloquence and length of her monologue, the reader can conclude that this has not been the first time she has done so. She took the freedom she demanded for women and lived her life as she saw fit, without caring about conventions, traditions, or institutions like marriage. Having her baby as well as herself die, however, suggests that this is the punishment she receives for having premarital sex and having a baby without being married. Having Lyndall fall sick while grieving on the grave of her dead child does, in contrast to Lyndall's own words ("I did not love it; its father was not my prince; I did not care for it", *The Story of an African Farm*: 194), imply that the common misconception about the New Woman, namely that because of those feminists society will die out as they do not care about children, is not true. Someone who does not care about their dead child would not sit out in the rain next to the grave until they fall fatally sick:

If Gregory stood up and looked out at the window he would see a bluegum-tree in the graveyard; close by it was a little grave. The baby was buried there. A tiny thing – only lived two hours, and the mother herself almost went with it. After a while she was better; but one day she got up out of bed, dressed herself without saying a word to any one, and went out. It was a drizzly day; a little time after some one saw her sitting on the wet ground under the bluegum-tree, with the rain dripping from her hat and shawl. They went to fetch her, but she would not come until she chose. When she did, she had gone to bed and had not risen again from it; never would, the doctor said. (*The Story of an African Farm*: 187)

Connecting her death this closely with the result of her premarital sex and the child that was born to unmarried parents, however, also connects Lyndall to a Fallen Woman that, as a punishment for her actions that go against the norm of society, dies. It also appears strange that Lyndall, before her death, wrote a letter to Gregory that only says four words: “You must marry Em” (*The Story of an African Farm*: 207). This, again, goes against Lyndall’s claims about marriage. She originally claimed that “marriage for love is the beautifulest external symbol of the union of souls” (*The Story of an African Farm*: 125) and at the same time judges “a woman who has sold herself, even for a ring and a new name” (*ibid.*). Later on, she herself agrees to marry Gregory if he promises to serve her and tells him that “you [Gregory] could serve me by giving me your name” (*The Story of an African Farm*: 158). While this already goes against her words, as now she ‘sells’ herself for a new name, it could be explained with her wish for freedom because she sees Gregory as a weak man who will not hinder her from doing what she wants, her last request cannot be explained like that. If she believes that a marriage should only be contracted between two people who truly love each other because everything else will only lead to misery, why would she tell Gregory, who told her that he does not truly love Em, to marry her cousin? Heike Bauer (2009) explains this as that Lyndall “deliberately seeks to dissociate the female condition from the body by arguing for the rational female mind” (Bauer 2009: 100). In other words, Lyndall is a female character who takes on a masculine role and, therefore, does what men at the time did: choose a husband for herself instead of having it chosen for her and, additionally, chooses a husband for her female relatives.

While the novel became an immediate success (exemplary, Berkman (1983) talks about a “widespread acclaim” for the novel, Berkman 1983: 273, and Clayton (2000) claims that she has been read by authors such as D.H. Lawrence and her novel has “stirred the hearts of Victorian Women”, Clayton 2000: 396), there has

also been great controversy about it, especially about Lyndall. George Meredith, for example, called the manuscript of *The Story of an African Farm* better than any other he has read at the time, yet felt that, due to how the public might perceive Lyndall and other controversial topics Schreiner touches, “the publication of it would not pay” (Cline 1970: 669-670). Nevertheless, not only did *The Story of an African Farm* become an immediate success at the time of its publication, but it is seen as one of the first feminist novels and, since the second wave of feminism in the 1970s and 1980s, Olive Schreiner has also been seen as a feminist icon by feminist literary critics (Ledger 1997: 72).

2.5 Conclusion Chapter 2

As it has been shown in the previous chapter, the first forms of feminism as we know it today root in the 19th century. While there have been women writers actively proclaiming (equal) rights for women, most prominently Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), before, what can be seen in the 19th century is more and more women coming forward to help in the cause of feminism. As a result, one can see the shift from works like *The Angel in the House*, in which women are assigned the role of a servant to their husbands and merely bystanders to their own lives, to women who take control of their lives and do what they feel is right for them. Ultimately, this development led to the New Woman writers and the New Woman movement, which, in the 20th century, resulted in the suffragettes. What can quite clearly be seen in this chapter is that authors like Coventry Patmore, who proclaimed male dominance and female servitude, or bestselling authors of their time like Marie Corelli, who condemned progress and change regarding gender equality and, despite their other scholarly efforts, did not want things to change for women in 19th century society, are nowadays mostly forgotten to a broader society. This claim can be underlined by looking at the circulation of their works: worldcat.org shows that, while there have been eight editions published in the 19th century, the last edition of Patmore's *The Angel in the House* has been published in 1998 by Haggerston Press with Boston College²⁰, which implies that the interest in Patmore's poem has drastically declined. The same can be said about Marie Corelli,

²⁰ See: <https://www.worldcat.org/title/angel-in-the-house/oclc/1167392028/editions?editionsView=true&referer=br>, accessed March 22, 2025.

as, despite the regrowing interest in her works,²¹ the latest edition of *My Wonderful Wife* has been published in 1984 in New York by F.M. Lupton²². Authors like Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters, or Olive Schreiner, instead, are nowadays considered to be classics of English literature, as they were advertising for marriage based on love and respect, not financial reasons, (bodily) autonomy for women, and equal rights between the sexes. One could, however, ask why the 19th century, including its authors and literature, is still important to problems of the 21st century. As Birch puts it, it “can give us a clearer understanding of the origins of our present problems, showing how our tangles over education and class, gender and religion took root in the first place” (Birch 2008: 144). The ongoing interest and fascination can most clearly be seen in the overwhelming success of the Netflix-series *Bridgerton*, which is based on the novels by Julia Quinn and shows all three types women were classified in – the Angel in the House, the Fallen Woman, and the New Woman –, and which, according to Netflix, had been streamed over 63 million times in the first two weeks after its release²³. The question remains, however, whether the perception of women has changed since the 19th century. For this reason, the following two chapters will focus on the reenactment of the 19th century in the form of Regency Romances and neo-Victorian literature on the one hand, to see how contemporary writers of different genres deal with the gender inequality of the 19th century, and on contemporary literature set in contemporary times on the other hand. The interest of study will be to find out how authors write for their ‘new’ audience, as it is nowadays more women than men who read, whether women are still placed into roles they need to fulfil, and how globalization influenced the role of women in Western societies.

²¹ See: <https://www.worldcat.org/title/romance-of-two-worlds-a-novel/oclc/1246511219/editions?editionsView=true&referer=br>, accessed March 22, 2025.

²² See: <https://www.worldcat.org/title/my-wonderful-wife-a-study-in-smoke/oclc/13230061/editions?editionsView=true&referer=br>, accessed March 22, 2025.

²³ See Netflix's statement on Twitter on January 4, 2021: https://twitter.com/netflixqueue/status/1346215076131161616?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E13462150761311616%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.tatler.com%2Farticle%2Fbridgerton-63-million-streams-viewing-figures-fifth-highest-netflix-originals-series, accessed March 22, 2025.

3. Reenactment of the 19th Century

As mentioned above, the 19th century is still important to today's problems of society because, as Birch puts it, it "can give us a clearer understanding of the origins of our present problems, showing how our tangles over education and class, gender and religion took root in the first place" (Birch 2008: 144). Gisela Bock (2000) elaborates on this further, as she claims:

Anatomie, Gynäkologie und Anthropologie hätten um 1800 mit der alten aristotelischen Tradition gebrochen, in der die Frau als unvollkommener Mann galt („the lesser man“, „homme manqué“). Das neue „bürgerliche“ Modell habe sie nicht mehr als „minderwertig“, sondern als essentiell „anders“ und dem Manne komplementär präsentiert, *separate but equal*: Das „eingeschlechtliche“ Modell sei von einem „zweigeschlechtlichen“ abgelöst worden, und solcher „Biologie“ habe auch das soziale Verhältnis der Geschlechter korrespondiert. Diese Zuschreibungen und das reale Verhältnis der Geschlechter waren oft als Tiefpunkt der Frauengeschichte in einer Langzeitperspektive gesehen: Auf dem Weg sozialer und politischer Modernisierung sei mit der viktorianischen Gesellschaft die Frühe Neuzeit als ein goldenes Zeitalter von Geschlechtermischung, Geschlechtergleichheit und Frauenherrschaft durch eine radikale Trennung und Arbeitsteilung zwischen den Geschlechtern abgelöst worden, die bis weit ins 20. Jahrhundert wirksam geblieben sei. (Bock 2000: 121-122)²⁴

King furthermore claims that contemporary novels set in Victorian times tend to be characterized by their engagement with gender issues (King 2005: 2), and Lisa Tuttle (1986) claims in her definition of feminist literary criticism that "it asks new questions of old texts" (Tuttle 1986: 184). The aim of this chapter, therefore, is to find out how contemporary writers portray men and women and their position within society when writing about the 19th century.

A problem contemporary authors face when writing about the 19th century, however, is the shift of the common reader. According to Lyons ([1995] 1999), there has been a clear distinction between the male and the female reader in the 19th century. Although women were not the sole readers of novels, they were seen as

²⁴ "Around 1800, anatomy, gynecology, and anthropology broke with the old Aristotelian tradition in which woman was considered an imperfect man ("the lesser man," "homme manqué"). The new "bourgeois" model no longer presented her as "inferior" but as essentially "different" and complementary to man, *separate but equal*: the "single-sex" model was replaced by a "two-sex" model, and the social relationship between the sexes also corresponded to such "biology". These attributions and the real relationship between the sexes were often seen as the low point of women's history in a long-term perspective: Along the path of social and political modernization, Victorian society had replaced the early modern period as a golden age of gender mixing, gender equality, and female domination with a radical separation and division of labor between the sexes that remained effective well into the 20th century." – translation by K. Pohlmann.

the main target group for novelists, as the novel was seen as the “antithesis of practical and instructive literature”, with the sole purpose of entertaining without demanding too much from its reader – implying that this sort of literature was exactly right for the “limited horizon and intelligence of women” (Lyons [1995] 1999: 319). Men, in contrast, were more likely to read the newspaper and discuss the world affairs with other men in the clubs. It was not uncommon that women were not allowed to read the newspaper, and that men read the newspaper to their wives and daughters in order to restrict and censor the knowledge females would gain (Lyons [1995] 1999: 320). This implies that, though more and more women learned how to read and write in the course of the 19th century, they, unlike men, were not free to read what they wanted and, as female reading was restricted and controlled, can therefore not be called the ‘main reader’ of the 19th century. This, however, has changed in the 21st century. Women still make up the main consumer of novels, buying 80% of all novels.²⁵ In Western societies, women are also no longer restricted or controlled in what they read, which shifts the main reader from men in the 19th century to women in the 21st century. This raises a problem for authors writing about the 19th century, however: how do they portray female characters in a time where women were expected to be submissive to men to an audience that is widely concerned with questions of feminism and gender equality? Chapter 3 aims to answer this question.

Firstly, Regency Romances will be examined with the help of *Regency Buck* (1935) by Georgette Heyer and the *Bridgerton* romances (2000-2006) by Julia Quinn. Not only because of the 2020-Netflix-series *Bridgerton*,²⁶ Quinn’s eight novels about the eight Bridgerton siblings in the beginning of the 19th century are worldwide bestsellers. In a second step and in order to cover the rest of the 19th century, neo-Victorian literature in the form of Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), together with Emma Tennant’s *The French Dancer’s Bastard* (2006), John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969), combined with Saki’s *When William Came* (1913), A.S. Byatt’s *Possession* (1990), and Sarah Waters’ *Fingersmith* (2002) will be analyzed. Due to the nature of neo-Victorian literature,

²⁵ See article in *The Guardian*: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/dec/07/why-women-love-literature-read-fiction-helen-taylor>, Johanna Thomas-Corr, accessed March 22, 2025.

²⁶ See: <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/news/bridgerton-netflix-most-watched-series-b1793698.html>, Rachel Brodsky, accessed March 22, 2025.

which, as mentioned in the introduction, Llewellyn describes as the rewriting of the historical narrative of the Victorian period by representing marginalized voices, new histories of sexuality, postcolonial viewpoints, and other generally different versions of “the Victorian” (Llewellyn 2008: 165) and which is, therefore, very critical of the Victorian period, whereas Regency Romances show a romanticized version of the 19th century, section 3.2 will be longer in its analysis than section 3.1.

3.1 Regency Romance

Regency romances aim, as the name suggests, to imitate novels from the Regency period (roughly 1811-1820), for example Jane Austen’s novels. Before taking a closer look at how those romances portray women and what message they try to bring across, it is important to note the difference between a ‘novel’ and a ‘romance’. The OED defines a novel as “a long fictional prose narrative, usually filling one or more volumes and typically representing character and action with some degree of realism and complexity; a book containing such a narrative” (*OED* s.v. *novel*, n.). A romance, in contrast, is defined as “a story of romantic love, esp. one which deals with love in a sentimental or idealized way; a book, film, etc., with a narrative or story of this kind. Also as mass noun: literature of this kind” (*OED* s.v. *romance*, n.). This, consequently, means that a novel usually tries to be somewhat realistic, whereas a romance in its very definition will not portray the real world, but an idealized one in which love overcomes all obstacles and always wins in the end. I therefore included Regency Romances in this thesis to have a closer look on how this kind of literature developed over the last 80 years and how it manages to idealize a time that did not give women equal rights to an audience that it widely concerned with gender equality.

According to Kendra (2007), Regency Romances comprise the largest group of historical romances on the market today (Kendra 2007: 145) and show quite some similarities and parallels to the fashionable novel of the 19th century, including “its painstaking attention to verisimilitude and material detail, enduring popularity with women readers, poor reputation as formula literature, and scornful reception by critics and scholars” (Kendra 2007: 146). The similarity to 19th century novels and romances and the ongoing popularity amongst female readers, however, is what makes the Regency Romance so interesting for the aim of this dissertation. For this

reason, this section will concentrate both on the earliest Regency Romance, *Regency Buck* (1935) by Georgette Heyer, and the *Bridgerton* romances (2000-2006) by Julia Quinn.

Julia Quinn's series consists of eight romances, each of which concentrates on one of the eight Bridgerton-siblings, a fictional family with great influence in London society at the beginning of the 19th century, on their quest to find true love. Each romance is told by an heterodiegetic narrator and an internal focalizer, who constantly switches between the respective Bridgerton-sibling and their love interest. *The Duke and I* (2000) focuses on Daphne Bridgerton and Simon Basset, Duke of Hastings, in a Pride-and-Prejudice-like quest for love. *The Viscount Who Loved Me* (2000), reminding the reader of *The Taming of the Shrew* not only through the name of the heroine, focuses on Anthony Bridgerton and Kate Sheffield. *An Offer From a Gentleman* (2001) is presented as another Cinderella-story between Benedict Bridgerton and Sophie Beckett. *Romancing Mr Bridgerton* (2002) tells the story between Colin Bridgerton and Penelope Featherington, while *To Sir Phillip, With Love* (2003) focuses on Eloise Bridgerton and Sir Phillip Crane. *When He Was Wicked* (2004) deals with Francesca Bridgerton and Michael Stirling, *It's In His Kiss* (2005) with Hyacinth Bridgerton and Gareth St Clair, and, lastly, *On the Way to the Wedding* (2006) focuses on Gregory Bridgerton and Lady Lucinda Abernathy. One thing that immediately catches the reader's eye is that the titles of the romances are almost all somewhat of an adaptation of other famous works of the English-speaking world. In the order of the *Bridgerton* romances, this would be respectively *The King and I* (1951), *The Spy Who Loved Me* (1977), *An Officer and a Gentleman* (1982), *Romancing the Stone* (1984), *To Sir, With Love* (1959), *Wicked* (1995), *The Shoop Shoop Song (It's In His Kiss)* (1963), and *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962). While Julia Quinn herself only confirmed that the title of the last romance, *On the Way to the Wedding* derives from the 1962-musical,²⁷ the intertextuality of the titles is quite apparent. While the intention of this appears to be an 'eye-catcher' or some sort of 'easter-egg-hunt', it may also be a way of drawing in readers from all different kinds of genres – musicals, action movies, comedies, or R&B music. There is always some sort of

²⁷ See <https://juliaquinn.com/books/on-the-way-to-the-wedding/> under "Inside the Story", Julia Quinn, accessed March 22, 2025.

connection between each respective *Bridgerton* romance and its ‘name giver’; exemplary, Zack Mayo in *An Officer and a Gentleman* grows up with a neglectful father after his mother died, just like Sophie did in *An Offer From a Gentleman*. Rick Braithwaite gains the love and acceptance of undisciplined children in his autobiography *To Sir, With Love*, as does Eloise in the respective *Bridgerton* romance. In the end of *Romancing the Stone*, Joan Wilder turns their adventures into a (bestselling) novel, as does Penelope in *Romancing Mr Bridgerton*. On these few examples, one can see how there is always a tiny part that connects each *Bridgerton* romance to another work of English-speaking pop-culture. Finding these ‘easter eggs’ may very well be considered a form of connecting and engaging with the novel, as is their take on contemporary issues, such as feminism. In section 3.1.2, the romances will be analyzed and compared to the concepts concerning gender stereotypes that were used in the 19th century to describe women.

Before that, however, the origin of Regency Romances will be analyzed. According to Laura J. George (2021), the sub-genre Regency Romance is thriving in the 21st century – as of November 2019, a search for Regency Romances available in “Books” on Amazon returned over 40.000 titles (George 2021: 54).²⁸ While there are several highly successful writers, including Julia Quinn, Stephanie Laurens (author of the *Cynster*-series), or Diane Gabaldon (author of the *Outlander*-series), the success of the genre goes back to Georgette Heyer, as, to name only one example, Betsy O’Donovan (November 8, 2019) claims in the *Publishers Weekly*:

Beginning in the 1930s, Heyer caused a sensation with a series of witty, slang-filled novels packed with deep research, down to the smallest ruffle or idiom that was allowed into her meticulously rendered, glamorous Regency world. It was also a world that was white, polite, and wealthy (give or take an orphaned heroine).

What followed was the sincerest form of flattery or, as some authors have noted, a form of fan fiction, with armies of readers who are steeped in the source material and prepared to do battle over the details. Heyer’s heirs offer one way of looking at that world, but a new generation of writers has slowly, deliberately, and often hilariously worked to expand the definition of a Regency romance.²⁹

²⁸ As of February 16, 2024, a search for Regency Romances on amazon.com under the condition "books" resulted in over 50.000 hits.

²⁹ For full article, see <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/new-titles/adult-announcements/article/81695-blame-jane-romance-novels-2019-2020.html>, Betsy O’Donovan, accessed March 22, 2025.

The fact that she is, to this day, highly influential to modern writers of Regency Romances can be seen in the fact that, according to George, modern writers still use terms and phrases that Heyer introduced in her Regency Romances (George 2021: 55). Having writers from the 21st century imitate a writer from the early 20th century, consequently, implies that Regency Romances have not changed in the last 80-90 years and that, following this logic, the image of women that is suggested in Regency Romances had not significantly changed either. Whether this is the case will be analyzed in the following.

3.1.1 The Origin of Regency Romances – *Regency Buck* by Georgette Heyer

In the 21st century, there is still a great interest in the Regency period and, quite prominently, in Jane Austen. *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, has developed a ‘life of its own’ in several rewritings, sequels, prequels, or adaptations. Exemplary and to only name a few, there is Emma Tennant’s *Pemberley Revisited* (2005), Helen Halstead’s *A Private Performance* (2005) and *Mr Darcy Presents his Bride* (2007), or Maya Slater’s *Mr Darcy’s Diary* (2008). Jerome de Groot (2009) attributes the continuing interest in Austen and, thus, the Regency period as a whole to Georgette Heyer and her romances (de Groot 2009: 65). As explained earlier, she counts as one of the earliest authors of Regency Romances and as someone with great influence on the genre.

The introduction to the romance and to its characters is, initially, very proper: the female main character is not introduced by her first name, Judith, but as “Miss Taverner” (*Regency Buck*: 8), as well as her brother is addressed by the narrator as “Sir Peregrine” – despite the fact that Judith calls him Perry (*ibid.*). This sense of properness can also be found in the way the characters’ clothing are described or in how Judith perceives other characters:

She was dressed neatly, but not in the first style of fashion, in a plain round gown of French cambric, frilled round the neck with scalloped lace; and a close mantle of twilled sarcenet. A poke-bonnet of basket-willow with a striped velvet ribbon rather charmingly framed her face, and a pair of York tan gloves were drawn over her hands, and buttoned tightly round her wrists. (*Regency Buck*: 9)

He had a well-bred air; the delicacy with which he had managed the whole business; his withdrawing just when he ought, all impressed her in his favour. She would not be sorry to make his better acquaintance. (*Regency Buck*: 16)

He was the epitome of a man of fashion. His beaver hat was set over black locks carefully brushed into a semblance of disorder; his cravat of starched muslin supported his chin in a series of beautiful folds; his driving-coat of drab cloth bore no less than fifteen capes, and a double row of silver buttons. (*Regency Buck*: 19)

The description of the characters that focuses less on how they look but more on the fashion of the Regency period and on the social status their clothing conveys the feeling that the romance's main goal is to introduce the Regency way of living rather than – as the name of the romance suggests – love affairs. This seems surprising because, as explained in section 2.2, the Regency period was more frivolous and indecent, being called the “era of nakedness”, yet the love affair between Judith and Julian only really happens towards the end of the romance.

From the beginning of the romance onwards, Judith has disliked Julian (“Miss Taverner had to own him a very handsome creature, but found no difficulty in detesting the whole cast of his countenance”, *Regency Buck*: 19) and Julian, who initially thought Judith to be a ‘loose woman’, has repeatedly insulted and even molested Judith, as he does not leave her alone when she asks him to, makes up a name for her, Clorinda, and later, when he learns that her name is Judith, refuses to use her real name, and kisses her without permission only to provoke her (*Regency Buck*: 32-36). Nevertheless, despite their quarrels throughout the romance, they fall in love. However, the circumstances of them admitting their love for one another are, from a feminist point of view, questionable, as Judith firstly lists all the things he has done to her, and then Julian's declaration of love is not exactly romantic either:

She regarded him with a smouldering eye. “Yes, you are!” she said. “Civility compelled me to try at least to thank you for the services you have rendered me, but if you will have none of it, I assure you I do not care! You put me in the horridest situation when you encouraged my cousin to make off with me; you had not the common courtesy to call to see how I did yesterday; you wrote me instead the most odious letter (and I daresay if he had not been away you would have told Mr Blackader to do it to save you the trouble!); and now you come to visit me in one of your disagreeable moods, and try to make me lose my temper! Well, I shall not do it, but I shall take leave to tell you, my lord, that however glad you may be to be rid of your ward you cannot be as glad as I am to be rid of my guardian!” (*Regency Buck*: 304)

“[...] Nonsensical child! I have been in love with you almost from the first moment of setting eyes on you.” “Oh, this is dreadful!” said Miss Taverner, shaken by remorse. “I disliked you amazingly for weeks!” The Earl kissed her again. “You are wholly adorable,” he said. “No, I am not,” replied Miss Taverner, as soon as she was able. “I am as disagreeable as you are. You would like to beat me. You said you would once, and I believe you meant it!” “If I only said it once I am astonished at my own forbearance. I have wanted to beat you at least a dozen times, and came very near doing it once – at Cuckfield. But I still think you adorable. Give me your hand.” She held it out, and he slipped a ring on the third finger. “You see, I *had* got a birthday present for you, Clorinda.” (*Regency Buck*: 305-306)

With Judith feeling remorse over disliking Julian for showing her no respect from the very beginning of their acquaintance, the message that is conveyed is that a man can do whatever he wants to a woman, and it does not matter as long as he loves her. This is underlined by the fact that he directly says that he wants to beat her and almost once did, as well as the fact that he still shows that he does not take her seriously by calling her both a child and by the name he gave her, yet the whole situation is supposed to be romantic because he said he loved her first. This is an image that is still, in the 21st century, conveyed to girls: ‘he is only mean to you because he likes you’ – which is something especially young girls often hear after a boy was mean to them. What this does, however, is tell girls to expect abuse from a man. It tells them that name-calling, pushing, hitting, or any other form of hurting them is not abuse, but a form of affection. It tells them that, as girls, they do not deserve equal respect and security in their relationships, but that it is ok if a man hurts them because this is how men show their feelings. Furthermore, this statement is a vicious circle, because it not only shows girls that they have to accept violence, but it also shows boys that they have to show their affection through violence.

The ending of the romance with Judith falling in love with Julian despite his obvious lack of respect for her is in how far surprising, as she occupies a more male position throughout the romance. This cannot be seen directly in the way she dresses or acts in public – as described earlier, she dresses like a woman, and, initially, she also acts how a woman is supposed to act and tries not to be a burden to her brother by not complaining even when he leaves her alone in her room to be bored (*Regency Buck*: 31) – but in her character. Very early on, she tells her brother to let her drive twice (“You had better let me drive”, *Regency Buck*: 17; “I wish you would give me the reins!”, *Regency Buck*: 18), even though she knows Peregrine would not do it because “the brute was hard-mouthed, not a sweet-goer by any means, no case

for a lady” (*ibid.*). She also refuses to hide behind a man and let them fight her battles: “To have Peregrine settle the business could bring her no satisfaction; it must be for her to punish the stranger’s insolence, and she fancied that she could do so without assistance” (*Regency Buck*: 38). Once they arrive in London and Judith is told that she must impress Mr. Brummell, who she calls the “uncrowned king of fashion” (*Regency Buck*: 56), her occupying a rather male role while reserving the stereotypical female role for a male character becomes obvious:

Miss Taverner, however, was heartily tired of the sound of the dandy’s name. Mr Brummell had invented the starched neck-cloth; Mr Brummell had started the fashion of white tops to riding boots; Mr Brummel had laid it down that no gentleman would be seen driving in a hackney carriage; [...] And Mr Brummell, said Mrs Scattergood, would give her one of his stinging set-downs if she offended his notions of propriety. “Will he?” said Miss Taverner, a martial light in her eye. “Will he indeed?” (*Regency Buck*: 55)

What can be seen in this scene is a male character who sets fashion-trends and who judges other based on their fashion-choices, which is a stereotypical female behavior, and a female character who obviously does not care about the rules of fashion and who is described by stereotypical male adjectives (“martial”). Obviously, at the end of the day, she is and remains a woman in the romance and is treated as such by other characters:

Do you think I will permit *my* ward to make herself the talk of the town? Do you think it suits my pride to have my ward drive down to Brighton wind-blown, dishevelled, a butt for every kind of coarse wit, an object of disgust to any person of taste and refinement? Take a look at yourself, my good girl!” (*Regency Buck*: 217)

However, she is continuously encouraged by Brummell and, occasionally, by Julian to be herself and to take on more male positions within the romance – which shows that Georgette Heyer was experimenting with gender norms in a time in which women had just gained the right to vote but were still treated unfairly and not equal at all.³⁰ While in the beginning of the romance, as explained earlier, she was already an independent soul and did not like to rely on a man to fight her battles, yet accepted that she was a woman and could therefore not do as she pleases, being

³⁰ For more on women in the 1930s, see <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2018/feb/04/the-1930s-women-had-the-vote-but-the-old-agitation-went-on>, Diana Souhami, accessed March 22, 2025.

encouraged to take on rather male roles also encourages her to stop thinking so much about society's opinion of her:

She smiled. "Pray do not snub me, Mr Brummell! If you are to do that I shall be left without any support in this horrid censorious world. You must know that I am a little in disgrace." "I have heard rumours. If you think my advice of value I have some for you." "Yes?" she said eagerly. He flicked open his snuff-box in his inimitable way and took a pinch. "Drive your phaeton," he said. "You are really very stupid not to have thought of it for yourself." "Drive my phaeton?" she repeated. "Of course. Upon every occasion, and where you would be least expected to do so. Did I not tell you once, Miss Taverner, never to admit a fault?" (*Regency Buck*: 235-236)

Having Julian, who, as quoted earlier, values his good reputation, fall in love and eventually end up with a woman like Judith, who shows clear signs of rebelling against social norms, therefore supposedly conveys the message that a woman should always stand up for herself and be courageous and do what she wants, and a 'real man' would never let that stop him from loving her. Heyer's romance however, does not end up letting Judith 'keep' the male role, but she returns it to Julian by begging him to protect her from the Prince Regent (*Regency Buck*: 265), and even though she defends herself, saying that she had no choice but to go with the heir to the throne when Julian blames her for the Prince Regent's failed attempts to seduce her (*Regency Buck*: 267), their following interaction clearly marks a shift in their relationship in which she becomes the obedient part (*Regency Buck*: 267-268) – despite the fact that, given their relation as guardian and ward, she technically always was. The image of a damsel in distress is underlined when Julian saves Judith from her cousin Bernard (*Regency Buck*: 289). Only then, as quoted earlier, are they both able to openly admit their feelings for the other. The message this conveys, therefore, is that a woman can be independent and brave all she wants but, at the end of the day, she needs a man to save her. According to de Groot, *Regency Buck* established the "Austen-esque romance, complete with a hero in the Darcy of *Pride and Prejudice* mould" (de Groot 2009: 58). He additionally explains that "Heyer's historical works conceive of spirited women who gradually come to accept a patriarchal system because it offers them the opportunity of love" (*ibid.*).

Regency Buck is in how far interesting because there are several images of women that come together. On the one hand, Judith is introduced as a strong-willed and independent character, and it is not suggested that this is a bad thing. What it

rather does is convey the message that being brave and not letting others fight their battles is a positive thing for women to do. On the other hand, the romance aims to show a realistic picture of the Regency period, and the female encouragement to be independent is taken back by the end of the novel. This can be seen in the fact that Judith and Julian do not convict Bernard together, but the image of the damsel in distress with Julian as Judith's savior is introduced. Thus, despite the experiment of reversing gender roles and the initial message that women have their own opinions and are allowed to express them, the image of women conveyed by one of the earliest Regency Romances is that women are not equal to men and, therefore, need a man to save them in an emergency. The next section will analyze the modern Regency Romance and their take on the image of women.

3.1.2 The Modern Regency Romances – *Bridgerton* by Julia Quinn

According to de Groot, historical fiction has not been deemed of importance in the early 20th century – the time *Regency Buck* has been published in – because it was considered literature that was “written and read by women”; in the late 20th and early 21st century, however, the genre has gained more and more popularity because of its “cultural importance and aesthetic accomplishments” (de Groot 2009: 45-46). Diana Wallace (2005) underlines this by claiming that “the historical novel has been one of the most important forms of women's reading and writing during the twentieth century” and continues to explain that those kinds of novels have “offered women readers the imaginative space to create different, more inclusive versions of ‘history’” (Wallace 2005: 3). Alison Light (1989), additionally, claims that those types of novels give “femininity, which usually has a walk-on part in the official history of our times, the lead role in the national drama” (Light 1989: 60). For this reason, I find it important to look at the modern Regency Romances and to find out how they treat the ‘woman question’.

Even though there are eight romances in the *Bridgerton*-series in total, this section will not focus on each romance individually but on the portrayal of women throughout the romances because, from their set-up and their images of women, the romances are very similar. This can most clearly be seen in the portrayal of the female characters of the novel:

Daphne Bridgerton is initially introduced to the reader as a typical product of her time: “She wanted to marry, truly, she did, and she wasn’t even holding out for a true love match” (*The Duke and I*: 16-17). However, taking on a male role and despite his reluctance, she basically forces Simon to marry her (*The Duke and I*: 212-214) and to have her children (*The Duke and I*: 324). Her sister Francesca is introduced as a character who tends to “favor her independent streak more often than not” (*When He Was Wicked*: 100). She married for love when she was young and was widowed only two years later with a period of four years of mourning, including wearing only greys and lavenders following the death of her husband John (*When He Was Wicked*: 64). Even though she eventually looks for a husband again because she “wanted a baby” (*When He Was Wicked*: 61), she does not let anything or anyone pressure her into marriage with Michael until she is ready – despite the fact that she enjoys the relationship she has with him (*When He Was Wicked*: 310). Again, Francesca takes on a male role rather than a female, enjoying a casual relationship while running the estate. Their sisters Eloise and Hyacinth do not even pretend to care about society’s norms for women and only hold out for a love match. In *To Sir Phillip, With Love*, Eloise is already 28 years old and it seems as if society and even her own family have accepted that she will live the life of a spinster. It is, however, not as if no one wanted to marry her, but rather that she was not willing to marry just anyone:

Eloise thought about all the marriage proposals she’d refused over the years. How many had there been? At least six. Now she couldn’t even remember why she’d refused some of them. No reason, really, except that they weren’t ... Perfect. Was that so much to expect? She shook her head, aware that she sounded silly and spoiled. No, she didn’t need someone perfect. She just needed someone perfect for her. (*To Sir Phillip, With Love*: 23)

The same goes for Hyacinth, who, at age 22, “had received a few proposals since her debut three years earlier” (*It’s In His Kiss*: 19), but remained unmarried, as she, just like all of her siblings, demands a love match. As for the sisters-in-law, the reader can see a similar pattern. Kate Sheffield, who ends up marrying Anthony Bridgerton, may be described to be a somewhat feminist who stands her ground against men. Sophie Beckett, being the illegitimate child of the Earl of Penwood, knows exactly what she is and where her place in society is, but still refuses to be abused by her stepmother or reduced to the status of a mistress by Benedict Bridgerton and, ultimately and with the help of Violet Bridgerton, the matron of the

family, ends up marrying the man she loves. Penelope Featherington is introduced to be an incredibly shy woman who never gains any attention from men and who has had a crush on Colin Bridgerton since she first met him. In *Romancing Mr Bridgerton*, however, it is revealed that she is the mysterious Lady Whistledown, who had written a column about ‘the ton’ and all their scandals for several years. Lucinda Abernathy, lastly, is again presented to be a typical product of her time, who does as she is told by her family even though that means sacrificing her own happiness. In the end of *On the Way to the Wedding*, however, she finds the courage to break up her own marriage to be with the man she loves.

What all female main characters in the eight romances have in common is that neither of them might be considered ‘perfect’ in the eyes of 19th century society. Daphne is too witty; Francesca is a widow, which means she is not a virgin anymore, and struggles to have children; Eloise is ‘too old’ to get married; Hyacinth talks too much; Kate talks back; Sophie is, as she calls herself, a bastard; Penelope is almost invisible to men and is generally considered to be unattractive; and Lucinda is having her first marriage annulled. This sends a very clear message to the reader: one does not have to be perfect in the eyes of society, which is described to be “capable of individual greatness”, but as a whole “tended to sink to the lowest common denominator” (*Romancing Mr Bridgerton*: 208), but only in the eyes of the one person they love. Much rather than only praising those women who are ‘different’, it is very directly said by Anthony in the first romance that the ‘typical’ women is rather boring: “And when they find you, you will find yourself trapped in conversation with a pale young lady all dressed in white who cannot converse on topics other than the weather, who received vouchers to Almack’s, and hair ribbons” (*The Duke and I*: 26). This is an important message, especially in a society that places unachievable (beauty) standards on women and tells those who do not look a certain way that they are ‘not enough’. Jada Jones, for example, writes in an opinion on *meteamedia.org* (April 9, 2021), an online platform that concentrates on creating next-generation solutions for content producers and theatres:

Social media, magazines, newspapers, and even televisions tend to push high and barely achievable standards. You must look a certain way for society to at least acknowledge your “beauty” even when you have tried to mold yourself to please them. Even then there is always criticism behind it all. Women have to be slim but not too slim, thick but not too thick to where you have a tummy. Women can wear makeup but not too much because it would look like we are trying too hard. We can show skin but not too much because we would get shamed. It is considered weird or impolite for a woman to even have bodily gases. What can we do but try to love ourselves as is? We cannot please everyone. It is even harder to try to love who we are especially when getting judged left and right. Almost anything a woman does, she gets criticized for and negative effects build up rapidly.³¹

What has been mentioned in 2.4.2, namely that humorous women are perceived to be unprofessional (Evans *et al.* 2019: 1082), goes in the same direction. To society, women cannot be boring, but they also cannot be too humorous or talk too much because that would be considered unprofessional or unwomanly. Having every male character realize that their respective love interest is not considered to be perfect by society standards, yet she is perfect to him (see exemplary: “She was so perfect, so utterly beautiful to him, and he felt a rather strange and primitive sense of satisfaction that most men were blind to her beauty”, *The Viscount Who Loved Me*: 264; “‘You *are* beautiful,’ he said, shaking his head in confusion. ‘I don’t know why nobody else sees it’”, *Romancing Mr Bridgerton*: 210), very much assures the reader that perfection is something unrealistic, as beauty (and, respectively, attraction) is in the eye of the beholder. Instead of striving to be someone they are not, girls are encouraged to be themselves, as this is the best they could possibly be. Not letting society dictate women (and respectively men) how to act and how to look is definitely a feminist approach to the 19th century, especially considering the immense success of Patmore’s *The Angel in the House*, as discussed in section 2.1, in the latter half of the 19th century, and is still an important message to send not only to girls, but also boys, in the 21st century.

However, the romances cannot be considered to be entirely feminist either, not at least because, as the name of the genre suggests, they do take place in a time where the perception of women was completely different to the one of the 21st century. A very clear motif throughout all the romances is a male sense of possession over women. When Kate asks Anthony to postpone the wedding night, as she is nervous and does not know what to do, he answers “And I don’t like being

³¹ For full article, see: <https://metamedia.org/20179/opinions/the-beauty-standards-placed-on-women-are-unrealistically-unachievable/>, Jada Jones, accessed March 22, 2025.

denied my rights” (*The Viscount Who Loved Me*: 257), implying that Kate is a mere object that Anthony can deal with as he pleases and whose only purpose it is to satisfy him. Thinking about Eloise, Sir Phillip fantasizes that “He wanted to own her, to possess her [...]” (*To Sir Phillip, With Love*: 233). Sir Gareth, even though he fancies Hyacinth Bridgerton, who he knows to be so wild and free in her character and her beliefs that she went on a treasury hunt with him and even broke into his father’s house, does not ask her if she wanted to marry him first, but naturally goes to her eldest brother Anthony to ask for her hand in marriage:

He looked up, meeting the viscount’s dark eyes with steady purpose. “I would like to marry Hyacinth,” he said. And then, because the viscount did not say anything, because he didn’t even move, Gareth added, “Er, if she’ll have me.” (*It’s In His Kiss*: 213)

While this would have been the normal procedure in the real world of the early 19th century, the romance has introduced a female character that is anything but what was considered ‘normal’ in the Regency era. It is therefore surprising to the reader that, while the romance has been built up around the fact that Sir Gareth falls in love with Hyacinth not despite the fact that she is totally different to other women, but because of this fact, Gareth does not ask her if she wants to marry him first, but goes back to the – at the time – natural habit of asking a male guardian for her hand and have another man decide upon her future. Although one could, therefore, argue that the male characters always get what they want, which is a sign of – for the time of action natural – male dominance, one must bear in mind that in the end, all eight marriages are built on equality and mutual love and respect, which, again, tells the reader that they should not settle for less.

In this, one can see a clear development from the first Regency Romances to the modern ones: in *Regency Buck*, it is made very clear that the lovers are not equals: firstly, Julian is Judith’s guardian, which naturally places him above her. Secondly, by the end she is portrayed as the damsel in distress, and he as her savior. Lastly, he never asks her to marry him, but simply states that they will marry, which takes away her choice completely. In the *Bridgerton* romances, in contrast, the respective lovers are, at the end of the day, always presented as a union of two equal individuals after the respective male character realizes that being misogynistic and placing himself above the woman is not leading him anywhere.

Another important aspect that needs to be mentioned – and that differentiates modern Regency Romances from the original ones – is that, as described in chapter 2, women of the 19th century were not supposed to enjoy sex, as it was believed that a woman who enjoyed it was not chaste and pure, but rather put them into a corner with the fallen women. As Michel Foucault (1978) explains,

A single locus of sexuality was acknowledged in social space as well as at the heart of every household, but it was a utilitarian and fertile one: the parents' bedroom. The rest had only to remain vague; proper demeanor avoided contact with other bodies, and verbal decency sanitized one's speech. And sterile behavior carried the taint of abnormality; if it insisted on making itself too visible, it would be designated accordingly and would have to pay the penalty. (Foucault 1978: 3-4)

In the *Bridgerton* romances, however, the sex-scenes are not only explicitly described, but both male and female characters enjoy the intercourse, and especially the lust of their counterpart, enormously, which, again, goes against the 19th century English upper class's expectations of women, but tells the reader that everything that is mutually okay between lovers is nothing to be ashamed of. The romances are therefore aiming to draw a somewhat realistic picture of male-female-relations in the early 19th century, yet, by showing a modern and romanticized version of those relations, are also telling the reader that a marriage can only really work if it is built on love and respect rather than political reasons or money. I would therefore claim that the anachronism of the romances is intentional, as the real treatment of women of the 19th century – for example being married against their will without the happy end Regency Romances promise – can hardly be portrayed as something romantic.

As described, the main topic of the romances is the quest of finding true love, and the main message is that this love is strong enough to withstand all obstacles, no matter how insurmountable they may seem. One very important aspect in this quest is that, despite social standing and family background, the lovers are always equals. This, however, has obviously not been the case for a majority of women in the 19th century, as Bock explains:

In England, aber auch anderswo konnte jede öffentliche Erklärung zur Frauenfrage Reaktionen provozieren, und die Artikulation von Normen oder Dissens war Teil einer gemeinsamen argumentativen Öffentlichkeit. Es kursierten, koexistierten, konkurrierten und überschnitten sich zahlreiche „Modelle“: Neben dem „naturrechtlichen“ von Welcker stand etwa eine Vision von Balzac, die an alte Paradoxa anknüpfte: „Die Frau ist, streng gesprochen, nur ein Annex des Mannes. Sie ist ein Sklave, den man auf einen Thron zu setzen verstehen muß.“ Dann gab es den Engel in seiner „Sphäre“ häuslicher Pflichten an der Seite und im Dienste seines Mannes (dafür standen in England die weitverbreiteten Benimmbücher von Sarah Ellis, derzufolge Frauen „relative“, vom Mann abhängige Geschöpfe seien) [...] (Bock 2000: 126)³²

Bock also points out the contrariness in those theories and the reduction of women to the house and family and their consequent removal from the public life under the proclamation “the state to the man, the family to the woman”, as a lot of women were also oppressed in their own families:

Der Theorie und den Gesetzen, nach denen im ehelichen Dissens der Mann zu entscheiden habe, widersprach die These vom Haus als Bereich der Frau und von einer reinlichen Scheidung zwischen männlicher und weiblicher Sphäre: „Selbst in der Familie gilt die Frau als eine Null“, klagte die Saint-Simonistin Élisabeth Celnart 1832, und auch andere kritisierten ihren *état de nullité*.³³ (Bock 2000: 127)

What can be found in the *Bridgerton* romances, however, is not only equality between the lovers, but a sort of women-rule amongst the Bridgerton-family and the ‘ton’ in general.

Inside the family, it is the matron, Violet Bridgerton, who meddles with their children’s love life, as it is said from the beginning that she is “the worst of the lot” of “fire-breathing dragons with daughters of – God help us – marriageable age” (*The Duke and I*: 26). However, her role is not only reduced to her household, but, if needed, she can be seen out intimidating and bribing others for the sake of her children:

³² “In England, but also elsewhere, any public statement on the women's question could provoke reactions, and the articulation of norms or dissent was part of a common argumentative public sphere. Numerous "models" circulated, coexisted, competed, and overlapped: Alongside Welcker's "natural law," for example, stood a vision by Balzac that echoed old paradoxes: "Woman, strictly speaking, is only an annex of man. She is a slave whom one must know how to place on a throne." Then there was the angel in her "sphere" of domestic duties at the side and in the service of her husband (this was represented in England by the widespread etiquette books of Sarah Ellis, according to which women were "relative" creatures, dependent on the man) [...]" – translation by K. Pohlmann.

³³ “The theory and the laws according to which the man had to decide in marital dissent were contradicted by the thesis of the home as the domain of the woman and of a pure divorce between male and female spheres: "Even in the family, the woman is considered a zero," complained the Saint-Simonian Élisabeth Celnart in 1832, and others also criticized her *état de nullité*.” – translation by K. Pohlmann.

Violet turned to the magistrate. "Might I have a few moments alone with Lady Penwood?" "Of course, my lady." He gave her a gruff nod, then barked, "Everyone! Out!" "No, no," Violet said with a sweet smile as she pressed something that looked suspiciously like a pound note into his palm. "My family may stay." The magistrate blushed slightly, then grabbed the warden's arm and yanked him out of the room. "There now," Violet murmured. "Where were we?" Benedict beamed with pride as he watched his mother march right up to Lady Penwood and stare her down. He stole a glance at Sophie. Her mouth was hanging open. "My son is going to marry Sophie," Violet said, "and you are going to tell anyone who will listen that she was the ward of your late husband." "I will never lie for her," Lady Penwood shot back. Violet shrugged. "Fine. Then you can expect my solicitors to begin looking for Sophie's dowry immediately. After all, Benedict will be entitled to it once he marries her." [...] "If someone asks me," Lady Penwood ground out, "I will confirm whatever story you bandy about. But do not expect me to go out of my way to help her." [...] His mother turned back to Lady Penwood. "Sophie's father was named Charles Beckett and he was a distant cousin of the earl's, no?" Lady Penwood looked as if she'd swallowed a bad clam, but she nodded nonetheless. (*An Offer From a Gentleman*: 336-337)

Violet is very clearly taking on a role that was traditionally reserved for men in the 19th century, not only as match-maker between Benedict and Sophie, but also as the judge who solves the conflict, brings justice to the situation, and even makes an illegitimate child respectable. While, as Frost (2003) explains, England's bastardy laws of the 19th century were the harshest of Europe and being an illegitimate child was considered a "serious stigma legally, socially, and emotionally" (Frost 2003: 293), in *An Offer From a Gentleman* it seems that, despite Benedict's original claims that he cannot marry Sophie (*An Offer From a Gentleman*: 258), Violet Bridgerton has the power to just make the stigmas and the problems of a marriage between a legitimate second-born son of a viscount and the illegitimate daughter of an earl disappear. While it is mentioned in the romances following the marriage of Benedict and Sophie that they live on the country side and barely come into town, it is never hinted that this is because of fear society might discover the real circumstances of Sophie's birth, but rather that Benedict was "preferring the quiet of the country" (*To Sir Phillip, With Love*: 24) and that, being a painter, he takes his inspiration from nature, as "one of his landscapes now hung in the National Gallery" (*Romancing Mr Bridgerton*: 29). This is another change from the original Regency Romances: women in the *Bridgerton* romances do not necessarily need a man to save them, as Judith did in *Regency Buck*, but they can rather help themselves or help one another.

Love being stronger than the rules and stigmas of society is a motif that is repeatedly shown throughout the romances. The quiet and shy Penelope Featherington, for example, turns out to be the popular and feared gossip columnist “Lady Whistledown”, whose “Society Papers” have been constantly read by the characters and whose identity has been a mystery for the first three books of the series. Despite the fact that Colin Bridgerton is certain that a scandal is “going to erupt when she [Lady Whistledown] is discovered” (*Romancing Mr. Bridgerton*: 128), points out that, whoever Lady Whistledown is, will “be ruined” (*Romancing Mr. Bridgerton*: 129), and calls the whole situation “stupidity” (*Romancing Mr. Bridgerton*: 196) once he finds out that it has been his future wife Penelope all along, it is, in fact, Colin who tells society about Lady Whistledown’s identity:

“You might say that my wife has two maiden names,” he said thoughtfully. “Of course you all knew her as Penelope Featherington, as did I. But what you didn’t know, and what even I was not clever enough to figure out until she told me herself...” He paused, waiting for silence to fall over the room. “... is that she is also the brilliant, the witty, the breathtakingly magnificent – Oh, you all know who I am talking about,” he said, his arm sweeping out toward the crowd. “I give you my wife!” he said, his love and pride following across the room. “Lady Whistledown!” For a moment there was nothing but silence. It was almost as if no one even dared to breathe. And then it came. Clap. Clap. Clap. Slow and methodical, but with such force and determination that everyone had to turn and look to see who had dared to break the shocked silence. It was Lady Danbury. She had shoved her cane into someone else’s arms and was holding her arms high, clapping loud and proud, beaming with pride and delight. And then someone else began to clap. Penelope jerked her head to the side to see who ... Anthony Bridgerton. And then Simon Basset, the Duke of Hastings. And then the Bridgerton women, and then the Featherington women, and then another and another and more and more until the entire room was cheering. (*Romancing Mr. Bridgerton*: 366-367)

Against his original claims that if society finds out that she is Lady Whistledown, Penelope will be ruined and shunned, this is not even remotely the case. She and Colin get married and it is at no point hinted that they are in any way shunned by society. Moreover, in the epilogue it is revealed that Colin has become a successful author and that Penelope is about to publish a novel herself (*Romancing Mr. Bridgerton*: 368-370). Greg Buzwell (2020), however, confirms that in the late 18th and early 19th century, “writing, and especially the writing of fiction for money, was seen as a most unladylike activity”, which was why it became quite popular to put “by a lady” on the title pages of novels written by women – as, for example, Jane Austen did (Buzwell 2020). In a letter written to Charlotte Brontë on March

12, 1837, Robert Southey claims that “literature cannot be the business of a woman’s life, and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure she will have for it even as an accomplishment and a recreation” (Buzwell 2020³⁴). Even nowadays, female authors have it harder to have their novels published, especially in fields of literature that are predominantly ‘male fields’, such as fantasy or science fiction. One of the most prominent examples would be Joanne K. Rowling, whose publisher advised her to not put “Joanne Rowling”, but “J. K. Rowling” on the cover of the *Harry Potter* novels, as “a book by an obviously female author might not appeal to the target audience of young boys”.³⁵ Considering the obstacles thrown into female authors’ paths up until the late 20th and even the 21st century, it seems quite unlikely that a woman who has made fun of and insulted the ‘ton’ for several years in the beginning of the 19th century is accepted as a successful female author by society.

On the Way to the Wedding even goes a step further into claiming that true love overcomes any obstacle in its way without actual consequences for the lovers. Despite being in love with Gregory Bridgerton, Lady Lucinda Abernathy marries Lord Haselby after her uncle and warden convinced her that Haselby’s father, Lord Davenport, has been blackmailing the family for years and she is “the final payment of a longstanding debt to Lord Davenport” (*On the Way to the Wedding*: 269). It becomes obvious, though, that Lord Haselby himself is also forced into this marriage, as he is, in fact, gay: “‘He prefers men,’ he said, getting the words out as quickly as he was able. ‘To women. Some men are like that.’” (*On the Way to the Wedding*: 257). This, however, does not shock the characters as they ought to be. Lucy merely gets angry with Gregory for telling her, as she thinks he did it to hurt her (*ibid.*), and her uncle “laughs” and claims that “of course I knew it” (*On the Way to the Wedding*: 265). While, according to Holly Williams (2017), homosexuality was something people in 19th century England were aware of, especially due to arts, there has, nevertheless, been the death penalty for ‘sodomy’ until 1861 and, furthermore, homosexuality has not been decriminalized in England

³⁴ For pictures of the letter, see: <https://www.bl.uk/womens-rights/articles/women-authors-and-anonymity>, Greg Buzzwell, accessed March 22, 2025.

³⁵ See: <https://www.jkrowling.com/about/>, Joanne K. Rowling, accessed March 22, 2025.

and Wales until 1967 (Williams 2017³⁶). Even though, as a lord, Haselby might not have qualified for the death penalty because of his homosexuality, it is quite unlikely that it did not actually bother anyone and that Haselby's main concern is not that people might talk about his open secret, but that, should he not have an heir, his title will go to his "odious cousin" (*On the Way to the Wedding*: 365). Additionally, he immediately offers Lucy an annulment of their marriage, claiming that it was not a problem as "it was the best thing that could possibly have happened. Shootings, blackmail, treason ... No one will ever look to *me* as the cause of the annulment now" (*On the Way to the Wedding*: 364). Reality, however, would not have been that easy. According to the national archives, an annulment would have meant that neither of them was allowed to remarry until the other one died. To be able to remarry, the husband or wife would, after achieving the annulment of the marriage, have to apply for a declaration of nullity, which would make the marriage invalid from the start.³⁷ The other way to end a marriage would have been to get a divorce. Divorces, however, have only been granted by parliament for adultery. Women, additionally, could only procure a divorce if the adultery was compounded by other offences, such as incest or bigamy, which is one of the reasons that the divorce rate remained quite low with only 193 divorces from 1800 until 1857, when the Matrimonial Causes Bill became law (Wolfram 1985: 157). This shows that, in reality, a woman would not have had it as easily as Lucy had it in *On the Way to the Wedding* to get out of an unwanted marriage to marry the man they actually loved – in fact, it is quite unlikely that any woman in the early 19th century would have had that chance.

While, as mentioned earlier, the *Bridgerton* romances offer a feminist approach towards marriage in the 19th century, not without aiming to show a somewhat realistic picture of male-female-relations, it is quite clear that the romances lack a certain form of realism for the sake of the dramatization of the lovers' ultimate union. This stands in clear contrast to the earliest Regency Romances, which very much focus on the Regency period and try to paint a realistic picture of the customs and traditions, as well as the lifestyle and the fashion.

³⁶ See: <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20170405-the-victorian-view-of-same-sex-desire>, Holly Williams, accessed March 22, 2025.

³⁷ See number 8.3 and 8.4 on: <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/divorce/>, no author, accessed March 22, 2025.

However, this unrealistic portrayal of the Regency period does not change anything about the popularity of the romances and the genre. According to Alyssa Rosenberg in *The Washington Post* (2021), not at least because of the success of the *Bridgerton* romances and the *Bridgerton* Netflix series, Regency romances might be the “next big thing” concerning the philosophy of love, sex, and marriage (Rosenberg 2021). She explains the fascination with the Regency period as follows:

If James's novels treated domination and submission as a kind of trauma therapy, Regency romance, as embodied by "Bridgerton," takes a lighter touch. In these stories, everyone knows that the rules that govern relationships between young, unmarried people are ridiculous. Chaperonage is an easily evaded farce. A single smooch shouldn't actually require the swift dispatch of wedding invitations. And yet, both nominally following these conventions and pushing up against their limits turns out to be a lot of fun for the characters. No wonder NBC is planning a Jane Austen-inspired dating show, and Netflix is looking to build a "Bridgerton"-inspired live events business. Obviously, there will be concessions to modern mores: No one's calling for the resurrection of the London marriage market or the end of sex education.³⁸

While the romances do not cover female, and also queer, struggles of the 19th century quite accurately and some of those struggles are actually being downplayed and overshadowed by the ever-prominent topic of true love, they do what, for example, Jane Austen's novels did to society: they offer (young) people a form of ‘safe-space’ and try to teach them that one does not have to give themselves up for the sake of their partner, but that any relationship or marriage can only work if it is built on mutual love and respect. This equality between men and women is shown in how their relationships displays. In contrast to novels from the Regency period and early Regency Romances, modern Regency Romances – on the example of the *Bridgerton* romances – go into detail when it comes to the sex scenes. In those scenes, it is made explicitly clear that true passion and lust can only be achieved when one is not only thinking about himself, but about giving pleasure to the other one. In other words, these scenes show that men have power over women, but equally so, women possess power over men as well. The picture that is being created about women, marriage, and male-female-relations in the early 19th century in Regency Romances, accurate or not, may therefore help to bring across the message that the relationship between a man and a women is not a master-servant-relationship but that men and women are equals – or, as Rosenberg puts it: “Better

³⁸ See <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/07/26/every-generation-needs-dating-philosophy-better-regency-romance-than-rules/>, Alyssa Rosenberg, accessed March 22, 2025.

to have some agreed-upon guardrails, especially if they can turn into something fun. After all, if you put on a corset, whether for a pole-dancing class or a Regency reenactment, you can always take it off later” (Rosenberg 2021). This means that modern Regency Romances – on the example of the *Bridgerton* romances – reveal a sort of feminist undercurrent: on the one hand, the female characters are shown to be strong and independent. They are not defined by their husbands, but by their own expectations and decisions. On the other hand, the romances preserve the tropes and ideals of the early 19th century and portray it as if a woman's only goal was to find a man. This is, in my opinion, what makes (modern) Regency Romances as popular as they are: for some readers, what speaks to them most is this sort of ‘nostalgia’ for etiquette and courting, which offers a welcome change from the fast-paced, superficial nature of modern relationships. For others, the subtle feminist undertones of the novels are a pleasant form of female empowerment – one that does not ask the reader for a complete disruption of society and its norms, but on the example of female characters that show strength without unhinging society. One could, therefore, say that ‘there is something for everyone’ in Regency Romances – despite the fact that they are, objectively speaking, not a feminist type of literature.

3.2 Neo-Victorian Literature

Having determined that Regency Romances show a very romanticized version of the beginning of the 19th century that, nevertheless, brings across the message that, just as men possess power over women, women also possess power over men, the focus now lies on the second half of the 19th century and neo-Victorian Literature. As mentioned in the introduction, Llewellyn describes it as the rewriting of the historical narrative of the Victorian period by representing marginalized voices, new histories of sexuality, postcolonial viewpoints, and other generally different versions of “the Victorian” (Llewellyn 2008: 165). This definition implies that neo-Victorian literature is a lot more critical of the 19th century than Regency Romances are. John Fowles underlines this assumption in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) by stating:

What are we faced with in the nineteenth century? An age where woman was sacred; and where you could buy a thirteen-year-old girl for a few pounds – a few shillings, if you wanted her for only an hour or two. Where more churches were built than in the whole previous history of the country; and where one in sixty houses in London was a brothel (the modern ratio would be nearer one in six

thousand). Where the sanctity of marriage (and chastity before marriage) was proclaimed from every pulpit, in every newspaper editorial and public utterance; and where never – or hardly ever – have so many great public figures, from the future king down, led scandalous private lives. (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*: 268-269).

Neo-Victorian literature therefore stands in clear contrast to other 'neo-concepts', such as neocolonialism. Nkrumah (1965) explains that the essence of neocolonialism is "that the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside" (Nkrumah 1965: 1). Applied to literary theory, this means that, even though the time of colonialism is over, neocolonial – or postcolonialist – literature continues to uphold the values of the colonial period and emphasizes the continuance of colonialism (Li and Zhang 2018: 3). In contrast to the concept of 'neo' in neocolonialism, neo-Victorianism does not try to uphold and/or bring back Victorian values. While Regency Romances romanticize the 19th century and proclaim that the values of society are, after all, not all bad and that the respect between men and women – or, so to say, gentlemen and ladies – that are so highly valued by society standards are actually something to live by, neo-Victorian literature goes beyond the surface and aims to show the hypocrisy of the century that "can give us a clearer understanding of the origins of our present problems, showing how our tangles over education and class, gender and religion took root in the first place" (Birch 2008: 144). However, I would claim that there are different layers of criticism: it can be humorous, trivial, up-front, etc., and each form of criticism serves its own purpose. I will therefore combine novels that are up-front directly critical with others that are not in the first two subsections to see in how far each layer of criticism differs and if there is common ground. Another interesting aspect of this section will not only be to see how the chosen novels, Saki's *When William Came* (1913), Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), A.S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990), Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith* (2002), and Emma Tennant's *The French Dancer's Bastard* (2006), deal with the Victorian era, but also how neo-Victorian literature has changed in itself in the course of almost 40 years. For this, each novel will be analyzed individually before drawing a conclusion at the end of the section.

3.2.1 A Feminist Response to Feminism of the 19th Century – Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Emma Tennant’s *The French Dancer’s Bastard*

In the past 200 years, there have been several attempts to rewrite or give a modern answer to the great novels of the 19th century – amongst them Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. Exemplary for these rewritings are Emma Tennant’s *The French Dancer’s Bastard*³⁹ (2006), which tells the story of *Jane Eyre* from Adèle’s perspective, and, probably most famously, Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), which focuses on Bertha’s perspective. The two novels give – 40 years apart from each other – voices to women that would have naturally been silenced in the 19th century: an illegitimate child and the ‘mad’ first wife. Otmani Ahlem and Salah Bouregbi (2020) claim that female authors write these types of novels because

For women writers (those who adopt Victorian novels), rewriting female characters becomes part of their feminist projects. By undermining “metanarratives”, to borrow Jean-François Lyotard’s term, postmodernism offers space for pluralism, eccentricity and difference, values also foregrounded by feminists. The focus on difference is one of the most interesting aspects of postmodernism to feminists. (Ahlem and Bouregbi 2020: 607).

The OED defines metanarrative as follows:

Any narrative which is concerned with the idea of storytelling, *spec.* one which alludes to other narratives, or refers to itself and to its own artifice. Also: a piece of narrative, esp. a classic text or other archetypal story, which provides a schematic world view upon which an individual’s experiences and perceptions may be ordered. (*OED* s.v. *metanarrative*, n.).

In the following, it will be shown that novels rewriting a piece of literature from the 19th century, such as *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *The French Dancer’s Bastard*, are not, as Ahlem and Bouregbi claim, undermining the metanarrative of *Jane Eyre* and the time it has been written in for the sake of “eccentricity and difference”, but that they are responding to it and are offering voices to women who are not the heroine, but outsiders in the world they were set in.

In *Jane Eyre*, neither Adèle nor Rochester’s first wife, whom he calls Bertha, are given much attention as autonomous persons. As for Adèle, though she is the reason Jane came to Thornfield Hall and met Rochester in the first place, she

³⁹ Despite its similarity in name to *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, Emma Tennant’s novel is a modern response to *Jane Eyre*. The similarity to John Fowles’ novel may therefore be understood as a provocative ‘eye-catcher’ to gain the reader’s interest in the novel.

is but an – illegitimate and female – child and, therefore, is not, despite Jane's liking of her, of much interest to society of the 19th century. Bertha/Antoinette, on the other hand, is merely described to be a madwoman who stands in the way of Rochester and Jane, and, as a result, not much thought is given to her personal life either other than her functioning as Jane's 'dark double' – dark where Jane is fair, weak where Jane is strong, crazy where Jane is sensible. However, it is those two women – young Adèle and Bertha/Antoinette – who are, after all, interesting characters to look at, as they have both been treated badly by society and Mr. Rochester for no apparent reason other than being there.

One reason that characters like Adèle are not necessarily considered important enough to look at is their conception of being 'bad' characters. In their *The Madwoman in the Attic* ([1979] 2000), Gilbert and Gubar call the original Adèle from *Jane Eyre* a "negative role model" for Jane and a "model female in a world of prostitutes" (Gilbert and Gubar [1979] 2000: 350). They go on to explain that female characters like Adèle were put into Jane's path as obstacles she needs to overcome on her quest to independent maturity (*ibid.*). *The French Dancer's Bastard* also starts off in the same direction by showing in its narrative why children, especially illegitimate and female children, were not given a voice in the 19th century by presenting eight-year-old Adèle as an unreliable narrator for the first part of the novel. Being forced to live in England after her mother abandoned her and went to Italy, Adèle – because of letters she received by her mother – convinces herself and the reader that, in contrast to Rochester's own words, he loves her and her mother and that her mother will come back, and they will be a family after all:

I know that Madame F understands that all Papa's gestures are for me. He pleases the governess in order to bring me happiness: he promises me dresses that will far outshine hers, because, *naturellement*, the dresses will come from Paris. If I miss lessons because Papa speaks with Jane, he speaks with her for that purpose: that I may enjoy my life here at Thornfield Hall. Madame Fairfax is *jalouse*, I daresay, of the preference for me over all others that her employer has recently shown. And if Miss Eyre looks at him like a moonstruck heifer in the barn where Jack takes me from time to time to milk the cows and pat their shiny black noses – then it is *tant pis* for her. She, too, will perforce understand the nature of Papa's love for his family, when Maman comes and our little circle in complete. (*The French Dancer's Bastard*: 85)

Later on, however, Mrs. Fairfax reveals that her mother never sent her those letters: "So great was the child's ability to deceive herself on the subject of her mother's

coming that she addressed letters to herself from the absent mother, these discovered by Leah in the fork of a tree and brought to me” (*The French Dancer’s Bastard*: 140). However, eight-year-old Adèle is convinced that her father loves her, her mother will come back to her, and, therefore, that Jane is in the way of her happy family. Yet, despite her dislike of her governess, Adèle does not ‘undermine’ the story of *Jane Eyre* but gives it validity. While, on the one hand, she says that Jane “appears to love the authority Maman and Jenny showed me how to hate” (*The French Dancer’s Bastard*: 73), she also talks about Jane’s “independent views” (*ibid.*) and the “fine picture of her own way of doing things” (*The French Dancer’s Bastard*: 74). This shows that focusing on a minor character from the original novel does not undermine the feminist message of *Jane Eyre*. In the original novel, Adèle adores Jane, but Jane has to, according to, as quoted above, Gilbert and Gubar, overcome the obstacle of Adèle and her upbringing as the child of a ‘fallen woman’. In *The French Dancer’s Bastard*, Adèle sees Jane as a threat, yet even the – due to her age unreliable – child who detests her governess acknowledges the independence Jane strives for and, consequently, the feminist message *Jane Eyre* sends.

While throughout the whole novel there is an internally focalized homodiegetic narrator, the voice changes from chapter to chapter. This gives back some validity to Adèle, as the adults – Rochester, Grace Poole, and Mrs. Fairfax – confirm parts of her story in ‘their’ chapters. Additionally, in those chapters told by adults, the reader also gets to hear the story from the point of view of stereotypical members of 19th century society and, simultaneously, women who did not usually get a voice either: Grace Poole and Mrs. Fairfax. However, they are clearly a product of their time and social status.

Grace, as a servant, does as she is told and, even though she feels sorry for Antoinette and is aware of the torture and abuse she has to endure (“You can’t help feeling sorry for this wife the master has made a prisoner of [...]” / “[...] and cruel it is, too [...]”, *The French Dancer’s Bastard*: 88), does not help her, but helps Rochester by locking his first wife away and setting her on drugs to keep her quiet (*The French Dancer’s Bastard*: 89). This is because, as Gilbert and Gubar explain, most women in *Jane Eyre* act as “agents for men”, who, as Grace does with Bertha,

can function as literal keepers of other women while not necessarily noticing that they are bound by the same chains as the prisoners (Gilbert and Gubar [1979] 2000: 351). As a stereotypical member of 19th century English society, she is expected to respect the boundaries of society that distinguish her from the upper class and show loyalty to her masters. Therefore, not much thought is being spent by Rochester that she could possibly betray him and tell people about his first wife being locked away in Thornfield Hall. Grace herself, however, claims that she could not help Antoinette even if she wanted to – which she did not – because she does notice that she is also locked away at Thornfield Hall:

“There is nowhere for me to go,” and I ram the point home. And then I know she knows I see Thornfield Hall as just as much of a prison as she does. We belong to a master who’d happily see us dead – that I tell her sometimes, too. And then she cries as if her heart would burst open. (*The French Dancer’s Bastard*: 89)

At the same time, Grace is also aware that, as a female servant, she is being overlooked and underestimated: “I didn’t count, I suppose: I was Just Grace Poole” (*The French Dancer’s Bastard*: 90). Being underestimated, no one expected her to form a plan to blackmail Rochester for money to finally leave Thornfield Hall and she herself cannot overcome the boundaries set for her by society and, after taking Antoinette away, never actually says anything to Rochester about wanting money. Yet, she does not blame her inability to go against the ‘natural law’ of 19th century society on herself, but – naturally – on someone else, namely the first best thing that is ‘unnatural’ to society and must therefore be at fault for everything ‘unnatural’ that is going on: “When things didn’t go as I planned, I put it down to the bad luck the little French girl had brought to Thornfield, with her talk of an old witch fortune-teller she visits in the “pretty, clean town” she left, to come and be with her Papa” (*The French Dancer’s Bastard*: 96-97). In the end, however, Grace’s inability to see that she would have been able to cross that boundary and leave Thornfield Hall, maybe even turn Rochester in and help Antoinette, who is, unlike herself, actually locked away without any chance of escape and who she feels so many parallels to, costs her her life, as she dies in the fire of Thornfield Hall.

The boundaries society set to divide genders and classes also lead to the downfall of Mrs. Fairfax. As a distant cousin of Mr. Rochester and a housekeeper at Thornfield Hall, it is her main priority to keep any gossip or shame from the name

of Rochester. Therefore, even though she has been aware of Antoinette's present in the attic, as well as the possible abuse ("For I knew better than anyone else that poor Mr Rochester's insane wife had been disposed of in quite a different way, and a good time before the fire of which I had just been told", *The French Dancer's Bastard*: 136), she lies to Lord and Lady Doune, another distant relative to whom Rochester has sent her before the fire of Thornfield Hall and claims that Antoinette never existed and that Rochester was a good person: "Edward Rochester did not have a wife living at Thornfield Hall, to my knowledge; but he was a man of tested loyalties and never dismissed anyone from his service, even if they fell fatally ill or went so far as to lose their reason" (*The French Dancer's Bastard*: 140). She goes on by doing what seems to have been the most reasonable thing to do in the 19th century when one was out of explanations for the things happening, in this case the existence of a wife that has been locked away for years – namely blaming everything on a 'madwoman':

"So who was it who put it about that Edward Rochester had a wife already living at the time of the fire, by those who did not know the facts?" asked Lady Doune, her voice and expression showing extreme uncertainty as to what or whom she might next believe. My answer, however, convinced the good countess, I am reasonably sure, of the truth of my words. "Why, the woman who spread this calumny was an old housemaid, my lady, who had long ago succumbed to the temptations of alcohol; and while indulging herself in her master's cellar, had lost her sanity along with any sobriety or good judgement she might once have possessed." (*The French Dancer's Bastard*: 141)

As a mad female servant is an easier thing to believe than a male member of the aristocracy locking away his first wife until she goes mad, the Lord and Lady are quick to believe Mrs. Fairfax's story. For her, while she does think of Jane Eyre and Adèle, who, after all, know the truth ("should the governess or the French child, now safely locked away at school, come to the hall again when I am there (and surely I will be), then they must suffer for their innocence", *The French Dancer's Bastard*: 142), it is yet easy to lie, as she is certain that society would not believe a child or a poor governess over her and Mr. Rochester.

However, in the course of the novel, Adèle does not only get older, but she simultaneously gets more reliable as a narrator and, therefore, also as a person. This can be seen clearly in her perception of herself and her situation. While, as a child, Adèle was convinced that everyone around her, including Rochester, loved her and

wanted her around, she begins to understand the place society assigned to an illegitimate child in the 19th century as she grows older: she begins to understand that “Monsieur Rochester was more inclined to deny paternity than to love” (*The French Dancer’s Bastard*: 160) her, that she was “unwanted” (*The French Dancer’s Bastard*: 159) at Jenny’s – her mother’s best friend – apartment and that only Jane, who “has tried from the very beginning to instill modesty, education and decency” (*ibid.*) into her, “pressed home her reasons for including ‘little Adèle’ in the family” (*The French Dancer’s Bastard*: 156). The greatest realization, however, is that, in contrast to what it is implied she has been told by Mrs. Fairfax as a child, not Adèle locked out Antoinette on the roof, which led to her falling to her death, but it has, in fact, been the other way around:

Now the pain, worse than homesickness, seized me once again. And with it came the pictures of the frightening times in Papa’s house: the finding of the starving, terrified Antoinette out on the roof and the bustling figure of Madame Fairfax as she hustled me along the passage, her footsteps loud on the wooden floor after fastening the window. (*The French Dancer’s Bastard*: 196)

In the postscript of the novel, it is revealed that, in contrast to Mrs. Fairfax’s belief that no one would believe a child over her, “Adèle’s testimony – concerning the actions of Mrs Fairfax, both in drugging the child and rendering her incapable of seeing the cruelty of the housekeeper – had been heard” (*The French Dancer’s Bastard*: 219) and that Mrs. Fairfax had been “sentenced and imprisoned” (*ibid.*).

Adèle, however, gets to do what she wants and, “with the permission of her parents” (*ibid.*), goes to Paris to become an actress. Adèle’s relationship with Jane in the end clearly resembles the one of mother and daughter, and one can see that Jane’s influence on Adèle has formed her perception of the world. This can most clearly be seen in Adèle’s attitude towards marriage. When she goes back to Paris to look for her mother, her mother’s friends talk a great deal about revolution:

One day it became clear that I couldn’t avoid the revolution of which Nadar spoke so gravely when I went to visit him in his studio – a revolution that Jenny and Jeanne said could never take place without a transformation of attitudes towards the role of women in society. (*The French Dancer’s Bastard*: 170-171)

Despite this talk of revolution and changing the position and the role of women in society, Jenny, once more showing that she is, after all, a product of her time who has no place for a bastard child, tries to arrange a marriage between Adèle and

Albert, a boy she has never met before (*The French Dancer's Bastard*: 174). Placide, another of her mother's friends, instead claims that she "was destined to be wife of the great Pierrot" (*The French Dancer's Bastard*: 181-182). With everyone around her trying to get her married off, Jane's influence on Adèle becomes most clear. Like Jane, she claims that she would rather be alone than be someone's "prisoner" (*The French Dancer's Bastard*: 182): "I'm alone in the world and the happier for it" (*The French Dancer's Bastard*: 183). This implies clearly that the influence Charlotte Brontë had with her *Jane Eyre* on younger generations of women is, despite the flaws of the novel regarding Mr. Rochester being portrayed as a Byronic Hero, a feminist one that encouraged young women to follow themselves and their own desires rather than what society dictates them.

Additionally, the novel also shows how pointless it is to not give voice to a child, especially one that is a clear outsider in society like Adèle, or servants, as also Mr. Rochester, a member of the upper class, is presented to be unreliable and even mad. This madness can be seen in one of Adèle's earliest memories of him in which, out of jealousy, he destroys their house completely and takes everything they had:

And here we are – Maman, Jenny, and I – returned from the foolish visit to La Cibot and standing in the ruins of Maman's pretty house in rue Vaugirard. For it's not only the conservatory now that is broken up and destroyed. The house itself has been emptied – of everything. The beds have gone, and all the furniture, and the rosy curtains and the Sèvres plates and all the kitchen spoons and forks and knives. (*The French Dancer's Bastard*: 35)

The novel follows the narrative of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in which Bertha was originally called Antoinette and was driven into madness by Mr. Rochester, which will be discussed in detail in the second half of this section. In *The French Dancer's Bastard*, Rochester does not seem to be able to fathom that he is responsible for his first wife's condition. He rather tries to put the blame on her, claiming that her dowry, the money for which he initially married her even though she did not want to, has not bought her him, but "has bought her only a cage, and like a tropical bird she is frozen to her perch, high above the hum of the household she should by rights have organised and controlled" (*The French Dancer's Bastard*: 40). He soon after claims that "the sheer inhumanity of her treatment appalls me" (*The French Dancer's Bastard*: 41). Very clearly, he tries to disassociate himself from any fault

by trying to convince both the reader and himself that not he married Antoinette for her money, but she tried to ‘buy’ him and it backfired on her, as well as that he does not support her being locked away in solitude, even though it was his decision and it is his house in which her abuse happens. According to Gilbert and Gubar, the fact that Rochester married Bertha “for status, for sex, for money, for everything but love and equality” (Gilbert and Gubar [1979] 2000: 356) already speaks of his inferiority rather than his superiority in the original novel (Gilbert and Gubar [1979] 2000: 355). In *The French Dancer’s Bastard*, his inferiority complex is very prominent. This is shown by the fact that he reverses the roles and places himself in the role of the victim, while making the actual victim – his locked-up first wife – the perpetrator. This, consequently, clearly marks him as an unreliable narrator as well – and more so, as it is made particularly clear that Adèle is, after all, an eight-year-old child who confuses wishful thinking with reality at times and who, as mentioned above, was literally drugged by Mrs. Fairfax to believe what she wanted the child to believe. The novel, thus, implies that not only are there always several sides to a story, but that one’s gender, social status, etc. does not determine one’s ability to speak their truth. In the case of the novel, Rochester stands for the patriarchy which sees itself as the ‘leaders’ of society and who have convinced themselves that they are always in the right and whoever is suppressed has done this to themselves. Adèle, in contrast, stands for the first feminists, who have, just like children, initially not been taken seriously, were then fought – just like Mrs. Fairfax tried to force Adèle to obey by gaslighting her – but, eventually, overcame those obstacles.

Wide Sargasso Sea, being the inspiration behind Rochester in *The French Dancer’s Bastard*, goes in the same direction when it comes to Rochester. While he is presented as a Byronic hero in *Jane Eyre* (see, for example, Thorslev: “[...] certainly the Brontë sisters’ Heathcliff and Rochester attest the continued appeal of this awesome hero [...]”, Thorslev [1962] 1965: 3), he is thoroughly unlikeable in both *The French Dancer’s Bastard* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The Byronic hero, which Thorslev links closely to the ‘Romantic hero’, as “the Byronic Hero shows the elements of every major type of Romantic hero” (Thorslev [1962] 1965: 4), is, in contrast, a character with faults and flaws, yet he is overall likeable: “He is almost invariably sympathetic in spite of his ‘crimes’, none of which involve unnecessary

cruelty, as do the crimes of the Gothic villain” (Thorslev [1962] 1965: 8). This shows that modern adaptations of *Jane Eyre* clearly distance themselves from Rochester as a ‘hero’ or overall good, sympathetic character and instead focus on his victims – his illegitimate, neglected daughter and his abused first wife. However, while *The French Dancer’s Bastard* does criticize the patriarchal feeling of superiority and the fact that the 19th century did not give a voice nor listened to people they saw as ‘less important’, such as women, servants, or children, the story remains superficial in criticizing society as a whole, but rather conveys a feeling of ‘having achieved one’s goal’ in the end, which implies that the fight for equality has not actually been that hard and is over now. *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in contrast, remains very critical of the 19th century and the treatment of women.

Wide Sargasso Sea tells the story of Antoinette before and right after her marriage to the Rochester-avatar⁴⁰ from both her and Rochester’s perspective to give an explanation where Bertha’s madness in *Jane Eyre* comes from. While, like *The French Dancer’s Bastard*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* does not portray Rochester in any way as the Byronic Hero he is in the original novel, the story also does not undermine the narrative of *Jane Eyre*, as Jane, who does not appear in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, does not see the side of Rochester that is being shown in the prequel, as well as she never met Antoinette, who has, after all, been driven into madness by the end of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in person. It rather gives voice to a woman who would not have been heard in the 19th century, as the word of a man counted much more than the word of a woman who was accused of being mad, and tries to give an explanation for Antoinette’s madness as well as show to what extreme the treatment of women in the 19th century could have gone and, therefore, why it must be insured that women are not treated like this any longer. The question that remains is why Charlotte Brontë included a character like Bertha in the first place. Elaine Showalter argues that it is possible that female writers of the 19th century included ‘mad’ women as an “unconscious form of feminist protest, the counterpart of the attack on patriarchal values carried out by the women’s movement of the time” (Showalter 1985: 5). However, she – rightly – goes on by explaining that one must

⁴⁰ In the novel, Antoinette’s husband is never actually named, and the reader can only assume that her husband is, in fact, Rochester from *Jane Eyre*. For reasons of simplicity, however, I will call the Rochester-avatar simply Rochester in the following.

be careful with such claims, as they “come dangerously close to romanticizing and endorsing madness as a desirable form of rebellion rather than seeing it as the desperate communication of the powerless” (*ibid.*). Nowak (1994), additionally, claims that the Gothic elements concerning Bertha very much appealed to the general public of the mid-19th century (Nowak 1994: 263), and that Jean Rhys was, among having other problems with *Jane Eyre*, unhappy with the implausible representation of Bertha and the fact that Rochester is, despite his obvious cruelty, portrayed as a likeable character (Nowak 1994: 268). *Wide Sargasso Sea*, therefore, distances itself from what might have been considered a ‘feminist protest’ in the 19th century, and rather raises the question where the madness of a woman that has been kept locked away for years might come from – and if Bertha’s/Antoinette’s downfall could have been prevented.

The novel starts in Antoinette’s childhood. Being the child of former slave owners and being her mother’s least favorite child after her mentally disabled brother Pierre, Antoinette is presented to be an outsider who barely has friends other than her mother’s former slave Christophine. To escape poverty after her father’s death and the abolition of slavery, Antoinette’s mother remarries Mr. Mason. The inequality between men and women already becomes obvious in those first pages of the novel. At a time where unmarried women were not allowed to even speak to a man without a married chaperone present and married women were bound to the domestic sphere, Antoinette’s stepfather questions the integrity of her aunt Cora and, out of his own dislike for a woman who, after her husband’s death, found her own way to escape misery without a man by her side (*Wide Sargasso Sea*: 12), tries to make her look bad in front of Antoinette and her family:

“Why did she do nothing to help you?” I told him that her husband was English and didn’t like us and he said, “Nonsense.” “It isn’t nonsense, they lived in England and he was angry if she wrote to us. He hated the West Indies. When he died not long ago she came home, before that what could she do? *She* wasn’t rich.” “That’s her story. I don’t believe it. A frivolous woman. In your mother’s place I’d resent her behaviour.” “None of you understand about us,” I thought. (*Wide Sargasso Sea*: 13)

Mr. Mason is presented to be a typical member of 19th century society. As a man, he thinks himself to be automatically right, whereas the word of a woman, who he, for the most part, believes unreasonable (*Wide Sargasso Sea*: 14), means little to nothing to him. For this reason, he also does not listen to Annette when she asks

him to leave their home, as she fears the hatred of the former slaves and what they could do to them, which, eventually, leads to Pierre dying in a fire set by the black people who have hated them for so long:

So it was all the more dreadful when she began to scream abuse at Mr Mason, calling him a fool, a cruel stupid fool. "I told you," she said, "I told you what would happen again and again." Her voice broke, but still she screamed, "You would not listen, you sneered at me, you grinning hypocrite, you ought not to live either, you know so much, don't you? Why don't you go out and ask them to let you go? Say how innocent you are. Say you have always trusted them." (*Wide Sargasso Sea*: 20)

Simone de Beauvoir's theory about the "feminine mystery", which means, as explained in 2.3.2, that some men would rather believe that mystical and supernatural things are happening than to admit that they do not understand women, also applies to Mr. Mason and his reaction to his wife's outburst after the fire and her son's death. Instead of trying to help her grief and slowly get over the loss of her son, he calls her mad and sends her away to live with a couple who torments her until she dies. This male inability to understand why a woman whose son has just died might not be rational and calm stems from the fact that, as Showalter explains, 19th-century-England saw 'madness' as something female; they even differentiated between 'English malady' and 'female malady'. English malady was said to be caused by intellectual and economic pressure, which, as its cause is something rational, concerned men. Female malady, in contrast, was said to be caused by sexuality and the essential nature of women, therefore only concerned women, and was seen as inexplicable other than being in the very nature of women (Showalter 1985: 7). The fact that Annette has to live through what the reader knows her daughter Antoinette will have to endure by the end of the novel as well stands for the suffering of women – being married off against their will, being disparaged if they acted differently to how society expected them to act, and being silenced – that has been going on for generations and will go on until the circle is finally broken.

While the focalization has only been on Antoinette during the first part of the novel, it switches between her and Rochester in the second part, which is set right after their marriage. Quite early on in his narrative, Rochester gives the reader a first reason why he did not trust his new wife. As a member of 19th century English society, he still believes in the tenets of physiognomy (as explained in section 2.1).

Interestingly, though, he complains about the opposite of what was believed to be trustworthy and beautiful: “She wore a tricorne hat which became her. At least it shadowed her eyes, which are too large and can be disconcerting” (*Wide Sargasso Sea*: 37). Tytler (2014), however, explains that it was believed that small eyes mean that a person is narrow-minded and uncouth, whereas big eyes, which were often given to female characters in literature, speak of the person’s good character (Tytler 2014: 211-212). This directly implies that, even for the time and society the story is set in, something must have been wrong with Rochester. This can also be seen in how he views their marriage. Even though Antoinette did not want to marry him and was basically forced to do so by her stepbrother Richard and Rochester himself (*Wide Sargasso Sea*: 45-46), he believes himself to be the victim of their marriage:

Everything is too much, I felt as I rode wearily after her. Too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hills too near. And the woman is a stranger. Her pleading expression annoys me. I have not bought her, she has bought me, or so she thinks. I looked down at the coarse mane of the horse ... Dear Father. The thirty thousand pounds have been paid to me without question or condition. No provision made for her (that must be seen to). I have a modest competence now. I will never be a disgrace to you or to my dear brother the son you love. No begging letters, no mean requests. None of the furtive shabby manoeuvres of a younger son. I have sold my soul or you have sold it, and after all is it such a bad bargain? The girl is thought to be beautiful, she is beautiful. And yet ... (*Wide Sargasso Sea*: 39)

What can clearly be seen in Rochester is that he is trying to blame the actual victim, Antoinette, for his feelings, his distress, and his subsequent physical and emotional violence against his own wife. According to Fast and Richardson (2019), there are three main reasons named by perpetrators for violence against women:

In the fields of violence against women and domestic violence, we see competing representations through ideas and theories that (a) present violence against women/mothers as an issue of misogyny; (b) present violence against female partners as a family or domestic problem; (c) present violence against women as linked to a problem or deficit within women and therefore blame and pathologize women. (Fast and Richardson 2019: 4)

They go on by explaining the reason why it is so easy to victim-blame: as the idea that there are two people needed for a loving, happy relationship is generally accepted, the same logic that not one, but both partners are to blame when one becomes violent, is applied to violence within that relationship (Fast and Richardson 2019: 14). *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a great example to show how this is not the case and that, despite Antoinette possessing flaws like any human being,

she is not to blame for Rochester's actions which have ultimately driven her into madness. The fact that even up to today women are still being blamed for the violence they experience, be it women being asked what they wore when they got raped or, as mentioned in the introduction on the example of the case of Sarah Everard, women being told they should not walk home alone at night if they did not want to be kidnapped and/or murdered, underlines the validity and importance of novels such as *Wide Sargasso Sea*: things have not changed as much as they should, or must, have since the 19th century, and there is still a lot to be done to achieve actual equality between the genders.

Rochester is presented to be unhappy with his own life, as he feels like he is forced to marry a rich girl because he is only the second-born son to his father, does not, therefore, inherit anything, and must somehow make his own way of living in this world. However, he cannot admit this 'weakness' of being unhappy with his life and having to rely on others for his own financial security to himself, let alone to other people, and must therefore find someone to blame for his unhappiness. Naturally, his source of blame becomes a woman. While in the beginning, he is merely irritated by her because she is different to the English women he is used to, his feelings towards Antoinette soon change towards hatred. This starts with the letter Rochester receives from Antoinette's alleged half-brother, Daniel Cosway, in which he claims that "there is madness in the family" (*Wide Sargasso Sea*: 58) and that Rochester has been "bewitched" by Antoinette (*Wide Sargasso Sea*: 59). He then goes on by telling Rochester about his wife's mother, however, without naming the reason for her "madness" – seeing her disabled son burn to death – but simply calling her a "raging lunatic and worse besides" (*Wide Sargasso Sea*: 60). Rochester's immediate reaction to this letter, which has, after all, been written by a complete stranger to him, is that he, without consulting his wife or anyone who has known her backstory, believes another man, even though he has never met or heard about him before: "I felt no surprise. It was as if I'd expected it, been waiting for it" (*ibid.*). As Antoinette's alleged madness is a suitable excuse for Rochester's own dissatisfaction with his life and his marriage, he uses every single of his wife's 'unusual' behaviors as proof of her madness. When she is mad that he did not stick up for her after her servant called her "white cockroach" and hit her (*Wide Sargasso Sea*: 61), he is convinced that there must be something wrong with her, as he could

not possibly explain her mood swings. He ignores her for days and then wonders why she could possibly be angry and frustrated:

At last I said, "Christophine, he does not love me, I think he hates me. He always sleeps in his dressing-room now and the servants know. If I get angry he is scornful and silent, sometimes he does not speak to me for hours and I cannot endure it any more, I cannot. What shall I do? He was not like that at first," I said. (*Wide Sargasso Sea*: 67)

He additionally tries to take away her identity by refusing to call her by her real name but calls her Bertha. His refusal to call her by her name, even though he knows how it makes her feel to be called Bertha ("it cannot be worse", *Wide Sargasso Sea*: 70 / "Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name. I know, that's obeah too.", *Wide Sargasso Sea*: 95) clearly shows that to Rochester, his wife is not a human being with feelings that must be respected, but she is a mere object that he can do with as he pleases. This also stands in contrast to the Regency Romances, namely *Regency Buck*, in which the refusal to call a woman by her name is described to be a playful teasing rather than emotional abuse (for example, Julian refuses to call Judith by her actual name and continues to call her Clorinda even when he proposes marriage, which is portrayed as being funny, playful, and romantic, *Regency Buck*: 306, see section 3.1.1) and shows how differently something can be portrayed based on the message one would like to bring across.

The relationship between Rochester and Antoinette is clearly a representation of how society viewed women in the 19th century and, to a degree, of how the male-female-relation continued to be up into the 20th century: on the one side, there were men who run the country, who were free to get an education or profession as they pleased – at least in the middle and upper classes –, and on the other side there were women who were bound to the household and whose only duty it was to obey their husbands and bear him children. Should she not do as she was expected to, she would be classified as a Fallen Woman and be ostracized from society. Interestingly, Rochester continuously pretends that Antoinette is a madwoman whose "hair hung uncombed and dull into her eyes which were inflamed and staring" (*Wide Sargasso Sea*: 94) and whose "face was very flushed and looked swollen" (*ibid.*), even though she tells him exactly how he and his actions – refusing to call her by her real name, ignoring her for days, not taking her

seriously, believing things a stranger tells him about her, and cheating on her with Amélie, the black servant who has insulted and hit her before – make her feel:

“If my father, my real father, was alive you wouldn’t come back here in a hurry after he’d finished with you. If he was alive. Do you know what you’ve done to me? It’s not the girl, not the girl. But I loved this place and you have made it into a place I hate. I used to think that if everything else went out of my life I would still have this, and now you have spoilt it. It’s just somewhere else where I have been unhappy, and all the other things are nothing to what has happened here. I hate it now like I hate you and before I die I will show you how much I hate you.” Then to my astonishment she stopped crying and said, “Is she so much prettier than I am? Don’t you love me at all?” “No, I do not,” I said (at the same time remembering Amélie saying, “Do you like my hair? Isn’t it prettier than hers?”). “Not at this moment,” I said. She laughed at that. A crazy laugh. (*Wide Sargasso Sea*: 95)

While, to the reader, it is made explicitly clear that Antoinette has not gone crazy, but is, indeed, incredibly lonely and unhappy in her marriage with Rochester, her emotional outburst is another indication for Rochester that his wife has gone mad. Additionally, and in stark contrast to how sex is described in Regency Romances, where, as discussed in section 3.1.2, both partners enjoy the intercourse and, by this, make the other respectively enjoy it even more, Antoinette’s desire for sexual attention and her consequent unhappiness when being deprived of it make it, once more, clear for Rochester that his wife must be ‘abnormal’:

She’ll loosen her black hair, and laugh and coax and flatter (a mad girl. She’ll not care who she’s loving.) She’ll moan and cry and give herself as no sane woman would – or could. *Or could*. Then lie so still, still as this cloudy day. A lunatic who always knows the time. But never does. (*Wide Sargasso Sea*: 107)

As mentioned in chapter 2, in the 19th century, a pure woman was not supposed to enjoy sexual intercourse with her husband (Tyson 2006: 90), which, to an 19th century audience, would explain Rochester’s behavior towards his wife. However, to a contemporary audience, Rochester hating his wife because she enjoys sleeping with him – when he was only interested in a physical kind of love to begin with – is clearly a sign not of her madness, but of his. This notion is underlined by the fact that only a page later, he is planning Antoinette’s downfall and life-imprisonment:

She’ll not laugh in the sun again. She’ll not dress up and smile at herself in that damnable looking-glass. So pleased, so satisfied. Vain, silly creature. Made for loving? Yes, but she’ll have no lover, for I don’t want her and she’ll see no other. (*Wide Sargasso Sea*: 108)

The question the novel asks the reader is particularly clear in this scene: who is really the mad one here, the woman who was forced into the marriage and only wants her husband's attention, or the man who actively and fully consciously plans to ruin her life because of his own dissatisfaction with his own life. Christophine, who functions as the voice of reason not just for Antoinette, but for every reader who is stuck in a toxic and abusive relationship, sees through his act of driving Antoinette insane. After telling Antoinette that she should pack her things and leave Rochester (*Wide Sargasso Sea*: 67-68) and learning that, according to 19th century English law, all the money a woman possessed belongs to her husband after they got married, she confronts Rochester about his abusive behavior ("I undress Antoinette so she can sleep cool and easy; it's then I see you very rough with her eh?", *Wide Sargasso Sea*: 97). It is only in this one encounter with Christophine that Rochester admits to himself that there is no madness in Antoinette that he fears, but he simply wants to drive her into insanity because he is unhappy with his own life:

"Your *wife*!" she said. "You make me laugh. I don't know all you did but I know some. Everybody know that you marry her for her money and you take it all. And then you want to break her up, because you jealous of her. She is more better than you, she have better blood in her and she don't care for money – it's nothing for her. Oh I see that first time I look at you. You young but already you hard. You fool the girl. You make her think you can't see the sun for looking at her." It was like that, I thought. It was like that. But better to say nothing. (*Wide Sargasso Sea*: 99)

When Christophine pleads for him letting Antoinette go and let her live a happy life with someone else who actually likes her, "a pang of rage and jealousy shot through me then" (*Wide Sargasso Sea*: 103). While he does not want his wife after he received the money he married her for, he also does not want anyone else to have her nor does he want her to be happy, which very clearly indicates that Rochester is a narcissist and sadomasochist. Rosegrant (2012) links the two – narcissism and sadomasochism – quite clearly. He explains: "People with narcissistic vulnerabilities frequently relate to other people sadomasochistically: They experience relationships in terms of who has power, and they try to dominate others, or submit to others, or both" (Rosegrant 2012: 935). As Rosegrant goes on explaining narcissistic vulnerabilities, it becomes particularly clear that Rochester is a prime example for narcissism:

Narcissistic vulnerabilities are vulnerabilities of the self, including problems with self-esteem regulation, problems with identity and self-definition, and problems with shifting between different self-states—different sets of sensations, feelings, and ideas. All of these problems of the self are at the same time experienced as problems in relating to other people: If my self-esteem is pathologically high or low, then I think I am not only exceedingly good (or bad), but also better (or worse) than other people. If I am not sure who I am, then I am not sure how I compare to other people. If I have trouble shifting between different self-states, then I have trouble fitting into different social contexts that call for different self-states. (*ibid.*)

Rochester married his wife because she was from a rich family and, as the second-born son who, as it is hinted, has not gotten any love from his father (*Wide Sargasso Sea*: 39), he somehow had to make his own way in this world financially. Being confronted with his new wife Antoinette, who initially starts up being happy in their new home, he feels jealous of her happiness and, consequently, must destroy it. Quite to the contrary, he never even makes an effort to overcome the, as Nowak calls it, ‘cultural shock’ between himself and his wife to get closer to one another and/or find some common ground, but he brutally asserts himself and takes everything Antoinette has, starting with her money and ending with her sanity and identity (Nowak 1994: 274-275). Again, this indicates that there has never been anything wrong with Antoinette to begin with, but clearly there has something been wrong with Rochester, but, as she is a woman and he is a man, he easily gets away with it. However, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is not only about the individual story of fictional Antoinette Cosway, but the last words the reader hears from Rochester in the novel confirm that it is, indeed, a story about all the women who have been, and continue to be, treated badly, accused wrongly of being mad just because they are themselves, and who have no voice to tell their stories, as no one listens to a ‘madwoman’:

Very soon she’ll join all the others who know the secret and will not tell it. Or cannot. Or try and fail because they do not know enough. They can be recognized. White faces, dazed eyes, aimless gestures, high-pitched laughter. The way they walk and talk and scream or try to kill “themselves or you” if you laugh back at them. Yes, they’ve got to be watched. For the time comes when they try to kill, then disappear. But others are waiting to take their places, it’s a long, long line. She’s one of them. I too can wait – for the day when she is only a memory to be avoided, locked away, and like all memories a legend. Or a lie ... (*Wide Sargasso Sea*: 113)

It is, however, important to note that the novel does not only talk about mistreated women like Antoinette, but also portrays women who have been able to emancipate themselves from a dependence on men: Cora, Amélie, and Christophine, who, as

Nowak puts it, form a counterpart to the strict Victorian England and its relationships of dependency (Nowak 1994: 276). Even though some critics, like Laura Niesen de Abruña (1988), claim that Jean Rhys's heroines are "uncooperatively anti-feminist" as they "dislike and fear other women, while hoping for love and security from men" (Niesen de Abruña 1988: 326), and Jean Rhys herself distanced herself from "feminist usurpations" of her works (Ganner 1983: 61-62), I would claim that the novel is, in fact, a feminist one. The novel operates in two steps here. On the one hand, it strongly criticizes the 19th century and its perception and treatment of women (for example, denying women feelings in a marriage of convenience in which they are dependent on a man). A very important part of that is the "female malady" Elaine Showalter has worked up, as well as what Simone de Beauvoir calls the "feminine mystery": madness in women was perceived as something illogical and irrational. Therefore, it was not considered necessary to look for possible reasons other than madness being in the nature of women. Additionally, Foucault ([1965] 1988) explains that being confined to a psychiatric institution for madness does not actually make sense: "[...] by a paradoxical circle, madness finally appears as the only reason for a confinement whose profound unreason it symbolizes. [...] First, confinement causes alienation." (Foucault [1965] 1988: 227). Considering that, as Showalter explains, the 19th century created a term for the 'natural madness' of women (female malady, Showalter 1985: 7) and that in the mid-19th century more women than men were committed into asylums (Showalter 1985: 52), the absurdity of the situation becomes clear. Women were generally assumed to have a certain madness because of their gender; every emotion could therefore be seen as a sign of this 'madness'. They were then, like Antoinette in the novel, locked away; this imprisonment (and the loneliness that came with it) then contributed further to the 'madness' until the woman finally became truly insane. *Wide Sargasso Sea* clearly condemns this perception by both showing that irrational madness is not solely reserved for women and that there usually is a reason for a person's madness – even for Rochester one could argue that the reason for his treatment of Antoinette is his loveless childhood and his strict and cold upbringing. On the other hand, the novel shows women who have managed to emancipate themselves from men and do not suffer like Antoinette does, which is a very direct message of feminism. Consequently, I would therefore claim that *Wide Sargasso Sea* conveys a feminist

message – even though Jean Rhys only wanted to write about Bertha Mason specifically and not about other (Creole) women (“It is that particular mad Creole I want to write about, not any of the other mad Creoles”, Wyndham and Melly 1984: 153). This means that, even if it was not her intention, she has given voice to women who did not have one in the 19th century and who have been suppressed and mistreated due to the misconception of the female psyche; the novel also shows that there is an alternative and that a woman does not have to give herself up to a man to be happy.

The ambiguous criticism of the 19th century in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, thus, towers over *The French Dancer's Bastard*. While both novels criticize that marginalized voices were ignored in the 19th century and women like Adèle or Antoinette would not have been listened to and, consequently, would not have received a fair treatment, this is where the similarities stop. *The French Dancer's Bastard* remains rather trivial, claiming that the aforementioned treatment of women was bad, but that feminism has changed that and, thus, things have changed for the better. Assuming that Gilbert and Gubar are right and Adèle has, as quoted earlier, originally been introduced as a ‘bad character’ in *Jane Eyre*, the novel has given her a voice to ‘redeem’ the character, but it has failed to acknowledge that the fight for an equal and fair treatment neither has been nor is as easy as the novel makes it out to be. Instead, it claims that, just as Adèle has grown up to be an independent and strong woman, feminism has reached its goal as well. *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in contrast, shows how women were mistreated in the 19th century due to beliefs that seem strange from a 20th and 21st century point of view, and shows that it is possible to break the cycle and find happiness outside of (Western) society standards. It also offers more depths into what has caused the ‘madness’ in each character, and how absurd it is to talk about a ‘natural madness’ in women while claiming that madness in men is naturally rational. To put it simple, the difference between the two responses to *Jane Eyre* is that *The French Dancer's Bastard* asks why certain marginalized groups were not allowed a voice, and *Wide Sargasso Sea* asks why society is expected to sympathize with a man who is clearly the perpetrator simply because he says so and despite the fact that the victim's side has not even been heard. While both novels can, therefore, be seen as a feminist response to what would have been considered a feminist novel in the 19th century,

what can be seen is that the layer as well as the nature of criticism differs: in a figurative sense, *The French Dancer's Bastard* criticizes that history might not be presented correctly because certain groups were not allowed a voice, but claims that this has changed; *Wide Sargasso Sea* claims that history is not presented correctly because society has decided that men are more trustworthy than women, and we therefore do not have to listen to women at all; however, the possibility for change is there.

3.2.2 Hypocrisy in the 19th Century – Saki's *When William Came* and John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

As it has been mentioned – as well as quoted – before, a big part of neo-Victorian criticism is the highlighting of the hypocrisy of the 19th century:

What are we faced with in the nineteenth century? An age where woman was sacred; and where you could buy a thirteen-year-old girl for a few pounds – a few shillings, if you wanted her for only an hour or two. Where more churches were built than in the whole previous history of the country; and where one in sixty houses in London was a brothel (the modern ratio would be nearer one in six thousand). Where the sanctity of marriage (and chastity before marriage) was proclaimed from every pulpit, in every newspaper editorial and public utterance; and where never – or hardly ever – have so many great public figures, from the future king down, led scandalous private lives. (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*: 268-269)

While John Fowles is famously quoted for exposing the Victorian era, authors like Hector Hugh Munro, known under his penname Saki, did so earlier on in the 20th century – however, he approached his criticism of the Victorian era by using humor and showing the absurdity of what might be if society kept going the way it was. Although Saki's works are technically not part of neo-Victorian literature, as he was actually a famous satirist and short story writer of the Edwardian era, he is nevertheless an interesting addition to the purposes of this thesis. This is because Saki, born in 1870, was raised in England by his grandmother and aunts from 1872 onwards (Byrne 2007: 3), experienced the New Woman movement firsthand, and, as a satirist, made fun of the (late) Victorian society. This section will therefore compare how the woman question has been dealt with in the beginning of the 20th century in comparison to the middle of the 20th century and how the 19th century has been viewed at both points of time.

Saki's *When William Came* has originally been published in 1913 and talks about the dystopia of Great Britain losing a war against Germany and being annexed to the German Empire. While the novel has been intended to ridicule British society and criticize their laziness, as well as it has been understood as a call for young men to prepare for war, one can very clearly see that the woman question is present in the novel as well. Cicely and Murrey Yeovil, a married English couple, have a very different approach towards the new German ruler. While Murrey is mourning the loss of the English empire, is appalled by all the changes the Germans have brought, and is clearly angry with all the men who accept the situation and the German emperor as their new head of state ("It is one thing to face the music, it is another thing to dance to it," said Yeovil", *When William Came*: 714), Cicely has accepted the situation as it is:

"It is just at a moment like the present that the people want something to interest them and take them out of themselves," said Cicely argumentatively; "what has happened, has happened, and we can't undo it or escape the consequences. What we can do, or attempt to do, is to make things less dreary, and make people less unhappy." (*When William Came*: 723)

While the intention of this is to show that it takes 'real men' to defend the country from outside intrusion, not women or 'weak' men who bend every way the wind is blowing, it is also made clear that it has been easier for women to adjust to the new situation because they have had to deal with suppression for all their lives. The women, shown on the example of Gorla Mustelford, who is now allowed to put up a dance show, even have more freedoms than they did under British rule:

"[...] if Gorla thinks that the necessities of art, or her own inclinations, demand that she should dance in public, why can't she do it in Paris or even Vienna? Anywhere would be better, one would think, than in London under present conditions." [...] "Or course the industrial life of the country has to go on," said Yeovil; "no one could criticize Gorla if she interested herself in organizing cottage industries or anything of that sort, in which she would be helping her own people. That one could understand, but I don't think a cosmopolitan concern like the music-hall business calls for personal sacrifices from young women of good family at a moment like the present." (*When William Came*: 722-723)

While the Germans allow women like Gorla to do what they want, British society was trying to hold them back and really only wanted to let them do something if it was valuable to society from a male perspective. The female adjustment to the new system is therefore quite understandable and explainable. In contrast to that, however, men like Murrey Yeovil have a very hard time to accept the new ruler and

adjust to the new situation. As British men of the middle and upper classes have never been oppressed, they are now so much more opposed to changes (as, for example, not being allowed to walk on grass in the park, *When William Came*: 716-718). Kaufman (1980) calls this ambivalence between the female and male perception of oppression, which is expressed in the fact that women enjoy more freedom while men are bothered by things that are, objectively speaking, unimportant, ‘feminist humor’ and differentiates it from “female humor”:

Feminist humor is based on the perception that societies have generally been organized as systems of oppression and exploitation, and that the largest (but not the only) oppressed group has been the female. It is also based on conviction that such oppression is undesirable and unnecessary. It is a humor based on visions of change. The persistent attitude that underlies feminist humor is the attitude of social revolution – that is, we are ridiculing a social system that can be, that must be changed. *Female* humor may ridicule a person or a system from an accepting point of view (“that’s life”), while the *nonacceptance* of oppression characterizes feminist humor and satire. (Kaufman 1980: 13)

Saki – intentionally or unintentionally – clearly uses feminist humor on a large scale and female humor on a small scale. The female humor is initially expressed in the fact that the female character simply accepts the changes the Germans brought and claims that the people need to bear them, whereas the male character sees his whole world shattering:

“Supposing they are not bearable?” said Yeovil; “during the few days that I’ve been in the land I’ve seen things that I cannot imagine will ever be bearable.” “That is because they’re new to you,” said Cicely. “I don’t wish that they should ever come to seem bearable,” retorted Yeovil. “I’ve been bred and reared as a unit of a ruling race; I don’t want to find myself settling down resignedly as a member of an enslaved one.” (*When William Came*: 731)

While women, being used to oppression, just do not seem to care too much who is on the throne, as they are used to others determining their lives, men like Yeovil think themselves to be slaves now, despite all the freedoms they still have. This clear distinction between the male and female reaction towards being occupied by a foreign empire can therefore be understood as criticism of late 19th century and early 20th century society. By trying to hold on to the ‘old ways’, in this case by trying to keep binding women to the domestic spheres and denying them the right of personal freedom, society automatically makes them prone to foreign charms and attractions and less so for keeping the status quo. However, while on the one hand it is implied and understood by the male characters of the novel that women are

weaker than ‘real’ men and therefore simply accept the German occupation because they are not strong enough to rebel against their oppressors, it is, on the other hand, made clear that women are more intelligent than men. This seemingly paradoxical portrayal is, however, inherently ambivalent, as it first invokes the negative stereotype, trivializes it, and then extends the ambivalence of the joke by explaining that such an intellectual discrepancy would not only apply to English women, but to their German counterparts as well – thus, things would not change if ‘William’ actually came:

Herr von Kwarl, with all his useful qualities of brain and temperament, might conceivably fall out of favour in some unexpected turn of the political wheel, and the Shalems would probably have their little day and then a long afternoon of diminishing social importance; the placid dormouse-like Gräfin would outlast them all. She had the qualities which make either for contented mediocrity or else for very durable success, according as circumstances may dictate. She was one of those characters that can neither thrust themselves to the front, nor have any wish to do so, but being there, no ordinary power can thrust them away. (*When William Came*: 750-751)

It is made quite obvious that neither ‘strong’ men, like Herr von Kwarl, nor people who are actively pushing their agenda to reach their goals, like the Shalems, will get very far in society. In contrast, a woman like Gräfin von Tolb, who is not “running after the patronage of influential personages” (*When William Came*: 750), will make it to the top of society.

The same can be seen for Cicely. To the outward, Cicely seems to have accepted the German occupation and tries to make the best of the situation. In the inward, however, this is different: “In her heart she detested the German occupation as a hateful necessity, but while her heart registered the hatefulness the brain recognized the necessity” (*When William Came*: 751). However, in contrast to her husband, who openly asks for revolution to get rid of the Germans, she understands that, at this moment, the occupant is too strong for the English: “The great fighting-machines that the Germans had built up and maintained, on land, on sea, and in air, were three solid crushing facts that demonstrated the hopelessness of any immediate thought of revolt” (*ibid.*). Therefore, she has formed a plan in silence:

Twenty years hence, when the present generation was older and greyer, the chances of armed revolt would probably be equally hopeless, equally remote-seeming. But in the meantime something could have been effected in another way. The conquerors might partially Germanize London, but, on the other hand, if the thing were skilfully managed, the British element within the Empire might impress the mark of its influence on everything German. The fighting men might remain Prussian or Bavarian, but the thinking men, and eventually the ruling men, could gradually come under British influence, or even British blood. An English Liberal-Conservative "Centre" might stand as a bulwark against the Junkerdom and Socialism of Continental Germany. (*ibid.*)

While on the one hand, this can be understood as criticism towards the suffragettes, who actively and loudly pushed for equal rights for women, for example the right to vote, in the beginning of the 20th century, it can also be understood as criticism towards men, who only talk about making a change to better things, but, considering the protests and strikes happening at the time of the writing of the novel, obviously did not do so. This point is underlined by Lady Greymarten when she talks about the occupation with Murrey Yeovil. While she herself is too old to fight the Germans, she asks Yeovil to do so, to which he answers: "As to fighting, one must first find out what weapon to use, and how to use it effectively. One must wait and watch" (*When William Came*: 775). To this, Lady Greymarten gives following opinion and plants her ideas and plans into Yeovil's mind:

"[...] If I had your youth, Murrey, and your sex, I would become a commercial traveller." "A commercial traveller!" exclaimed Yeovil. "Yes, one whose business took him up and down the country, into contact with all classes, into homes and shops and inns and railway carriages. And as I travelled I would work, work on the minds of every boy and girl I came across, every young father and young mother too, every young couple that were going to be man and wife. I would awaken or keep alive in their memory the things that we have been, the grand, brave things that some of our race have done, and I would stir up a longing, a determination for the future that we must win back. I would be a counter-agent to the agents of the *fait accompli*. [...]" (*ibid.*)

This clearly backs the notion that, while women form ideas and plans to get what they want, men of the late Victorian/early Edwardian era are more about talking than taking action and, therefore, actually form the weaker part of society. Another indicator for this claim is that the novel can entirely do without any form of male gaze, meaning the sexualization or objectification of female characters, while, instead, presenting their minds rather than their bodies. Hence, the novel also criticizes how lazy society as a whole (and especially men) have become, as they simply want to preserve the status quo under any circumstances in order not to lose

their comfort instead of going forward into a new modern era and achieve greatness as a whole:

Most people that she knew took endless pains and precautions to preserve and prolong their lives and keep their powers of enjoyment unimpaired; few, very few, seemed to make any intelligent effort at understanding what they really wanted in the way of enjoying their lives, or to ascertain what the best means for satisfying those wants. Fewer still bent their whole energies to the one paramount aim of getting what they wanted in the fullest possible measure. (*When William Came*: 692)

It is therefore telling that it is a woman who is calling out the “silliness” (*When William Came*: 695) in English society as they, despite everything that has happened to them, still would not accept that a woman like Gorla, who is from a “good and respectable family”, is doing what she wants and puts up a dancing show. The portrayal of the female characters and their scheming to get rid of the Germans, therefore, shows that the novel as a whole is written as a feminist humor. This is underlined by the fact that the male characters still see themselves as figures of authority, yet they are not able nor willing to change anything about the situation they detest. The female characters, in contrast, have become aware of the physical and intellectual limitations of the male characters and demonstrate an attitude of nonacceptance, which Kaufman, as quoted, defines as feminist humor. Figuratively speaking, the transformation from female to feminist humor in the novel can be seen as equivalent to feminism: initially, women accepted their role because they had no other choice. They saw men as their oppressors, but they did not have the power to change things. Once they realized that there is a way to change things, however, the ‘female’ turned into the ‘feminist’. Kaufman, therefore, calls female humor the “humor of hopelessness” and feminist humor the “humor of hope” (Kaufman 1980: 13-14).

The aforementioned refusal to change anything within society and the reluctance to those changes brought by the Germans, including the hypocrisy that it brings with it, can also be seen in Lady and Lord Shalem. The narrator describes them to be social climbers who only got their title due to the efforts of Lady Shalem. Once the Germans conquered Great Britain, the Lord and Lady were amongst the first to pledge allegiance to the German emperor. Even though it is said that “the world of tradesmen and purveyors and caterers, and the thousands who were dependent on them for employment, privately blessed the example set by Shalem

House [...]” (*When William Came*: 739), it is made clear that society (still) does not accept them as one of their own because of where they came from and what they are doing (*When William Came*: 738-739). Additionally, they look at Cicely with “distrust and suspicion” (*When William Came*: 755) as well, as she spends time with the Shalems. A young cleric, talking to Yeovil, gives an explanation for the reluctance towards the Shalems, Cicely, and everyone else who does not openly oppose the occupation:

They look round for some one to blame for what has happened; they blame the politicians, they blame the leisured classes; in an indirect way I believe they blame the Church. Certainly, the national disaster has not drawn them towards religion in any form. One thing you may be sure of, they do not blame themselves. (*When William Came*: 759)

As it has been explained previously, and as it is shown in, for example, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the far easier solution to a problem than to admit that one has done something wrong is to blame someone they believe weaker than themselves, which mostly have been and still to this day are women and social classes one believes lower than one’s own. However, the novel ends on a more hopeful note. Even though the older generation, meaning late Victorian society, has accepted their fate of being occupied by the Germans and is not willing to start a revolution, including Yeovil, who, despite his hatred for the situation and all his talking about fighting, has “cooled down” (*When William Came*: 807), the younger generation is not so easy to bring under control. This can be seen in the last scene of the novel, when British Scout Boys were supposed to play at the German emperor’s triumphal march, but they simply did not show up: “[...] in thousands of English homes throughout the land there were young hearts that had not forgotten, had not compounded, would not yield. The younger generation had barred the door” (*When William Came*: 813). This implies that, while members of the late Victorian era have become lazy and unwilling to change things for the sake of society as a whole, there is hope for change in the new century. While the main focus of the novel has been to motivate society to prepare for war and to defend England against any outlandish intrusion, it can, as explained, also be seen as a warning to the challenges of society within: clearly, Saki understood that the world was changing, as women all around the globe fought for equal rights and freedom, and by trying to oppress those female efforts, society would only create an enemy within. The novel,

therefore, clearly recreates Victorian society and depicts it negatively on the one hand, while showing that the new era and the 20th century are giving a voice to groups, such as women or the youth, that had been oppressed by the Victorian. Giving a voice to marginalized groups of the Victorian period is, as discussed earlier, a factor of neo-Victorian literature, which is why Saki's literature was included in this section.

John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, which has been published 56 years after *When William Came* in 1969, also satires the Victorian period. While Saki calls out the laziness and the unwillingness to change anything in Victorian society, which will, ultimately, lead to the downfall of society, Fowles criticizes the hypocrisy.⁴¹ As quoted several times earlier in this study, women were expected to be an 'Angel in the House' and had to follow strict rules, such as, while they were still unmarried, not even being allowed to talk to a man without a chaperone present in order to not be shunned, while on the other hand men were able to buy literal children to have sex with. This two-sided approach to sexual intercourse – on the one hand, prostitution was not illegal and until 1875, the age of consent was twelve, until 1885 it was thirteen, and after 1885 it was sixteen (Leighton 1989: 110), on the other hand women were ostracized from society if they had sex before marriage – can be seen in Mrs Poulteney, who functions as a stereotypical member of Victorian society in the novel. For her, premarital sex is even worse than cannibalism:

Gipsies were not English; and therefore almost certain to be cannibals. But the most serious accusation against Ware Commons had to do with fare worse infamy: though it never bore that familiar rural name, the cart-track to the Dairy and beyond to the wooded common was a *de facto* Lover's Lane. It drew courting couples every summer. (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*: 90)

As Pearsall explains, the 19th century middle class obsession with morality stems from the fact that they "modeled their behavior and thought processes on those of the upper classes, or what they thought was the behavior and thought processes of the upper classes" (Pearsall [1969] 2003: xi). The problem with this, however, was the hypocrisy of the Victorian period that Fowles also profoundly points out, as "the

⁴¹ As quoted before, Ronald Pearsall wrote a whole book on the hypocrisy of the Victorian period with *The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality* (1969).

upper classes did not give a damn about conventional morality, and pursued their libidinous pleasures with a gusto only tempered by occasional panic” (*ibid.*).

While premarital sex is seen to be ‘far worse’ than cannibalism – which, one could argue, might be due to the propaganda spread in the 19th century that everything that is not English is barbaric, wild, and savage, and that the bad things that happen in those ‘barbaric’ countries could never happen in England as long as everyone sticks to the moral code – even sex within a marriage is not something that is to be enjoyed:

She had once or twice seen animals couple; the violence haunted her mind. Thus she had evolved a kind of private commandment – those inaudible words were simply ‘I must not’ – whenever the physical female implications of her body, sexual, menstrual, parturitional, tried to force an entry into her consciousness. But though one may keep the wolves from one’s door, they still howl out there in the darkness. Ernestina wanted a husband, wanted Charles to be that husband, wanted children; but the payment she vaguely divined she would have to make for them seemed excessive. She sometimes wondered why God had permitted such a bestial version of Duty to spoil such an innocent longing. Most women of her period felt the same; so did most men; and it is no wonder that duty has become such a key concept in our understanding of the Victorian age – or for that matter, such a wet blanket in our own. (*The French Lieutenant’s Woman*: 30)

In this scenario, the difference between neo-Victorian literature and Regency Romances become particularly obvious. While, as discussed in section 3.1, Regency Romances romanticize the 19th century and the Regency period, and, especially in modern Regency Romances, both the female and the male characters enjoy sleeping with their love interest and, at the end of the day, do it because they are having fun doing it, having sex is portrayed as the complete opposite in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*: The only purpose of sex is to reproduce and have children, but, as the moral code dictated especially women to be pure and chaste, it was not something to be enjoyed. On this subject, the hypocrisy of Victorian society can very clearly be seen.

In Ernestina, the hypocrisy is shown as she, despite her Christian morals she presents to the outward world, has no compassion for Sarah. While she does introduce her to Charles as “poor Tragedy” (*The French Lieutenant’s Woman*: 9), she does not feel real pity for her, but rather calls her “a little mad” (*ibid.*) as she “waits for him [the French Lieutenant] to return” (*ibid.*). This shows that Ernestina, and, respectively, society as a whole, know that the French Lieutenant has done

Sarah wrong, as he promised her he would return to marry her and then never did, but they reverse the roles and ostracize the actual victim of the situation from society while putting barely any blame on the man. This shows clearly that, from a 1960s point of view, the goal of Victorian society has not been to uphold a moral standard, but to put women into their place while men were free to go to casinos and brothels as they pleased (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*: 304).

The point Fowles made in the late 1960s is that in the Victorian period, society has oppressed women under the pretext of maintaining the morality of the country. While one would expect society to have changed drastically in the more than 50 years since this criticism was voiced by John Fowles, a similar pattern with an ostensible reason to oppress women can still be seen in the 21st century in other English-speaking, Western societies. Exemplarily for this are the abortion laws in the United States of America, for example in Texas. As of September 2021, women in Texas cannot have an abortion after six weeks of pregnancy – even though most women do not even know that they are pregnant at six weeks yet –, with no exception for rape or incest.⁴² Simultaneously, data shows that in Texas, investigations of rape only lead to arrests in 13.4% of all cases.⁴³ This clearly shows that in Texas, officials are more concerned with marginalizing women than punishing the men who have assaulted and raped women. While those abortion laws have been introduced to ‘save lives’, as ‘all lives are sacred’, it is interesting to see that in the midst of the COVID-19-pandemic, Texas has lifted the mask mandate in March 2021, as “no person may be required by any jurisdiction to wear or to mandate the wearing of a face covering”.⁴⁴ Comparing these two 2021-laws of the state of Texas, one can clearly see the bias: on the one hand, it is completely fine to force women to carry a child they might not want or might not have the means to care for, and to go through the trauma of giving birth to a child under the fig-leaf of “saving lives”, while, on the other hand, it is not ok to ask people, including men, to wear a piece of cloth over their mouth and nose to stop a deadly virus from

⁴² See: <https://legiscan.com/TX/text/SB8/id/2395961>, no author, accessed March 22, 2025.

⁴³ See: <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/crime-courts/backers-texas-law-restricts-abortion-after-rape-say-just-arrest-n1282306>, Laura Strickler, accessed March 22, 2025.

⁴⁴ See: <https://open.texas.gov/uploads/files/organization/opentexas/EO-GA-34-opening-Texas-response-to-COVID-disaster-IMAGE-03-02-2021.pdf>, Greg Abbott, Governor of Texas, accessed March 22, 2025.

spreading. This clearly shows that it is very much not about saving lives, but about oppressing women.

Coming back to *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and the second character that stands exemplary for Victorian society, Mrs Poulteney, the hypocrisy becomes especially obvious in her. While she wants to appear like a good Christian lady, it is revealed that there is a hidden agenda in everything she is doing. When she decides to “provide a home for such a person [Sarah]” (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*: 25), she does so not because she is a good person and feels bad for Sarah, which she really does not, but because she, firstly, thinks it would be good for her reputation to be known as “dear, kind Mrs Poulteney [who has] taken in the French Lieutenant's Woman” (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*: 21), and, secondly, because she thinks it would gain her God's favor and would, therefore, be good for her eternal life: “As she lay in her bedroom she reflected on the terrible mathematical doubt that increasingly haunted her: whether the Lord calculated charity by what one had given or by what one could have afforded to give” (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*: 22). This can be understood not only as criticism of Victorian society, but of religious people in general: on the one hand, they act very God-fearing and Christian and judge people who choose to or cannot live up to their expectations, on the other hand, however, they do not possess the altruism they preach, as they do not care about other people but only themselves. To make his criticism of Victorian society and the hypocrisy of it clear, the heterodiegetic narrator, who makes it known that the story he is telling is solely fictional and not real (e.g. pp. 55, 96/97, and, most directly, p. 95: “This story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my own mind”), later on provides more insight in Mrs Poulteney, claiming that she was an “opium-addict” (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*: 92) and that her hatred for Sarah and everything ‘abnormal’, like having and/or enjoying sex, stems from her own deep-rooted desires:

I cannot imagine what Bosch-like picture of Ware Commons Mrs Poulteney had built up over the years; what satanic orgies she divined behind every tree, what French abominations under every leaf. But I think we may safely say that it had become the objective correlative of all that went on in her own subconscious. (*ibid.*)

While there is obvious hatred towards Sarah and her actions from most of the other female characters, which is both due to deep-rooted jealousy as well as a simple lack of compassion and, at the end of the day, outrage over Sarah's 'immoral' behavior, she receives not so much hatred, but rather ridicule from the male characters. While the female characters are simply appalled by Sarah's supposed actions themselves, namely sleeping with a man without being married to him, the male characters are trying to find a way to free the French lieutenant from all fault and put the blame entirely on Sarah. The vicar, for example, claims that "she [Sarah] should have known better" (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*: 34), and the doctor talks about Sarah's "deranged mind" (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*: 225), as "no one of foresight could have behaved as she has" (*ibid.*), and claims that "I think I know why that French sailor ran away. He knew she had eyes a man could drown in" (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*: 226). Especially in the doctor, one can see the male urge of the 19th century to rid themselves of any blame – keeping in mind that, according to Nead (1988), Victorian society believed that the moral condition of the nation derives solely from the moral standards of women (Nead 1988: 92) – and instead put it all on women. He not only frees the French lieutenant from any blame by indicating that Sarah is a witch and the French sailor was lucky to get away from her in time, he also calls men who visit brothels "victims" of the prostitutes (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*: 225) and convinces Charles that it is not natural chemistry or mutual attraction that makes him fall in love with Sarah, but that Charles is rather a "man possessed against his will" (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*: 227), again indicating that Sarah is a witch. This exchange with Grogan brings Charles to agree to do "anything to be rid of her – without harm to her" (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*: 228). A similar approach is also described earlier on in the novel and shows the attitude of society towards men and women having premarital sex: "The boy must thenceforth be a satyr; and the girl, a hedge-prostitute" (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*: 90). While a prostitute is, obviously, something very real that every member of society can grasp, a woman is therefore automatically branded as a Fallen Woman. A satyr, in contrast, is a creature from Greek mythology that, though known for its animalistic appearance and its lechery, but also for its love for dancing, music, and wine, is, firstly, not connoted as negatively as a prostitute, and, secondly, is not as likely to be graspable by the whole of society. This shows that, while men and women had a different approach towards

‘immorality’, namely that women were appalled by the action itself whereas men were concerned with the light a certain action would throw on a fellow man, the outcome of the situation is the same. Again, the metaphor of a Fallen Woman being like a virus that threatens the whole of society as discussed in section 2.2 becomes obvious: both want to get rid of the ‘blain’ – the Fallen Woman – before the ‘disease’ – unmoral behavior – can spread.

Sarah, however, though she is obviously hurt by the French lieutenant’s actions and society’s rejection of her person, has found a way to use this position as an outsider for her own benefit. Claiming that she is “a doubly dishonoured woman. By circumstances. And by choice” (*The French Lieutenant’s Woman*: 175), Sarah also declares that being ostracized from society has actually set her free:

[...] I did it so that I should never be the same again. I did it so that people *should* point at me, *should* say, there walks the French Lieutenant’s Whore – oh yes, let the word be said. So that they should know I have suffered, and suffer, as others suffer in every town and village in this land. I could not marry that man. So I married shame. I do not mean that I knew what I did, that it was in cold blood that I let Varguennes have his will of me. It seemed to me then as if I threw myself off a precipice or plunged a knife into my heart. It was a kind of suicide. [...] What has kept me alive is my shame, my knowing that I am truly not like other women. [...] Sometimes I almost pity them. I think I have a freedom they cannot understand. No insult, no blame, can touch me. Because I have set myself beyond the pale. I am nothing, I am hardly human any more. I am the French Lieutenant’s Whore. (*The French Lieutenant’s Woman*: 175-176)

According to Özdemir (2024), a new ‘form’ of feminism emerged in the 1960s from an interplay between postmodernism and second-wave feminism: postmodern feminism, which, she explains, “aims to subvert the patriarchal image of the self, drawing on post-structuralism’s deconstruction which helps women create a new self for themselves” (Özdemir 2024: 906). She goes on by calling Sarah a postmodern feminist, as she “deliberately chooses to be hysteric and mad to deconstruct the patriarchal conception and construction of femininity. The novel’s heroine uses madness against itself to challenge the patriarchal representation of the female identity” (*ibid.*). As quoted earlier, Showalter also argued that female writers of the 19th century might have included ‘mad’ women as a feminist protest to the patriarchal values of society yet criticized this concept as “romanticizing and endorsing madness” rather than emancipating women (Showalter 1985: 5). In *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, one can see what Showalter means by “romanticizing and endorsing”, as the novel, despite its claim that it is purely fictional, claims that

freedom is achieved by renouncing all socio-cultural norms – and that life becomes easier as a result. However, in the context of what Özdemir explains as postmodern feminism, in which women create a new self for themselves, one can also argue that Sarah is definitely a postmodern feminist.

Sarah clearly challenges the patriarchal norms of the society she lives in after she has been ostracized: By declaring her freedom, Sarah takes on a male privilege, and, as she is already an outsider to society and does not plan on ever going back to the position that has been assigned to women, there does not seem to be anything anyone could do to take this privilege away from her. Charles even acknowledges that “there *was* something male about her there” (*The French Lieutenant’s Woman*: 181), while at the same time he “felt himself an old woman; and did not like the feeling” (*ibid.*). This change of gender roles can also be seen in the fact that Sarah reverses her own misery into something positive and, while it would be expected that she has nowhere to go and entirely relies on the pity and good-will of others, knows that she can go where she wants and do as she pleases, whereas Charles, who used to travel a lot and who is, in the eyes of society, free to do what he wants, finds himself in a position where he knows he wants to do something, like “sailing once again through the Tyrrhenian; or riding, arid scents in his nostrils, towards the distant walls of Avila; or approaching some Greek temple in the blazing Aegean sunshine” (*The French Lieutenant’s Woman*: 178), but no longer possesses the freedom to do so. According to Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), an ‘inexplicable’ sadness and listlessness is something (American) women of all social classes in the 1950s experienced because they felt unfulfilled, yet would not admit to that because of the picture of femininity society has put out for them:

I have heard so many women try to deny this dissatisfied voice within themselves because it does not fit the pretty picture of femininity the experts have given them. I think, in fact, that this is the first clue to the mystery: the problem cannot be understood in the generally accepted terms by which scientists have studied women, doctors have treated them, counselors have advised them, and writers have written about them. Women who suffer this problem, in whom this voice is stirring, have lived their whole lives in the pursuit of feminine fulfillment. (Friedan 1963: 22)

I would claim that this is exactly what is happening to Charles after his and Sarah’s roles have been reversed. Sarah, having taken on a male role, is able to free herself

from this 'deadlocked structure' society has created, but Charles, who has taken on the female role, finds himself trapped in his own unhappiness – an experience that was and is attributed to women.

The reversed gender roles are also present in the different endings of the novel. While ending number one presents the reader a proper Victorian ending, in which everything is as it was supposed to be, it is made clear that this is not what one should hope for: "Charles and Ernestina did not live happily ever after; but they lived together, though Charles finally survived her by a decade (and earnestly mourned her throughout it)" (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*: 340). While Sarah does not appear again in Charles' lifetime (*ibid.*), it is, however, revealed that Mrs. Poulteney, being the most stereotypical character of the novel, is, despite her efforts, not granted a place in heaven after her death, but is going straight to hell (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*: 341). The second and third ending, however, are a lot more interesting. For the most part, they are the same, with Charles breaking up his engagement to Ernestina and him slowly, and with the punishment of Ernestina's family, turning into Sarah: "My father will drag your name, both your names, through the mire. You will be spurned and detested by all who know you." (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*: 386) / "He means you to remain a bachelor all your life" (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*: 418). While Charles turns more and more into Sarah, Sarah, in contrast, again takes on a male role and becomes more similar to the French Lieutenant, sleeping with Charles and then leaving him: "But what can her purpose have been? To give herself to me – and then to dismiss me as if I were nothing to her" (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*: 420). Their reunion two years later makes this transformation once more explicitly clear: While Sarah is wearing "the full uniform of the New Woman, flagrantly rejecting all formal contemporary notions of female fashion" (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*: 446) and declares that she has no interest in every getting married, as she is happy with who she is and where she is in life and does not want to change for anyone (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*: 453), Charles has fully turned into the original, melancholiac Sarah he has met in Lyme Regis, calling himself "a ghost, a shadow, a half-being" (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*: 452). At this point, the second and the third ending start to differ. Ending number two reveals that Sarah's daughter is also Charles' daughter (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*: 463) and leaves the

ending open. The reader is given the prospect of Sarah and Charles ending up together and becoming a ‘real’ family with their daughter, while it is also possible that Sarah stays single, as she previously stated that she has no intention of getting married, but Charles gets to spend time with his child. In the third ending, Charles does not find out that he has a daughter, but finally puts the whole story with Sarah behind him (*The French Lieutenant’s Woman*: 468). By this, he completes his transformation into Sarah, leaving the melancholy behind him and rediscovering his freedom: “He walks towards an imminent, self-given death? I think not; for he has at last found an atom of faith in himself, a true uniqueness, on which to build” (*The French Lieutenant’s Woman*: 470).

Because the story is told exclusively from a male perspective, as the narrator appears to be John Fowles himself, the only insight he gives into a character’s thoughts are the ones of Charles, and the reader never directly hears Sarah’s perspective on the situation, Magali Cornier Michael (1987) claims that “Sarah remains objectified and never becomes a subject in her own right” (Michael 1987: 228). This stands in clear contrast to Deborah Byrd (1984), who calls *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* “an almost ideal feminist fictional work” (Byrd 1984: 306). Özdemir, additionally, claims that “Sarah is a storyteller who creates an alternative storyworld and subverts masculine authority” (Özdemir 2024: 910), that “feminists connect madness with authorship and power” (Özdemir 2024: 911), and that “she [Sarah] creates an alternative language and universe for her freedom through redefining concepts” (*ibid.*). This would mean that an extradiegetic narrator – who appears to be Fowles himself – tells the (fictional) story of Charles, but not of Sarah; she rather writes her own story as an intradiegetic narrator, and thus, as Özdemir puts it, subverts the metanarratives that have been framed around her (*ibid.*). This assumption refutes Michael’s claim that Sarah never becomes a subject in her own right and contributes to the view that *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* is a feminist work. Additionally, Fowles called himself a feminist in one of the last interviews he gave to Adam Lee-Potter in 2003 in *The Guardian*: “I am a feminist. Men need to realise that a great deal of truth in life lies in the woman. A woman’s main task is to educate us, to make us see we’re not fully educated yet”.⁴⁵ I would claim that

⁴⁵ See: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/oct/12/biography.johnfowles1>, Adam Lee-Potter, accessed March 22, 2025.

the novel is neither entirely feminist nor is it based on a male gaze that objectifies Sarah. Although I share Özdemir's view that Sarah is telling her own story within the (overarching) story, this assumption, in order to categorize the novel as a definitively feminist work, presupposes that the reader can follow the action to this deep level. On a superficial level, therefore, the assumption remains that, just as they did not get a voice in the 19th century, women do not get a voice in the novel; however, remaining on the superficial level, it is, on the other hand, also not true that Sarah's point of view is completely lost in the novel, as she does give several monologues in which she presents Charles her story and her thoughts on it. I would claim that the novel is, moreover, entirely critical of Victorian society and, as Victorian society was treating women unfairly, automatically becomes critical of the treatment of women and, therefore, attempts a feminist approach towards the 19th century. While the novel tells the story of a woman who has been ostracized from society due to her 'immoral behavior', and at several points mentions that sex was not something that was expected to be enjoyed by women, the narrator also makes sure the reader understands the hypocrisy that is ever present in Victorian society:

While conceding a partial truth to the theory of sublimation, I sometimes wonder if this does not lead us into the error of supposing the Victorians were not in fact highly sexed. But they were quite as highly sexed as our own century – and, in spite of the fact that *we* have sex thrown at us night and day (as the Victorians had religion), far more preoccupied with it than we really are. They were certainly preoccupied by love, and devoted far more of their arts to it than we do ours. (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*: 269)

This highly sexed side of Victorian society can be seen in London, when Charles walks past several brothels "in all the adjoining back streets" (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*: 304) and prostitutes, "from demure little milky-faced millinery girls to brandy-cheeked viragos" (*ibid.*), dressed as "Parisian bargees, in bowler and trousers, as sailors, as señoritas, as Sicilian peasant-girls" (*ibid.*). This clearly shows the two extremes of the Victorian era: on the one hand, society was incredibly strict, binding women of the upper and middle classes to the domestic spheres, forbidding them to even talk to a man without a chaperone present, and ostracizing them for any 'moral offense'. On the other hand, however, the nightlife, reserved mostly for men, was wild and a chance for men of the Victorian period to live out every fantasy they might have had. However, the narrator also makes it

clear that society of the 20th century – the novel being published in 1969 – is not as different to Victorian society, claiming:

The Victorians chose to be serious about something we treat rather lightly, and the way they expressed their seriousness was not to *talk openly* about sex, just as part of our way is the very reverse. But these “ways” of being serious are mere conventions. The fact behind them remains constant. (*The French Lieutenant’s Woman*: 270)

He goes on stating that “our world spends a vast amount of its time inviting us to copulate, while our reality is as busy in frustrating us” (*The French Lieutenant’s Woman*: 271). This implies that, though society has made a 180-degree turn, the situation for women has essentially not changed. While in the 19th century women were, for the most part, ostracized from the public life and have not been taken seriously by men, women are being highly sexualized and, consequently, still not taken seriously in the latter half of the 20th and early 21st century. This sexualization can be seen in several areas, such as beauty pageants, which gave contestants the reputation of being pretty but dumb, tv shows, in which the camera likes to put a focus on female bottoms and necklines, but also stereotypical casting of movie roles, such as, for example, Latina women being presented to be hypersexualized, promiscuous, overly dramatic, and feisty. On this example, one can see that it is true what Siegfried Broß has said, as quoted in section 1.1: the position of women within a society cannot change solely by changing the law and, on paper, giving them equal rights to men. Rather, the attitude towards women needs to change fundamentally, and it needs to be understood that, in fact, women really can do just as well as men do.

3.2.3 Comparing the Past and the Present – A.S. Byatt’s *Possession*

A.S. Byatt’s *Possession*⁴⁶ (1990) has – at least partly – been written in response to John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, as she was, according to Fletcher (2003), dissatisfied with Fowles’ approach to the 19th century, being certain that, despite Byatt’s fascination with his experimental style of writing, she felt like she could find a more satisfying balance between realism and experiment (Fletcher 2003: 28). In Byatt’s opinion, the three alternative endings of *The French*

⁴⁶ Verbatim quotations from the novel are sometimes cited in italics in this section. This italicization is taken from the novel and is intended to signal the difference between the two storylines – the present day and the 19th century.

Lieutenant's Woman reduced the novel "to paperiness again" (Byatt 1991: 174), as they "painfully destroy the narrative 'reality' of the central events, which have happily withstood authorial shifts in style, interjections, and essays on Victorian reality" (*ibid.*). In *On Histories and Stories* (2001), Byatt gives a closer explanation to the opposition between her narrative style of the Victorian and Fowles':

Fowles has said that the nineteenth-century narrator was assuming the omniscience of a god. I think rather the opposite is the case – this kind of fictive narrator can creep closer to the feelings and inner life of characters – as well as providing a Greek chorus – than any first-person mimicry. In *Possession* I used this kind of narrator deliberately three times in the historical narrative – always to tell what the historians and biographers of my fiction never discovered, always to heighten the reader's imaginative entry into the world of the text (Byatt 2001: 56)

While, therefore, Fowles' narrator is telling the reader from the beginning that this work is purely fiction and they should not get too attached to the characters, as there is no real closure – underlining this by giving the reader three endings to choose from rather than one ending they need to accept as canon –, Byatt is trying to draw the reader closer to her characters and have them build a connection. However, similarities between the novels, or rather Byatt giving an answer to Fowles, cannot only be seen in the narrative style and the approach to the Victorian, but also in the characters.

Just like Sarah in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Christabel LaMotte finds her own freedom in her solitude. By not being married, she finds herself to be able to do what she wants, go where she wants, and write poems when and about what she pleases. In her letter-exchange with Randolph Ash, she directly points out that even the possibility that they might fall in love with each other is threatening this freedom she has claimed for herself: "*The core is my solitude, my solitude that is threatened, that you threaten, without which I am nothing – so how may honour, how may morality speak to me?*" (*Possession*: 195). However, while Sarah surrounds herself with melancholy and roots her freedom in her already ruined reputation, Christabel surrounds herself, despite living in seclusion, with her good friend – and possible lover – Blanche Glover, as well as several activities she tells Randolph about, and does not seem one bit melancholic and depressed. This different approach to a woman of the 19th century claiming her own freedom very clearly shows that if a woman does not have nor want a husband and/or children, it is quite possible as well as reasonable that the reason for this is not her status as a

Fallen Woman with a ruined reputation that makes it nearly impossible for her to find a husband, but that it might very much be her own decision for the simple fact that she does not want to be married.

Therefore, Christabel finds herself in a conflict with herself when she ends up pregnant with Ash's illegitimate daughter Maia, who, to avoid social exclusion for herself and her daughter, she gives to her sister and brother-in-law to raise. As she reveals in her final letter to Randolph, she felt like she was being "punished, in some sort, for keeping her from you" (*Possession*: 502) because she was nothing more than "the spinster aunt who is not loved" (*ibid.*) to her own daughter. This feeling of guilt towards her child 'reduced' her to writing children's stories, which she is mostly remembered for in contemporary times ("She wrote religious poems, didn't she? A gloomy little booklet called *Last Things*. And children's stories. *Tales Told in November*.", *Possession*: 31): "*I wrote her small tales, and they were bound and printed, and I gave them to her, and she smiled sweetly and thanked me, and put them by.*" (*Possession*: 502). However, by clearly feeling guilty for bringing Maia into the world like this and giving her away for the sake of her reputation, she also gave up her mission of becoming an independent and successful poet of her own and, therefore, feels like she failed not only her daughter, but also herself:

Do you remember how I wrote to you of the riddle of the egg? As an eidolon of my solitude and self-possession which you threatened whether you would or no? And destroyed, my dear, meaning me nothing but good, I do believe and know. I wonder – if I had kept to my closed castle, behind my motte-and-bailey defences – should I have been a great poet – as you are? I wonder – was my spirit rebuked by yours – as Caesar's was by Antony – or was I enlarged by your generosity as you intended? (*Possession*: 502)

Christabel, therefore, clearly represents the inner strife early feminists were often faced with. On the one hand, society expected women to be the Angel in the House and to prosper at the prospect of being a wife and mother. On the other hand, it was a feminist's aspiration to go against society's standards and to be wild and free in their quest for equal rights. She therefore does not only feel guilty for bringing her child into this world illegitimately and, to protect her from society's cruelty, having given her away, but also for betraying her own aspirations of becoming a great poet, and is therefore left feeling powerless.

Similarly, Ash's wife, Ellen, represents the struggle between tradition and progress women of the 19th century were faced with from a married woman's point of view. In her diary entries, the reader can clearly see how she is trying to be the Angel in the House for her husband ("I am full of projects for improvements in his comfort [...]", *Possession*: 222) and, thus, keep a respectable household on the one hand, while being aware of the injustice women are faced with on the other hand. This can most clearly be seen in the treatment of her servant Bertha, who has been impregnated whilst not being married. While Bertha is denying to name the father of her unborn child, as he could not "possibly be required to take care of her, either by marrying, or in any other way" (*Possession*: 226) and beseeches Ellen to not tell her mother, as "it would break her heart and set her obdurately against me forever" (*ibid.*), Ellen's initial problem with the situation is the one of replacement: "There is also the dreadful problem of the *replacement* to be thought of, with all the fears of drunkenness, theft, breakages and moral corruption which go with such choices" (*ibid.*). She also agrees that Bertha must be sent away to "an institution that makes very handsome provision for women in her position" (*Possession*: 227), which, ultimately, means that Bertha is getting locked away, but the father of the unborn child, who, after all, played an essential role in its creation and now refuses to take any responsibility, goes free without any consequences. Ellen later, however, acknowledges that "I have done wrong in her regard. I have behaved less than well" (*Possession*: 231). This realization comes after she spends some time thinking about the position of women in 19th century society:

I slept badly and as a result had a strange fragmented dream in which I was playing chess with Herbert Baulk, who had decreed that *my Queen* could move only one square, as his King did. I knew there was injustice here but could not in my dreaming folly realise that this was to do with the existence of *my King* who sat rather large and red on the back line and seemed to be incapacitated. I could see the moves She should have made, like errors in a complicated pattern of knitting or lace – but she must only lumpishly shuffle back and forth, one square at a time. Mr Baulk (always in my dream) said calmly, "You see I told you you could not win," and I saw it was so, but was unreasonably agitated and desirous above all of moving my Queen freely across the diagonals. It is odd, when I think of it, that in chess the female may make the large runs and cross freely in all ways – in life it is much otherwise. (*Possession*: 228)

It is only in a spoilt game of chess she dreams about that she understands that women are cheated out of their rights every day in real life. This scene gives a good explanation of why feminism took so long to really grow to people and why also a

lot of women, like, for example, Marie Corelli, as discussed in 2.4.1, were against the New Women and the first wave of feminism in the 19th century: Women had been reduced to the domestic sphere for so long that they did not even realize that they were deprived of any rights and, consequently, did not feel like they were being cheated on by society, as they did not know any other reality. Women all of a sudden demanding rights that men already long possessed therefore seemed like a radical thing to do, even though they only asked for equality and not for more rights than men had, and the movement was therefore seen as something dangerous and abnormal, not only by men, but also women.

Consequently, just like *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, *Possession* also claims that despite a century passing, things for women have not as significantly changed as they should have in contemporary times. While, as discussed in the previous section, John Fowles claims that society has undergone a 180-degree turn and now hypersexualizes women instead of ostracizing them from society, yet still does not take them any more serious than before, Byatt shows that men, in fact, still try to ostracize women from parts of society, in this case the academic world. Therefore, I would claim that *Possession* is built on the concept of *écriture féminine*, female writing, that Hélène Cixous (1976) describes in her *The Laugh of the Medusa* (the revised and translated version of *Le Rire de la Méduse*, 1975):

It is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence. (Cixous *et al.* 1976: 881)

The novel is written by a woman and it is clearly written for women, giving a voice to those that were, as will be discussed later on in this section, mostly excluded from the scientific world not only in the 19th century, but still at the time of the novel's publication. That the exclusion of women is an ongoing observation in the novel can be seen in the parallels between Professor Blackadder and Beatrice Nest, who represent the older generation of contemporary society, and Maud Bailey and Fergus Wolff, who are part of the new generation. Blackadder makes his opinion about feminism and, additionally, Beatrice quite clear in the very beginning of the novel, claiming that feminist theory is not a literary field to be taken seriously as "they *know* what there is to find before they've seen it" (*Possession*: 31), which

implies that everything concerning feminist theory is simply made up. He goes on by making fun of Beatrice and her academic achievements:

Poor old Beatrice began by wanting to show how self-denying and supportive Ellen Ash was and she messed around looking up every recipe for gooseberry jam and every jaunt to Broadstairs for *twenty-five years*, can you believe it, and woke up to find that no one wanted self-denial and dedication any more, they wanted proof that Ellen was raging with rebellion and pain and untapped talent. Poor Beatrice. One publication to her name, and a slim book called *Helpmeets* without irony doesn't go down well with today's feminists. (*ibid.*)

This clearly shows how he sees feminists and women in the academic field in general: according to him, female researchers do not have the intellectual capacity to deal with 'real' male writers such as their male counterparts do, and therefore try to make up things about women of the 19th century before ending up insignificant to the academic world. The relationship between Fergus and Maud shows a similar pattern. While they dated before the events of the novel, Maud does not have very pleasant memories of their relationship ("I had a bad time, with Fergus. We tormented each other", *Possession*: 270), as he felt the constant need to belittle, lecture, and control her:

He's one of those men who argues by increments of noise – so that as you open your mouth he says another, cleverer, louder thing. [...] He used to *prance around* the flat – with nothing on – quoting Freud saying that "at no point in one's analytic work does one suffer more from a suspicion that one has been preaching to the winds than when one is trying to persuade a woman to abandon her wish for a penis" [...]. And then Fergus said, the shaved [hair] style was a cop-out, a concession, it made me look like a skull, he said. I should simply have it. So I grew it. (*Possession*: 271)

While both Roland and the reader are only given Maud's words on their relationship in this scene and could therefore argue that it could also be hurt feelings talking, the direct confrontation between Maud and Fergus earlier on in the novel shows that Fergus' attitude really is that of a man who does not believe women to be equal to men. When she refuses to talk to him because she was in a hurry, he makes fun of her scientific efforts, saying "To do what? Pursue the labyrinthine coilings of the *Melusina*? Or to see Roland Michell" (*Possession*: 235). This is clearly supposed to be a direct hit at her, implying that, as a woman, the only two options of her heading somewhere are to do something useless for the scientific world or to run to a man. When he realizes that his efforts of belittling her no longer work on her, he gets both physical ("He put out a strong hand and clasped it like a handcuff on her

wrist. [...] He was pulling on her arm while he talked [...]", *ibid.*) and tries to wrap her into his charms with some sweet talk:

"Don't be like that, Maud. I want to talk to you. I'm suffering terribly in about equal amounts of curiosity and jealousy. I can't *believe* you've got involved with sweet useless Roland and I can't *understand* what you're doing haunting the Crematorium here, unless you have." [...] Let's just talk. You're the most intelligent woman I know. I miss you terribly, you know, I should have said that, too." (*ibid.*)

That this is nothing but sweet talk is proven by the fact that, once he realizes she is not telling him nor giving him what he wants, he changes his tactics and threatens her: "And if you don't tell me, I shall find out and consider what I find out to be my own property, Maud" (*Possession*: 236); "I warned you" (*ibid.*). While this scene, on the one hand, shows that he does not regard Maud as an equal and thinks that, as she is only a woman, some nice words will make her bend in his arms and give him what he wants, it, on the other hand, also shows that, deep down, he knows that she is capable of doing work that is equally, if not more, significant than his own work, and feels threatened by it.

However, despite male efforts to keep women out of certain fields of society, the novel also underlines the importance of feminism and that it is not a lost cause at all. This can be seen in the difference between Beatrice and Maud when being faced with injustice from their male colleagues. In the following quote, Beatrice tells Maud what it was like for her in the 1960s:

They said it would be better to – to do this task which presented itself so to speak and seemed appropriate to my – my sex – my capacities as they were thought to be, whatever they were. A good feminist in *those* days, Dr Bailey, would have insisted on being allowed to work on the Ask and Embla poems. [...] I don't think you can imagine, Miss Bailey, how it was then. We were dependent and excluded persons. In my early days – indeed until the late 1960s – women were *not permitted* to enter the main Senior Common Room at Prince Albert College. We had our own which was small and slightly *pretty*. Everything was decided in the pub – everything of import – where we were not invited and did not wish to go. I hate smoke and the smell of beer. But should not therefore be excluded from discussing departmental policy. We were grateful for employment. We thought it was bad being young and – in some cases, not in mine – attractive – but it was worse when we grew older. There is an age at which, I profoundly believe, one becomes a *witch*, in such situations, Dr Bailey – through simple ageing – as always happened in history – and there are *witch-hunts* [...]. (*Possession*: 220-221)

It is important to note that there is a good 20-year difference between the start of their scientific careers and, while some men still try to undermine female efforts,

the female answer to this has significantly changed in a relatively short period of time. This, in my opinion, shows what feminism can – and cannot – do and why it is important: It cannot force men to accept female colleagues or acknowledge that female research is, firstly, just as important and, secondly, just as valuable as male research. However, it can and does empower women to stand up for themselves and gain the confidence to defy those obstacles that are being put in their ways and to simply keep going and doing what they are doing.

As the novel aims to compare the past in the present, I think it is essential to see how things have changed for women in sciences so far and where society stands now compared to what *Possession* claims to be the truth for women in the 19th and 20th century. For this, I will look at the UNESCO Science Report, which was introduced in 1993 as ‘World Science Report’ to monitor the evolution of science, technology, and innovation worldwide. Looking at the earliest Science Report from 1993, it is striking that there are no statistics on or even mentions of women in science.⁴⁷ The second Science Report from 1996⁴⁸ does include a whole chapter on women in science, and while it does not give exact percentages of how many women work in the science sector, it does claim that “women professionals are not present in science and technology either in ‘critical mass’ or at a ‘critical level’ in national governments or in the United Nations or any other regional or inter-governmental body” and that “the presence of professional women is negligible in decision-making bodies, high-level advisory boards and national academies” (UNESCO Science Report 1996: 313). This, accordingly, means that what *Possession* claims – that women are not taken seriously in the sciences and do not get the same chances as men for no other reason than their sex – applied very much to the reality of the 1990s. The question that remains is, therefore, where we are now. According to the UNESCO Science Report 2021,⁴⁹ 33.3% of all researchers in 2018 have been women, which is an improvement of 4.9 percentage points as compared to 2013 (28.4%) (UNESCO Science Report 2021: 117). However, it is

⁴⁷ For full report, see <https://www.un-ilibrary.org/content/books/9789210059107/read>, several authors, ed. Federico Mayor, accessed March 22, 2025.

⁴⁸ For full report, see <https://www.un-ilibrary.org/content/books/9789210059091/read>, several authors, ed. Federico Mayor, accessed March 22, 2025.

⁴⁹ For full report, see:

<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000377433/PDF/377433eng.pdf.multi.page=129>, Nair-Bedouelle *et al.* For women in science, see chapter 3 (103ff.), accessed March 22, 2025.

important to note that, overall, female graduates and researchers are, in most countries, still overrepresented in the arts and humanities, journalism and information, social sciences, and health and welfare (UNESCO Science Report 2021: 116), while being underrepresented in the technical field, as, exemplary, the percentage of women graduating in computer science in the US was at 37% in 1984 but has declined to only 18% in 2018 (*ibid.*). The following table, taken from the UNESCO Science Report 2021 (pp. 118/119), show the exact percentages of women in the respective fields in Germany, the UK, and the US:

	Germany	UK	USA
Agriculture	42.3	65.0	52.0
Engineering	21.1	23.5	20.4
Health and Welfare	70.6	75.4	81.4
Natural Sciences	46.8	53.0	52.5
ICTs	19.4	19.4	23.6
Social Sciences and Journalism	65.7	62.4	65.3
Business, Admin., and Law	53.1	53.7	50.5
Arts and Humanities	73.5	68.0	62.1

What can be seen is that, despite the huge difference in the field of agriculture, the numbers of female representatives in the scientific fields are quite telling. While the numbers between the three countries in the aforementioned ‘typical’ fields for women vary in about ten percentage points, e.g. German women tend to rather study arts and humanities whereas US-American women rather go into health and welfare, it is significant that in each country the female percentage in engineering and ICTs is only at around 20%. This means that, while the report is showing that more and more women find their way into science and want to become researchers, there is – still – a clear distinction between ‘female fields’ and ‘male fields’, which is something that needs to be worked on. However, as *Possession* shows the reader, women have started at being completely excluded from the scientific world and are now an integral part of it. This gives confidence for the future that, rather sooner than later, there will not be ‘female fields’ and ‘male fields’ in science, but simply equal researchers of all genders in all fields with equal opportunities.

The problem of unequalness between men and women even in the same field is also a prominent topic of the novel. From the very beginning, there is a clear distinction between the male researchers and, as they call their female counterparts,

“the feminists”, and it is made explicitly clear that those two groups do not like each other. Blackadder, as discussed earlier, makes fun of feminist efforts, and Maud, when first meeting Roland, despite claiming that she was “intrigued” (*Possession*: 39) by his interest in her work, “did not smile” (*ibid.*). While she does grow to like and eventually falls in love with Roland, she almost until the end takes a similar approach towards relationships as Christabel. When asked whether she sees herself being with someone, she answers:

I feel as she did. I keep my defences up because I must go on *doing my work*. I know how she felt about her unbroken egg. Her self-possession, her autonomy, I don't want to think of that going. You understand? (*Possession*: 506)

Roland, on the other hand, has been in a long relationship before, and has felt ‘unmanly’, being financially supported by and dependent on his girlfriend Val (“When his DES grant ran out, Val became the breadwinner, whilst he finished his PhD. [...] If he could get a job, it might be easier to initiate some change.”, *Possession*: 13-14). His and Maud’s journey, however, has shown him that a relationship cannot be based on such feelings, and he has learned to not be daunted by (more) successful women, but to rather focus on his own work while being happy for the other one’s accomplishments. This is why he, despite Maud being evidently superior to him in literally every aspect, as she is “much taller than him” (*Possession*: 38), had a job, her own apartment, and her own car from the very beginning, and turns out to be the rightful owner of the whole Ash-LaMotte-correspondence, which brings new scientific prospects with it, he is finally ok with himself. When he is offered jobs in Hong Kong, Barcelona, and Amsterdam (*Possession*: 505), while Maud stays in England to edit the letters (*ibid.*), it is clear to them both that they are equals, and no one needs to give up themselves or their dreams for the sake of the other one:

“In Hong Kong, Barcelona and Amsterdam?” “Well, certainly, if I was there. I wouldn't threaten your autonomy.” “Or be here to love me,” said Maud, “Oh, love is terrible, it is a *wrecker* –” “It can be quite cunning,” said Roland. “We could think of a way – a modern way – Amsterdam isn't far –” Cold hand met cold hand. (*Possession*: 507)

While the novel leaves the ending relatively open and does not tell the reader whether Maud and Roland actually make it work and end up together or go their separate ways with their respective research, it does state that there was “a strange

new smell [...] and it smelled fresh and lively and hopeful” (*ibid.*), implying that this could be a change of tide for both men and women and their views of the other. The distinction between the male and female part of research can, however, not only be seen between the researchers, but also in the research itself. It is worth noting that both Roland and Maud only start reading into research written by the respective other sex, namely Leonora Stern (Roland) and Mortimer Cropper (Maud), and therefore showing interest in each other’s work when they started liking each other. Leonora, writing about Christabel LaMotte, clearly focuses on the *écriture féminine*, claiming that “women writers and painters are seen to have created their own significantly evasive landscapes, with features which deceive or elude the penetrating gaze, tactile landscapes which do not privilege the dominant stare” (*Possession*: 244) and talking about the “female language, which is partly suppressed, partly self-communing, dumb before the intrusive male and not able to speak out” (*Possession*: 245). Mortimer Cropper, talking about Randolph Ash, on the other hand, does not focus on things such as language, but paints a picture of Ash as a “White Knight of the seashore” (*Possession*: 247), who is “much influenced by the work of the great anatomist, Richard Owen, on Parthenogenesis, or the reproduction of creatures by cell fission rather than by sexual congress” (*Possession*: 248-249). However, despite taking an interest in the others work, neither Roland nor Maud like what the other sex researches (“He did not like this vision [...]” / “[...] and she did not find Mortimer Cropper’s company pleasant”, *Possession*: 246). This might very well be because the differences between those works are significant and can be seen in their description of nature: while, according to Leonora Stern, female writers use nature as a metaphor to say what they are permitted to say by society, male writers, according to Mortimer Cropper, simply state facts about nature, as they are well aware of the science behind natural phenomena. However, despite their differences in form of interest and/or approach, Maud, Roland, Blackadder, Beatrice, and Leonora (with the help of Euan MacIntyre) learn that they can obtain the best results, namely to discover that Christabel LaMotte and Randolph Ash did, in fact, have a child together, and that Maud is a direct descendent of said child, when they work together rather than against each other, and that their work might, in fact, not stand in contrast, but compliment the other.

The connection between Leonora Stern, who is researching and writing about the *écriture féminine*, and A.S. Byatt, who, as I claimed earlier, built up *Possession* around this concept, is quite ironic here. What Leonora says about the suppressed female voice is something Cixous mentions as well: “A double distress, for even if she transgresses, her words fall almost always upon the deaf male ear, which hears in language only that which speaks in the masculine” (Cixous *et al.* 1976: 880-881). Cixous, however, goes on by claiming that once a woman has found the courage to speak, she is unstoppable:

Listen to a woman speak at a public gathering (if she hasn't painfully lost her wind). She doesn't “speak,” she throws her trembling body forward; she lets go of herself, she flies; all of her passes into her voice, and it's with her body that she vitally supports the “logic” of her speech. Her flesh speaks true. She lays herself bare. In fact, she physically materializes what she's thinking; she signifies it with her body. In a certain way she inscribes what she's saying, because she doesn't deny her drives the intractable and impassioned part they have in speaking. Her speech, even when “theoretical” or political, is never simple or linear or “objectified,” generalized: she draws her story into history. (Cixous *et al.* 1976: 881)

What Cixous describes is a force of nature: a woman who is so enthusiastic about herself and her own work that she inspires other women to do the same – basically, what she is saying is that women must create their “own movement” (Cixous *et al.* 1976: 875). Next to the fact that “drawing her story into history” is exactly what – especially – Maud is doing in the novel, the effervescent enthusiasm Cixous describes can be compared to how male and female researchers are described in *Possession*: as mentioned earlier, female researchers in the novel are said to use metaphors and figurative language, male researchers are said to be factual and concise. Only when the male and female characters combine those traits, they manage to get the result they want.

The fact that scholars, companies, and the like reach their best goals when the acting group is diverse is, however, not only something like ‘wishful thinking’ or ‘food for thought’ by A. S. Byatt from the 1990s, but it has been proven by several studies in recent years. In a – so far – tripartite study-series (*Why Diversity Matters* – 2015, *Delivering through Diversity* – 2018, *Diversity Wins* – 2020, Hunt *et al.* 2020: 3), Hunt *et al.* (2020) have examined the impact of diverse work groups on the progress of businesses. The result of their 2020 study is, as the name suggests, that “Diversity Wins”:

As this report makes clear, greater diversity, in terms of both gender and ethnicity, is correlated with significantly greater likelihood of outperformance. More than that, fostering a diverse and inclusive culture is a critical success factor: it enables individuals both to shine in their own right and to pull together as a team. (Hunt *et al.* 2020: 47)

Similarly, Campbell *et al.* (2013) have examined the differences in scientific recognition between heterogeneous groups of scholars and homogeneous groups, with following results:

This dataset is the first to document the positive consequences of gender diversity on the quality of science produced by collaborative working groups. Gender-diverse groups (specifically authorship groups with at least one woman) tend to receive more citations from their peers, suggesting that peers perceive the publications produced by gender-diverse groups to be higher quality. Bringing together the collective abilities of diverse thinkers need not be thought of as an exercise in tokenism but rather as the best opportunity to address the biggest scientific puzzles of the day. (Campbell *et al.* 2013: 5)

This strongly underlines the notion that, when it comes to moving forward, may it be in business-relations, scientific work, or when it comes to society as a whole, great results can never be achieved when one group of people – may it be based on gender, ethnicity, religion, etc. – puts itself above others, but only when everyone understands and accepts that equality is the key.

3.2.4 The Angel vs. the Fallen Woman – Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith*

As it has previously been discussed, a big problem for women of the 19th century was not only that they were excluded from doing certain things by men, but that other women judged their behavior and their morals and, should they find what they considered a moral misconduct, ostracized other women from society. This can both be found in neo-Victorian criticism, for example in how Mrs Poulteney treats other women in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (section 3.2.2), and in writers of the 19th century themselves, for example in Marie Corelli, who criticized other women for demanding the freedom Corelli herself already possessed in *My Wonderful Wife* (section 2.4.1). This lack of unity between women fueled the male perception of women being weak and therefore the 'lesser man' and helped categorizing women into either being the 'Angel in the House' or a 'Fallen Woman'. Sarah Waters takes up this motif of men playing women against each other in her novel *Fingersmith* (2002), and also shows that in each 'category', things are not necessarily what they seem. The story, and, respectively, the narrative, follows two female characters,

who both function as the autodiegetic narrator in their respective parts of the novel, in 19th century London, and initially puts each of them in one category.

On the one side, there is Sue Trinder, who grew up in Lant Street, London, raised by Mrs. Sucksby amongst thieves (“We were all more or less thieves, at Lant Street”, *Fingersmith*: 7). From the moment she was born and because of her upbringing – her mother was hanged for murder when Sue was a newborn (*Fingersmith*: 11), she was taken to her first robbery when she was but an infant (*Fingersmith*: 3-4), and she dreams about being “married, to a thief or a fencing-man” (*Fingersmith*: 13) – Sue might very well be considered a Fallen Woman in the eyes of society.

On the other side, there is Lady Maud Lilly, who grew up in Briar House, an old mansion in Marlow, and who was, being an orphan, too, raised by her uncle (*Fingersmith*: 33). She – in the beginning of the novel – clearly represents the Angel in the House in the eyes of society and, again initially, in the eyes of the reader. However, at the latest in the second part of the novel, told from Maud’s point of view, it becomes clear that this is really not the case.

For the first ten years of her life, Maud was raised by the nurses of a madhouse (*Fingersmith*: 180), and when she is brought to Briar House to live with her uncle, she is nothing like the ‘angel’ society dictates a girl of her background to be. This can, firstly, be seen in how her uncle describes her physical appearance, which rather sounds like he is picking out a new horse rather than bringing home an actual human being, his niece:

I see she wears her mother’s likeness. Very good. It will remind her of her mother’s fate, and may serve to keep her from sharing it. I don’t care at all for her lip, however. It is too plump. It has a bad promise. Likewise her back, which is soft, and slouches. And what of her leg? I shan’t want a thick-legged girl. Why do you hide her leg behind so long a skirt? Did I ask for that? (*Fingersmith*: 181)

This description of her by a representative of patriarchal 19th century society both shows that women were not considered to be actual human beings at all, but rather accessories to men with which they could pride themselves in society, and that, as already explained in section 2.1, physiognomy played a big role in the perception of women. Additionally, Maud at ten years old proves to be stubborn and to have a head of her own, as she is originally not willing to do as she is told (“[...] Give me

your hand, Maud.' I will not give it", *Fingersmith*: 186) and is not afraid to stick up for herself ("She has pulled me from the sofa, and begins to unlace my gown. I tug away from her, and strike her", *Fingersmith*: 189). This resilience, however, is broken by her uncle and his housekeeper, Mrs. Stiles, by violence ("I am beaten often, I believe, in my first days there", *Fingersmith*: 192). The work her uncle intended for her contains ordering and keeping the indices of pornographic novels and, occasionally, reading them to her uncle and his friends. Being exposed to such novels at only 13 years of age, Maud is initially shocked and filled "with a kind of horror" (*Fingersmith*: 200), but soon grows curious and adopts the language of the novels:

I begin to lie each night at Barbara's side, wakeful while she sleeps on; one time I put back the blanket to study the curve of her breast. Then I take to watching her as she bathes and dresses. Her legs – that I know from my uncle's books should be smooth – are dark with hair; the place between them – which I know should be neat, and fair – darkest of all. That troubles me. Then at last, one day, she catches me gazing. "What are you looking at?" she says. "Your cunt," I answer. "Why is it so black?" She starts away from me as if in horror, lets her skirt fall, puts her hands before her breast. Her cheek flares crimson. "Oh!" she cries. "I never did! Where did you learn such words?" "From my uncle," I say. "Oh, you liar! Your uncle's a gentleman. I'll tell Mrs Stiles!" (*ibid.*)

This, again, shows that, first of all, a woman, and especially a female child, was not believed over a man, and that, though society expected the niece of a gentleman to be the perfect angel, reality was far from it. Moreover, it is quite clear that, despite the original expectations of both the reader and the characters, as Gentleman describes her to them as "fey", "innocent", and "a natural" (*Fingersmith*: 30), Maud may very well be what the 19th century considered a Fallen Woman. Not only did she use foul language from an early age onwards, she also abuses her maid ("When she is clumsy, when she is slow, I hit her", *Fingersmith*: 203; "At last I take the needle from her hand and gently put the point of it against her flesh; then draw it off; then put it back; then do this, six or seven times more, until her knuckles are marked between the freckles with a rash of needle-pricks", *Fingersmith*: 206), and she has both sexual desires and a sexual interest ("I imagine my mouth, stopped up with kisses. I imagine the parting of my legs. I imagine myself fingered and pierced", *Fingersmith*: 200). As mentioned before, women in the 19th century were not supposed to have any sexual desire other than for reasons of reproduction, which, according to Elaine Showalter (1985), leads to sicknesses in women:

Mothers pretend they have no passion, and teach their daughters that women feel no sexual desire, because, “in the conventional society, which men have made for women, and women have accepted, they *must* have none, they *must* act the farce of hypocrisy.” Nonetheless women’s lives are eaten up in fantasy, the product of repressed sexuality, boredom, and vacuity. [...] The suffocation of family life, boredom, and patriarchal protectivism gradually destroys women’s capacity to dream, to work, or to act. (Showalter 1985: 64)

Quite clearly, one can see on the example of Maud and Sue that the categorization of women into Angels and Fallen Women, which was very popular in the 19th century and, quite frankly, is still popular in the 21st century, does not make sense, as things are not always black or white, good or bad, but there are several nuances when it comes to human beings: Sue grew up amongst criminals, yet, like a lady, dreams about getting married and having children (*Fingersmith*: 13), whereas Maud was raised as a lady, yet swears and has sexual desires “like a slut and a filthy beast” (*Fingersmith*: 201).

Interestingly, once Maud falls sick, she is seen by a doctor, who, as a friend of her uncle’s has seen and heard her being forced to read pornography to a group of men, puts the blame of her fever solely on Maud and her ‘immorality’: “‘Are you troubled,’ he says, ‘with uncommon thoughts? Well, we must expect that. You are an uncommon girl’” (*Fingersmith*: 203). This shows clearly that, despite the fact that he knows that Maud does not do certain things out of her own free will, but because she is forced to, he refers everything back to her supposed immorality and shifts the blame from the man who forces the girl to do something she does not want to do by, as described, physical violence, as well as the threat of starvation and freezing (*Fingersmith*: 202), to the victim of the situation. What can, therefore, be seen in the 19th century – as it is made clear in the novel – is that there are women who have no control over what is happening to them on the one side, and men who take advantage of their superiority on the other side to do what they want and then blame women for their ‘immorality’ or ‘insanity’. What is important to note is that in the Victorian era, according to Wynter (1875),

It is agreed by all alienist physicians, that girls are far more likely to inherit insanity from their mothers than from the other parent, and that the same rule obtains as regards the sons. The tendency of the mother to transmit her mental disease is, however, in all cases stronger than the father's; some physicians have, indeed, insisted that it is twice as strong. In judging of the chances of an individual inheriting mental disease, or, indeed, of the insane temperament, it may not be unadvisable to study the general likeness and character. If the daughter of an insane mother very much resembles her in feature and in temperament, the chances are that she is more likely to inherit the disease than other daughters who are not so like (Wynter 1875: 52-53).

Expanding this 19th century belief and assuming that every criminal has some sort of 'mental disease', this, basically, means that for every crime that has ever been committed, from both men and women, at the end of the day women are to blame because they, as Showalter puts it, are "the prime carriers of madness, twice as likely to transmit it as were fathers" (Showalter 1985: 67). Additionally, it is worth pointing out that, again, physiognomy plays a big role here and underlines the unfairness women were faced with: they were not only judged by things they could control, like their behavior, but also based on their looks, which a person literally has no control over and which they could not just change. This also implies that, potentially, a woman who would have been the perfect Angel in the House, but happened to look like another woman, who was, for whatever reason, 'fallen', would not have had a real chance in society despite the fact that she has not done anything wrong.

Sarah Waters also makes use of the assumption that a mother determines the mental state of her children, especially daughters, in when Maud helps Gentleman convince the doctors that Sue is mad and says: "The servants at Briar would speak of her as of a lady not quite right, in the brain. I believe her mother was mad, sir" (*Fingersmith*: 299). Additionally, the – educated – men of the novel are not only frightened by mothers, but the notion that women are the ultimate evil that bring about madness and destruction when they leave their – by men – assigned place is carried throughout the novel. As quoted above, Maud's doctor blames her fever on reading pornography. Moreover, the doctors in the asylum claim that any form of education leads to madness in women:

[...] But the over-exposure of girls to literature – The founding of women's colleges – "His brow is sleek with sweat. "We are raising a nation of brain-cultured women. Your wife's distress, I'm afraid to say, is part of a wider *malaise*. I fear for the future of our race, Mr Rivers, I may tell you now. [...]" (*Fingersmith*: 300)

3. Reenactment of the 19th Century

“You have been put too much to literary work,” he said on one of his visits, “and that is the cause of your complaint. But sometimes we doctors must work by paradoxical methods. I mean to put you to literary work again, to restore you. [...]” (*Fingersmith*: 429)

What is, however, funny is that already in the 18th century, Mary Wollstonecraft has written about female education and has noted quite the opposite. While men of the 19th century believed female education and female progress to lead to the downfall of the human race, Wollstonecraft claims that it is the other way around and humanity may seize to exist if women kept being uneducated and dull:

The education of women has, of late, been more attended to than formerly; yet they are still reckoned a frivolous sex, and ridiculed or pitied by the writers who endeavour by satire or instruction to improve them. It is acknowledged that they spend many of the first years of their lives in acquiring a smattering of accomplishments: meanwhile strength of body and mind are sacrificed to libertine notions of beauty, to the desire of establishing themselves, - the only way women can rise in the world, - by marriage. And this desire making mere animals of them, when they marry they act as such children may be expected to act: - they dress; they paint, and nickname God’s creatures. – Surely these weak beings are only fit for a feraglio! – Can they govern a family, or take care of the poor babes whom they bring into the world? (Wollstonecraft 1792: 8-9)

The question remains whether Mary Wollstonecraft was just way ahead of her time or whether English society took a step back under the rule of a female monarch, Queen Victoria.

According to Showalter, this phenomenon of increasingly alienizing women can also be seen in the percentages of asylum-patients in the 19th century. While in the first half of the century men made up the majority of patients in asylums, “by the 1850s there were more women than men in public institutions” (Showalter 1985: 52). This also explains why it is so easy for Gentleman and Maud to play their trick on Sue and admit her to an asylum, where the doctors do not examine or question Sue at all or try to do any background-check whatsoever, but simply take Gentleman’s words for it that she is, in fact, his wife who believes herself to be her own mistress:

Dr Christie made a bow. "Good day," he said. "Mr Rivers. Miss Smith. Mrs Rivers, you remember me of course?" He held out his hand. He held it to me. There was a second, I think, of perfect stillness. I looked at him, and he nodded. "Mrs Rivers?" he said again. Then Gentleman leaned and caught hold of my arm. I thought at first he meant to keep me in my seat; then I understood that he was trying to press me from it. The doctor took my other arm. They got me to my feet. [...] "It's not me you want! What are you doing? Mrs Rivers? I'm Susan Smith! Gentleman! Gentleman, tell them!" Dr Christie shook his head. "Still keeping up the old, sad fiction?" he said to Gentleman. (*Fingersmith*: 173-174)

Showalter explains that simply taking another person's word for someone's madness was quite common at the time, as "Victorian asylum superintendents were reluctant to listen to their patients, or to find out how they felt and why" (Showalter 1985: 61). Exemplary, she refers to Samuel Tuke, who wrote about the methods of treatment in the asylum York Retreat in his *Description of the Retreat* (1813), in which he claims:

It must, however, be understood, that the persuasion which is extended to the patients, is confined to those points which affect their liberty of comfort. No advantage has been found to arise from reasoning with them, on their particular hallucinations. One of the distinguishing marks of insanity, is a fixed false conception, which occasions an almost total incapacity of conviction. The attempt, therefore, to refute their notions, generally irritates them, and rivets the false perception more strongly on their minds. There have been a few instances, in which, by some striking evidence, the maniac has been driven from his favourite absurdity; but it has uniformly been succeeded by another equally irrational. (Tuke 1813: 96)

Not being listened to is also something Sue has to endure after she has been sent to the asylum: "'Will you listen to me?' I said. 'Listen to you? La, if I listened to all the rubbish I heard in this house, I should go mad myself. Come on, now.'" (*Fingersmith*: 404). The big problem for women at the time, therefore, is becoming quite clear: the 19th century was a time where women did not really have a voice and, as also discussed in the previous sections, were not believed over men. At the same time, doctors and nurses of psychiatric hospitals were told not to listen to their patients. It, therefore, must have been quite easy to get rid of an unpleasant woman by simply claiming she was insane and having her locked away. As no one would listen to her, simply because she was 1. a woman and 2. a patient, she would have no way of ever escaping, which is clearly what Gentleman had in mind for Sue. What has been explained in section 3.2.1 about Antoinette and how women did not actually stand a chance when they were accused of madness also applies here. If we assume that women in the 19th century were said to have a certain 'madness'

because of their very existence and nature (Showalter 1985: 7), that there were more women in asylums than men (Showalter 1985: 52), and that locking people away only fuels madness (Foucault [1965] 1988: 227), whether it was there in the first place or not, this would, consequently, mean that the goal was not to ‘cure madness’, but it was a fight against women and a tool to ‘keep them in check’. In *Fingersmith*, this is exactly what Gentleman is doing: in his fight against two young women, he uses the 19th century belief about women’s natural madness against them to cheat both of them out of their money, paying no attention to the fact that he is ruining two lives.

Sarah Waters is not only playing around with the stereotypes of the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ woman, the Angel in the House and the Fallen Woman, with the intention to show that it is not realistically possible to put another person solely into one category, but also concentrates on the fact that often women are very critical of other women instead of supporting one another, which makes it easier for men to claim superiority for themselves. This phenomenon is, however, not only a problem of a certain period in time, but it can be found in 19th century society, where self-determined women like Marie Corelli deny other women the rights they have claimed for themselves (section 2.4.1), 19th century literature, where Nelly judges Catherine and Isabella for causing men inconveniences in *Wuthering Heights* (section 2.3.2), in neo-Victorian literature, where Mrs Poulteney is the first to judge and ostracize Sarah in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (section 3.2.2), contemporary literature, where for every positive female character there is a negative one to match her, for example Emma Clifton vs. Lady Virginia Fenwick (section 4.1.1), as well as in contemporary society. This can be seen in how men and women usually judge other women. The subjective perception taken from every-day-conversations is that men will usually be more superficial and judge women based on their superficial looks: “she is too fat/thin”, “her ass/breasts is/are too big/small”, “she looks like a slut”, etc. Women, however, while doing that, too, often go a lot more into detail, judging other women based on, for example, whether their purse matches their shoes, whether their makeup is applied correctly, whether their clothes match their skin tone, etc. This, it seems, gives men like Gentleman in *Fingersmith* the impression that women are weak, ready to turn on each other for their own benefit, and are therefore inferior to men. For this reason, he trusts that

both Sue and Maud are willing to turn against the other while he is double-crossing both of them in order to get their money.

One could nevertheless argue that the plan to cheat Maud and Sue out of their money was not created out of a patriarchal feeling of male superiority over women, as Mrs. Sucksby orchestrated the whole plan together with Gentleman (“Listen to me, Maud. The scheme was hers, all of it. From start to finish, hers.”, *Fingersmith*: 323). However, it is made quite clear from the beginning of the novel onwards that Mrs. Sucksby, despite being a woman, has taken on a male role. Even though she is taking in infants and takes care of them, which would be a traditional female role, she is also very clearly the boss of a criminal gang, as she herself says that she is “hiring out” the children she takes care of to go begging and stealing – “I don’t hire my infants out to have them brought back like this, turned blue with screaming” (*Fingersmith*: 4) –, as well as Sue claims that everyone was afraid of Mrs. Sucksby: “She was like everyone, too scared of Mrs Sucksby” (*Fingersmith*: 7). Additionally, on top of being the boss of a criminal gang, she is also the main caretaker of Sue, which was, like leading a business, criminal or not, usually a male role,⁵⁰ and is, as she reveals at the end of the second part of the novel, the biological mother of Maud (“‘Dear girl,’ she says. ‘My own, my own dear girl –’”, *Fingersmith*: 392). Despite the fact that Sue’s real mother, Marianne Lilly, claims in her testament that Mrs. Sucksby has given up Maud “to be raised a gentlewoman; and to know that her mother loved her, more than her own life” (*Fingersmith*: 532), she herself makes it clear that she has been helping Marianne in switching up the babies for no other reason than receiving all the money in the long run:

[...] “But I swear, I’ll settle half my fortune on her; and Susan shall have the rest. She shall have it, if you’ll only take her for me now, and bring her up honest, and keep her from knowing about her inheritance till she has grown up poor and can feel the worth of it. [...] For God’s sake, say you do! There’s fifty pounds in the pocket of my gown. You shall have it.” [...] And what I said at last was: “Keep your money. Keep your fifty pounds I don’t want it. What I want, is this: Your pa is a gentleman, and gents are tricky. I’ll keep your baby, but I want for you to write me out a paper, saying all you mean to do, and signing it, and sealing it; and that makes it binding.” (*Fingersmith*: 333-334)

⁵⁰ According to Harvard Business School, a woman was not allowed to be a guardian to her under-aged children when her husband died, see: https://www.library.hbs.edu/hc/wes/collections/women_law/, no author, accessed March 22, 2025.

Richard laughs. Mrs Sucksby smooths her mouth, and begins to look crafty. “As for me,” she says, “- well, I had seen from the first that the only puzzle was, how to get the whole of the fortune when I was only due to have half. My comfort must be, that I had eighteen years for figuring it out in. I thought many times of you.” (*Fingersmith*: 339)

Securing her own financial stability by ruining her daughter’s and her ward’s lives may very well be seen as a clear perversion of the 19th century practice to marry off their children, especially their daughters, to men they did not know or like for political or financial reason in order to guarantee stability for their own lives. Even though Mrs. Sucksby takes the blame for Gentleman’s death in the end (“‘I done it,’ she said. ‘Lord knows, I’m sorry for it now; but I done it. And these girls here are innocent girls, and know nothing at all about it; and have harmed no-one.’”, *Fingersmith*: 508) and clearly feels remorse for what she has done to the girls (“She nodded. ‘She spoke of you,’ she said. ‘Of me? What did she say?’ ‘That she hoped you never knew. That she wished they might hang her, ten times over, before you should. That she and your mother had been wrong. [...]’”, *Fingersmith*: 543), both Maud and Sue reject the norms of patriarchal society after what men – Gentleman, Christopher Lilly, Dr. Christie, and Mrs. Sucksby by taking on a male role – have done to them, and choose to do what makes them happy – live happily in a homosexual relationship, supported by the money Marianne has left them and by the money Maud makes by writing pornographic novels (*Fingersmith*: 546-547):

When I kissed her, she shook. I remembered what it was, then, to make her shake by kissing her; and began to shake, too. I had been ill. I thought I might faint! We moved apart. She put her hand against her heart. (*Fingersmith*: 547)

Digression: Queer Literature

The homosexual desire and love between Maud and Sue in *Fingersmith* is a very present topic in the novel, as several scenes show:

I have begun, in sleeping, to dream unspeakable dreams; and to wake, each time, in a confusion of longing and fear. Sometimes she stirs. Sometimes she does not. “Go back to sleep,” she will say, if she does. Sometimes I do. Sometimes I don’t. Sometimes I rise and go about the room; sometimes, take drops. I take drops, this night; then return to her side; but sink, not into lethargy, but only into more confusion. I think of the books I have lately read, to Richard and to my uncle: they come back to me, now, in phrases, fragments – *pressed her lips and tongue – takes hold of my hand – hip, lip and tongue – forced it half-strivingly – took hold of my breasts – opened wide the lips of my little – the lips of her little cunt* – I cannot silence them. (*Fingersmith*: 280, original emphasis)

“Miss Sucksby, call her! Oh! I shall go mad! To think I thought she was a spider that had got you all in her web. To think there was once a time when I stood, pinning up her hair! If I had said – If she had turned – If I had known – I would have kissed her –“ “Kissed her?” said Dainty. “Kissed her!” I said. “Oh, Dainty, you would have kissed her, too! Anyone would! She was a pearl, a pearl! [...]” (*Fingersmith*: 534)

“I don’t want to be rich. I never wanted to be rich. I only want –“ [...] Then I looked back, into her eyes. “I only want you,” I said. (*Fingersmith*: 543-544)

While the main topic of this dissertation is the role and treatment of – in the corpus of this thesis, mostly heterosexual – women and female characters and their treatment by men and society, and the analyses are thus carried out from a feminist point of view rather than a queer one, it is nevertheless important to note that all members of the LGBTQ+ (standing for ‘lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and open to everyone else’) community, which includes men, women, non-binary, and transgender people, have had to experience horrendous ostracism, stigmatization, and cruelty throughout the centuries. Even nowadays, in the 21st century, they face similar struggles the first feminists had to overcome in the first waves of feminism in the 19th and 20th centuries⁵¹ in their striving for acceptance and equality. I therefore feel like it would do neither this work nor society, especially the LGBTQ+ community as a whole, justice to ignore the relevance of Queer Literature. This relevance (and importance) is underlined by the rising number of scholars who deal with queer studies, some of the most important and famous ones being Judith Butler (e.g. *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*, 1988, and *Undoing Gender*, 2004), David Halperin (*One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, 1990), Lauren Berlant (*Sex in Public*, 1998), or Michael Warner (*The Trouble With Normal*, 1999). Although queer studies only developed into its own scholarly field towards the end of the 1980s, it was, however, something people were already aware of in the 1800s, as will be explained in the following.

In the 19th century, people were, as already mentioned in section 3.1.1, aware of homosexuality, yet there has been the death penalty for ‘sodomy’ until 1861 (Williams 2017).⁵² Leaving alone the fact that the act in itself has been

⁵¹ For further information on the waves of feminism, see: <https://www.pacificu.edu/magazine/four-waves-feminism>, Martha Rampton, accessed March 22, 2025.

⁵² For full article, see: <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20170405-the-victorian-view-of-same-sex-desire>, Holly Williams, accessed March 22, 2025.

punished with death, the use of the word ‘sodomy’ is quite telling for the 19th century’s view on homosexuality, as it is defined as

1. Formerly: any form of sexual intercourse characterized as unnatural or immoral, or otherwise culturally stigmatized. Later: any of a number of forms of sexual intercourse other than heterosexual vaginal intercourse, esp. as legally defined (see note). Now chiefly: anal intercourse, esp. between men; (sometimes more generally) homosexual activity, homosexuality.
2. *figurative*. Any behaviour that is considered to be immoral, unnatural, demeaning, or shameful. (*OED* s.v. *sodomy*, n.).

Michel Foucault, in contrast to this definition, claimed in the first volume of his *The History of Sexuality* (1976) that there has been an increasing interest in sexuality outside of the simple wife-husband-relationship in the 19th century, which led to the ‘birth’ of homosexuality, as a person interested in same-sex relationships would no longer be an individual, but homosexual people would form a new “species”:

As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle; written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away. It was consubstantial with him, less as a habitual sin than as a singular nature. We must not forget that the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized-Westphal's famous article of 1870 on "contrary sexual sensations" can stand as its date of birth – less by a type of sexual relations than by a certain quality of sexual sensibility, a certain way of inverting the masculine and the feminine in oneself. Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species. (Foucault 1976: 43)

With these claims, Foucault caused, according to Alan Soble (2009), “a thunderstorm among philosophers, historians, and other theorists of sex” (Soble 2009: 118), as he disagreed with the established discourse about sexuality introduced by, for example, Freud, Reich, or Marcuse (*ibid.*). Despite this “thunderstorm”, Soble claims, Foucault had a great influence on gender studies, feminism, and queer theory (*ibid.*).

What can, therefore, be found in the 19th century is a harsh punishment for homosexuality on the one hand, and an increasing interest in same-sex-relations on

the other. While in the 18th century, pornographic literature and especially literature that included homosexual lovers were very likely to be banned (one of the most famous examples being *Fanny Hill* (1748, 1749) by John Cleland, who was charged with “producing an obscene work” before the novel was, despite becoming an – illegal – bestseller, withdrawn from circulation⁵³), the 19th century gave room for more queer literature with *Ein Jahr in Arkadien: Kyllenion* (1805) by August, Duke of Sachsen-Gotha, which is considered to be “the earliest known novel that centers on an explicitly male-male love affair” (Haggerty 2000: 612), *Carmilla* (1871) by Sheridan Le Fanu, which Pam Keesey (1993) calls “the most famous and influential lesbian vampire story” (Keesey 1993: 9), or, most famously, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) by Oscar Wilde. However, the trials and the imprisonment of Oscar Wilde, which led to a decline in his health and, possibly, his ultimate death, show that, despite an increasing interest, actually and openly living out one’s homosexuality was not accepted in the 19th century. What was accepted, though, was authors who lived with a ‘companion’ of the same sex – which still leaves scholars to speculate about their sexuality. A prominent example would be Marie Corelli, who lived with her ‘companion’ Bertha Vyver for almost 40 years (Federico 2000: 163), left her all her possessions after her death in 1924 (Federico 2000: 8), and is buried side by side with her in Stratford-upon-Avon (*ibid.*). It has, however, also been reported that Corelli had been madly in love with the painter Arthur Severn (*ibid.*), which, again, leads to speculations on whether Corelli was heterosexual and really just very good friends with Bertha, bisexual, or just pretended to be in love with a married painter to cover up her homosexuality. While speculation about Marie Corelli’s sexuality is not part of this thesis, it is, however, noteworthy that 19th century society accepted potential homosexuality if it was handled discretely. While one could argue that women like Marie Corelli and Bertha Vyver were more free to live out their – potential – relationship because female homosexuality was never criminalized in England (Adut 2005: 223), the proposition that ‘discrete homosexuality’ was overlooked is underlined by the fact that London society was well aware of Oscar Wilde’s homosexuality way before his trials, and yet treated him as “society’s darling” (Adut 2005: 214). However,

⁵³ Sabor (2004), see: <https://www-oxforddnb-com.emedien.ub.uni-muenchen.de/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-5595?rskey=O2XQIR&result=1>, Peter Sabor, accessed March 22, 2025.

one needs to bear in mind that the experiences of celebrities and those of common people were and are not the same, as ‘scandals’ – calling it a scandal because being anything other than heterosexual was very much considered to be a scandal in the 19th century – are always more likely to be swept under the rug for people that are widely loved and praised. This is underlined by what Hesney Wedgwood, a London magistrate in the first half of the 19th century, had to say about the punishment for homosexuality, claiming that ‘sodomy’ was the only capital crime rich men were able to commit without being prosecuted for it (Cocks 2003: 38). This statement was made after he committed James Pratt and John Smith, who, in 1835, became the last (known) men who were hanged for homosexual acts in Great Britain, an execution that was followed by “groans and hisses” (*The Morning Post* 1835, issue 20273, p. 4) by the spectators, which could have either signified their distaste against the homosexual act, but might just as well have been a sign of the public’s discontent with Pratt and Smith’s verdict, as it has been reported that many people came forward to beg for mercy for them⁵⁴.

What can be seen in the 19th century attitude towards queer people is that there are quite some obvious parallels between society’s stance towards feminism and towards homosexuality – though, of course, the treatment of queer people due to their sexuality was undoubtably worse than that of women due to their gender. Just as heterosexual women were not supposed to enjoy sex and were ostracized for having sex outside of their marriages, yet for men it was a different story, society was highly hypocritical when it came to homosexuality: As mentioned before, prostitution was not illegal or a criminal offense in the 19th century, and until 1875, the age of consent was twelve, until 1885, it was thirteen, and after 1885, it was sixteen (Leighton 1989: 110). This means that, while women were supposed to sit at home and only have sex as a means of reproduction, being told that it is naughty, dirty, and unseemly, men were free to go and sleep with whoever they wanted, even children. The same can be seen when it comes to homosexuality. It was declared a criminal offence, punishable by death, and almost every offender was listed as a “labourer” (Cocks 2003: 27), which implies to the public that ‘something like this’ only happens in the lower classes, which were, again, labeled as naughty, dirty, and

⁵⁴ For full article about James Pratt and John Smith, see: <https://www.bl.uk/lgbtq-histories/articles/the-men-killed-under-the-buggery-act#>, no author, accessed March 22, 2025.

unseemly. However, Cocks shows that of those arrested for homosexual offences, 22% were gentlemen (*ibid.*), which proves that what society preached and what society did were two different things.

As the aim of this thesis is to find out how the situation for women, no matter their sexuality, has changed from the 19th century, which may be called the birth of modern-day feminism, to contemporary times, it is also interesting to see in how far the situation for members of the LGBTQ+ community has changed. When it comes to literature, queer novels have been published throughout the 20th century, including novels like Virginia Woolfe's *Orlando* (1928), James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956), and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982). *Orlando* deals with gender-swap, cross-dressing, and fantastical elements, as Orlando lives to be over 300 years old; *Giovanni's Room* deals with the struggles of coming out and accepting one's sexuality; *The Color Purple* concentrates on racism, incest, patriarchal violence, and lesbian love. Queer literature of the 21st century, in contrast, focuses more on the external struggles queer people are faced with, including stigmatization, rejection, and ostracism. One of the most famous novels that deals with all those problems is *The Line of Beauty* (2004) by Alan Hollinghurst: big topics of the novel are the stigmatization of diseases like AIDS and the hypocrisy of society when it comes to homosexuality. That does not mean, however, that queer literature focuses solely on the problems of the queer community: According to de Groot, for example, "lesbian historical fiction might allow the creation of a new set of possibilities, outside of (or at least not defined by) patriarchal, heteronormative bounds and historiographic limits" (de Groot 2009: 151). This can be seen in *Fingersmith*, in which, as Akira Suwa (2022) claims, the sexuality of the main characters allows them to temporarily escape the everyday constraints and pressures of patriarchal and heteronormative society (Suwa 2022: 1)

As this digression has shown, the struggles members of the LGBTQ+ community have had to face in the 19th century were enormous, and even nowadays, they face the same problems the first feminists did 200 years ago: ostracization, stigmatization, etc. What can, however, also be seen is a step in the right direction,

as more and more people, companies, and countries call for equalization, gender-friendly language, representation, etc. Representing queer people in media, such as movies, TV-shows, but also in novels, including bestsellers like *Breakfast on Pluto* (1998) by Patrick McCabe or *The Prophets* (2021) by Robert Jones Jr, is a good start of inclusion. The quote of Siegfried Broß, cited in the Introduction of this thesis, however, also applies here: one cannot achieve equalization between all genders and people of all sexualities by only changing the law or introducing measures like holding “Gay-Parades”, announcing diversity officers in companies, or making a language more gender-friendly, but society needs to change its attitude towards the LGBTQ+ community. Just as society has not yet fully accepted the equalization of men and women, it is unfortunately not there yet for the queer community either, as stonewall, who provide information, support, and guidance on LGBTQ+ inclusion in the UK, points out that they face discrimination in almost all aspects of life:⁵⁵

- Health: 23% have witnessed discriminatory or negative remarks by healthcare staff, and 90% have reported experiencing delays when seeking transition-related healthcare
- Home: 46% of homosexual and 47% of trans people do not feel able to communicate freely about their sexuality with their family
- Work: 35% hide their sexuality at work for fear of discrimination
- University: 47% have been targeted by negative comments by their fellow students and 28% have been excluded by the other students for being a member of the LGBTQ+ community
- Hate crime: 64% have experienced anti-LGBTQ+ violence or abuse
- Sport: 70% of football fans have heard or witnessed homophobia
- International: 70 countries still criminalize same-sex relationships

While the main topic of this thesis is the development of feminism and the ongoing struggle for equalization between the genders, and my analyses are applied from a heterosexual female point of view, it is important to me to show that one cannot simply separate the struggles: misogyny, sexism, homo- and transphobia,

⁵⁵ Due to space restrictions, only one example of each category stonewall names has been taken into this thesis. For the full article and all facts and statistics, please see <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/media/lgbt-facts-and-figures>, no author, accessed March 22, 2025.

racism, etc. are not separated problems, but they are overlapping and a person can be affected by multiple forms of exclusion and discrimination. I therefore found it important to highlight the importance of queer representation and queer literature in this digression.

3.3 Conclusion Chapter 3

As this chapter has shown, there are different literary ways to approach the 19th century, two of which have been introduced here: Regency Romances and neo-Victorian literature. What can be seen is that those two approaches portray the 19th century quite contrary to one another: while Regency Romances paint a very colorful and romanticized picture of the Regency period, focus on the upper classes and on the positive things like beautiful dresses, fun dance parties, etc., and pretend that true love always wins in the end, neo-Victorian literature shows the problems, the hypocrisy, and the overall negative parts of the Victorian era. Interestingly, while the Victorian era was, economically and globally speaking, much more fruitful and successful for Britain than the Regency period, modern approaches to both the Regency period and the Victorian period convey the picture that the Regency was much better. This opposite view on the 19th century can also be seen in how women and their position within society are portrayed.

While Regency Romances do acknowledge that men were essentially ranked above women in the 19th century, modern Regency Romances also paint the – unrealistic – picture that women always got to choose how and with whom they wanted to spend their lives, and that true love overcomes all obstacles and leads to greatness. This true love can, however, only be achieved if the two partners of a relationship treat each other with mutual respect and see each other as equals. Fundamentally, this means that without an equal standing of the genders, there cannot be real greatness within a society – and, consequently, a nation. The message of modern Regency Romances is, therefore, bipartite: on the one hand, it tells women that they should not settle for less than what they really want because anything less than that is destined to make them unhappy. On the other hand, it tells society that denying women equal rights only holds it back as a whole because a society that holds half of its members back cannot achieve anything great in the long run. The problem with this is, however, that the version of the Regency Period

those romances paint is so distorted that the problems of the 19th century are often no longer perceived by a 21st-century-audience.

Neo-Victorian literature, in contrast, concentrates on the hypocrisy and the problems of the 19th century: Women were suppressed, ostracized, and underestimated. If a man said something about a woman, he was believed, and she was not heard. If a woman demanded respect, she was crazy. If a woman did what men did, she was 'morally unbearable' and ostracized. The message of neo-Victorian literature when it comes to the treatment of women is therefore quite clear: if our contemporary society does not learn from the mistakes of the past, it will fail. Greatness and progress can only be achieved if everyone works together, not if some members of society place themselves above others. Limiting and prohibiting others from getting equal education, possibilities, and salary only leads to creating an enemy from within that will destroy a nation rather than bringing it forward.

What can be seen in the two short summaries of Regency Romances and neo-Victorian literature is that, at the end of the day, they proclaim the same message through different approaches. One exaggerates in a positive way, painting a utopia and telling its reader "would it not be nice if we could achieve this?". The other one confronts the reader with the harsh reality of what was, what is now, and what could be if society does not change its ways. As both sorts of novels speak to different kinds of readers, it is, in my opinion, important to be aware of both and not exclude one from scholarly work.

After having examined what the situation was like for women in the 19th century and how contemporary society deals with the example of the 19th century, the next chapter will draw on contemporary novels set in contemporary times. The importance will be on finding out in how far things have and have not changed for women, and where our current problems lie. What chapter 3 has shown is that what the first world-wide famous feminist scholars, like Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, Simone de Beauvoir, or Hélène Cixous wrote in the 20th century about feminism, as well as the criticism they express, is very much taken into account by authors who want to voice criticism of the 19th century. Chapter 4 will firstly concentrate on the changing image of women in the 20th century, the

time in which feminism as we know it today really started, and then concentrate on a topic that has not been considered so far: different images of women from multiple cultures coming together, and the problems and similarities of women with different cultural backgrounds.

4. Women in Contemporary Times

After having talked about literature and women in the 19th century and contemporary literature set in the 1800s, as well as its view on females, the question that remains is the situation of women in the 21st century. Superficially speaking, one could, of course, ask: what else do you want? In our Western society, women have the same chances as men academically, they are not – at least openly – excluded from certain jobs, and every year, more and more is done to achieve equalization between the sexes. However, this is only one side of the coin.

On the other side, there is still a gender pay gap in all countries of the Western world,⁵⁶ and though, according to the UK Parliament, it has been continuously getting smaller since 1997, the median pay for all employees was still 14.3% less for women than for men in the UK in April 2023.⁵⁷ While one could argue that this number derives from the fact that it is taken from an overall evaluation of employees and it only seems so high because it is not taken into account that men and women occupy different types of jobs, one needs to understand that this is exactly the problem: lucrative senior roles in high-paying industries are still mostly occupied by men rather than women, and, according to The Forbes Magazine Online, there is substantial evidence that men get promoted “at a much faster pace than women”.⁵⁸ Consequently, this means that, even if there was no gender pay gap within the same profession (which, Forbes argues, is not true, as, for example, female preschool and elementary teachers in the US only earn 83.8 cents for every dollar earned by a man in the same profession), there would still be a bias against women, as they have a much harder time getting into these high-paying jobs.

Moreover, women are faced with several assumptions and stereotypes about their womanhood and their validation within society. In a 2017-study, Kim Parker,

⁵⁶ As stated in the introduction, I define the ‘Western world’ as countries that follow similar values on issues such as gender equality. For the purpose of this paper, these include primarily the United Kingdom, North America (USA and Canada), and Germany. Current data on gender equality issues is therefore collected from all of these countries.

⁵⁷ For full article, see [https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn07068/#:~:text=According%20for%20the%20Office%20for,\(figures%20exclude%20vertime%20pay\),](https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn07068/#:~:text=According%20for%20the%20Office%20for,(figures%20exclude%20vertime%20pay),) Brigid Francis-Devine and Patrick Brione, accessed March 22, 2025.

⁵⁸ For full article, see <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kimelsesser/2020/03/30/on-equal-pay-day-what-is-the-real-gender-pay-gap/?sh=1b76899e28ba>, Kim Elsesser, accessed March 22, 2025.

Juliana Horowitz, and Renee Stepler have found that, in the US, the trait that is valued most in women is physical attractiveness, followed by empathy, nurturing, and kindness, whereas for men it is honesty and morality followed by professional and financial success (Parker *et al.* 2017: 19). The study also shows that “being family-oriented” is a value that is placed at 5% for men, but not at all for women, which implies that, as being “empathic, nurturing, and kind” is placed at 30% for women, being family-oriented is a prerequisite for women (*ibid.*). On the other hand, there are three values that are placed on women that are not placed on men at all: competence and ability, independence and self-reliance, and the ability to multitask (*ibid.*). As those are values that are appreciated in the work field, one can therefore assume that those are values that are prerequisites for men. What one can take from this study is, therefore, that in the eyes of society, the most important thing about a woman are her looks, her prioritizing her family is taken for granted, and the work field still does not accept it as a given that a woman can be just as professional and independent as a man. Another interesting result of the study is that more women (79%) than men (64%) say that women feel pressured to be attractive (Parker *et al.* 2017: 21). This means that, while men find it important for women to be attractive, they do not necessarily realize the pressure this puts on women. It also underlines the – subjective – perception of how women are seen in society: If a woman wears no makeup or does not do her hair every day, she is ‘not taking care of herself’. If she wears a lot of makeup, she is said to be unprofessional and only ‘trying to impress the men’. If she is dressing casually, she is lazy, if she is dressing up, she is ‘overdoing it’. This being said, it is not at all implied that men are never judged on their appearance, but that the judgement women receive is a lot harsher than that of men; this can most clearly be seen in tabloid-columns called ‘flop or top’ in which – almost exclusively – female celebrities get ranked into the top- or flop-category based on their appearance at a certain event.

However, a strong sentiment of women empowerment has been built up throughout the 20th and 21st century, and women started playing a more important role on the world stage. In 1979, Margaret Thatcher became the first female British Prime Minister; and even though Thatcher valued the old, ‘Victorian’ values highly, her election is seen as a break-through for women in politics: In 1997, Madeleine Albright became the first female secretary of state in the US, and famously claimed

that it “took me a long time to find my voice, there is no question about it, but having found it, I’m not gonna shut up”.⁵⁹ In 2005, Angela Merkel became the first female chancellor of Germany. In 2021, Kamala Harris became the first female – and black – vice president of the US. Even when it comes to royalty without actual political influence, after the death of Queen Elizabeth II, who ruled the UK for 70 years, in 2022, people were mourning that, as the three princes in line of succession to the throne – the new King Charles III, Prince William, and Prince George – are all male, we will most likely not see another British Queen within our lifetime – despite the fact that most people have not seen a British King before Charles in their lifetime either. This all shows that, despite the obstacles and problems we face, women have found their way to the international scene and are not willing to give it up.

As it is often said, literature functions as a ‘mirror’ to society. Novels often transport certain messages and morals that are valued highly within a society, and, by this, also shape society’s views on certain topics. The equality of the sexes is one of these topics because, as described by Siegfried Broß, cited in the introduction and the digression in chapter 3, it is something that cannot be changed simply by changing the law, but by changing the mindset of the people. This chapter therefore focuses on contemporary literature set in – mostly – contemporary times with contemporary female characters. In a first step, the changing image of women throughout the 20th century is analyzed on the example of Jeffrey Archer’s *Clifton-Chronicles* and Ken Follett’s *Century Trilogy*. In a second step, the position of women in a more and more globalized world as well as the image and struggles of women with a multicultural background will be analyzed on the example of Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* and Zadie Smith’s *NW*.

Jeffrey Archer and Ken Follett, who are both bestselling authors, yet neither of them is deemed of great scholarly importance, each wrote the respective series that will be analyzed as a family-story over the course of the 20th century. The interesting part in these novels will, therefore, be to see how the position of women has changed, where we are now, and how a bestselling male author of the 21st

⁵⁹ See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qdklvPCICPc&ab_channel=USATODAY, accessed March 22, 2025.

century portrays women. Monica Ali and Zadie Smith, in contrast, focus not solely on the position of women in the 21st century, but, considering the ongoing globalization and the expanding diversity of societies and the consequent existence of several images of women within one society, extend their focus on immigrant women and women from different cultural backgrounds and their experiences as well as their position within Western society.

4.1 The Changing Image of Women in the 20th Century – Jeffrey Archer’s *Clifton-Chronicles* and Ken Follett’s *Century Trilogy*

The *Clifton-Chronicles*, written from 2011 to 2017, tells the fictional life-story of Harry Clifton, from the tragic circumstances of his birth and early youth to his death in 1992. The series contains seven novels and, despite the fact that its main character is a man, draws upon topics such as feminism, social change within a society, but also politics and – male and female – entrepreneurship. Including women as important characters into his works – even though in most of his novels the main character is a man who is being guided by a woman, as can be seen in *Heads You Win* (1918), but also, as will be explained in this section, the *Clifton-Chronicles* – is an important thing to do for Jeffrey Archer because he believes himself to be a feminist, as he points out in an interview to *The Lady*, England’s longest running weekly magazine for women, in 2014:

Three, in particular, have played a major role in Archer’s life and their names come round again and again, like key characters in one of his bestselling novels. They are his wife of 50 years, Mary, his ‘remarkable mother’, Lola – and Margaret Thatcher.

In fact, rather surprisingly, there’s something of the feminist about Archer. “I’m a very strong believer in equal rights, because I know women are superior,” he says. “And that’s not said for *The Lady* – I’ve proved it all my life. I believe women are superior. Full stop.”

He pauses briefly for breath and then names a fourth heroine: German Chancellor Angela Merkel. “I’d have her as prime minister today,” he announces. “I’d bring her over in a rowing boat and put her in Number 10. She’s fantastic.”⁶⁰

Jeffrey Archer’s affection for Margaret Thatcher comes from the fact that she appointed him deputy chairman of the Conservative party in 1985, but he

⁶⁰ For full article, see <https://lady.co.uk/women-are-superiorfull-stop-0>, no author, accessed March 22, 2025.

resigned a year later in 1986 after it has been reported that he paid to sleep with a prostitute.⁶¹ As Prime Minister, Thatcher represented the right wing of the Conservative Party and coined the term ‘Thatcherism’, which refers to, according to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, “certain aspects of her ethical outlook and personal style, including moral absolutism, fierce nationalism, a zealous regard for the interests of the individual, and a combative, uncompromising approach to achieving political goals”.⁶² Archer, in contrast and despite his admiration for Thatcher, claimed in 1999 that, though he was a member of the Conservative Party, he disliked extremists: “I hope we don't return to extremes. I'm what you might call centre-right but I've always disliked the right wing as much as I've disliked the left wing”.⁶³ This means that his views come from a conservative point of view, and, though he said otherwise, his admiration for Margaret Thatcher also implies that he rates the Victorian values Thatcher tried to retrieve highly. To find out whether this is actually the case will be part of section 4.1.1.

Ken Follett, in contrast to Archer, has not really made public statements about his beliefs about women and their standing in society. His novels, however, almost always include both male and female main characters, which speak for themselves. His *Century Trilogy*, written from 2011 to 2015, concentrates on men and women from Wales, England, Germany, Russia, and the US during the major events of the 20th century: the First World War, the Second World War, and the Cold War. Again, the focus is not primarily on women *per se*, but on the historical development of society as we know it today, which includes the development of the position of women.

In this section, the focus will lie on how bestselling authors like Jeffrey Archer and Ken Follett – according to [business-standard.com](https://www.business-standard.com), as of 2021, Archer has sold over 275 million copies of his 37 titles in 97 countries, and his novels have

⁶¹ For full article on Archer's political and personal career up until his conviction for perjury in 2001, see <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2001/jul/19/archer.politics2>, Simon Jeffrey, accessed March 22, 2025.

⁶² For full article on Margaret Thatcher in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, see <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Margaret-Thatcher>, Hugo Young, accessed March 22, 2025.

⁶³ See http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/269876.stm as the answer to the last question, no author, accessed March 22, 2025.

been translated into 33 languages,⁶⁴ and, according to bookreporter.com, Ken Follett has sold over 170 million copies of his 32 titles⁶⁵ – portray women and where, according to them, the problems of society lie. After analyzing the two series, section 4.1.3 will provide current data, statistics, as well as examples on the position of women to examine where society stands now regarding the 'woman question'.

4.1.1 Jeffrey Archer's *Clifton-Chronicles*

As it has been mentioned before, the *Clifton-Chronicles*, containing seven novels, focus on Harry Clifton, an obviously male character, and his family. The internal focalization of the heterodiegetic narrator does not solely lie with Harry Clifton, but it switches from chapter to chapter and gives the reader insight into all the characters of the novels. By doing this, it becomes obvious that Harry Clifton's success in life does not fall back only to him, but that he owes almost everything to the women in his life, most importantly his mother Maisie and his wife Emma. However, it is made explicitly clear that these women are not and have never been stay-at-home-wives whose only duty in life it is to accommodate their son or husband, but they are strong, independent women who work for their money and, therefore, function as role models for their sons – in Maisie's case, Harry, and in Emma's case, their son Sebastian. In the following, the role of the women in the *Clifton-Chronicles* will be analyzed further.

4.1.1.1 *From Rags to Riches – Maisie Clifton*

The first novel – *Only Time Will Tell* – is the only one out of the whole saga that breaks the form of heterodiegetic narration and, instead, introduces an autodiegetic narrator: the prelude is told by Maisie Clifton, the first chapter is told by Harry Clifton, and throughout the novel, there are, again, chapters told by Maisie. In the prelude, Maisie tells the reader how she met her husband, Arthur Clifton. They both grew up poor in the working class of Bristol, and soon after the First World War,

⁶⁴ See https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/british-author-jeffrey-archer-signs-3-book-deal-with-harpercollins-121011400964_1.html#:~:text=Over%20the%20course%20of%20his,million%20copies%20around%20the%20world.,no%20author,accessed%20March%2022,%202025.

⁶⁵ See <https://www.bookreporter.com/authors/ken-follett>, no author, accessed March 22, 2025.

Arthur asked her out. Being told that men “only wanted one thing” (*Only Time Will Tell*: 4), she deliberately plans to get him to propose to her:

The following Saturday, Arthur invited me to the flicks to see Lillian Gish in *Broken Blossoms*, and although I allowed him to put an arm around my shoulder, I still didn't let him kiss me. He didn't make a fuss. Truth is, Arthur was rather shy. The next Saturday I did allow him to kiss me, but when he tried to put a hand inside my blouse, I pushed him away. In fact I didn't let him do that until he'd proposed, bought a ring and the Reverend Watts had read the banns a second time. (*ibid.*)

However, after her engagement and being told that she was the “last known virgin on our side of the River Avon” (*ibid.*), she decides to lose her virginity before getting married. Although she plans to do it with Arthur, she ends up sleeping with Hugo Barrington, heir to the Barrington-title and shipping company:

When he put a hand on my bum, I should have slapped his face, but for several reasons I didn't. To start with, I thought about the advantages of having sex with someone I wasn't likely to come across again. And I have to admit I was flattered by his advances. (*ibid.*)

She then reveals that she does not feel too guilty about being unfaithful to her future husband as he had been “sick all over me on the journey back to Bristol” (*Only Time Will Tell*: 5) and that her mother, after she told her what happened, advises her to “keep my mouth shut as she didn't want to have to cancel the wedding, and even if I did turn out to be pregnant, no one would be any the wiser, as Arthur and I would be married by the time anyone noticed” (*ibid.*). Later on, she reveals that she did end up pregnant with Harry and that she did not know who the father was:

Arthur was delighted when I told him I was in the family way, because he wanted at least six babies. My worry was whether the first would be his, but, as only my mum and I knew the truth, there was no reason for Arthur to be suspicious. Eight months later I gave birth to a boy, and thank God there was nothing to suggest that he wasn't Arthur's. (*Only Time Will Tell*: 104)

Soon after, Arthur disappears and is declared dead, it being later revealed by Old Jack Tar in another autodiegetic chapter that Arthur had been locked inside the double bottom of the *Maple Leaf*, the ship they were currently building, and, to not lose any profit, left there to die by Hugo Barrington (*Only Time Will Tell*: 236-240).

The beginning of the saga strongly underlines the beliefs about women of the 19th century: Maisie had sex outside of her marriage, and she did so with a man that she was not going to marry. She did not tell her husband, and she pretended a

child that was potentially someone else's was his. In the time of setting – the series starts in 1920 –, this would have clearly marked her as a Fallen Woman, and, as no one knew about her affair and therefore could not ostracize her, she is punished otherwise: she is widowed at 20 years old with a one-year-old son, has no money, no home of her own, and no perspective. In the 19th century, that would have been the end of it. However, as the novels tell the story of the Clifton-family over the course of the 20th century, they also show how the times are changing – especially for women.

As it was often the case for the working class – and especially the women of the working class –, Maisie did not go to school and therefore did not know how to read or write (*Only Time Will Tell*: 14). However, she does not let her lack of academic education discourage her and goes looking for a job. Funny enough, it becomes obvious that, while women had been the backbone of society at home during the First World War and where the ones who kept the economy alive, men tried to push them back into the 'sphere they belonged to' – meaning the domestic sphere – when they came back from war:

Maisie's attempts to find a job didn't turn out to be easy, not least because the government had recently issued a directive to all employers advising them to take on men who had served in the armed forces before considering any other candidates. [...] Although women over thirty had been given the vote at the last election after their sterling service in munitions factories during the war, they were pushed to the back of the queue when it came to peacetime jobs. (*Only Time Will Tell*: 110)

Additionally, she is told that she is either "too young" (*ibid.*) for a normal job, yet at the same time "too old" (*Only Time Will Tell*: 111) for an apprenticeship, and that her "tits aren't big enough" (*Only Time Will Tell*: 113) to work as a barmaid. She ends up being employed by Miss Tilly in a tea shop, in which she excels (*Only Time Will Tell*: 114). When she is offered a better-paid job at the Royal Hotel, however, her mother is not happy for her, but is worried about the reaction of Maisie's brother Stan:

"I don't doubt it," said Grandma, "but I can think of one problem we're all going to have to learn to live with." "And what's that, Mum?" asked Maisie. "You could end up earnin' more than Stan, and he's not going to like that, not one little bit." "Then he'll just have to learn to live with it, won't he?" said Grandpa, offering an opinion for the first time in weeks. (*Only Time Will Tell*: 28)

This, again, shows the attitude towards women of the early 20th century. Women were not expected to be ambitious and, even if they had to work in order to help keep the family alive, they were definitely not supposed to ‘outshine’ men in any way, not in performance and definitely not in salary. This sentiment of male superiority in the work-area is something that can still be seen in today’s society in the aforementioned gender pay gap. Even years later, after having worked several jobs, Maisie still “didn’t take any money home, because she didn’t want Stan to find out she was earning more than he was” (*The Sins of the Father*: 235).

Despite Maisie’s success in work, her career is not a straight line to the top, but there are several obstacles that she needs to overcome. After having worked at the Royal Hotel for a while, she decides to buy Tilly’s Tea Shop after Miss Tilly retired. When she quits at the Royal Hotel, her boss, Mr. Frampton, asks her “Frankly, Maisie, you are the best at what you do, but are you really sure you want to switch from being a player to joining the management?” (*Only Time Will Tell*: 151), clearly questioning a woman’s ability to run a business. The *Clifton-Chronicles*, however, show that things are beginning to change in the course of time: A couple years after the incident with Mr. Frampton and during the Second World War, Maisie works at the Grand Hotel. Similar to the First World War, women took on more and more responsibility while men were at war, and it is no longer totally unimaginable that a woman could do a ‘man’s’ job; in a John-Fowles-style of heterodiegetic narration, it is implied that times are, indeed, changing despite the fact that men and women did not yet have equal rights:

Many of the young men who worked at the hotel were leaving to join the armed forces, and their places were being taken by women. It was no longer considered a stigma for a young lady to work, and Maisie found herself taking on more and more responsibility as the number of male staff dwindled. The restaurant manager was due to retire on his sixtieth birthday, but Maisie assumed that Mr Hurst would ask him to stay on until the end of the war. It came as a shock when he called her into his office and offered her the job. (*The Sins of the Father*: 231)

“I don’t know how I’m going to replace you,” he said before adding, “but management make these decisions, not me, you understand. It’s out of my hands.” “But I enjoy my job,” said Maisie. “That may well be the case, but I have to tell you that on this occasion I agree with head office.” Maisie sat back, ready to accept her fate. “They have made it clear,” continued Mr Hurst, “that they no longer want you to work in the dining room, and have asked me to replace you as soon as possible.” “But why?” “Because they’re keen for you to go into management. Frankly, Maisie, if you were a man, you’d already be running one of our hotels. Congratulations!” (*The Sins of the Father*: 252-253)

While the gender-bias is still mentioned and Mr. Hurst admits that it is only for her gender that Maisie has not been promoted years earlier, it is also shown that society is slowly but surely accepting that a position should be filled with the person most qualified for the job rather than someone solely based on their gender. It is also important to mention that it is only at this point, when she is starting a management position, that Maisie decides that she wants to learn how to read and write. Similarly, she meets her second husband at school, him being Harry's former teacher and her current teacher, which stands in clear contrast to the place society assigned to women at the time: Maisie did not marry to financially secure herself and her son, but she secured herself, working hard and making her own money, and got married for no other reason than her wanting to get married. The same motif of doing things on her terms for no other reason than her wanting to do those things can be seen in the fact that at 62, she decides that she wants to go to university and "three years later graduated with a first-class honours degree" (*Cometh the Hour*: 244). It also stands in contrast to the beliefs about the New Woman, who was said to 'bring an end to British society' because of their 'focus on 'being like a man' and their unwillingness to marry and bear children' – a belief that, in itself, reduced women to a mere birthing-machine rather than a human being. Very much in contrast, she worked hard, became independent, and overcame all the obstacles that were thrown into her path not because she was 'selfish' and 'did not care about her family', as the early feminists were often accused of being, but, quite contrary, she did everything she did for her son and to secure a better life for him.

Most of these obstacles thrown into her path stem from the deep-rooted hatred Hugo Barrington had for her – despite the fact that he slept with her and simply for the fact that Maisie had the audacity to get pregnant and have a baby that could have potentially be his, and because she was a living reminder that he signed Arthur Clifton's death-sentence by deciding to not open up the ship to find him. He refuses to take responsibility for either of those incidents, and does everything in his power to hurt her – both physically and mentally by interfering with her life, burning down her tea shop and having her fired from her new job afterwards:

“Now you listen to me, Maisie Clifton, and listen carefully,” he said, a look of fury in his eyes. “If you ever threaten me again, I’ll not only see that your brother is sacked, but I’ll make sure he never works in this city again. And if you’re ever foolish enough to even hint to my wife that I’m that boy’s father, I’ll have you arrested, and it won’t be a prison you’ll end up in, but a mental asylum”. He let go of her, clenched a fist and then punched her full in the face. She collapsed on to the ground and curled up into a ball, expecting him to kick her again and again. When nothing happened, she looked up to see him standing over her. He was tearing the thin brown envelope into little pieces and scattering them like confetti over a bride. (*Only Time Will Tell*: 173)

Hugo smiled when he saw the photograph of Maisie Clifton and her staff standing on the pavement, grimly surveying the burnt-out remains of Tilly’s. The gods were clearly on his side. (*Only Time Will Tell*: 222)

“He gave his order to a young lady who appeared to be in charge,” continued Hugo, ignoring the comment. [...] “When he came out of his room he observed the same woman, still dressed in her hotel uniform, leaving room 371. She then walked to the end of the corridor, climbed through the window and out on to the fire escape.” [...] “Be assured, Mr Barrington, the person concerned will be dismissed immediately, and not supplied with a reference. May I add how grateful I am that you have brought this matter to my attention.” (*Only Time Will Tell*: 228-229)

After being fired, Maisie finds herself desperate for a job to secure the future of her son Harry and, despite the stigma and the blow it does to her reputation should anyone find out, starts working as a prostitute in a nightclub to make sure she could give her son everything that he wanted and needed. This part of Maisie’s story describes the dilemma women were often faced with in the 19th and early 20th century: women were often desperate to find jobs to support their families and if they, for one reason or another, ended up working in a job that ostracized them from society, they were marked as a Fallen Woman. Being branded as a Fallen Woman, however, made it impossible for them to return to a ‘normal’ life within society, which means that once a woman was seen a certain way, she had no other choice but to be that person society chose for her to be.

In the *Clifton-Chronicles*, Harry reacts just how society dictates him – and how Hugo Barrington had hoped him to – to view prostitutes when he finds out about his mother’s new profession:

Harry ignored her. His eyes had settled on a woman at the far end of the bar who was listening intently to an older man who had his hand on her thigh. The girl looked to see who he was staring at. "I must say, you know class when you see it," she said. "Mind you, Maisie can be choosy, and I have to warn you, she doesn't come cheap." Harry turned and bolted back up the steps, pulled open the door and ran out on to the street, with Giles chasing after him. Once Harry was on the pavement, he fell to his knees and was violently sick. Giles knelt and put his arm around his friend, trying to comfort him. (*Only Time Will Tell*: 342-343)

Hugo Barrington's goal was to both hurt Maisie and Harry by revealing Maisie's situation and to break up Emma and Harry. Emma, however, who, together with Maisie, functions as the living proof that times are changing throughout the novel (for the reasoning behind this claim, see section 4.1.1.2), tells Harry that she does not only not care about Maisie's vocation, but that she is "admiring your mother even more than I did before" (*Only Time Will Tell*: 358):

"She works as a waitress to support her family, ends up owning Tilly's, and when it's burnt to the ground she's accused of arson, but holds her head high, knowing she is innocent. She finds herself another job at the Royal Hotel, and when she's sacked, she still refuses to give up. She receives a cheque for six hundred pounds, and for a moment believes all her problems are solved, only to discover she's in fact penniless just at the time when she needs money to make sure you can stay at school. In desperation, she then turns to..." "But I wouldn't have wanted her to..." "She would have known that, Harry, but she still felt it was a sacrifice worth making." Another long silence followed. "Oh my God," said Harry. "How can I ever have thought badly of her." (*ibid.*)

Another indication the novels give that the times are changing is the reversal of the roles of Maisie and Hugo. While, in the beginning, it was made particularly clear that they came from different social standings and that they both lived according to their social classes, this changes throughout the novels. While Maisie works hard and works in jobs she does not necessarily want to work in in order to secure a better life for herself and her son and it is said that, after overcoming the obstacles destiny and Hugo threw into her way, "her two accounts were always in credit" (*The Sins of the Father*: 235), the opposite applies to Hugo. After his divorce from Elizabeth and being cut off by his father, he moved to London and, as he could not find a job ("if any potential employer knew his father, he never even got an interview, and when he did, his new boss expected him to work hours he hadn't realized existed, and for a wage that wouldn't have covered his bar bill at the club", *The Sins of the Father*: 214), quickly ran out of money (*ibid.*). Hugo's situation stands in clear contrast to Maisie's: the latter one would have taken on any job she could and would have worked hard, whereas Hugo's solution regarding his

financial situation is to beg his mother for money (“Mama could always be relied on for a tenner, just as she’d been for ten bob when he was at school”, *ibid.*) and, when that was not enough, find himself a rich woman: “It wasn’t her face or figure that immediately attracted his attention, but the pearls, three rows of them, that were draped around her neck” (*The Sins of the Father*: 215). In order to live off of her money, he promises her marriage (*The Sins of the Father*: 216), though he never intends to keep that promise. Instead, he steals her jewelry and paintings (*The Sins of the Father*: 222-223) and, once his father had died and he inherited the title and the money (*The Sins of the Father*: 225), he leaves Olga altogether. In this moment, it looks as if he would get away with his scheming, lying and manipulation again. However, just as Maisie represents the changes for women and the lower classes, Hugo represents the changes for the aristocracy and upper classes. Not only is his accomplice in the robbery of Olga charged with said robbery and willing to hand Hugo over to the authorities in order to receive a lighter sentence, but Olga is also suing him for breach of promise as well as lodging a paternity suit, as he impregnated her and then left her and their daughter (*The Sins of the Father*: 316). Being used to the fact that women are not believed over men and getting away with everything because of his name and his status, Hugo dismisses those two lawsuits, before being reminded that the times are changing:

“Among the evidence that will be presented to the court is the receipt for an engagement ring purchased from a Burlington Arcade jeweller, and both her resident housekeeper and her lady’s maid have signed affidavits confirming that you resided at forty-two Lowndes Square for over a year.” For the first time in ten years, Hugo asked Mitchell for his advice. “What do you think I should do?” he almost whispered. “If I found myself in your position, sir, I’d leave the country as soon as possible.” “How long do you think I’ve got?” “A week, ten days at the most.” (*The Sins of the Father*: 317)

Although it is beginning to look like he is getting away with everything again, as he is set free after his accomplice commits suicide in jail and he leaves the police station a free man (*The Sins of the Father*: 325), Olga is not willing to let it go. She visits him in his office with her daughter and tries to force him to pay for their child. When he resolves to threatening her and beating her, just as he did with Maisie when she did the same thing, she takes a letter opener and kills him before taking her own life (*The Sins of the Father*: 334-340). His death is quite symbolic: he represents the old beliefs of society, that men were the natural rulers and women stood below them, as well as the sanctity of the upper class. He therefore thinks he can get away

with everything and that he will always get what he wants and resolves to violence and threats if he does not. However, in the end it is a woman he does not even take seriously who takes his life, which indicates that those old beliefs are slowly being extinguished. On the other side, there is a woman from the lower classes without any education or means who, against all odds, finds her place in society by working hard and makes the best she possibly can out of her life. This is a symbol for the change of times in which one's life should no longer be determined by their gender or the circumstances of their birth, but by one's own determination and willingness to work hard for what they want.

4.1.1.2 Moral Opponents – Woman vs. Woman

Despite the fact that it is made clear throughout the novel that Harry Clifton would not have made it without the women in his life, a reoccurring theme of the novel is playing one woman against the other. On the one hand, one woman represents the ideal of what a modern woman should be like, and, on the other hand, her counterpart represents what a woman should not be like. While this is something that has been done before (see, for example, section 2.4.1, in which it is explained how Marie Corelli plays the New Woman – Honoria – against the traditional woman – her sister Georgie), the roles have been reversed in Archer's saga. Here, the ideal woman is a modern, strong, and independent, yet loving woman, while her counterpart is backwards, keen on traditions, and unopen for change. This can most clearly be seen in Harry's wife, Emma Clifton, née Barrington, and Lady Virginia Fenwick, Giles Barrington's first wife – and, consequently, the novels divide the female characters in two opposing camps.

4.1.1.2.1 Feminism in the Clifton Chronicles

In this camp, the women are modern, fierce, independent, and strong. Most prominently, there is Emma Clifton. Being born into the British aristocracy, her life takes a completely different turn when she falls in love with Harry Clifton. After she finds out she is pregnant by Harry, their wedding is crashed due to the fact that they might be siblings (*Only Time Will Tell*: 378-380). Consequently, they are not getting married, Harry leaves England to go to war, and Emma is expelled from school:

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Emma had also left Oxford early, but unlike Harry, she hadn't been given a choice. For her there would be no chance of returning. Pregnancy was frowned upon at Somerville, and even more so when you weren't married to the father. [...] Once it became obvious that Emma was pregnant, she was whisked off to her grandfather's estate in Scotland, to give birth to Harry's child. Barringtons don't produce illegitimate offspring, at least not in Bristol. Sebastian was crawling around the castle before the prodigal daughter was allowed to return to the Manor House. (*The Sins of the Father*: 56-57)

However, just like Maisie, Emma is not willing to accept the fate women in her position would have awaited at that time. She is neither ashamed of loving Harry nor of having his illegitimate son, and when she is told that Harry had been killed at sea, she refuses to believe that, too (*The Sins of the Father*: 60). Instead, she decides to go to the US on her own to find and bring Harry home. One thing that is striking, however, is how Emma views her instructor Peggy on the ship that brings her to America:

Down, down and down they went, the stairwells becoming more cramped with each deck. Peggy only stopped talking when a crew member stood aside to let them pass. Occasionally she would reward them with a warm smile. Emma had never come across anyone like Peggy in her life: so fiercely independent, yet somehow she managed to remain feminine, with her bobbed fair hair, skirt that only just fell below the knees, and tight jacket that left you in no doubt how good her figure was. (*The Sins of the Father*: 73)

While this observation shows how women were seen in the first half of the 20th century, even by other women who were not willing to play by the rules, namely that a woman could either be feminine or independent, but not both, it is also foreshadowing how Emma will turn out to be. Although she is a loving wife and mother to her husband and son, she also signs up for a business degree at Stanford University (*Best Kept Secret*: 48) in order to ultimately take up her place at the board of Barrington's, the family's shipping company (*Best Kept Secret*: 203). Despite her accomplishments, however, Emma is aware of the times they are living in, claiming her degree and her job

[...] have only been possible in my case because Cyrus Feldman and Ross Buchanan are enlightened men when it comes to treating women as equals. [...] It will still be decades before competent women are given the chance to replace incompetent men. (*Best Kept Secret*: 338)

When she has the opportunity to become chairman of Barrington's, she is immediately faced with prejudice and underestimation. Although her opponents even admit that they only have "one trump card" (*Be Careful What You Wish For*:

98) in the race for job, they are quite confident that Emma stands no chance against that trump: “You’re a man, and there isn’t a publicly listed company in the country that has a female chairman. In fact, few even have a woman on the board” (*ibid.*). Additionally, it is claimed that “I don’t believe that women were put on earth to chair boards, take on trade union leaders, build luxury liners or have to raise vast sums of money from bankers in the City of London” (*Be Careful What You Wish For*: 107). In her own speech, however, Emma takes advantage of those prejudices and addresses them directly:

“I suffer,” Emma continued, “from being a woman in a man’s world, and frankly there is nothing I can do about it. I appreciate that it will take a brave board to appoint a woman as chairman of Barrington’s, especially in the difficult circumstances we are currently facing. But then, courage and innovation are precisely what this company needs at the present time.” (*Be Careful What You Wish For*: 106)

One major character trait that separates the two camps of women in the novels is morality. While the ‘traditional’ women like Lady Virginia, who claim to be mourning the old times in which women were the Angel in the House, are portrayed to be manipulative, cunning, and overall evil, the ‘modern’ women, who were said to destroy society and all that is good in it in the 19th century, are highly moral. This can be seen in several characters, including Samantha, which will be explained later, as well as Emma. For the final vote on who is to become chairman, she decides to take the moral high road and abstain, despite the fact that her own son begged her not to do that (*ibid.*), whereas her opponent votes for himself. Nevertheless, she is elected chairman of Barrington’s in 1958 (*Be Careful What You Wish For*: 111) for the simple fact that, a) it is made clear that in the end the good will always prevails, and b) men underestimated women. It is, in fact, her opponent’s wife who saves her by switching her vote. Susan Fisher doing so, after realizing that their marriage was a “sham” and that her husband neither loved her nor gave her what she wanted or needed (*ibid.*), is another indicator that times are changing and that women no longer accept what they were forced to accept for centuries, while the fact that Alex did not realize that he was losing both his wife and her vote signifies that men who are too blind to see those changes will fall by the wayside.

However, even a couple of years later, and despite the fact that Emma has been successful as chairman, those prejudices do not stop and men applying to work for her still fail to take her seriously: “But as I still find myself with time on my hands, I thought it might be fun to work under a woman chairman” (*Mightier than the Sword*: 72). That not being taken seriously as a woman is not a problem of the mid-20th-century but it is still relevant in the 21st century will be explained in section 4.1.3. However, this authority gap is not only something the 20th and 21st century deemed a problem, but women already noticed and complained about this in the 19th century: Exemplary, Charlotte Brontë once said that she and her sisters took on male pennames because “we did not like to declare ourselves women, because we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice”.⁶⁶

Coming back to the motif of morality, one can see a clear distinction between the two types of women in the series. While the morality – or rather the lack thereof – of the ‘traditional’ women will be explained in a later part of this section, it is made clear to the reader that the ‘modern’ woman is morally inoffensive. Quite ironically, this is the exact same concept women were branded with in the 19th century: the traditional woman was the Angel in the House, she was good and submissive, responsible for the house and the family, did as she was told, and, most importantly, she was morally inoffensive. The New Woman, the woman who was independent and demanded equal rights, was a threat to that and, consequently, was seen as morally offensive. In the Clifton Chronicles, the same concept is applied, though the roles are reversed. Having already discussed Emma’s morality, another great example is the ‘next generation’ of modern women, Sebastian’s girlfriend Samantha. Even though they are seemingly happy, want to get married, and she is expecting a child from him – which he is not aware of at the time –, she leaves him when she finds out that he is not willing to hold onto his end of a bargain and cheat an older man out of his money:

He leant down to kiss her, but she turned away. “The truth is, you never had any intention of paying Mr Swann, did you?” Seb made no attempt to answer her question as he turned and walked quickly towards the door. “Can’t you see that if you don’t pay Mr Swann, you’ll be just as bad as Adrian Sloane?” said Sam with feeling. (*Mightier than the Sword*: 158)

⁶⁶ See <https://www.panmacmillan.com/blogs/classics/famous-female-authors-with-male-pseudonyms#:~:text=We%20did%20not%20like%20to,of%20her%20era%2C%20Jane%20Eyre.,Harriet Sanders, accessed March 22, 2025.>

[...] I fell in love with the son of Harry and Emma Clifton, the brother of Jessica Clifton, which is one of the many reasons I wanted to be the wife of Sebastian Clifton. But that man no longer exists. Despite everything, I will treasure our short time together for the rest of my life. Samantha. Sebastian fell to his knees, the words of Sam's father ringing in his ears. "Samantha sets standards, like your mother, that the rest of us normal mortals find hard to live with, unless, like your father, they're guided by the same moral compass." (*Mightier than the Sword*: 160)

This clearly shows a shift in the priorities of women – or rather in what a man thinks women stereotypically prioritize. While in the 19th century, women were said to focus solely on social status and money when it came to choosing a husband – see, for example, Catherine in *Wuthering Heights* –, the *Clifton-Chronicles* claim that the modern woman does not pay attention to those things anymore and rather cares about things such as love, morality, etc. While there is truth to the aspect that the priorities have shifted, one needs to, however, remember why such a shift was possible. One must not forget that well up until the 20th century, women did not necessarily get a say in who they ought to marry, and it was a lot harder for them to find a job to be able to support themselves. While the intention of this is positive, namely, to encourage women to be independent and focus on love, morality, and equality in a partnership rather than wealth and status, the effect is contrary. Just as society did in the 19th century, the novels put women on a pedestal and basically tell them that this is how a woman is supposed to be. Nevertheless, the importance of feminism is not lost in the novels, and the development of it is depicted in different forms.

First off, there is Emma, who, against all odds, becomes the first chairwoman of Barrington's, then goes into politics and works with Margret Thatcher – who even makes a guest appearance and is portrayed as a hard-working, likeable, modern and feminist woman, which stands in contrast to the real Margaret Thatcher's politics –, and, lastly, becomes a patron for hospitals. While one could claim that she is a hard-working, independent woman and, therefore, the stereotypical feminist, this is not the case. When it comes to her children – her son Sebastian and her adoptive daughter Jessica, who is actually her half-sister from her father's fling with Olga –, the difference in her attitude towards her son and her daughter can quite clearly be seen. Talking about Sebastian, she is usually described to be extraordinarily proud of everything he does and accomplishes and there is not

a scene in the novels where she openly criticizes her son. To the contrary, she takes obvious pride in the fact that he seemingly follows into her footsteps:

“Funny you should mention that,” said Emma, “because he’s recently begun to take a great deal of interest in the company’s fortunes, which comes as something of a surprise. In fact, he reads the minutes of every board meeting from cover to cover. He’s even bought ten shares, which gives him the legal right to follow our every move, and I can tell you, Ross, he’s not shy in expressing his views, not least on the proposed building of the *Buckingham*.” (*Be Careful What You Wish For*: 30)

The same, however, cannot be said about Jessica, who, unlike her adoptive brother and mother, shows no interest in money and business and the likes, but, like her adoptive father, in the arts: she is a painter. About her daughter’s work, Emma is said to feel embarrassment: “Emma could only hope that Sebastian would be released before Jessica’s offerings reached the reception area. She always felt a little embarrassed whenever her daughter presented Matron with her latest effort” (*Be Careful What You Wish For*: 32). Even a couple of years later at Jessica’s graduation, after both Emma and Harry could and should have been aware of how talented Jessica is, they show signs that they a) do not really know their daughter as well as they think, and b) do not care about their daughter as much, either. To her newest paintings, Emma says “am I meant to understand what this represents?” (*Be Careful What You Wish For*: 199). When Sebastian explains to them that Jessica no longer tries to imitate other artists, but wants to simply be herself, Harry answers “Even if you’re right [...]” (*ibid.*), both of them making it clear that they do not take their daughter very seriously for the simple fact that they do not understand her art, and that they also do not really bother to try to understand her. When they are told that the paintings are for sale, they react similarly unsympathetic:

“But is this really the best Jessica can do?” she asked, turning her attention back to the painting. “It’s her graduation work, which will determine if she’s offered a postgraduate place at the Royal Academy Schools this September. And it might even make her a bob or two.” “These paintings are for sale?” said Harry. “Oh yes. The graduation exhibition is the first opportunity for a lot of young artists to display their work to the public.” “I wonder who buys this sort of thing?” said Harry, looking around the room, whose walls were covered with oil paintings, watercolours and drawings. “Doting parents, I expect,” said Emma. “So we’ll all have to buy one of Jessica’s, you included, Seb.” (*Be Careful What You Wish For*: 200)

The fact that they would doubt their daughter’s work is quite ironical, as it is revealed that “all of Jessica’s pictures were snapped up within minutes” (*Be Careful What You Wish For*: 204) and, as her own parents are late to her graduation

ceremony, they do not get a chance to buy one of her pictures (*Be Careful What You Wish For*: 205). They also show once more that they do not really know their daughter when they find out from Sebastian that Jessica has a boyfriend (*Be Careful What You Wish For*: 201) and when it is revealed to the reader that Sebastian is the only one who knows about Jessica's struggles with social anxiety:

Emma was fascinated to discover who this remarkable young artist might be, so she could compare their work with Jessica's. "Frankly, no one will be surprised, other than possibly the winner herself, that the school's star pupil this year is Jessica Clifton." Emma beamed with pride as everyone in the room applauded, while Jessica simply bowed her head and clung on to Clive. Only Sebastian really knew what she was going through. Her demons, as she called them. Jessica never stopped chattering whenever they were on their own, but the moment she became the centre of attention, like a tortoise she slipped back into her shell, hoping no one would notice her. (*Be Careful What You Wish For*: 206)

It is quite telling that Harry and Emma would know every detail about their son's life, but they do not even know those basic things – whether she has a boyfriend or that she struggles with social anxiety – about their daughter. This leads back to what has been mentioned before: women are put on a pedestal of what they must be like, and as Jessica does not meet those expectations, they do not take her as seriously as they would their son or a woman like Emma. However, while she does not really acknowledge her daughter's passion, it is not like she tries to tear other women, who do not act like her, down. Ironically enough, she reveals in a conversation with Sam, in which the latter one claims that she does not think she can go back to work yet after her and Sebastian's second child is born, that "I admire you for that. [...] I sometimes wonder if I should have made the same decision" (*This was a Man*: 166), and later openly says that Sam, who is looking for a job at the time, already has a job by being a mother and raising their children (*This was a Man*: 274). Those two scenes directly address the gender stereotypes that women should be the main caregiver and men the main earner, whose relevance in the 21st century will be explained in section 4.1.3. This conflict women are faced with is made obvious in Emma and Sam: Emma has prioritized her career and feels guilty about not having spent as much time with her son, whereas Sam spends all of her time with her children and feels guilty about not working. To have each of the two women support the other in her decisions, however, shows the reader that both decisions are fine and should be equally appreciated – underlined by the fact that both Emma and

Samantha, as previously described, are the paragon of what a woman should be like in the novels.

Another type of feminist that can be found in the *Clifton Chronicles* is shown in the form of Grace, Emma's and Giles' younger sister. While she does not play a major role in the novels, it is revealed that Grace "won an open scholarship to Girton College, Cambridge, and from the day she'd arrived in that seat of learning she had outshone the brightest men" (*The Sins of the Father*: 57). Although the focus is never laid directly on her, she is described to be closest to the New Woman of the 19th century: after their mother's death in the early 1950s, their solicitor, Mr. Siddons, is "amused" to see that Grace was wearing blue stockings (*Best Kept Secret*: 121). She also appears to not like men ("[...] Although he's one of those rare men whose brain is bigger than his balls, [...]", *Best Kept Secret*: 27), and, while she does have a great career, she never gets married nor has children. Even though her character has been built up throughout the novels to be independent and happy with this, she reveals to Sebastian in the 6th novel of the series that "I regret not marrying and having children" (*Cometh the Hour*: 31). While it is important to point out that having a career and a family are not mutually exclusive, as it can be seen in Emma, Grace would have been a good example to show the reader that not every woman necessarily wants to be married or have children, but some simply want to focus on themselves and their career, and that this is just as fine and fulfilling for some as having a husband and children is for others. Having Grace, who has been presented to be content with her life throughout the novels, voice regret over her life-decisions by the end of the series underlines a stereotype men have for women, namely that they cannot be taken seriously because they do not know what they want and just keep changing their minds. What Grace functions as, however, is being a role model to her students and encouraging women to pursue their dreams. It is her who first gives Emma the gentle push to even consider meeting with Professor Feldman, who then convinces her to get her degree and become a businesswoman (*Best Kept Secret*: 27), it is her who saves Sebastian's daughter Jessica – named after her aunt Jessica, who committed suicide – when she is about to be expelled from Art School (*This was a Man*: 267-271), and she takes an early retirement from university to work at a local school in the hopes of encouraging young women to go to university (*This was a Man*: 275). One can

therefore quite clearly see that Grace, despite the fact that she ends up voicing regret over not having had a husband or children, represents the New Woman movement in its positive form and may therefore be called the ultimate feminist, as she is the only character in the novel who has never relied on any man and is enabling other women to be who they want to be. It is, thus, noteworthy that, in contrast to how career-driven, unmarried women are often described even in contemporary media, a classic example of this being the movie *The Proposal* (2009), in which the female main character is portrayed to be pushy, bossy, and unlikeable, Grace is portrayed as a genuinely nice and caring advocate for women and women's rights.

Lastly, female struggles in the face of globalization and the clash of cultures are – though not at length – discussed in the novels (for a longer and more detailed description of the matter, including a differentiation between the 'West' and the 'East', see section 4.2.1). This is done in the person of Priya, Sebastian's girlfriend. On the one hand, Priya is described to be a modern young woman ("one or two of the banks are slowly coming round to accepting that it's just possible a woman might be as bright as a man", *Cometh the Hour*: 159) who admires strong and successful women ("your mother is a remarkable lady, Seb. I wonder if she knows just how many women look upon her as a role model?", *ibid.*). On the other hand, she is tightly bound to her culture and religion:

[...] My mother has spent the past few months selecting the man I will be expected to marry, and I think she's made her final choice." "No," said Seb, "that can't be possible." "All that's needed now is my father's approval." "You have no choice, no say in the matter?" "None. You have to understand, Seb, it's part of our tradition, our heritage and our religious beliefs." "But what if you were to fall in love with someone else?" "I would still have to honour my parents' wishes." (*Cometh the Hour*: 164)

Here, clearly, the Western views Priya learned in England and the values of her upbringing clash, as, on the one hand, she went out with Sebastian, but on the other hand very much believes in her own culture and traditions ("What about love?" "That can come after marriage", *Cometh the Hour*: 166). What follows, however, is quite problematic. Even though Priya has clearly told Sebastian that she wants to obey her parents and does not want to be with him, he does not accept no for an answer. Instead, he tries to talk her into choosing him by sending her roses every day on every hour (*Cometh the Hour*: 168), as well as conspiring with her roommate and even stalking her:

“It’s Miss Jenny Barton on line three, Mr Clifton.” “Put her through.” “Hi, Seb. I was just calling to say hang in there. She’s weakening.” “But she hasn’t replied to any of my letters, doesn’t answer my calls, won’t acknowledge –” “Perhaps you should try to see her.” “I see her every day,” said Seb. “I’m standing outside Hambros when she turns up for work in the morning, and again when she catches her bus in the evening. I’m even there when she gets back to her flat at night. If I try any harder, I could be arrested for stalking” “I’m visiting my parents in Norfolk this weekend,” said Jenny, “and I won’t be back until Monday morning. I can’t do much more to help, so get on with it.” (*Cometh the Hour*: 169)

While it is described to be ‘romantic’ of Sebastian to not give up on Priya, even though she clearly told him that she wants him to give up on her, what it actually does is refuse to allow the woman in the situation to make her own decisions. The (false) assumption that a woman's 'no' is not a real 'no', but an invitation to fight for her, is still a problem in the 21st century and is discussed in more detail in section 4.1.3. In the case of Sebastian and Priya, their friends might find Sebastian’s persistence sweet and romantic, and Priya does eventually give in and they plan on getting married, but what Priya has been afraid of and why she has originally rejected Sebastian eventually happens: she is being kidnapped by her father and her brother to marry a man of their choosing, not Sebastian (*Cometh the Hour*: 173). This shows just how much of a paradoxical situation the whole scenario is for Priya – and, in that respect, for millions of women who find themselves in the same situation: no matter what she does, it gets her in deep trouble, for the simple fact that other people have made the decisions about her life for her instead of simply letting her be. Even after her kidnapping, Sebastian does not give up and follows her to India to rescue her. To Sebastian’s credit, he realizes what mess he has gotten her into by not respecting her wishes and asks her if she wants to be rescued: “‘I’ve come to take you back to England.’ He paused. ‘But only if that’s what you want.’” (*Cometh the Hour*: 191). However, they do not manage to get out of the country in time and Priya is fatally shot by one of her father’s guards (*Cometh the Hour*: 203). Priya’s death may be interpreted in several ways: some may see it as a punishment for not obeying her parents, others as the tragic death of a young, modern woman rebelling against the patriarchal structures of her culture. I would claim that it is a symbol for the struggles of millions of women in the same situation – immigrant women in Western societies, torn between the tradition of their culture and the Western values they see outside of their families. Her death pays tribute to the many women who wanted nothing more but to make their own decisions about their own lives, one of the most prominent examples in Germany being the assassination of

Hatun Sürücü, who was shot by her own brother in 2005 in Berlin because she left the cousin she was married to against her will and stopped wearing a hijab.⁶⁷ Section 4.2.1 will go into greater detail about the struggles of women like Priya on the example of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*.

As it has been shown, feminism and feminist topics play a huge part in the novels. While it is clearly implied that feminism is a good thing and women are encouraged, the problem with the novels is that the only flaw the 'good' women in the novels have is that they are 'too good' or 'too morally superior' – which, next to the fact that it tells women what they are supposed to be like, sets an unachievable standard for them, just as it was done in 19th century popular literature. Consequently, this means that the Angel in the House, which had been introduced by Coventry Patmore in the 19th century, is – as Virginia Woolf has claimed – indeed dead. It does not mean, however, that the idea is dead, as the 'angel' is simply not bound to the house anymore. Instead, women are supposed to be the Angel in the Job, the Angel in Morality, and, at the end of the day, indeed the Angel in the House. This means that in the view of the novels, the spheres in which women move about have expanded and the expectations towards women have changed, but the idea of the Angel – the idea that a woman must be and act in a certain way – remains. This is important because the *Clifton Chronicles* have sold over 2.5 million copies in print in English,⁶⁸ which clearly makes them bestsellers – an indication that huge parts of society agree with the views of the novels.

As mentioned, it is very clearly distinguished between feminists, who are described to be modern, empowering, and genuinely good, and the traditional women. Archer's take on those traditional beliefs will be discussed in the following.

4.1.1.2.2 The 'Traditional' Women in the *Clifton Chronicles*

As the novels set off at the beginning of the 20th century, the beliefs and the traditions of the late 19th century are still very much present in the characters.

⁶⁷ For full tribute to Hatun Sürücü's death and more information on the case, see <https://www.welt.de/regionales/berlin/gallery2887012/Der-Tod-einer-23-Jaehrigen.html>, no author, accessed March 22, 2025.

⁶⁸ See <https://us.macmillan.com/books/9781250131492/thecompletecliftonchroniclesbooks17#:~:text=%231%20New%20York%20Times%20and,copies%20in%20print%20in%20English.>, no author, accessed March 22, 2025.

However, just as the take on feminists is reversed in comparison to the 19th century, the same is done to the ‘traditional’ women and, thus, they are portrayed in a negative light. In contrast to the modern woman, who signifies that the times are changing and, consequently, women are changing, too, there are not several examples in the novels, but only one – which, thus, signifies that the old beliefs are slowly but surely becoming extinct while the modern beliefs spread. The character that is associated with those traditional beliefs is Lady Virginia Fenwick, the first wife of Emma’s brother Giles, who, after their divorce, spends her life trying to take down the Barrington/Clifton-family. This spins a connection between Emma and Virginia – for everything good Emma does, there is something bad that Virginia does. While it has been established that Emma represents the modern woman that has no limitations, as she is all a wife, a mother, a grandmother, a businesswoman, a politician, and a benefactor, Virginia is the exact opposite. She does not work, she does not have her own family, she lies and manipulates, she is spiteful, and she has no intention of helping others if it is not for her own benefit.

When she is first introduced to the reader, it is immediately made clear that she is not a likeable character:

“I’m Mrs Holcombe,” Maisie replied. “Harry’s my son.” “Oh, yes, of course,” said Virginia. “Aren’t you a waitress or something?” “I’m the manager of the Grand Hotel in Bristol,” Maisie said, as if dealing with a tiresome customer. “Of course you are. But then, it will take me a little time to get used to the idea of women working. You see, the women in my family have never worked,” Virginia said, quickly moving on before Maisie could respond. [...] “Little girl, don’t interrupt me when I’m speaking,” said Virginia. “It’s frightfully rude.” “Sorry, miss,” said Jessica. “I’m not ‘miss’, you should always address me as Lady Virginia.” (*Best Kept Secret*: 101)

In her last will, Emma’s mother even directly says so, leaving Virginia her Siamese cat because “they are both beautiful, well-groomed, vain, cunning, manipulative predators” (*Best Kept Secret*: 124). The depth of her moral degeneracy can be seen in that she does not only hate and try to take down Giles after their divorce or Emma because of their open aversion, but she stoops so low as to involve Emma’s children, who, at the time of the divorce, were literal children who had nothing to do with the whole situation. When Jessica becomes engaged to Clive, whose mother Priscilla is an old friend of Virginia’s, Virginia takes it upon herself to inform Priscilla about Jessica’s real parentage – something of which Jessica herself was not aware of – as

well as some more lies and exaggerations to make Jessica and the family look worse:

“And you say there’s reason to believe that Sir Hugo Barrington was her father?” “No question about it. And frankly, his death came as something of a relief for the family, because he was just about to go on trial for fraud. [...] And that’s not the half of it, my darling, because Jessica’s mother then committed suicide to avoid being charged with Sir Hugo’s murder.” “I just can’t believe it. She seemed such a respectable girl.” “I’m afraid it doesn’t get any better if you take a closer look at the Clifton side of the family. Harry Clifton’s mother was a well-known prostitute, so he’s never been quite sure who his father was. [...]” Priscilla thought about that for a few moments before she said: “Do you think Jessica knows the truth about her parents? Clive has never so much as hinted at any suggestion of scandal.” “Of course she knew, but she never intended to tell you or Clive. The little hussy was hoping to get a gold band on her finger before any of this became public. Haven’t you noticed how she’s been winding Robert around her little finger? Promising to paint his portrait was nothing less than a masterstroke.” Jessica stifled a sob, turned and quickly fled back upstairs. (*Be Careful What You Wish For*: 228-229)

Not only does this lead to Jessica breaking off her engagement to Clive (*Be Careful What You Wish For*: 231), but the revelation of who her real parents were, the lies Virginia spread about her being a gold-digger, and the subsequent rejection of Clive’s mother cause Jessica to commit suicide (*Be Careful What You Wish For*: 235). That Virginia feels no remorse or even responsibility for Jessica’s death is shown in that she neither stops her vendetta against the Barrington/Cliftons nor leaves Priscilla alone, but rather encourages her to firstly spy on them (*Mightier than the Sword*: 59), as her husband becomes a member of the board of Barrington’s, and then, when it fits her agenda, to get a divorce (*Mightier than the Sword*: 169 ff.). It even goes so far as that she convinces Priscilla, who has been introduced to the reader as being a conservative, but also open and nice woman (*Be Careful What You Wish For*: 219), to behave like her:

The waiter deftly removed the plate without comment, as Priscilla turned to Harry. “Can you make a living as a writer?” “It’s tough,” admitted Harry, “not least because there are so many excellent authors out there. However-“ “Still, you married a rich woman, so it really doesn’t matter all that much, does it?” This silenced Harry, but not Emma. “Well, at last we’ve discovered something we have in common, Priscilla.” “I agree,” said Priscilla, not missing a beat, “but then I’m old-fashioned, and was brought up to believe it’s the natural order of things for a man to take care of a woman. It somehow doesn’t seem right the other way round.” (*Mightier than the Sword*: 58)

Next to the fact that she is presented to be cunning, manipulative, and vengeful, what is interesting about the character of Virginia is that, as she represents the old beliefs of the 19th century, she stands for everything despicable of the

Victorian era. While it was considered normal for women to look for wealthy husbands and to make ‘good matches’ in the 19th century, as most women had no other choice than to do as they were told and marry who they were told to marry, the perversion of this is shown in the *Clifton Chronicles*. While the ‘good women’ – put in quotation marks as Archer’s portrayal of women is yet another way of classification – all marry for no other reason than love, Virginia is not shown to be capable of any real feelings other than selfishness and hatred. Her reasons for starting any sort of relationship, be it platonic or romantic, are always selfish ones – either to support her acts of revenge or to boost her social standing or financial situation. As Virginia is unwilling to work yet will not give up the glamorous lifestyle she has always known, she is in constant need of money and support, be it from her father, who regularly cuts her off, or from rich men. For her own financial benefit, she is not even hesitant to stoop so low as to fake a pregnancy with the help of her butler, who planned to give up his own child for adoption (*Cometh the Hour*: 209-210). Even though her scheme is initially successful and she receives a large sum from both her father (*Cometh the Hour*: 230) and the child’s alleged father, Cyrus T. Grant, (*Cometh the Hour*: 232) to support her and the baby, Ellie May Grant, Cyrus’s wife, finds out what actually happened and that Cyrus is not the father and stops the monthly payments (*Cometh the Hour*: 446). Additionally, her own father leaves the whisky distillery he promised Virginia to her “son” Freddie when he dies – “to teach her a lesson” (*Cometh the Hour*: 509). Although Virginia has never particularly cared for Freddie, she then abandons him completely, leaves it to her brother to raise her “son”, and openly admits that Freddie is not her child:

“But as you well know, Virginia, in his will Father left the distillery to Freddie, whom you abandoned several years ago, leaving me with the responsibility of bringing your son up.” “He isn’t my son, as you well know. He’s no more than the offspring of my former butler and his wife. So he has absolutely no claim on father’s estate.” (*This was a Man*: 215)

“And how’s your son?” asked Priscilla, trading blow for blow. “Freddie is not my son, as you well know, Priscilla. And when I last heard, he’d run away from school, which would have solved all my problems, but unfortunately he returned a few days later.” (*This was a Man*: 336)

Contrary to her father’s last wishes, Virginia has, however, not learned a lesson and continues her scheming. Her next victim is Perry, The Duke of Hertford, who she starts a relationship with not remotely out of love or sympathy, but with the simple

purpose of becoming a duchess: “She had been living at Eaton Square with the duke for almost a year, and once the official mourning period was over, her next purpose was quite simply to become her grace, the Duchess of Hertford” (*This was a Man*: 291). Once she had managed that, her next goal is to get rid of her new husband. After Perry has a heart attack and is released from hospital with a strict diet sheet and the instruction to be more physically active, Virginia never gives their Cook the sheet nor any information and encourages her husband to continue his unhealthy lifestyle with no exercise and lots of unhealthy food (*This was a Man*: 313-314). When he consequently dies, the depth of her scheming and her frigidity becomes clear once more:

She checked his pulse, but couldn’t find it. She sat on the end of the bed and thought carefully about what she should do next. First, she removed any signs of the cigar and the brandy, replacing them with a bowl of nuts and a carafe of water with a slice of lemon. She opened the window to allow in some fresh air, and once she had checked the room a second time, she sat down at her dressing table, checked her make-up and composed herself. Virginia allowed a few moments to go by before she took a deep breath and let out a piercing scream. (*This was a Man*: 316)

While the intention of this is quite obvious – the reader is meant to understand that ‘trophy wives’ are something to beware of and that every woman who marries for money rather than love is a bad woman – it also makes a mockery of the millions of women who had or still have no choice in the matter. Not only was it expected of women in the 19th century to ‘set their cap’ for the richest option available to them, if they have not been betrothed to a man by their parents when they were born, but even nowadays around 55% of the marriages worldwide are arranged, according to a report by Gitnux, an independent market research platform trusted and cited by, among others, the BBC and Business Insider, from December 2023.⁶⁹ Although it is of course true that marrying someone with the simply purpose of taking their money is wrong, the novels make it too easy by having Virginia, the privileged, dislikable woman, do all these despicable things, such as faking a pregnancy and marrying for money, while the ‘good’ women like Samantha or Priya do not ask for help while raising their child or go against their family’s wishes in order to marry for love rather than money. Because it is Virginia who does these things, it is easy for the reader to condemn these actions and to also include women who had no other choice but to do what was expected of them in that condemnation.

⁶⁹ See <https://gitnux.org/arranged-marriages-statistics/>, Jannik Lindner, accessed March 22, 2025.

This can also be seen in the terms generally used for people who date or marry others for their money. Two of the most used terms are ‘gold digger’ and ‘sugar baby’. Although these terms are not gender specific, the mind usually jumps to the conclusion that one is talking about women trying to get money, fame, and/or status from an older man. Especially the term ‘gold digger’ very much implies that she is digging for his money. In contrast to that, there is the male equivalent, the ‘toy boy’. The difference in term is, however, that ‘toy boy’ implies that the older, richer woman is using the younger man as her ‘toy’, which, again, implies that she is using him rather than him using her – consequently, it puts the blame on the woman rather than the man.

However, Virginia’s scheming fails, as her late husband has put a clause in his last will that everything he left Virginia was to be hers for her lifetime, yet was to remain in the duke’s name, which means that she was not able to sell it and make money off the duke’s property (*This was a Man*: 346-347). Being forced to return the two Ming Vases she thought she could take and sell, she destroys them in the last scene she actively appears in (*This was a Man*: 352). This could signify to the reader that Virginia was so far gone without any chance of redemption and that she was fundamentally evil; however, though she is not named and it is therefore easy to miss it, she does show up at Harry’s funeral to pay her respect: “An elegant old lady, who bowed her head as Giles passed, was seated near the back, clearly no longer wishing to be acknowledged as a dowager duchess might have expected to be [...]” (*This was a Man*: 498). This is basically the only nod the novels give that, just as Emma, who is generally described as the paragon of womanhood, has her faults, Virginia is not all bad; though, as she is not mentioned by name in this scene, it is not tried to be made particularly clear to the reader.

To sum it up, Lady Virginia Fenwick is presented as the negative example of womanhood. The interesting thing about her character is that she is initially presented as what the 19th century considered to be the perfect woman: she is beautiful, of a good and rich parentage, and she is, quite simply, the ‘traditional’ woman of the 19th century. However, as the novels heavily show how the times are changing, especially for women, she is not a likeable character. She is never happy and satisfied and her sole purpose in life is to tear others down. Reading into this,

one could say that this is because she has neither a family of her own nor a job to fulfill her – especially as the other female characters of the novels have either one of those things or both and are presented to be happy. Instead, she represents the things men fear in a relationship: being taken advantage of, being used for one's money or status, and having a child passed off as his when he is, in fact, not the father. Section 4.2.2 will draw on the reversed experience, a woman being pushed into a marriage and having children even though she does not want that, for comparison.

4.1.1.2.3 Conclusion

As it has been mentioned before, the female characters of the novels, especially Emma and Virginia, function as moral opponents. For everything good Emma does, Virginia does something bad. To name a few examples, Emma goes all the way to the US to find Harry simply because she does not believe he is dead, whereas Virginia leaves Giles because he does not have enough money. Where Emma loves her children and does what she can to keep them safe, Virginia fakes a pregnancy and abandons the child when he no longer suits her needs. Where Emma tries to help others by working for the health sector, Virginia denies her own husband the medical treatment and help he needs. The question is, why is it necessary to have that? Why can a woman and the good work she does not stand on her and its own? Although there are, of course, bad male characters in the novels, none of them are a constant parallel to Harry Clifton just as Virginia is to Emma. It seems that, while a man can do his work and stand on his own without a counterpart on the 'other side', for women it is just not possible. For some reason, a woman's worth is not measured in how good her work is, but in whether she is better than other women. This can also be seen in today's society, with the 'who wore it better'-columns in the tabloids after an award show or the constant comparison of two women in similar positions. According to Cixous, pinning women against each other was done deliberately by men to undermine the strength of femininity:

Men have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves, to be the executant of their virile needs. They have made for women an antinarcissism! A narcissism which loves itself only to be loved for what women haven't got! They have constructed the infamous logic of antilove. (Cixous *et al.* 1976: 878)

Whether it is true that men have deliberately created this structural dislike between women because they feared them or not, what can be seen is that they count on the fact that women tear other women down, for example when it comes to selling papers or generating views and/or clicks online. The most prominent example of this would be Catherine, the Princess of Wales and Meghan, the Duchess of Sussex. While both women were doing their separate works, the constant comparison of them by the British tabloids made it very clear from the beginning that there could only be one, namely the future Queen. For this reason, the tabloids took something they praised Catherine for and trashed Meghan for the exact same thing. Exemplary, the Daily Mail – their CEO being The Viscount Rothermere Paul Zwillenberg – headlined on March 21, 2018, that “pregnant Kate tenderly cradles her baby bump”, while the headline on January 26, 2019, was “why can’t Meghan Markle keep her hands off her bump? [...] Is it pride, vanity, acting – or a new age bonding technique”. After each wedding, when talking about the wedding bouquet, the Express – their CEO being Timothy G. Baxter – said on August 29, 2011, about Catherine’s flowers that lily of the valley means “a return of happiness”, whereas talking about Meghan’s bouquet on October 13, 2019, lily of the valley “is a highly poisonous woodland flowering plant” that could have potentially killed her niece, Princess Charlotte.⁷⁰ This shows that, in the eyes of society, it is not enough for a woman to do good work, but to be really accepted or praised, she must out-do other women – yet, of course, she must not do it purposely or else she is said to be cunning and manipulative. The standard women are being held to is therefore significantly higher than it is for men, and the reaction of society towards those women underlines this claim: sticking to the example of the Princess of Wales and the Duchess of Sussex, as of February 2024, 73% of the British population had a positive opinion of Catherine and only 21% had a positive opinion of Meghan.⁷¹ Meghan is blamed for the rift between her husband, Prince Harry, and the Royal Family – even though Prince Harry himself claimed that it was him who wanted to leave Great Britain. She is often called manipulative and a narcissist who “cosplays as Princess Diana”, while at the same time the British tabloids praise

⁷⁰ For a more detailed list of headlines comparing the Princess of Wales and the Duchess of Sussex, see <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ellievhall/meghan-markle-kate-middleton-double-standards-royal>, Ellie Hall, accessed March 22, 2025.

⁷¹ See <https://www.statista.com/statistics/863823/most-liked-members-of-the-royal-family/>, no author, accessed March 22, 2025.

Catherine for “honoring” Princess Diana by wearing similar styles. Meghan is said to show no respect to Great Britain and the Royal Family by “breaking royal protocol”, but Catherine is praised for her “touch of modernity” when she dresses or behaves similarly to her sister-in-law. While it is not actually known what is going on behind closed doors, what can be seen is that those two women are played off against each other in men-led tabloids, praising one and trashing the other for the exact same thing, and society just happily follows that pattern, happy to have a female scapegoat rather than facing the reality that a prince might just not want to live the life society has chosen for him anymore.

The need for a negative counterpart for everything positive a woman does – may it be the way she dresses, her job, charity work, etc. – shows that society as a whole has not come as far as one would hope or as the law in Western societies might have one believe. Legally, a woman has all the rights and all the chances a man has, yet by society standards, she has to work a lot harder and overcome a lot more obstacles, including those of ‘being better’ than other women rather than being able to lift other women up, to be taken seriously by the public. As long as this does not change, feminism is still very much needed for women all over the world.

4.1.2 Ken Follett’s *Century Trilogy*

In contrast to the *Clifton-Chronicles*, which strictly follows one family from the birth to the death of Harry Clifton, Ken Follett’s *Century Trilogy* aims to teach the reader about history, having a heterodiegetic narrator follow different people of different origins, genders, and races and their families from World War I over World War II to the Cold War, ending in 2008 with the election of Barack Obama as the first African-American US president. As it is Follett’s ambition to give a historically correct overview of the 20th century and how things changed for the people as a whole during and after two World Wars and the Cold War, his depiction of female characters is interesting and fruitful for the aim of this thesis. Due to the length of the novels and the limited space in this thesis, however, only the main characters with a greater appearance-time throughout the novels will be analyzed.

Throughout history, feminist have always asked themselves what it was like to be a woman at a certain point of time. As mentioned before, especially in section

3.1 on the example of the *Bridgerton* romances and their Netflix-adaptation, pop-culture often romanticizes the standing of women in history. Exemplary, this can be seen in the TV-Show *Vikings* (2013-2020), based on the life of the famous Viking Ragnar Lothbrok, which portrays Viking men and women as equals, with both genders equally raiding other countries or reigning over their people, whereas the literature suggests that the “Norse law codes paint a patriarchal picture in which women have much less power than men” (*Friðriksdóttir* 2020: 74). This romanticization can also be seen in the Netflix-series *Queen Charlotte – A Bridgerton Story* (2023), in which the arranged marriage between King George III and Queen Charlotte and them slowly falling in love is shown to be very romantic, and a young Lady Danbury having to endure sleeping with her much older husband while she is visibly in distress functions as a sort of comedic relief in the series, while the reality for women forced into arranged marriages to this day is often neither romantic nor funny at all. While this is done in pop-culture often to attract a wider audience, it is not beneficial to feminism in the real world, as especially younger and more influenceable people take what they see on TV for granted and, therefore, might neither see the problem nor the benefits of feminism.

In contrast to this, Ken Follett aims to give a historically correct overview of the events of the 20th century in his *Century-Trilogy*. This includes the feminist movements and the slow path to more gender equality, but also the experiences of women during war – overall, what it meant to be a woman in the 20th century.

4.1.2.1 World War I

The trilogy begins in Wales, at the brink of World War I, by introducing the families that the novels will follow over the course of the 20th century. Those first couple of chapters before the war starts function as sort of laying the ground and showing the reader where it started and what the situation was like for the people – for the purpose of this thesis, especially women. Earl Fitzherbert, for example, complains that his sister Maud is still unmarried at the ripe age of 23 (*Fall of Giants*: 31) as well as contemplates forcing his wife to have sex with him, yet decides that he will not, not because it occurs to him that it might be wrong to force himself onto a woman, but because, to him, it is “never very satisfactory” (*ibid.*). His wife Bea, a Russian princess, is still stuck in the past, hitting and physically punishing servants

as she has learned as a child in Russia, even though she knows that this is not done in England (*Fall of Giants*: 30). In addition to her cruelty towards people she thinks below her, she, as a representative of the ruling class, is presented to be very selfish:

Princess Bea stayed in her room: this was not her kind of social event. All upper-class people were selfish, in Ethel's experience, but Bea had made an art of it. All her energy was focused on pleasing herself and getting her own way. Even when giving a party – something she did well – her motive was mainly to provide a showcase for her own beauty and charm. (*Fall of Giants*: 71)

Their maid Ethel, in contrast, is described to be the polar opposite of Bea: she was born into a working-class family, works as a maid for the Earl, and while she is described to be beautiful by other people (e.g. *Fall of Giants*: 7), her focus is not on her beauty or on charming men, but she is ambitious and wants to excel in her job (*Fall of Giants*: 36). When she starts an affair with Earl Fitzherbert (*Fall of Giants*: 74), this initially puts her in a direct contrast to Bea. This direct rivalry is underlined when they fall pregnant around the same time (*Fall of Giants*: 187-188). However, in contrast to the *Clifton-Chronicles*, in which this connection between two women to show what a woman is and is not supposed to be like is a consistent theme throughout the novels, in the trilogy it ends when Fitz informs Ethel that their child is “not wanted by you, me, or anyone else” (*Fall of Giants*: 188). Although she knows that she will lose her job (*Fall of Giants*: 189), she is thrown out of the house by her father (*Fall of Giants*: 207-208), and Fitz sends his lawyer to buy himself out of her pregnancy (*Fall of Giants*: 193), she is not giving up. When Fitz's lawyer calls her “naughty” (*Fall of Giants*: 192), she responds by explaining to him that Fitz “[...] did the same thing, you know. It takes two people to make a baby” (*Fall of Giants*: 193). When she hears Fitz's offer, she does not give in easily, but the injustice of the situation rather starts forming her into the suffragette she will later on become:

The lousy rotten miser, Ethel thought. How could he be so mean to me? Twenty-four pounds was a housemaid's wage. It was half what Ethel was getting as housekeeper, and she would be losing her room and board. Why did men think they could get away with this? Probably because they usually could. A woman had no rights. It took two people to make a baby, but only one was obliged to look after it. How had women let themselves get into such a weak position? It made her angry. (*Fall of Giants*: 193)

“The off is not acceptable.” “Now, don’t be foolish, Miss Williams – “I’ll say it again, Mr Solman, so there can be no doubt in your mind. The offer is not acceptable. My answer is no. I got nothing more to say to you. Good day.” She went out and banged the door. (*Fall of Giants*: 195)

She went on: “I still love you too much to want to spoil your happiness.” He felt even worse. “I don’t want to hurt you,” she said. She swallowed and turned away, and he saw tears in her eyes. He began to speak, but she held up her hand to silence him. “You are asking me to leave my job and my home, so you must help me start a new life.” [...] “You’re going to buy me a little house. Nothing fancy – a working-class neighborhood will suit me very well. But I want six rooms, so that I can live on the ground floor and take in a lodger. The rent will pay for repairs and maintenance. I will still have to work.” [...] “And I promise to love and care for your child, and raise her – or him – to be happy and healthy and well educated, even though you don’t show any sign of being concerned about that.” (*Fall of Giants*: 202)

After she has moved to London and has worked in a sweatshop for some time, Ethel ends up being paper manager for *The Soldier’s Wife*, a newspaper edited by Lady Maud, Fitz’s sister, campaigning for a better treatment of the wives of soldiers during the war (*Fall of Giants*: 395). Additionally, it is shown that Bea, who is initially introduced as Ethel’s bad counterpart, is not actually an all-bad character, but more a product of her time, who was taught to live and think a certain way and cannot escape those traditional beliefs:

She kept her eyes cast down. “I know my duty.” Fitz felt dishonest. He talked about an heir – and everything he had said was true – but he was not telling her that he hungered to see her soft body spreadeagled for him on the bedsheets, white on white, and her fair hair spilling over the pillow. He repressed the vision. “If you know your duty, please do it. Next time I come into your room I shall expect to be welcomed like the loving husband that I am.” “Yes, Fitz.” He left. He was glad he had put his foot down, but he also felt an uneasy sense that he had done something wrong. It was ridiculous: he had pointed out to Bea the error of her ways, and she had accepted his reproof. That was how things ought to be between man and wife. But he could not feel as satisfied as he should. (*Fall of Giants*. 497)

Two aspects especially stick out in this scene: firstly, the use of the phrase “man and wife” instead of “husband and wife” implies that, while Fitz remains a human being, a man on his own, Bea’s whole identity is bound to the fact that she is the “wife of”. Secondly, they are at no point talking about love or passion, even though Fitz clearly feels that for Bea, as he fantasizes about her naked body, but about her ‘duty’ to sleep with her husband and bear him children. That this was the general attitude towards women can also be seen in the fact that Ethel’s husband, Bernie, who initially supports her and the feminist movement, is deeply offended by the fact that, after being asked at a party’s assembly to do it, Ethel considers becoming

the Labour-candidate to become a Member of Parliament when that was what he wanted for himself, accusing her of “sabotaging him” and questioning whether she actually loves him (*Fall of Giants*: 738). Despite this backlash from her own husband, however, Ethel goes into politics and, eventually in the third novel, becomes a baroness and is introduced into the House of Lords (*Edge of Eternity*: 170). Just like Maisie Williams symbolizes the change within society in the *Clifton Chronicles*, Ethel represents the change of the position of women in society. In the 19th century, and, respectively, in the early 20th century, Ethel would have been considered fallen: she had sex before marriage with a married man who ranks way above her socially, she has a baby out of wedlock, and, in a clear contrast to what an ‘angel’ was supposed to be like in the 19th and early 20th century, she is lying to avoid judgement from society and she is a convinced feminist. However, as women claim more and more rights for themselves, those limitations of class, gender, or education can no longer hold women back.

Lady Maud, the second feminist character of the novel, is introduced to the reader by her brother, who calls her a “socialist”, whose children would probably spend the family’s fortune on revolution (*Fall of Giants*: 31). She has fallen in love with Walter von Ulrich, a member of the German aristocracy, who calls her “passionate about everything: poverty, women’s rights, music – and Walter. He felt amazed and privileged that she had fallen in love with him” (*Fall of Giants*: 126). In contrast to how early feminists and suffragettes have been portrayed in novels of the 19th and early 20th century (exemplary, see Marie Corelli’s description of feminists in *My Wonderful Wife*, discussed in section 2.4.1), they are portrayed in a very positive light by Ken Follett. Maud volunteers in a charity clinic paid for by her brother, helping poor families in need: “The clinic is for fatherless families, though in practice we never turn anyone away” (*Fall of Giants*: 128). To underline this swift of tone concerning feminists, Walter’s father, Otto von Ulrich, claims that he is “appalled to see the sister of an earl in a place like that with a Jew doctor” (*Fall of Giants*: 130), is “disgusted” that she would help “the spawn of prostitutes” (*ibid.*) and claims that, were she his sister, he would “give her a good thrashing” (*ibid.*). While the contrast and conflict between the “traditionalists” – people of the 19th and early 20th century who do not see a problem with how they are living and, therefore, see no need for change – and the suffragettes remains the same, namely

that the traditionalists see the suffragettes and their stride for change as a threat to society, the tone has changed from authors like Marie Corelli to authors like Ken Follett: the suffragettes have turned from the villains to the ‘good ones’, and the traditionalists, who, in 19th century literature suffered because of the feminists, are now portrayed as the villains. While in 19th century literature, the New Women were often described to be selfish and their goal was said to be to ‘end society’ as they were unwilling to marry or to bear children, quite the opposite can be found in *Fall of Giants*. Firstly, the feminists in Follett’s novels do not dislike their children, but they want to change the world so that their children could have better lives (“It will be a better world when you grow up, Lloyd, she promised silently. We’ll make sure of that”, *Fall of Giants*: 467). Secondly, and as mentioned before, it is the traditionalists in form of Fitz and Bea that are portrayed as selfish (Bea) and unwilling to care for their children (Fitz). Thirdly, it is made explicitly clear that Maud is at no point appalled to marriage itself, but she was unwilling to let a man reduce her to being a man’s subordinate:

What had changed her? She had never been like this. It was him, of course, and the connection she felt with him, an intimacy so intense that she felt she could say anything, do whatever she liked, suppress nothing. What made him so different from every other man who had ever taken a fancy to her? A man such as Lowthie, or even Bing, expected a woman to act like a well-behaved child: to listen respectfully when he was being ponderous, to laugh appreciatively at his wit, to obey when he was masterful, and to give him a kiss whenever he asked. Walter treated her as a grown-up. He did not flirt, or condescend, or show off, and he listened at least as much as he talked. (*Fall of Giants*: 142)

What is striking in this scene is that in the following, Maud gives Walter a hand job in public while they are in the opera (*Fall of Giants*: 142-143), and though she calls herself “completely mad” (*Fall of Giants*: 143) and does not know what “possessed” her (*ibid.*), she also calls it a “pleasure” (*ibid.*). While it is clear that, had they been caught, she would have been considered fallen and the use of words such as “mad” and “possessed” suggest that she would have been seen as a crazy, bewitched person, it is also made explicitly clear that she did what she did not because a man forced her to – Walter, in fact, did not say a word – but because she wanted to, simply because he treated her like an equal, like a human being, and she loved him for that. This stands in clear contrast to her brother Fitz, who, as mentioned and quoted earlier, did not see a problem in forcing himself on his wife other than the fact that his own satisfaction suffered from it. For this reason (“Every

other man she had ever met had treated her and all women like overgrown children. Only Walter was different. It was him or no one”, *Fall of Giants*: 269), Maud marries Walter in secret with only Ethel and Walter’s cousin Robert present, right at the beginning of World War I (*ibid.*).

As mentioned before, Maud and Ethel form an unlikely friendship – unlikely because Ethel used to be Maud’s servant – and start publishing a feminist newspaper, *The Soldier’s Wife*, during the war. In this newspaper, next to asking for a fair treatment of soldier’s wives, they also ask for equality in the work-field and for the right to vote. Even though the job market opened up more for women during World War I due to the lack of men available, and female workers were actually desperately needed, they were still not treated equally:

All kinds of new jobs were opening up for women, but Ethel had quickly learned that men and women were still unequal. Jobs at which men earned three or four pounds were being offered to women at a pound a week. And even then the women had to put up with hostility and persecution. Male bus passengers would refuse to show their tickets to a woman conductor, male engineers would pour oil into a woman’s tool box, and women workers were barred from the pub at the factory gate. What made Ethel even more furious was that the same men would call a woman lazy and shiftless if her children were dressed in rags. (*Fall of Giants*: 337)

“If it’s worth the employer’s while to pay a man a shilling a piece to make gudgeon pins, it’s worth his while to pay a woman at the same rate.” The men shifted uncomfortably in their seats. (*Fall of Giants*: 341)

As mentioned before, this gender pay gap Ethel is angry about in the novel that takes place in the beginning of the 20th century still exists about 100 years later in real life in the 21st century. Section 4.1.3 will elaborate on this further.

The second big topic for feminists of the early 20th century is the right to vote. What is made clear in the novel is that, for men, women simply did not have the same standing as men and, though they had to give in in opening up the job market due to the lack of male workers, they saw no reason to give women the vote and, as women then demanded the right to vote, tried to make them stop by saying that this was not the right time:

4. Women in Contemporary Times

After the talk, Maud was questioned aggressively by the Labour Party men. The branch treasurer, a red-faced Scot called Jock Reid, said: "How can you keep on moaning about votes for women when our boys are dying in France?" There were loud sounds of agreement. "I'm glad you asked me that, because it's a question that bothers many men and women too," Maud said. Ethel admired the conciliatory tone of the answer, which contrasted nicely with the hostility of the questioner. "Should normal political activity go on during the war? Should you be attending a Labour Party meeting? Should trade unions continue to fight against exploitation of workers? Has the Conservative Party closed down for the duration? Has injustice and oppression been temporarily suspended? I say No, comrade. We must not permit the enemies of progress to take advantage of the war. It must not become an excuse for traditionalists to hold us back. As Mr Lloyd George says, it's business as usual." (*Fall of Giants*: 341)

Ethel, additionally, notices that, in contrast to what the patriarchy would like society to believe, there was no equal division of labor within a family and, as men did the 'actual' work outside of the house, they alone should be able to make political decisions:

But her angry feminism had set as hard as concrete during years of living alongside the tough, hard-working, dirt-poor women of London's East End. Men often told a fairy tale in which there was a division of labour in families, the man going out to earn money, the woman looking after home and children. Reality was different. Most of the women Ethel knew worked twelve hours a day and looked after home and children as well. Underfed, overworked, living in hovels and dressed in rags, they could still sing songs and laugh and love their children. In Ethel's view one of those women had more right to vote than any ten men. (*Fall of Giants*: 615)

Even when the government gives (some) women the right to vote, they do not do so because they believe it to be the right thing to do, but for tactical reasons:

"The bill will give the vote only to women over thirty who are householders or the wives of householders. Most women factory workers are excluded, because they tend to be younger. And all those dreadful female intellectuals are single women who live in other people's home." [...] "Most of the new voters will be mature middle-class mothers of families." Jones tapped the side of his nose in a vulgar gesture. "Lord Fitzherbert, they are the most conservative group of people in the country. This bill will give our party six million new votes." "So you're going to support women's suffrage?" "We must! We need those Conservative women. At the next election there will be three million new working-class male voters, a lot of them coming out of the army, most of them not on our side. But our new women will outnumber them." (*Fall of Giants*: 623-624)

The use of the phrase "our new women" is clearly a direct attack on the actual New Woman, the first feminists, dividing women into two groups – "our" women and "the other" women – and implying that women are not real people that must be taken seriously, but little 'silly-billies' that may be used to the male advantage.

By the end of *Fall of Giants*, the roles of Maud and Ethel have basically been reversed. Maud moved to Germany with Walter, and, despite the fact that she “had never been taught to do much except dress up and go to parties” (*Fall of Giants*: 843), works in a nightclub as a musician to make some money (*ibid.*) after Fitz had decided to cut her off because she did not ask his permission to get married (*Fall of Giants*: 830). Despite the poverty and the hardships, however, Maud has no regrets (*Fall of Giants*: 841) and lives a happy life with her husband and her two children. Ethel, in contrast, becomes a MP for the Labour party (*Fall of Giants*: 848), which means that, while Maud now lives in poverty, Ethel has climbed the social ladder (Ethel’s affiliation the Labour party stems from the fact that Follett himself was a donor to the Labour party, he associates his political beliefs with the Labour party, and his wife was a Member of Parliament for the Labour party⁷²). What is noteworthy, however, is that both of them are a lot happier than they were in the beginning of the novel. The name “Fall of Giants”, therefore, on the one hand means the fall of the German and the Russian empire over the course of World War I, but it also means the beginning of the fall of the patriarchy, as women have taken the right to vote, the right to work, the right to be active members of politics, and the right to choose their own fates for themselves.

4.1.2.2 World War II

The second novel of the trilogy, *Winter of the World*, takes place around World War II, with the children of the characters of the first novel taking over as the main characters. One thing that is interesting to note is that, while Ethel’s son Lloyd and Maud’s daughter Carla are the main characters for their respective families, both Ethel and Maud are still described to be “very pretty” (*Winter of the World*: 22) and “striking [...] poised, well dressed, attractive and confident” (*Winter of the World*: 24), and, more importantly, very much present characters that have a purpose in the novels, as they continue to fight injustice and evil:

⁷² See http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/817067.stm, no author, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/nov/25/this-much-i-know-ken-follett-you-dont-have-to-wear-a-hairshirt-in-the-labour-party>, Michael Hogan, or <https://members.parliament.uk/member/72/career>, no author, all accessed March 22, 2025.

“You realize that will infuriate the Nazis,” he said. “I hope so,” Mother said coolly. “The day they’re pleased with what I write, I shall give it up.” “They’re dangerous when riled.” Mother’s eyes flashed anger. “Don’t you dare condescend to me, Walter. I know they’re dangerous – that’s why I oppose them.” (*Winter of the World*: 5)

When they had ordered, Ethel explained her trip. “I lost my parliamentary seat in 1931,” she said. “I hope to win it back at the next election, but meanwhile I have to make a living. Fortunately, Maud, you taught me to be a journalist.” “I didn’t teach you much,” Maud said. “You had a natural talent.” “I’m writing a series of articles about the Nazis for the *News Chronicle*, and I have a contract to write a book for a publisher called Victor Gollancz. I brought Lloyd as my interpreter – he’s studying French and German.” (*Winter of the World*: 24)

In contrast to that, the traditionalist women of *Fall of Giants*, Bea and, to a degree, Olga, lost the only thing they had, their good looks, and are now described to be dull and boring, and do not play an important role anymore:

They both looked at Olga, sitting on Daisy’s bed, reading the *Buffalo Sentinel*. In photographs taken when she was young, Olga was a willowy beauty. Now she was dumpy and drab. She had lost interest in her appearance, though she shopped energetically with Daisy, never caring how much she spent to make her daughter look fabulous. (*Winter of the World*: 80)

Behind Mrs Peshkov came Earl Fitzherbert with a fat woman who must be his wife. (*Winter of the World*: 179)

This may be interpreted in several ways. On the one hand, one could argue that this development signifies that a woman’s value lies in her beauty, and once she is not beautiful anymore, she has lost her value and may therefore be forgotten. This argument can be underlined by the fact that in the Russian storyline, Volodya’s sister Anya, whose children will become the Russian main characters in the third part of the trilogy and are both described to be good-looking and successful, is said to be rather ugly and never really plays a role other than being mentioned as Grigori’s daughter, Volodya’s sister, or Dimka and Tanya’s mother: “He was fond of his sister, but he knew she was not beautiful. She was short and stumpy, and wore dull clothes in drab colours. She had not had many boyfriends, and it was good news that one liked her enough to come home with her” (*Winter of the World*: 230). The same goes for Eva, a Jewish German described to be “not a pretty girl” (*Winter of the World*: 79), who was sent to America by her parents when the Nazis took power and became a good friend of Daisy’s, but functions more as a bystander one could easily overlook, even though her (again, good-looking) children will also become important characters in the third novel. However, I would argue that Bea

and Olga both function as a symbol of what the old, traditionalist beliefs do to women: they were both forced into a social construct of rules and traditions they had to live by with a man that does not love them and who they do not love either. Their husbands have lost interest in them once the only thing that made them interesting to them – their good looks – started to fade. Consequently, they felt ignored and lonely, shifted all their energy and interest to their children, and stopped caring about themselves.

Daisy, Olga and Lev's daughter, functions as a symbol that it is possible for women to break free and leave those old beliefs Olga and Bea are stuck in behind. She is introduced as a young girl who feels rejected by her father, who spends more time with his mistress and illegitimate son (*Winter of the World*: 82), and originally grew up in the same beliefs her mother grew up in – that it is important to marry for social status rather than love:

Eva said: "Daisy, if they're all so snobbish, why do you want to go to the party?" "Charlie Farquharson will be there, and I'm thinking of marrying him," Daisy said. "Are you serious?" Olga said emphatically: "He's a great catch." Eva said: "What's he like?" "Absolutely adorable," Daisy said. "Not the handsomest boy in Buffalo, but sweet and kind, and rather shy." "He sounds very different from you." "It's the attraction of opposites." Olga spoke again. "The Farquharsons are among the oldest families in Buffalo." (*Winter of the World*: 82-83)

"I sure can. And I'll marry him if only to prove his mother wrong." "Oh Daisy, why do you care so much what these people think?" "Let's watch the tennis." Daisy sat on the sand beside Charlie. He might not be handsome, but he would worship his wife and do anything for her. The mother-in-law would be a problem, but Daisy thought she could handle her. (*Winter of the World*: 89)

Daisy did not have to feign this enthusiasm. It was her dream to raise a string of champions. She saw racehorse owners as the ultimate international elite. (*Winter of the World*: 101)

Those scenes introduce a girl that may be described as shallow at best and cunning at worst – but definitely a girl that was raised to believe that her own value depends not on herself, but on her ability to find a suitable husband. One could, however, argue that her desire to marry into a society that tolerates her because it has to because of her father's money, but does not accept her as one of them, stems not solely from the fact that she grew up in the old beliefs, but rather compensates for the fact that she had been rejected by her father. This need for compensation is underlined by the fact that, as just quoted, she wants her husband to "worship" her and to do "anything for her" – something that she has never seen her own father do

for her or her mother. One can therefore already see that, though she believes in what her mother has taught her and wants to marry for status rather than love, she wants to break the cycle and not end up like her mother and father. However, Charlie breaks up with her because of her father's business (*Winter of the World*: 144) and, once she goes to England to escape the scandal, Daisy meets Fitz's son Boy and decides that she wants to marry him to eventually become a Countess. In England, the conflict within her – traditions vs. progress – once more become obvious, especially when she first meets Lloyd:

Daisy was surprised. "Do many undergraduates befriend housemaids?" "My goodness, what a snobbish thing to say! My mother was a housemaid, before she became a Member of Parliament." Daisy felt herself blush. She hated snobbery and often accused others of it, especially in Buffalo. She thought she was totally innocent of such unworthy attitudes. "I've got off on the wrong foot with you, haven't I?" she said as the dance came to an end. "Not really," he said. "You think it's dull to talk about Fascism, yet you take a German refugee into your home and even invite her to travel to England with you. You think housemaids have no right to be friends with undergraduates, yet you pay for Ruby to see the dentist. I don't suppose I'll meet another girl half as intriguing as you tonight." (*Winter of the World*: 164)

Lloyd very clearly describes the two sides of Daisy: the one her upbringing created, in which she believes she belongs to a certain social class, must remain in that class under all circumstances, sees herself above people who do not belong to that class, and, as a girl, must not talk about 'male interests', such as politics, other than by agreeing with what the man says. On the other hand, she despises class-thinking and wants to help fight the evil in the world, even if it is 'only' by taking in a refugee. However, her traditional side initially wins and, scheming with her mother to make Boy propose marriage (*Winter of the World*: 188-189), she marries him and becomes Lady Aberowen (*Winter of the World*: 194-195). By becoming Boy's wife, Daisy automatically adopts her husband's views, just as the rules and traditions she grew up with dictate her: as Boy is a leader of the English Fascists and an admirer of Oswald Mosley, she starts supporting the Fascists as well:

There was no doubt why she was here. She was wearing a beautifully tailored female version of the uniform, with a long grey skirt instead of the breeches, her fair curls escaping from under the black cap. [...] Daisy had told him she liked Boy Fitzherbert, and Boy's politics clearly made no difference to that. But to see her obviously supporting the Fascists in their attack on Jewish Londoners rammed home to him how utterly alien she was from everything that mattered in his life. [...] "Democracy is not necessarily the most appropriate political system for every country in all times." She was quoting Mosley's propaganda, Lloyd guessed. (*Winter of the World*: 206)

Although it is hinted that she does not actually support the Fascists out of belief but out of duty to her husband ("Daisy looked away", *Winter of the World*: 207; "She looked troubled [...]", *ibid.*), in this scene she clearly switches from an in-between-character, which the reader could not really place, to a character that stands in clear contrast to characters like Ethel, Maud, or Carla: she is hypocritical, as she supports the persecution of Jews, even though her best friend Eva is Jewish and tries to make the excuse that it does not matter what happened to Eva's family because she does not know them (*ibid.*), she is selfish, as she only cares about her own benefit and ignores everything else, and she stopped thinking for herself when she married and simply adopted her husband's worldview. However, once she realizes that marriage to Boy is exactly what she did not want, her progressive side starts to shine through again:

She had never seen one, but she had heard people talk about such things. Americans called it a Trojan, the British a rubber johnny. The correct term was condom, and it was to stop you getting pregnant. Why did her husband have a bag of them? There could be only one answer. They were to be used with another woman. [...] He looked at the open drawers of the bedside cupboard and said: "How dare you spy on me?" "I suspected you of being unfaithful," she said. She held up the condom. "And I was right." "Damn you for a sneak." "Damn you for an adulterer." He raised his hand. "I should beat you like a Victorian husband." She snatched a heavy candlestick from the mantelpiece. "Try it, and I'll bop you like a twentieth-century wife." (*Winter of the World*: 302)

Even though they want to work it out and Boy promises he will stop cheating on her, she catches him cheating on her again (*Winter of the World*: 384), and finally leaves him, which marks the beginning of her redemption-arc: right after leaving Boy, London gets bombed by the Germans, and in contrast to Boy, who goes into hiding together with his mistresses, she takes the initiative and takes on the – originally male – role of the hero who saves people's lives without questioning it; even though she is clearly distressed by the suffering and the death of people, she is not only encouraged by another woman, not a man, to keep going, but she also

finds some self-worth – something that she thought had been lost after her husband had repeatedly cheated on her – in helping others:

Daisy left the girl with him and ran to the front door of the building. It seemed to be an old house subdivided into cheap apartments. The upper floors were burning but she was able to enter the hall. Taking a guess, she ran to the back and found herself in a kitchen. There she saw a woman unconscious on the floor and a toddler in a cot. She picked up the child and ran out again. The girl with the burned hair yelled: “That’s my sister!” Daisy thrust the toddler into the girl’s arms and ran back inside. (*Winter of the World*: 386)

Daisy said: “I’ll drive it. Where should I go?” “Can you drive?” Most British women could not drive: it was still a man’s job here. “Don’t ask stupid questions,” Daisy said. “Where am I taking the ambulance?” [...] With huge relief she reached the hospital and followed another ambulance to the emergency entrance. The place was frantically busy, with a dozen vehicles discharging maimed and burned patients into the care of hurrying porters with bloodstained aprons. Perhaps I’ve saved the mother of these children, Daisy thought. I’m not completely worthless, even if my husband doesn’t want me. (*Winter of the World*: 387)

“I’ll deal with it,” the nurse said briskly. “You have to go back.” “Must I?” said Daisy. “Pull yourself together,” said the nurse. “There will be a lot more dead and injured before this night is over.” “All right,” said Daisy; and she got back behind the wheel and drove off. (*Winter of the World*: 388)

Similarly to what Ethel experienced during World War I, however, Daisy also finds out quickly that, even though she and other women do the same job as men by driving ambulances and saving people, they still will not get the same respect and there are no women in leading positions:

Daisy joined in. “You don’t really think all you men are smarter than all of us women, do you?” Nobby said: “Matter of fact, there are some women senior wardens.” “I’ve never met one,” said Naomi. “It’s tradition, isn’t it,” Nobby said. “Women have always been home-makers.” “Like Catherine the Great of Russia,” Daisy said sarcastically. Naomi put in: “Or Queen Elizabeth of England.” “Amelia Earhart.” “Jane Austen.” “Marie Curie, the only scientist ever to win the Nobel Prize twice.” (*Winter of the World*: 397)

However, Nobby quickly points out why there cannot be women in leading positions: “It’s very simple. Men won’t take orders from a woman” (*Winter of the World*: 398). This scene highlights a major problem women are still faced with in the 21st century, which section 4.1.3 will comment on further: not being taken seriously for doing the exact same thing men are doing.

The double standards deeply rooted in society between men and women can also be seen in how Boy reacts when Daisy starts dating again. Even though Daisy

and Boy had separated when she caught him cheating on her, Boy makes a scene when he finds out that Daisy is in a relationship with Lloyd:

“My God, you did it, you slept with him!” Boy roared. Even the waiters had paused in their work and were standing still, watching the row. Daisy walked to the door. Boy yelled: “You slut!” Daisy was not going to exit on that line. She turned around. “You know about sluts, of course. I had the misfortune to meet two of yours, remember?” [...] “No, he’s overseas. But, yes, I do love him. I’m sorry, Boy. You have no right to judge me – your offences are worse – but I judge myself.” “That’s it,” he said. “I’m going to divorce you.” Those were the words she had been waiting for, she realized. Now they had been said, and everything was over. Her new life began from this moment. She sighed. “Thank God,” she said. (*Winter of the World*: 676-677)

Both Daisy’s and Boy’s reaction to the other one cheating is something that cannot only be found in fiction for the dramatic effect, but rather something that happens in real life as well: according to news-medical.net, one of the world’s leading open access medical and life science hubs, research has shown that men find physical infidelity – their partner having sex with another person – worse, whereas women regard emotional infidelity – their partner having a close relationship with another person – more serious.⁷³ For Daisy, the worst part about being cheated on was not the fact that he had sex with someone else, but that, after she forgave him the first time and he promised he would end the relationship with his mistresses, she had to find out that he had not only kept sleeping with those women, but had formed a close relationship with them. For Boy, even though he and Daisy had long separated, the act in itself is the worst, which is a combination of the fear of being cuckolded and a sense of male possessiveness – what is his is his alone and no one else must touch it. However, according to news-medical.net, research has shown that, in contrast to the novel, in which Boy hypocritically finds Daisy’s cheating much worse than his own and does not find any forgiveness in him, men and women are equally likely to forgive their partner for cheating in real life and about 80 years after the time of action in the novel – an indicator that society is coming to a point of realization that both male and female feelings are equally important and neither of them is better or worse than the other for hurting those feelings. Boy, however and in contrast to his initial words, refuses to divorce Daisy after he found out that she was in a relationship with Lloyd out of spite (*Winter of the World*: 688, 746),

⁷³ For full article, see <https://www.news-medical.net/news/20200729/Men-and-women-react-differently-to-infidelity.aspx>, no author, reviewed by James Ives, M.Psych., accessed March 22, 2025.

and even his last words show his hatred toward his former wife, who had, according to him (*Winter of the World*: 742), the audacity to not tolerate him cheating on her, but rather left him to be with someone else: “Boy opened his eyes and said: ‘Williams.’ ‘What is it, Boy?’ Boy seemed to grin. ‘You can marry the bitch now,’ he said. Then he died.” (*Winter of the World*: 770). This scene is playing around with a stereotype that is often assigned to women: that they are too emotional, hold (unnecessary) grudges, and are therefore unfit for great positions within society because they lack calmness. Here, however, it is Boy, a man, who holds a grudge for so long and is so caught up in his hatred for Daisy that, even as he was dying, he cannot find forgiveness or impactful words, but uses his last breath to throw an insult at his former wife. This – and, on a larger scale, the whole section about Daisy – clearly signifies that stereotyping people is a close-minded thing to do, as not all women act one way and all men act another way, but every person, regardless of their gender, have their faults and it depends on the character, not the gender, what they make of their lives.

The other female main character of the second part of the trilogy is Carla, Maud’s daughter. From the very beginning, it is made clear that, even as a child, Carla was aware that her mother was different to other women and would not accept being a ‘second-class citizen’ behind men:

Carla could guess how this argument would end. Father loved her dearly, she knew, but in all her eleven years he had never looked after her for a whole day. All her friends’ fathers were the same. Men did not do that sort of thing. But Mother sometimes pretended not to know the rules women lived by. (*Winter of the World*: 11)

The fact that she is more courageous than most women can be seen in the fact that, at eleven years old, she takes charge of the situation and delivers her housekeepers baby all on her own while her older brother Erik is frightened and does not know what to do (*Winter of the World*: 46-49). While one could think that Carla is a very stereotypical character, as the child of a feminist and a socialist, who were both very prominent and positive characters in the first novel, must automatically also be a very likeable character, it is made clear on the example of Erik that this is not necessarily the case. Very early on, Erik joins the Hitler Youth and “felt like a prince” (*Winter of the World*: 44) in his uniform. This, again, shows that stereotyping people does not make sense, as, at the end of the day, every person

makes their own decisions. Having Erik join the Nazis also shows that being related does not automatically mean that people have the same beliefs, courage, or character, as Erik, in contrast to his parents and his sister Carla, says that he was finally “one of the gang” (*ibid.*) and is “infuriated” (*ibid.*) that his parents would not support the Nazis, who he describes as “winners” (*ibid.*) and as “smart and fit and loyal and efficient” (*ibid.*). Erik’s faith in Hitler and the Nazis is not even broken when he is stationed in Russia and his unit is left to freeze by the German state (*Winter of the World*: 525), nor by the fact that the Nazis had killed his father: “He thought a lot about his late father, and felt deep rage mingled with his grief and loss. [...] Why had he had to be such a rebel? Why had he been so attached to the outdated ideology of democracy? Freedom had done nothing for Germany, whereas Fascism had saved the country” (*Winter of the World*: 527). Continuously and unabatedly supporting the regime that not only killed one’s father, but very clearly does not care about one as they left them to freeze in the Russian winter draws a parallel to the polls of 1930s, which show that, despite the fact that the Nazi party (NSDAP) was, according to Boak (1989) the “sole party to reduce women’s role in society to a purely biological function, that of producing future generations of Germans [...]” (Boak 1989: 303), the female vote played a substantial role in bringing Hitler and the NSDAP to power (Boak 1989: 304). This parallel shows that asking the question why someone would support a party or a person that would and will not benefit them at all but rather harm them is not solely focused on one gender, but it is a universal question that is still relevant today, which will be further discussed in section 4.1.3.

As it has been explained in chapter 3, a big mistake patriarchal regimes make is to underestimate and oppress members of societies they deem weaker than themselves – for the purpose of this thesis, women. While the notion for the regimes is usually that the oppressed party cannot do anything anyway because they are too weak, history has shown that sooner or later all oppression does is create an enemy from within that will, eventually, bring about change and/or an end to the regime. In the novel, this is shown on the example of Carla. As previously mentioned, the Nazis saw women as a bare birthing machine, hence would not grant them any power or public standing. Carla finds out that one’s gender counts more than one’s qualifications when she applies for a scholarship to become a doctor and is denied:

He put out his cigarette thoughtfully in the ashtray on his desk. "I'm afraid you are not suitable as a candidate for this scholarship," he said. She was astonished. How had she failed? She has answered every question! "Why not?" she said. "My qualifications are irreproachable." "You are unwomanly. You talk freely of the vagina and the penis." "It was you who started that! I merely answered your questions." "You have clearly been brought up in a coarse environment where you saw the nakedness of your male relatives." "Do you think old people's diapers should be changed by men? I'd like to see you do it!" "Worst of all, you are disrespectful and insolent." "You asked me challenging questions. If I had given you timid replies you would have said I wasn't tough enough to be a doctor – wouldn't you?" He was momentarily speechless, and she realized that was exactly what he would have done. "You've wasted my time," she said, and she went to the door. "Get married," he said. "Produce children for the Führer. That's your role in life. Do your duty!" She went out and slammed the door. [...] Outside the building, she said to Frieda: "He had no intention of recommending me for the scholarship, because I'm a woman. My qualifications were irrelevant. I did all that work for nothing." Then she burst into tear. Frieda put her arms around her. After a minute she felt better. "I'm not going to raise children for the damned Führer," she muttered. (*Winter of the World*: 294-295)

While the professor clearly thought that by denying a woman access to education and jobs would force her into "doing her duty" and becoming a wife and mother, what it actually did was to boost Carla's hatred for the Nazis. Firstly, she and her friend Frieda go all the way from Berlin to Bavaria to inquire about Frieda's brother's and Ada's son's deaths and find out that the Nazis experimented on handicapped children and then killed them (*Winter of the World*: 451-461). Then they help to make it known to the general public (*Winter of the World*: 474-477), which results in protests, which are described to be "the only time in the history of the Third Reich that there had been a public outcry against any government action" (*Winter of the World*: 478). As a result of the regime's underestimation of women, the responsible inspector of the Gestapo, Thomas Macke, cannot grasp how the secret got out, as it does not even cross his mind that a woman could outsmart him:

He had tracked down the three troublemakers, Werner Franck, Pastor Ochs and Walter von Ulrich, and in different ways he has silenced each of them. And yet the secret had come out. [...] Neither clue led anywhere. In any case, Macke felt sure this calamity could not be the work of a gaggle of girls. (*Winter of the World*: 478-479)

Despite her reluctance to become a traitor to her own country, the hatred for the Nazis eventually drives Carla, together with her mother Maud, to become a spy for the Russians (*Winter of the World*: 601). This is meant to show how underestimating and oppressing a certain group of people will eventually do nothing but create an enemy that will destroy the regime from within. That this is still

relevant in the 21st century – and, consequently, that leaders of totalitarian regimes neither understand nor learn from history – will be discussed in section 4.1.3.

Next to showing that oppression will, sooner or later, always backfire and that women are, despite not being taken as seriously, just as capable and, therefore, dangerous to a totalitarian regime as men, Carla also represents the destiny of women in a war. While the trauma and the sacrifices of soldiers, of which a majority has been and still is male, is a well-known fact, and rightly so, the destiny of women is often overlooked. Despite the fact that she has worked as a spy for the Russians – which, obviously, almost no one is aware of –, she is raped by Russian soldiers after the war is over, offering herself to save a 13-year-old girl, who she will later adopt as a daughter:

The tall soldier pointed at Rebecca. She cringed away from him and tried to hide behind Carla. A second man, small with fair hair, grabbed Rebecca and pulled her away. Rebecca screamed, and the small man grinned as if he liked the sound. [...] When they reached the door, Carla stepped forward and cried: "Wait!" Something in her voice made them stop. "She's too young," Carla said. "Only thirteen!" She did not know whether they understood her. She held up two hands, showing ten fingers, then one hand showing three. "Thirteen!" The tall soldier seemed to understand her. He grinned and said in German: "*Frau ist frau.*" A woman is a woman. Carla found herself saying: "You need a real woman." She walked slowly forward. "Take me, instead." (*Winter of the World*: 798-799)

She turned her head to the side, but the soldier grasped her chin and turned her face back, making her look at him as he thrust inside her. She closed her eyes. She felt him kissing her, trying to force his tongue into her mouth. His breath smelled like rotting meat. When she clamped her mouth shut, he punched her face. She cried out and opened her bruised lips to him. She tried to think how much worse this would have been for a thirteen-year-old virgin. The soldier grunted and ejaculated inside her. She tried not to let the disgust show on her face. He climbed off, and the fair-haired one took his place. [...] Time passed, and he ejaculated. Then another one got on top. [...] The third soldier satisfied himself, then the fourth lay on her. (*Winter of the World*: 800-801)

The novel shows that Carla's gang rape is not an exception but rather the order of the day by the fact that under Russian occupation, the children of Berlin start playing a new game called "Komm, Frau", in which little boys throw girls to the ground and imitate sexual intercourse (*Winter of the World*: 848). That this is not an exaggeration by the novel is – while remaining a sort of taboo topic – underlined by several sources: According to Brunnbauer *et al.* (2007), Russian soldiers have raped approximately 2 million women in the Soviet occupation zone (Brunnbauer *et al.* 2007: 486). However, may it be shame by the victims or simply a matter of

trying to forget and leaving the past in the past, neither are exact numbers known nor are the mass rapes a real topic of conversation when it comes to World War II. Nevertheless, the rape of women by soldiers during or after a war has become a more spoken off topic in recent years, exemplary with Ingo von Münch in *Frau, komm! Die Massenvergewaltigungen deutscher Frauen und Mädchen 1944/45* (2009) or Miriam Gebhardt in *Als die Soldaten kamen. Die Vergewaltigung deutscher Frauen am Ende des Zweiten Weltkriegs* (2015). No longer silencing the suffering of women – and with this, the trauma of male soldiers who have lived through killings, injuries, and war captivities shall by no means be played down or forgotten – is definitely a positive development of the 21st century.⁷⁴ Despite this positive development when it comes to no longer silently accepting the abuse of women in history, the situation for women in war zones has not much changed. Section 4.1.2.3 will draw on this more closely.

4.1.2.3 The Cold War

In the third novel, the same motif as in *Winter of the World*, namely giving importance to female characters based on their appearances, is repeated. On the one hand, there are characters like Jacky, who was described to be immensely beautiful in her youth, but is not beautiful any longer:

Jacky Jakes had one been pretty, he knew: he had seen photographs of her as a teenager, when she had aspired to be a movie star. She still looked young: she had the kind of dark-chocolate-coloured skin that did not wrinkle. [...] But the wide mouth that smiled so broadly in those old photos was now turned down at the corners in an expression of grim determination. [...] She had gained that careworn face raising him alone for the first decade of his life, working as a waitress and living in a tiny house at the back of Union Station, and drilling him in the need for hard work and education and respectability. (*Edge of Eternity*: 21-22)

In contrast, when it comes to Daisy, it is said that “Daisy Williams at forty-six was still attractive, with big blue eyes and fair curls: when she was young she must have

⁷⁴ In addition to the fact that more and more people are talking about the rape of women by soldiers during or after a war, reinstalling a historical woman's reputation in pop-culture is also becoming more and more popular. Exemplary for literature, Lucia Herbst is writing novels about female figures from Greek mythology and, finally, gives them a fair treatment: in part one of her “Greek Goddesses”-series, *Medusa: Verdammt lebendig* (2022), Medusa sues Poseidon and Athena for rape and a fair trial is being held. In the second and third part (*Persephone: Verdammt mächtig* and *Psyche: Verdammt frei*, both published in 2024), Persephone frees herself from a toxic relationship with a narcissistic Hades, and Psyche figures out whether she must give up her freedom for love and whether love forgives everything. Another example would be the depiction of Henry VIII's wives in the TV series *The Tudors* (2007-2010), in which they, especially Anne Boleyn, are no longer shown to be the villains, but the victims.

been irresistible, Jasper thought” (*Edge of Eternity*: 299). This again shows the difference between a woman who is loved and treated properly – Daisy – and a woman who had to give up her dreams to become a single mother after she had been left due to her race and social standing – Jacky. Despite the fact that it is made clear that Jacky has raised her son alone since she was sixteen, worked hard to provide for him and herself, and taught him about the importance of education and hard work, which means that she has objectively done a terrific job as a mother, the first thing that is said about her is that the hard work has left its toll in her and that she is no longer beautiful. When it comes to Daisy, it is also not important what she is like and what she stands for, but that she, despite her ‘old age’ of 46 – which, obviously, is not actually that old after all –, is still attractive. This shows the value – or rather, the lack thereof – women have in society: what matters above all is their looks way before the character, their work ethic, etc.

In general, next to the fact that a woman’s value still lies more in her appearance than her character in the eyes of society, the reader can find a lot of scenarios for women repeated in the last novel of the series. A very prominent one is the female proclivity for men of power and the abuse thereof. Just as Fitz has seduced Ethel when she was still a maid in his house, has promised her love, had an affair with her that they both knew would lead nowhere due to him being married and her lack of social status, and then basically shoved her out of his house to fend for her own when she fell pregnant with his child, basically the same can be found in *Edge of Eternity* with Maria and John F. Kennedy – while it is not exactly clear why Follett makes Kennedy the only historically real person to appear as a frequent character in the novels (other historically real people appear or are mentioned, but Kennedy is the only one who plays a bigger role), I would argue that this is done to show that the male abuse of power is not something fictional, as it could be argued with Fitz and Ethel, but that it is something real that has happened and still happens; Kennedy was also known for his several affairs during his lifetime. Maria is originally introduced to be a hard-working young woman George meets on the first Freedom Ride, and it is later revealed that while she went to college, she focused on herself and her studies, did not really go out on dates (*Edge of Eternity*: 136), and was still a virgin (*Edge of Eternity*: 153). When she starts a job in the White House, she soon catches the attention of the president, and he starts inviting her for

private lunch breaks (*Edge of Eternity*: 141). When the two of them begin to be intimate, it is shown that he does not force her to sleep with him, but he very clearly takes advantage of her, as he quite obviously expects her to be willing to sleep with him without ever asking her permission and does not try to make it nice for her – clearly, this is only about him and she functions more as a ‘toy’ to satisfy himself:

He was breathing hard and so was she. He unfastened his suit pants and dropped them, then he lay on top of her. Was it always this quick? She did not know. [...] He continued with closed eyes. She studied his face, the look of concentration, the smile of pleasure. Then he gave a sigh of satisfaction, and it was over. He stood upright and pulled up his pants. Smiling, he said: “The bathroom is through there.” He pointed to a door in the corner, then did up his fly. [...] This is Jackie’s bathroom, she thought guiltily; and suddenly she wanted to leave. The bedroom was empty. She went to the door, then turned and looked back at the bed. She realized he had not once kissed her. (*Edge of Eternity*: 153-154)

This abuse of power can also be seen in the fact that it is always about what Kennedy wants, never about Maria (“He had gently taught her to give oral sex. [...] That was usually what he wanted when he arrived”, *Edge of Eternity*: 159), and in what happens when Maria falls pregnant: like Fitz, Kennedy – whose middle name was Fitzgerald, which draws another parallel to Fitz – does not want to have a child with someone who is a) not his wife and b) ranks way below him in regard to social status. He therefore pays for her abortion and, even though she is quite sick afterwards, does not show up to support her or help her in any way (*Edge of Eternity*: 272). This, just as it did with Fitz and Ethel in *Fall of Giants*, again presents (and is meant to criticize) a male conviction that, despite the fact that it takes two people to make a baby, an unplanned pregnancy and its consequences, be it having that baby or having an abortion, is solely a woman’s responsibility. Even as they continue their relationship, Kennedy “had not mentioned her abortion. It was almost as if he had forgotten about it” (*Edge of Eternity*: 340). Maria also never mentions it, claiming that “her role was to make him happy, not sad” (*ibid.*). Instead, she becomes a literal toy that is 100% dependent on President Kennedy:

She had gone to sleep half hoping it would happen. She dreaded the end of their love affair. She knew it had no future. For him to leave his wife would destroy him politically; to do so for a black woman was unthinkable. Anyway, he did not even want to leave Jackie: he loved her, and he loved their children. He was happily married. Maria was his mistress, and when he tired of her he would discard her. Sometimes she felt she would prefer to die before that came to pass – especially if death could come while she was at his side, in bed, in a flash of nuclear destruction that would be over before they knew what was happening. (*ibid.*)

This clearly differentiates Maria from Ethel. While they both fall for a man of power, Ethel eventually understands that she was being used when Fitz throws her out of his house because of her pregnancy, and instead of breaking down she only grows stronger. Maria, in contrast, though she understands that she is only the mistress and that he does not love her, is willing to let him do what he wants when he wants and would rather die than be without him. After President Kennedy is shot, she even builds a shrine in his memory in her apartment (*Edge of Eternity*: 682), which, as she is not dating and is very reluctant to even think about another man (*Edge of Eternity*: 680), shows that her love for the man who only used her has become obsessive. Despite her conviction that a powerful, handsome man like President Kennedy can do whatever he wants to a woman simply because he is who he is, she is, however, not an antifeminist. To the contrary, she even compares the women's movements with the fight for racial equality and calls sexism worse than racism, as it affects more people:

“If she settled down with you, she'd have to live in Washington.” “Is that so bad?” “Her job is in Atlanta.” George did not see the problem. “Most women live where their husband's job is.” “Things are changing. If Negroes can be equal, why not women?” “Oh, come on!” George said indignantly. “It's not the same.” “It certainly is not. Sexism is worse. Half the human race are enslaved.” “Enslaved?” “Think how many housewives work hard all day for no pay! And in most parts of the world, a woman who leaves her husband is liable to be arrested and brought home by the police. Someone who works for nothing and can't leave the job is called a slave, George.” (*Edge of Eternity*: 679)

This scene, in contrast to how she was depicted in her relationship with Kennedy, shows that Maria is not generally a person who thinks that a man is always right because he is a man and a woman must therefore do as she is told. She later becomes one of the White House insiders to leak information about President Nixon and the Watergate scandal to the press (*Edge of Eternity*: 873); a main factor for her not being discovered as one of the insiders is that the men in power do not suspect a woman of leaking, and even Jasper, the journalist, thinks that the informant must be a man (*Edge of Eternity*: 875). Later, after Maria and George finally started dating, she breaks up with him after he says that, when they get married and have children, he expects her to stay home with the children while he works, claiming that “we're in the seventies now. Feminism has arrived. Work is no longer something a woman does merely to pass the time until some man condescends to make her his domestic slave” (*Edge of Eternity*: 927). Those two sides of Maria –

the fierce fighter for social justice on the one hand and the young woman who is obsessing over a man she does not mean anything to on the other one – symbolize that anyone can find themselves stuck in an abusive relationship. This is also not something that solely concerns women, though the victims are more often women than men, as will be explained in section 4.1.3. It also shows that it is not as easy as to say that the victims of such abusive relationships – and President Kennedy abusing his power and making her so dependent on him that she would rather die in a nuclear strike than be without him may very well be called abusive – are just ‘silly little girls’ or ‘weak boys’ because it is shown several times throughout the novels that Maria – as well as Ethel some 50 years earlier – is neither silly nor weak – she is just manipulated and becomes emotionally dependent on someone that cleverly lured her into his net of seduction. However, both Maria (eventually) and Ethel came out of their respective abusive relationships stronger than before and fought for what they believed in. In Ethel’s case, it is claimed that she had “transformed her country as well as herself. She had fought and won political battles – for votes for women, for welfare, for free health care, for girls’ education, and now freedom for the persecuted minority of homosexual men” (*Edge of Eternity*: 713). In contrast to John F. Kennedy, who is shot when he is 46 years old and never owns up to what he has done to Maria, his wife, or his other mistresses, Fitz lives long enough to admit that he had done Ethel wrong and that, in fact, he had loved her more than anyone else – and likewise (*Edge of Eternity*: 714). While this scene is supposed to be a redemption arch for Fitz, in which he confesses his love for the dying Ethel and promises he would shake Lloyd’s hand, it is striking that, even though he admits that he had been wrong, he never actually apologizes to her. This means that, while he loved that she made him feel desirable when his wife would not and he loved the time they had together, he certainly does not love her (or their child) and, while he does not deny a dying woman her last wish and admits that he has been wrong, does not really see the big problem in abandoning the woman he supposedly loves and his son. The fact that Ethel forgives him in this scene, as well as the other characters (exemplary, Lloyd forgives Fitz after he called himself a fool, *Edge of Eternity*: 818, and Carla forgives him for disowning her mother when all he does is come to the funeral, *Edge of Eternity*: 824), while he not once actually says the words “I am sorry” out loud, shows that society is often easier on men than on women. This can also be seen in the legacy of the real John F. Kennedy, who is

alleged to have had multiple affairs, but when speaking about this, it is rarely said that he was a notorious cheater, but that he was a womanizer, a ladies' man, implying that, being as handsome as he was, women just flew towards him rather than admitting that he willingly made the choice to cheat on his wife every chance he got. In contrast, when Jackie Kennedy got remarried, she received huge public backlash, with, according to German newspaper *Stern* (2003), newspapers saying that the US lost a saint and that her marrying Aristoteles Onassis was the greatest insult to American men since Pearl Harbor.⁷⁵ This shows that, for the public of the late 1960s, a widow remarrying was worse than a man cheating on his wife.

Another repeated motif is underestimation of the braveness of women. In *Fall of Giants*, it is mainly Maud, who, despite her privileged social standing, fights for women's rights and suffrage and is later willingly exchanging her comfortable life in England's upper class for a life in poverty with Walter when her brother is trying to blackmail her into staying. In *Winter of the World*, it is her daughter Carla, who is actively fighting the Nazis, who very clearly do not consider women to be clever or brave enough to be a danger to the regime. In *Edge of Eternity*, next to Maria, who, as mentioned before, helped to uncover the Watergate scandal, it is Tania, who, together with her friend Vasili, produces and publishes an illegal news-sheet to report on censorship, demonstrations, trials, and political prisoners in the Soviet Union (*Edge of Eternity*: 63). The contrast between her and her twin brother Dimka is shown when Vasili is caught with a copy of their news-sheet and Tania is trying to save him from an even harsher punishment by getting rid of the typewriter they wrote it on before the KGB finds it:

Tania said: "We have to go to the apartment, now, and take that typewriter and get rid of it." Dimka took a step back from her. "Absolutely not. Forget it." "We must!" "No. I'd risk anything for you, and I might risk a lot for someone you loved, but I'm not going to stick my neck out for this guy. We could all end up in fucking Siberia." "I'll do it on my own then." [...] "I'll do it alone. You're right, I can't put you in this much danger." "But I can't leave you in this much danger," he said. "What's the address?" (*Edge of Eternity*: 82-83)

⁷⁵ See <https://www.stern.de/lifestyle/leute/die-first-lady-besser-vom-podest-stuerzen--als-darauf-erfrieren-3520440.html>, no author, accessed March 22, 2025.

She ripped up the sheets of paper, threw them in the fireplace, and put a match to them. Watching them burn, Dimka said angrily: "Why the hell do you risk everything for the sake of an empty protest?" "We live in a brutal tyranny," she said. "We have to do something to keep hope alive." "We live in a society that is developing Communism," Dimka rejoined. "It's difficult and we have problems. But you should help solve those problems instead of inflaming discontent." "How can you have solutions if no one is allowed to talk about the problems?" "In the Kremlin we talk about the problems all the time." "And the same few narrow-minded men always decide not to make any major changes." (*Edge of Eternity*: 84)

These two scenes show that, between them, Tania is the braver twin – despite the fact that Dimka is the more influential of the two (like his uncle Volodya or his grandfather Grigori, he works for the Russian government (*Edge of Eternity*: 70) and Tania is "one of more than a thousand reporters" working for TASS, the Soviet news agency (*Edge of Eternity*: 59)). Dimka is willing to take risks for his loved ones, in this case his sister, but even though he knows about the flaws of the Soviet Union, he believes in the system as it benefits him, and he therefore has no reason to question it. Tania, in contrast, sees the problems of the Soviet Union and the struggles of the people more clearly than her brother and, while initially they both want to change the country for the better, sees that things have not changed since the Russian revolution because of the "same few narrow-minded men" (*Edge of Eternity*: 84) in the Kremlin. That she is braver – and, for that matter, more intelligent – than her brother and most men can be seen several times throughout the novel. One of the most significant – and dangerous – things she does is smuggling a typescript to the Leipzig Book Fair, hoping to find some publisher from the West to inform the world of how cruel the Soviet Union really is:

She had done dangerous things before. She had published a seditious newspaper; she had been arrested in Mayakovsky Square and dragged off to the notorious basement of the KGB's Lubyanka building; and she had made contact with a dissident in Siberia. But this was the most frightening. Communicating with the West was a crime of a higher order. She was taking Vasili's typescript to Leipzig, where she hoped to place it with a Western publisher. [...] Before, she had thought of Communism as a well-intentioned experiment that had failed and ought to be scrapped. Now, she saw it as a brutal tyranny whose leaders were evil. [...] She even had trouble talking to her twin brother, who still hoped that Communism could be improved rather than abolished. [...] And she had realized that wherever there was cruel oppression – in the Deep South of the US, in British Northern Ireland, and in East Germany – there had to be many nice, ordinary people like her family who looked away from the grisly truth. But Tania would not be one of them. She was going to fight it to the end. Whatever the risk. (*Edge of Eternity*: 658-659)

Through this action, Tania clearly shows that she is prepared to give her all to overthrow an unjust system and fight for freedom and justice. This will to resist was

caused by the inequality and unfair treatment of people – women, political opponents, etc. – in the Soviet Union. The motif of creating an enemy from within, as explained in section 4.1.2.2, is clearly carried throughout the novels with a clear message: A regime or a state that purposely oppresses a whole group of people, be it women, queer people, people of color, etc., is set to fail. While oppression is of course not solely a female problem, choosing several female characters throughout the novel to fight injustice not only symbolizes that braveness is not bound to one's gender but one's character, but also that society is taking a long time to understand this concept, as time and again the same story repeats itself throughout history.

As mentioned in section 4.1.2.2, a part of war that is often overlooked is the destiny of women. While in *Winter of the World* the focus lies on German women being raped by Soviet soldiers, *Edge of Eternity* shows, on the example of the Vietnam War, that rape is not only something 'the others' did, but that is a recurring weapon of war:

Slope translated. The peasant man answered him. Slope said: "He says there are no tunnels in this village." "Lying motherfucker," said Smithy. Jack said: "Shall I...?" Smithy looked thoughtful. "Do the girl, Jack," he said. "Make the parents watch." Jack looked eager. He ripped the girl's pyjamas off, causing her to scream. He threw her to the ground. Her body was pale and slender. Donny held her down. Jack pulled out his penis, already half erect, and rubbed it to stiffen it. Once again Jasper was horrified but not surprised. Rape was not commonplace, but it happened too frequently. (*Edge of Eternity*: 729)

He pumped vigorously for a minute. The mother continued to plead, though Slope did not bother to translate. The father was silent, but Jasper saw tears streaming down his face. Jack grunted a couple of times, then stopped and withdrew. There was blood on the girl's thighs, bright red on her ivory skin. Smithy said: "Who's next?" "I'll do her," said Donny, unzipping. [...] They were not even animals; they were worse than that; they were mad, evil fiends. (*Edge of Eternity*: 730)

Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, raping women as a weapon of war is not "something of the past" – and Ken Follett acknowledges this by repeating the storyline. While in *Winter of the World* the reader sees the rape through the victim's eyes, *Edge of Eternity* shows it through the eyes of the perpetrator. Although Jasper does not rape the Vietnamese girl himself and is clearly appalled by his comrades' actions, he does nothing to stop it out of fear of repercussions. This change of perspective makes the occurring war crimes even less bearable, as the soldiers joke about "losing their cherry", by which they mean committing their first war crime (*Edge of Eternity*: 731), and force others to rape and kill civilians as well in order

to make them a tight-knit team in which everyone is as guilty of war crimes as the other and therefore no one would tell on them (*Edge of Eternity*: 731-732). This, consequently, means that some sort of thinking and planning went into their actions and that soldiers are aware of the severity of their crimes, yet continue to commit those atrocities. While history has not really paid much attention to what happened to women in a war in the past, it is becoming more of a topic in the 21st century. Section 4.1.3 will draw on this more closely.

As *Edge of Eternity* is the novel with the least female characters out of the trilogy, yet takes place closest to contemporary times, as it is set from the 1960s onwards until 2008, a last aspect to focus on is the male gaze. As mentioned before, it is significant that the female characters of importance in all three novels are always described to be very pretty and/or very courageous, and once they have served their purpose in the storyline, they are described to have become dull and are barely mentioned any longer. When it comes to the interaction between the characters, in the first two books, the male attitude towards women is very old-fashioned, especially from characters like Fitz or his son Boy, who both, as an earl and his heir, think that they can do as they please and the rest of the world, including their wives, are there to serve them. In *Edge of Eternity*, however, there are both more and more female characters who claim equal rights for men and women, as well as male characters who claim to be on-board with and supportive of this change. However, looking at the internal thoughts of the characters, no matter their place of action, often paints a different picture. Looking at Dimka in Russia, he thinks of himself as being more progressive than his friends:

Early on in their friendship, Dimka had said to him: "What do you do about, you know, avoiding pregnancy?" "That's the girl's problem, isn't it?" Valentin had said carelessly. "Worst comes to the worst, it's not that difficult to get an abortion." Talking to others, Dimka found out that many Soviet boys took the same attitude. Men did not get pregnant, so it was not their problem. And abortion was available on demand during the first twelve weeks. But Dimka could not get comfortable with Valentin's approach, perhaps because his sister was so scornful about it. (*Edge of Eternity*: 99)

This continuous notion throughout the novels of male characters being convinced that a pregnancy is solely the woman's problem and they have nothing to do with it shows that it is both a problem that concerns women all over the world, no matter in which society they live, and that it is not a thing of the past, but happens to this

day (in the books, it happens in Wales, the US, and Russia all throughout the 20th century). As explained in greater detail in section 3.2.2, there are still strict abortion laws in supposedly modern and open societies that will punish women harshly for terminating an unplanned pregnancy while nothing happens to the man who got the woman pregnant in the first place. As quoted, Dimka – as well as his distant relative George in the US, who calls Kennedy’s behavior “despicable” (*Edge of Eternity*: 272) after he sent Maria to have an abortion and never showed any sign of concern for her afterwards – does not support this male way of thinking, which clearly marks them as being more progressive. However, looking more closely at both Dimka and George, one can see very clearly the unconscious bias men often possess – they do not necessarily think themselves above women and do not consciously discriminate against them, but the internalized gender gap becomes quite obvious in their actions. For Dimka, this can be seen in a small section after he has met his first girlfriend Nina, and suddenly felt very confident about women:

Consequently, he looked at other women in a new, more knowing way. He could imagine them naked, speculate how their breasts curved, visualize their body hair, imagine their faces when they made love. In a way he knew all women, knowing one. (*Edge of Eternity*: 216-217)

The fact that him looking at women triggers the automatic thought of their naked bodies and what they are like in bed, combined with the fact that women are not individual people to him, but he believes that they are all the same, shows that, even though he is supposed to be a progressive character, the internalized dehumanization of women is very much present. This view also does not really change over time, as, years later, after he has long divorced Nina and is dating Natalya, he thinks about how she was nervous meeting his son for the first time because she has never had kids until her “usual maternal instincts” (*Edge of Eternity*: 835) kicked in. This, again, implies that all women are essentially the same: they all want children and, therefore, they all have “usual maternal instincts”.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ This, obviously, is not true, as, according to The Guardian in 2022, more and more women choose to have children later on in life or not at all, see <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2022/jan/27/women-child-free-30-ons>, Denis Campbell, accessed March 22, 2025.

A similar attitude can be seen in George in the US. His mother Jackie was a single mother who sacrificed everything for her son, and he is very much aware of this, saying numerous times throughout the novel that he was lucky to have her and would not be where he is without her (exemplary, *Edge of Eternity*: 93). This means that, technically, he is aware of the fact that women can be just as hard-working and smart, yet often do not have the same opportunities as men, and he presents himself to be very respectful of women (*Edge of Eternity*: 22). Nevertheless, just like Dimka, he, despite him being portrayed as a modern young man, does not see women as real human beings either, but more of a possession a man can take and, consequently, dump whenever he pleases:

George was trying to forget Maria Summers. He was dating Norine Latimer, a history graduate who worked as a secretary at the American History Museum. She was attractive and intelligent, but it was not working: he still thought about Maria all the time. Perhaps Verena might be a more effective cure. (*Edge of Eternity*: 111)

George wanted to ask her for a date, but he held back. He was going to break up with Norine Latimer as soon as possible: that was inevitable, now that Maria was here. But he felt he had to tell Norine their romance was over before he asked Maria out. Anything else would seem dishonest. And the delay would not be long: he would see Norine within a few days. (*Edge of Eternity*: 138)

From these two scenes, one can quite clearly see his attitude towards women. In his mind, he can use women as a tool to forget about someone else, which essentially makes women interchangeable for him. It also does not even cross his mind that his actions might be hurtful to the women he is using. Additionally, the fact that in his internal thoughts it is said that “he felt like he should break up with his girlfriend before starting to date someone else”, which, objectively speaking, is the only decent thing to do, shows that he himself has a) no remorse and b) sees himself as the good person in the situation. He only sees it as dishonest to cheat on his girlfriend, but to him it is not a bad thing that he has wasted Norine’s time by dating only to get over someone else, but never had real interest in her. This internalized feeling of superiority can also be seen in his reaction when Maria rejects him, saying that he was “taken aback” because it “had not occurred to him that she might already be dating” (*Edge of Eternity*: 158). As quoted earlier, his relationships also often fail because he expects women to give up their lives and their jobs to accommodate him and his career. This very clearly shows that, even though he is not described to be a bad character, but he is intelligent, brave, and fighting for social justice, in his

mind women are not equal, but they are toys a man can pick up to play with whenever he wants, and they therefore have no mind or feelings of their own a man must take into consideration. Two things about this are ironic. Firstly, George is a fighter for social justice, joining the Freedom Rides against racial segregation in his youth⁷⁷ and later goes into politics to fight racism. However, when, as quoted earlier, Maria suggests that sexism is worse than racism because it concerns more people (*Edge of Eternity*: 679), he is offended, which shows that his fight for social justice does not actually stem from the fact that he wants justice and equality for everyone, but to him, it only matters when it concerns him – which, when it comes to the equal treatment of women, it does not. This leads to the second ironical aspect about George: while characters like John F. Kennedy or Fitz are presented to be very straight-forward in their ill-treatment of women, George is initially introduced as a respectful character and he resents President Kennedy for how he treats Maria, but his internalized views on women are essentially the same.

Another problem that stems from the fact that men think themselves above women can be seen in Cameron, who is described to be a conservative and, therefore, the odd one out from the beginning (*Edge of Eternity*: 178). Despite his conservative views, he falls in love with the left-wing, free-spirited Evie as a teenager, saying that he adored her but hated her views (*ibid.*). After a school theater, in which Evie strips down naked (*Edge of Eternity*: 182), he confesses his love, thinking that, because he is such a nice boy who accompanies her home, she will automatically like him back – which she does not:

Cameron waited patiently, letting them monopolize her, knowing that he had the ultimate advantage: he would be taking her home. [...] They reached Great Peter Street and still he had not said what he wanted to say. As they approached the house he stopped. She took another step forward, so he grabbed her arm and held her back. “Evie,” he said, “I’m in love with you.” “Oh Cam, don’t be ridiculous.” Cameron felt as if he had been punched. Evie tried to walk on. Cameron gripped her arm more tightly, nor caring now if he hurt her. (*Edge of Eternity*: 184)

As discussed earlier in section 4.1.1.2.1 and as will be further explained in section 4.1.3, this is another example of rejection violence. He thinks that, simply because he is nice to her, Evie owes him something, and when she makes it clear that she has no interest in him, he becomes violent. The fact that he does not care whether

⁷⁷ For more information on the Freedom Rides, see <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/freedom-rides>, no author, accessed March 22, 2025.

he hurt her or not also shows that he is not actually in love with her, and his refusal to let her go shows that, in his mind, she has no right to refuse his advances. Although he does not actually say or think that, his decision to confess his love for Evie only fell after she has stripped down naked. It is therefore likely that, in his mind, she was ‘fallen’ and therefore ‘fair game’, and the fact that she would not let him ‘rescue’ her hurts his pride. His attitude towards women also does not change in time. At 34, he is still single and regularly visits prostitutes and fantasizes about making his female co-worker Florence, who rejected him before (*Edge of Eternity*: 951), his sex-slave (*Edge of Eternity*: 952). When he is sent to Poland as a spy and he finally meets a woman who wants to be with him, however, he calls her a “sex maniac” (*Edge of Eternity*: 960) when she wants to sleep with him in the morning. This shows a very 19th century attitude towards women: for him, it is ok to go to prostitutes and find his pleasure there regularly; for women, even if they are dating, it is not ok to want too much intimacy. Cameron shows clear signs of being what is nowadays called an incel, which the Cambridge Dictionary describes to be:

a member of a group of people on the internet who are unable to find sexual partners despite wanting them, and who express hate towards people whom they blame for this (*Cambridge Dictionary* s.v. *incel*, n.)

In his mind, just as it is the case with incels, he is a great person, and he thinks that women owe him something. Just as he did not care whether he hurt Evie after she rejected him and he reduces Florence to his sex-slave in his fantasies, he humiliates the one woman who wants to be with him – even if, as his family suspects, she only wants to be with him and ends up marrying him for his money and a Green Card (*Edge of Eternity*: 992-993).

4.1.3 Current Data on the Position of Women Within Society

Having analyzed the two series about the changing image of women in the 20th century, it is interesting to see where society stands concerning the ‘woman question’ and feminism in general in 2024. Therefore, this section will provide current data, statistics, and examples on the situation of women in the Western world – as explained in the introduction, this includes primarily the UK, the US, and Germany, and the examples and data will be taken from studies, polls, but also pop-culture for a broader overview of society’s views on women.

In the *Clifton-Chronicles*, Maisie is denied a leading role in her job at the Royal Hotel and, when she quits her job to run her own tea shop, her ability to do so is highly questioned. Denying women leading roles or even the ability to seize the mantle is a sentiment that has always been grounded within society, and it is still relevant in the 2020s, also in the Western world. Exemplary, in a debate between two political youtubers, Hunter Avallone, who represented social-democratic views, and John Doyle, who represented conservative views, organized by Uncensored American, a non-partisan organization dedicated to fighting for freedom of speech in the US, on November 14, 2022, gender roles and women in leading positions also became topic. Being asked by a female member of the audience why he thinks that men are better leaders than women, John Doyle answered that this is because “he [men] is far less influenced by emotions. He’s far more willing to do what needs to be done for the people over whom he governs than women are. Women are far more likely to allow emotional impulses to govern their judgement”. While Hunter Avallone argues that studies have shown that companies with women in top positions “have outperformed their competitors by near 25%” and that “men and women were virtually identical when it came to making rational decisions”, Doyle – without giving evidence – claims that these studies are not to be taken seriously because the corporations “don’t want a media backlash, they want to look favorable to their donors and everything, so they appoint women to avoid lawsuits”.⁷⁸ To name only a couple of sources to show that women in top positions do, in fact, have a positive impact on a company, Soyoung Han and Marcus Noland (2020) from the Peterson Institute for International Economics (PIIE) found that, taking data from 1997-2017, firms with at least one female director or officer have performed consistently higher than firms without female leaders (Han and Noland 2020: 5-6), and Harvard Business Review Online claims that research has shown that firms with more women in senior positions are “more profitable, more socially responsible, and provide safer, higher-quality customer experiences – among many other benefits”.⁷⁹ This shows both that there is no

⁷⁸ For full video of the debate, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C0q3m9lnkX8&ab_channel=HunterAvallone, accessed March 22, 2025. For the above-mentioned question about male and female leaders and the following discussion, see 1:34:27 ff. of the video.

⁷⁹ See <https://hbr.org/2021/04/research-adding-women-to-the-c-suite-changes-how-companies-think>, Corinne Post, Boris Lokshin, and Christophe Boone, accessed March 22, 2025.

evidence that men in general are better leaders than women and that the belief that they are is still very much grounded in society, especially in conservative minds. Although there are more than enough examples around the world of men and women proving their equal worth – in other words, of women repeatedly proving themselves capable scientists and scholars, writers and rulers – they are continually confronted with the stereotype that women are not as capable as men. In their 2019 study about gender stereotypes, Hentschel *et al.* have found that men rate other men significantly higher than women in leadership competence, assertiveness, and independence, while granting women that they have better social skills than men: exemplary, the mean value of male raters rating leadership competence for men is 4.64, while it is 4.20 for women. Respectively, male raters give men a mean value of 4.73 for assertiveness and a mean value of 3.99 to women, and a mean value of 4.56 to men and 3.98 to women when it comes to independence. In contrast, the mean values by male raters for emotional sensitivity are 3.96 for men and 4.92 for women, and for sociability 4.09 (men) and 4.85 (women). Female raters, in comparison, rate male and female leadership competences and independence almost equally (5.01 for men and 4.93 for women for leadership competences, and 4.73 for men and 4.69 for women for independence) but agree that men have better assertiveness (4.94 for men, 4.50 for women) and women possess a better emotional sensitivity (3.66 vs. 5.29) and sociability (4.17 vs. 5.10) (Hentschel *et al.* 2019: 8). This shows that the discrepancy between how men and women see one another is still enormous. Men, according to these numbers, still believe that women are dependent on men and are neither assertive nor can they lead as well as men, yet are more connected to their feelings and to the feelings of others: in other words, men have a very traditional view, in which men work in important jobs and women stay home to care for their children or work in lower paid, social jobs, such as nurses, nursery school teachers, etc. Women, in contrast, believe that, despite the fact that they cannot enforce things as easily as men, they can lead just as well and do not see themselves as being dependent on a man. What is interesting, however, is that the discrepancy between male rating and female ratings when it comes to social skills is a lot bigger on the side of female rating. This, in other words, means that women have a much lesser opinion of male social skills than men. While Hentschel *et al.* do not give a scientifically proven reason for this, one could argue that women rate male social skills so much lower than female social skills because

men often still do not take women seriously – an indicator for this being the creation of a word for men not seeing women as equals: to mansplain – “to explain (something) needlessly, overbearingly, or condescendingly, esp. (typically when addressing a woman) in a manner thought to reveal a patronizing or chauvinistic attitude” (*OED* s.v. *mansplain*, v.).

Despite the fact that studies have shown that firms with more women in senior positions are better off than firms without women in senior positions, the salary still differs between male and female employees. As of March 6, 2023, the German Federal Statistical Office reported that the gender overall earnings gap (which takes into account several dimensions of earnings inequality, such as the difference in payment per worked hour, but also the number of monthly hours worked and paid, etc.) was at 39% in 2022.⁸⁰ Additionally, the German Association of University Professors and Lecturers (Deutscher Hochschulverband) reports that, as of 2018, salaries for professors vary greatly – to the detriment of female professors: “Die tatsächlich bezogene Besoldung variierte zu Lasten der Professorinnen bei W3 um 690 Euro, bei W2 um 290 Euro und bei W1 um 130 Euro”.⁸¹ According to Reichelt *et al.* (2021), the COVID-19-pandemic also played a role in extending the gap, as women were more likely to work part-time even before COVID, and, therefore, were also more likely to work from home, reduce working hours, and become unemployed when the pandemic started (Reichert *et al.* 2021: S240).

Another obstacle women face in the work field is the authority gap. Even on the big political stage in the 21st century, women are not saved from that. In 2021, Turkish President Erdoğan sat down together with Charles Michel, president of the European Council, while placing Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission, on a sofa further away from them so she could not participate in their

⁸⁰ For full report, see

https://www.destatis.de/EN/Themes/Labour/Earnings/GenderPayGap/_node.html, no author, accessed March 22, 2025.

⁸¹ “The actual salary paid to female professors varies by 690 euros for W3, 290 euros for W2 and 130 euros for W1” – translation by K. Pohlmann. For the full report, see <https://www.hochschulverband.de/positionen/presse/resolutionen/geschlechterunterschiedliche-verguetung-in-der-wissenschaft>, no author, accessed March 22, 2025.

conversation. While that did spark protest from the European Union,⁸² nothing was done by neither Charles Michel nor any diplomat about that situation while it occurred, which shows that women in high positions are taken a lot less seriously, as a political affront has been willingly and knowingly done and accepted. Mary Ann Sieghart (2021) dedicated a whole book to this authority gap, and explains:

Research shows that we still expect women to be less expert than men. Most of us – men and women – are still less willing to be influenced by women’s views. And we still resist the idea of women having authority over us. In other words, there is still an authority gap between women and men. And the authority gap is the mother of all gender gaps. If women aren’t taken as seriously as men, they are going to be paid less, promoted less and held back in their careers. They are going to feel less confident and less entitled to success. If we don’t do anything about it, the gap between women and men in the public sphere will never disappear. (Sieghart 2021: 3)

Spotting our own biases is a start, but it’s not the end. We need to address the problem at a structural level too. As long as we see many more men than women in positions of authority, we will tend to associate men with authority and women with subordinate status. As long as we allow boys to grow up believing that they are superior to girls, we are instilling habits of mind that will be very hard to change in later life. As long as we keep women in the workplace down by punishing them for being as assertive or self-promoting as men, they will never advance in the same numbers. And as long as we make work patterns unfriendly for parents of both genders, we are going to prevent women from reaching the positions of authority they need to for society to rebalance its stereotypes. (Sieghart 2021: 9-10)

The fact that Sieghart claims that she has “talked to women from Africa, Latin America, Asia and the Middle East, as well as from Europe and America, and they all say that they have experience of being taken less seriously than men” (Sieghart 2021: 6) shows that society has not come as far as we would like to believe since the 19th century.

In addition to the fact that women are taken less seriously at their jobs, the gender stereotypes that women are associated with being the main caregiver whereas men are associated with being the main earner prevails even today (Aarntzen *et al.* 2023: 13). Their recent study has shown that a) this ongoing stereotyping of women being the main caregiver directly influences them experiencing guilt when they have to choose between work or family, and b) there is no difference in this experience between mothers with a more traditional and

⁸² For all notes of protest by the leading MEPs, see <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/delegations/en/turkey-s-treatment-of-the-ec-president-i/product-details/20210413DPU29421>, no author, accessed March 22, 2025.

mothers with a more egalitarian approach to gender roles (Aarntzen et. al. 2023: 24). This means that women are not only expected to be the main caregiver by men, but this stereotype is so deeply rooted within society that women themselves believe it and, consequently, feel guilty about not ‘living up’ to the role society has assigned them. The stereotype of women being the ‘natural’ caregivers goes hand in hand with the fact that women are – still – expected to both want and have children. However, a 2022 poll by Pew Research Center, a Washington based US polling institute, shows that 44% of non-parents aged 18 to 49 in the US say that they never want to have children (for reference, in 2018, the number of US adults who do not wish to ever have children was at 37%).⁸³ Nevertheless, women who say they do not want to have children are often not taken seriously, and the argument that women will regret not having children one day – as, for example, the *Clifton-Chronicles* claim happened to Grace – is, essentially, nothing other than society telling women how to live their lives. Additionally, the National Public Radio has done research into the matter of people not wanting to have children after the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*, the fundamental decision for the right of abortion, in the US in 2022, and has reported that a) doctors see a growing demand for sterilization, and b) a lot of women have difficulties finding a doctor to perform the sterilization, as the doctors are trying to tell them that they “might change their minds”.⁸⁴

Not being taken seriously is a problem that encompasses several facts. Just as it is often assumed that women who do not want to have children will ‘change their minds’, which implies that a grown woman in her 20s or 30s is incapable of forming an opinion on her own life, a woman’s ‘no’ is also often not accepted in its very meaning, but rather interpreted as an invitation to fight for her. In a 2017 article published by Quartz, an online newsroom for global economy, it is explained that, as children, boys do not learn how to handle rejection, as, instead of allowing them to be sad over a rejection, face their emotions, and then move on, they are constantly told by society as well as the media that they must keep trying until they reach their

⁸³ For full poll, see <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/11/19/growing-share-of-childless-adults-in-u-s-dont-expect-to-ever-have-children/>, Anna Brown, accessed March 22, 2025.

⁸⁴ For full article, see <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2022/07/29/1113573995/more-people-are-opting-to-get-sterilized-and-some-are-being-turned-away>, Aaron Bolton and Ellis Juhlin, accessed March 22, 2025.

goal.⁸⁵ This, however, often creates two scenarios that are equally scary for women: rejection violence and/or stalking. Rejection violence is something that almost every woman has experienced before: from telling a guy in a club that she does not want him to buy her a drink and getting called ‘an ugly bitch who he was not interested in anyways’ to actual murder,⁸⁶ almost every woman has a story to share about rejection violence and why it is scary for females to just say no. When it comes to stalking, the US Department of Justice has released a report in 2022 that said that as of 2019, women were stalked more than twice as often as men.⁸⁷ This does not at all mean that men cannot be the victim of violence or stalking or that male victims are to be taken less seriously, but it shows that the likelihood of women becoming a victim is a lot higher and that it is a real threat. Exemplary, according to the Domestic Abuse Statistics UK, as of 2022, 1 in 5 adults experiences domestic abuse (which includes physical, sexual, economic, psychological, and emotional abuse), which equates to 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6-7 men.⁸⁸ It is, therefore, about time that every person understood one fundamental thing, as Megan LeCoutillier states in the title of her 1995 book: No is a complete sentence.

Another topic talked about by Archer and associated with his character Maisie is that of prostitution and being branded a Fallen Woman. That this is still an issue in the 21st century, despite our modern beliefs, shows a 2016 campaign of Amnesty International, which was aimed to help sex workers, as Tawanda Mutasah, then Senior Director for Law and Policy at Amnesty International, claimed:

We want laws to be refocused on making sex worker’s lives safer and improving the relationship they have with the police while addressing the very real issue of exploitation. We want governments to make sure no one is coerced to sell sex, or is unable to leave sex work if they choose to.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ For full article, see <https://qz.com/1113287/boys-arent-learning-how-to-cope-with-rejection-with-dangerous-consequences/>, Olivia Campbell, accessed March 22, 2025.

⁸⁶ See <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/09/13/killer-of-8-in-texas-was-the-estranged-husband-of-one-of-the-victims-police-say/>, Rachel Siegel, for an example of a man who killed his wife and seven of her friends after she filed for divorce, accessed March 22, 2025.

⁸⁷ For full report, see <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/sv19.pdf>, Rachel E. Morgan and Jennifer L. Truman, accessed March 22, 2025.

⁸⁸ See <https://www.ncdv.org.uk/domestic-abuse-statistics-uk/>, no author, accessed March 22, 2025.

⁸⁹ For full article, see <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/05/amnesty-international-publishes-policy-and-research-on-protection-of-sex-workers-rights/>, no author, accessed March 22, 2025.

Despite all the efforts, when it comes to sex workers, the change that one would expect from the 19th to the 21st century has not been as significant as one would hope. First and foremost, there is the risk of being caught up in human trafficking. While anyone, regardless of gender, age, race, or religion, can fall victim to human trafficking, the US Department of Justice states that most victims have a non-stable background and lack educational and economical opportunities, as “trafficking victims are deceived by false promises of love, a good job, or a stable life and are lured or forced into situations where they are made to work under deplorable conditions with little or no pay”.⁹⁰ What the Department of Justice could, however, tell was that a vast majority of the defendants in those cases were men: a total of 91.9%, with 78.3% responsible for peonage, slavery, forced labor, and sex trafficking, 92.6% responsible for sexual exploitation and other abuse of children, and 97.4% responsible for the transportation for illegal sex activity, of people charged for human trafficking in the US in 2020 were male.⁹¹ According to ProCon.org, a nonpartisan issue-information source founded by Britannica, however, 80% of prostitutes worldwide are female,⁹² which leads to assume that, while it is known that the majority of the perpetrators of human trafficking and sex trafficking are men, the majority of the victims are women. Next to the very real dangers of exploitation, abuse, rape, murder, etc., it is also important to note that legal sex workers who do this job because they want to are still frowned upon in society. A woman who works as a prostitute, a stripper, etc. is still someone society does not view as a human being who deserves the same amount of respect as other members of society. Additionally, a very common insult to girls and women is to call them ‘sluts’ or ‘whores’, implying that a woman’s sexual activity is something to be embarrassed of, while there is no such equivalent for men.

Ken Follett’s *Century Trilogy* focuses a lot on politics and historical events. As mentioned in section 4.1.2.2, the Nazi’s rise to power and the unwavering

⁹⁰ For full article, see <https://www.justice.gov/humantrafficking/what-is-human-trafficking>, no author, accessed March 22, 2025.

⁹¹ For full article, see <https://bjs.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh236/files/media/document/htdca22.pdf>, Amy D. Lauger, Danielle Kaebler, and Mark Motivans, accessed March 22, 2025. For the named statistic, see p. 4.

⁹² See <https://prostitution.procon.org/questions/how-many-prostitutes-are-in-the-united-states-and-the-rest-of-the-world/#:~:text=80%20percent%20of%20the%20world,%2Dfor%2Dsale%20industry%20worldwide>, no author, accessed March 22, 2025.

support of people who, from a logical point of view, had no business supporting the Nazis, are discussed in the second novel of the trilogy. People supporting a party or a person that does not benefit, but harm them is something that can still be seen in the 21st century – and it is not a gender-specific phenomenon. Exemplary, this can be shown on the example of the German right-wing party AfD, which in October 2023 was, with 23%, at an all-time high in German polls.⁹³ According to Marcel Fratzscher of DIW Berlin (2023), the majority of voters for the AfD are middle aged men with lower income as well as a lower level of education (Fratzscher 2023: 1-2). However, the discrepancy between what the AfD stands for politically and where their voters stand in society is so high that, was the AfD in power, their voters would be among the ones suffering the most (Fratzscher 2023: 6). Similar patterns can be found in several countries, for example with Donald Trump, who was, according to the Washington Post, averaging 20% of Black voters and 42% of Hispanic voters as of September 2023, which would have been a modern-day record for a Republican candidate,⁹⁴ even though he repeatedly makes racist remarks about Latin Americans, African Americans, and other ethnic groups. People supporting something that would eventually harm them is, therefore, clearly a phenomenon that can be found all over the world and can, as shown, not be assigned to only one gender, ethnicity, etc.

However, the ‘other side of the coin’ must also be recognized – people who fight totalitarian systems and risk their own lives for their own freedom and the freedom of others. This is, again, not gender specific. Rather, history has shown that people who have been suppressed have turned into an ‘enemy from within’ and fight the system with all they have. In the 2020s, this can most clearly be seen in Iran: women all over the country have started to protest the oppression of and violence against women after the so-called “morality police” has killed 23-year-old Jina Masah Amini on September 16, 2022 for an alleged violation of hijab-laws. Under the slogan “Woman, Life, Freedom”, Iranian women since protest the regime, refuse to wear hijabs, and will not even let arrests, torture, rape, and executions stop them – showing bravely that women are not the weaker sex.

⁹³ See <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/afd-erreicht-laut-ard-deutschlandtrend-rekordhoch-von-23-prozent-a-a99396d5-757d-4b51-8ec5-76df74d8dfa7>, no author, accessed March 22, 2025.

⁹⁴ See <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2023/09/19/trump-poll-support-black-hispanic/>, Aaron Blake, accessed March 22, 2025.

Nevertheless, the destiny of women in times of war is often overlooked. In contrast to the trauma of soldiers, which is a widely discussed topic – and which shall under no circumstances be belittled or denied –, what happens to women in war is something society tends to not talk about. In the *Century Trilogy*, the rape of women is a recurring theme, which symbolizes that it is something that has happened all throughout the wars of history, and still happens. While as of 1949, Article 27 of the Geneva Conventions states that “Women shall be especially protected against any attack on their honour, in particular against rape, enforced prostitution, or any form of indecent assault”,⁹⁵ the United Nations only recognized rape as a strategy of war and therefore a war crime in 2008.⁹⁶ Since Russia has started its aggressive war against Ukraine in February 2022, there have been numerous reports of the atrocities Russian soldiers commit against Ukrainian civilians, and especially women. The United Nations report that:

The Commission documented patterns of summary executions, unlawful confinement, torture, ill-treatment, rape and other sexual violence committed in areas occupied by Russian armed forces across the four regions on which it focused.⁹⁷

While this is just one of the most recent examples, similar reports can be found for all conflicts and wars of the past 30 years. While the sad truth is that the atrocities committed in a war, for the purpose of this thesis especially the experiences of women, have not changed, it is a good sign that those crimes are now recognized as such – even though, as, for example, *Edge of Eternity* suggests, it is often hard to bring the perpetrators to justice.

All these current statistics, data, etc. show that society has not come as far as one might have hoped. The examples mentioned are only a small fracture of what could have been talked about; however, due to space limitations, those couple of examples that are touched upon in the *Clifton-Chronicles* and the *Century Trilogy* – fictional stories that take place throughout the 20th century – have been selected as examples of what the situation for women is like as of 2024. What has been

⁹⁵ For full volume of the Geneva Conventions, see <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%2075/volume-75-I-973-English.pdf>, no author, accessed March 22, 2025.

⁹⁶ See <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/rape-war-crime>, T Vishnu Jayaraman, accessed March 22, 2025.

⁹⁷ For full report, see <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/10/1129652>, no author, accessed March 22, 2025.

shown is that, despite the Western world going into the right direction, equality between the genders has not yet been achieved.

4.1.4 The Changing Image of Women Within the 20th Century – Conclusion

In their respective series, both Jeffrey Archer and Ken Follett very much acknowledge that times are changing. To show this, both use a similar technique: a woman that would have been considered fallen in the 19th century for having sex before marriage and/or having a child out of wedlock works hard for herself and her family and ends up being very successful. What is important in this scenario is that those women are never dependent on anyone, particularly not a man, but they are able to make it on their own through hard work and determination – characteristics that were originally attributed to men. In contrast to the 19th century, which painted a picture of feminists hating men and children and letting the human race become extinct, the modern women in Archer and Follett do not despise their families – to the contrary, they love their husbands and children and want to leave them a better and fairer world. It is also interesting to note that Archer and Follett come from different political backgrounds – Archer was active in the Conservative Party and Follett a donor for the Labour Party –, so one would assume that their views differed more. Despite the fact that they put their female characters into different settings – Archer embeds women more strongly in traditional families and social structures whereas Follett emphasizes the changes and challenges faced by women in history –, they essentially agree on the ‘woman question’ and are of the same opinion: feminism is something positive and a modern woman is independent, self-confident, and wants to make the world a fairer and better place. As a society, this is what we want: realizing that times are changing and have changed, and that qualifications count rather than one’s gender or background.

However, as shown, this is not reality – neither in the novels nor in real life. One can see in the way the male characters are written that even the ‘nice’ guys are subconsciously biased towards female characters, which shows the reader that the problems concerning feminism and gender equality are not simply solved by declaring everyone equal, but that the mindset of the people must change – just as Siegfried Broß, as quoted in the Introduction, suggests.

Additionally, the female characters are also put on a pedestal. In order to be relevant, they must act and look a certain way, and, as even the female villains are described to be good-looking, it is suggested that the biggest crime a woman can commit is being considered ugly – though, of course, beauty is in the eye of the beholder. This stands in contrast to, for example, the *Bridgerton* romances, which suggest that everyone is worthy of love if they only find the right person for them – consequently, this shows the difference of perception between male and female (bestselling) writers. While the terms Angel in the House or Fallen Woman are no longer used and, as explained in 4.1.1.2.1, the traditional ‘angel’ may indeed be declared dead, the idea of those terms remains: Women must be a certain way to be considered good and likeable. What is changing, however, is that a woman is able to redeem herself; where in the 19th century, a Fallen Woman was fallen and, no matter the circumstances, remained fallen, as can exemplify (as well as critically) be seen in the neo-Victorian depiction of Sarah in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, this is no longer the case and it is understood that all humans, no matter their gender, make mistakes.

Comparing bestselling authors of the 19th to the 21st century, one can see that the way they are writing about the topic of feminism has been completely reversed. Marie Corelli lived in a time in which the New Women were considered a threat to society, and, despite the fact that she was a working woman without a husband or children as well, wrote *My Wonderful Wife* according to those fears, even fueled them, either because she believed the feminist movement to be bad and did not see the irony or because she knew that this was what appealed to society. Archer and Follett, in contrast, portray the feminists, even the early ones that have been cursed in their own time, in a very positive light, suggesting that gender equality is important, inevitable, and, most importantly, good for society. Despite this reversal, one can see a similar pattern: a topic that is seen in a certain way by society – in this case, negatively in the 19th century and positively in the 21st century – is taken and a story is constructed around this. However, and this is an important factor, in contrast to *My Wonderful Wife*, in which feminism is discussed to be black or white, one is either a New Woman and therefore bad or a traditional woman and therefore good, with no in-between, ‘good’ and ‘bad’ is starting to overlap in bestsellers of the 21st century – which suggests that society is stopping to think in

black-and-white when it comes to how women are perceived, but start to understand that women are human beings with faults and rough edges just like men, and not ‘angels’ or ‘fallen angels’ with no in-between.

4.2 Image(s) of Women in a Globalized World – Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* and Zadie Smith’s *NW*

Having analyzed the changing image of women in the 20th century, this section focuses on the different images of women in a globalized world in which different cultures come together. This will be done on the example of Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003) and Zadie Smith’s *NW* (2012). This chapter brings about a new point of interest that has been slightly touched upon in section 4.1.1.2.1 but has not yet been discussed lengthy: the experiences of women with a multicultural background. Those women are not only being met with the expectations of the society they live in, but also with those of the ‘other’ culture, which often leaves them torn. This is especially important, as, according to The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford, over 9.5 million migrants lived in the UK in 2021, making up about 14.5% of its population; of these 9.5 million migrants, slightly more than half (53%) are female.⁹⁸ This shows that being torn between two cultures and, therefore, expectations is a problem that millions of women face in the UK alone, leave alone the rest of the world. Therefore, Monica Ali, being of Bangladeshi and English descent, and Zadie Smith, being of Jamaican and English origin, are chosen to give voice to women in general, and particularly to women who find themselves stuck between different cultures.

4.2.1 New Culture – new me? Women and Feminism in a Globalized World

Before going into greater detail about the experiences of women with a multicultural background, the contrast between Nazneen and her sister Hasina in Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* will be analyzed. Although they, as sisters, experienced the same upbringing and have been taught the same values, their lives take completely different turns because of the choices they make and the courage they show. What can be seen in the sisters is that there is no guarantee that one’s life turns out great if they do this or bad if they do that, but that everyone is responsible

⁹⁸ See <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/migrants-in-the-uk-an-overview/>, no author, accessed March 22, 2025.

for themselves. This multi-layered depiction of Bangladeshi women stands in clear contrast to what Germaine Greer said about *Brick Lane*, calling the characters a “caricature” and claiming that Ali built on a pre-existing stereotype of Bangladeshi people in the UK after the backlash the movie adaptation of the novel received by residents of the real Brick Lane who did not want the movie to be filmed there (exemplary, some residents of Brick Lane complained that Sylhetis are presented as “dirty little monkeys” who are “uneducated, illiterate, and close-minded” in the novel, and threatened to burn the novel, whereas others had no problem with neither the novel nor the film adaptation or its filming in Brick Lane);⁹⁹ interestingly, Salman Rushdie called Greer’s statement “philistine, sanctimonious, and disgraceful”, and claimed that Greer was trying to “deracinate” Ali.¹⁰⁰ This shows that the (inner) conflict the novel deals with is also very present in real life – both in the real Brick Lane and outside of it.

4.2.1.1 Contrasts between sisters – Nazneen and Hasina

Growing up, Nazneen has continuously been told that one cannot escape one’s fate and that, understanding this and living by this, her mother was a saint:

As Nazneen grew she heard many times this story of How You Were Left To Your Fate. It was because of her mother’s wise decision that Nazneen lived to become the wide-faced, watchful girl that she was. Fighting against one’s Fate can weaken the blood. Sometimes, or perhaps most times, it can be fatal. [...] Hamid said – he always looked away as he spoke – your mother is naturally a saint. She comes from a family of saints. (*Brick Lane*: 15)

Because of this belief, she quietly and without complain accepts her father’s authority. This stems from the fact that patriarchal values and rules have been expressed and enforced in ancient philosophy and religion (Cremer 2021: 29), with the “rule of fathers” established even before organized, urban civilizations arose (Cremer 2021: 25-26). Simone de Beauvoir further adds that “lawmakers, priests, philosophers, writers, and scholars have gone to great lengths to prove that women’s subordinate condition was willed in heaven and profitable on earth” (de Beauvoir [1949] 2009: 31). According to Cremer, this “rule of fathers” is also widespread all over the world because “through the rise of imperialism and

⁹⁹ See <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2006/jul/27/film.books>, Paul Lewis, accessed March 22, 2025.

¹⁰⁰ See <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2006/jul/29/topstories3.books>, Paul Lewis, accessed March 22, 2025.

colonialism, Western patriarchy helped shape modern patriarchy in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, merging with indigenous patriarchies of their own” (Cremer 2021: 30). For this reason, Nazneen’s submission to her father makes sense: from the earliest she can remember she is told that one cannot fight their Fate, and as the male authority is rooted in societies all over the world as something ‘God-given’, something ‘natural’ that has always been there, she accepts it as such. Additionally, she sees how her mother, who also lives according to the rules their patriarchal society sets, is put on a pedestal, being called a “saint” (which can be seen as the equivalent to the 19th century ‘angel’). This twisted logic, in which women are told that they are something divine and much better than men, but only as long as they live according to men’s expectations, which, however, oppress and limit women, is quite ironic. Easily translated, what it means is: women are actually better than men, but only if they let men oppress them. Obviously, this logic does not really make sense, and in the novel one can see how quickly the mood can change when a woman steps down from the pedestal and no longer wants to be a “saint”. Nazneen, when told that her father chose a husband for her, simply states: “Abba, it is good that you have chosen my husband. I hope I can be a good wife, like Amma” (*Brick Lane*: 16). Her sister Hasina, however, has been deemed trouble by their father since she has been only six years old because of how pretty she was, as “such beauty could have no earthly purpose but trouble” (*Brick Lane*: 50). In his view, this becomes true as she decides that she wants to make the decisions in her own life and not have someone dictate her life for her, so she elopes and marries the man she loves (*Brick Lane*: 16). Her father’s reaction to this is to call her a “whore-pig”, planning to cut off her head when she comes back, and, when it becomes clear that she does not come back, to never speak of her again (*ibid.*) – clearly nothing a man would do to the divine figures he believes in. Ironically, he also calls his “holy” wife ugly (*Brick Lane*: 50), cheated on her, and tried to get another wife (*Brick Lane*: 156). Consequently, both Nazneen’s and Hasina’s attitude towards how a wife should be treated (“A wife could reasonably be beaten for a lesser offence”, *Brick Lane*: 22; “Just because man is kind to wife it do not mean she can say what she like. If women understanding this no one will beat”, *Brick Lane*: 25) implies that this is what they had learned at home and seen between their parents. This is underlined by the fact that Hasina later tells Nazneen that their mother has committed suicide (*Brick Lane*: 434-436) because “she see no other way” (*Brick*

Lane: 436), which implies that their mother felt so trapped in a possibly abusive marriage that her only way of escape was to end her own life. This all shows that in patriarchal societies, in the case of the novel in a Bengali Muslim society, women have no chance of winning: they are regarded as saints, but they are abused. They are deemed trouble when they are too pretty, but insulted when they are not. This shows quite clearly that the oppression of women is not a tool to ‘protect them’, as it is often claimed, because what real women in similar situations to fictional women like Nazneen, Hasina, or their mother would actually need is protection from their fathers, husbands, or families in general.

The different styles of narration – heterodiegetic narration for Nazneen and epistolarian, autodiegetic narration for Hasina – creates a distinction between the two sisters. In Nazneen’s storyline, both the heterodiegetic narrator as well as Nazneen herself and the people in her life speak perfect English, and the only indication that English functions as a ‘substitute’ for Bengali is a scene early in the novel, in which Chanu corrects Nazneen’s pronunciation of ice-skating (*Brick Lane*: 36-37). Having English represent both English and Bengali without giving much indication of when the characters supposedly speak which language – especially since Hasina’s narration is so different, which implies that those differences are not solely there to make the novel easier to read – gives the reader a feeling of calmness and order surrounding Nazneen. Additionally, according to Ashcroft *et al.* ([1989] 1994), the “syntactic fusion is much more common in post-colonial writing as a less overt feature of the linguistic material” (Ashcroft *et al.* [1989] 1994: 68) – which, again, suggests that the predominant lack of any obvious fusional language in Nazneen’s narration conveys a deeper message. In contrast to Nazneen, Hasina’s epistolarian, autodiegetic narration, which is represented in very broken English, suggests chaos, helplessness, and despair. Calmness and order for the one who obeyed her father and chaos and despair for the one who did not conveys the idea of natural order in the patriarchal society they both grew up in: if a woman does as she is told, her life is easy and quiet and calm, but if she revolts against society’s expectations, she is punished for it with a hard and complicated life. To really understand what is going on in their respective lives and to see whether those ideas apply, the reader therefore has to actually pay attention to their stories.

In Hasina, the reader can see the inner turmoil of women torn between patriarchal traditions and their strive for freedom and self-determination. Initially, she opposes her father and elopes with the man she loves, which introduces her as rebellious character. Her first letters to Nazneen, however, show that, despite her earliest efforts to determine her own fate, she is still stuck in the beliefs she grew up with: that men and women are not equal, and that women must serve men, do as they are told, and not question male authority. This can especially be seen in the way she hints that her husband abuses her yet puts the blame on herself: “And you are good wife. I maybe not good wife but is how I try for always. [...] He is good man and very patient. Sometime I make him lose patience without I mean to.” (*Brick Lane*: 47). However, after a couple of months, Hasina decides that she must leave Malek because he is abusive towards her (*Brick Lane*: 58), despite the fact that her landlady tells her she should not leave her husband because “it is better get beaten by own husband than beating by stranger” (*ibid.*). By having the courage to continuously do what is best for herself despite all odds, Hasina lays the foundation of pushing Nazneen to find the courage within herself as well.

In her letters, Hasina makes it clear on several occasions that, in contrast to her sister, she refuses to let “fate” – or rather, what the patriarchal society she grew up in expects her to do – dictate her life: “God not putting me on earth only to suffer” (*Brick Lane*: 25); “I am not waiting around suffering around” (*Brick Lane*: 159); “But I am not like her. Waiting around. Suffering around. She wrong” (*Brick Lane*: 434). She finds herself a job in a factory (*Brick Lane*: 146) and encourages Nazneen to find a job herself as well (*Brick Lane*: 151-152), claiming that “working is like cure” (*Brick Lane*: 152). Despite her enthusiasm for her new job, however, she must face the reality that the patriarchal society she still lives in does not accept women as equals, and being a woman with a job automatically makes her a ‘fallen woman’ in the eyes of society: “Some people making trouble outside factory. They shout to us. ‘Here come the garment girls. Choose the one you like.’” (*Brick Lane*: 152). According to Dina M. Siddiqi (2009), this is the reality for women in Bangladesh, as female workers are considered to be “primarily sexualized bodies” (Siddiqi 2009: 167), and she further claims that “the highly sexualized vocabulary and body language that supervisors, line chiefs, production managers and others use to discipline female workers creates a hostile, intimidating and sexually charged

environment” (Siddiqi 2009: 168). Combined with the fact that, as Siddiqi explains, women in Bangladesh are “policed and regulated through a distinct moral regime, separating the ‘good’ girls from the ‘immoral’ ones” (Siddiqi 2009: 167), this alleges that, in Bangladeshi society, a woman who does nothing other than work to be able to afford to live is considered to be fallen and immoral – and, being fallen, does not deserve respect. This notion is underlined by the fact that, according to a report by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) from May 2024, the total number of employed population in the country in the first quarter of 2024 has increased in comparison to the first quarter of 2023, but the number of female employees has declined from 2023 to 2024.¹⁰¹ However, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) claims in a report from October 2016 that women have been “at the forefront of Bangladesh’s recent successful economic growth” (ADB Briefs 2016: 1) and that the Bangladesh government has made “significant efforts to improve conditions for women, including in the working world” (ADB Briefs 2016: 2). Nevertheless, they admit that the situation for women is still difficult, touching upon topics such as gender segregation traditions that make it difficult for women to really set roots in the labor market (ADB Briefs 2016: 5), as well as the problem that there is a lack of safe and affordable public transportation as well as childcare, which makes the situation even more difficult for women (*ibid.*). Additionally, the report claims that in 2011, 44% of married women aged 20-24 said that they were not allowed to visit their own relatives without their husbands permission, and 22% said that they were not even allowed to go to a health center alone or with their children without permission (ADB Briefs 2016: 2) – which, consequently, suggests that women are still highly regulated in what they can and cannot do, despite the changes being made.

Being considered fallen is also something Hasina faces, as the other workers spread rumors about her and her landlord, Mr. Chowdhury, who Hasina at this point considers to be a father-figure (*Brick Lane*: 159), and she later loses her job because of rumors about her and Abdul having slept together after he walked her home (*Brick Lane*: 160-162). Abdul, in contrast, does not lose his job, as the manager simply tells him to “get a little practice in before marriage” (*Brick Lane*: 162), while the gossip and rumors about Hasina spread and result in Mr. Chowdhury

¹⁰¹ See <https://www.bssnews.net/business/187485>, no author, accessed March 22, 2025.

forcing her to sleep with him (*Brick Lane*: 165). At this point, both society (“You are damaged past repair”, *Brick Lane*: 171) and Hasina herself (“I am a low woman. I am nothing”, *ibid.*) consider her fallen. Despite her being at her lowest at this point, she does not give up. She gets married again (*Brick Lane*: 172), and when she realizes that this marriage also does not work for her and she is unhappy, she leaves again and, despite temporarily living in a house for, as Hasina calls it, “falling women” (*Brick Lane*: 220), does not stop until she is happy with her life and her job (*Brick Lane*: 177). The fact that Hasina uses a term that, at the time of action in the novel, was no longer used in the Western world to describe and classify women, shows that there is a large discrepancy between the East and the West in the novel – something that will be analyzed further in section 4.2.1.2. While on the one hand, one could argue that Hasina is lost and unable to take proper care of her own life, making bad decision after bad decision, I would argue that she functions as a symbol for a great number of women in patriarchal societies who are not willing to let someone else dictate their lives. Having her face all those hardships and obstacles shows a realistic picture of the difficulties women still have to face in the 21st century when all they want is to be self-determined and free. When by the end of the novel Chanu informs Nazneen that Hasina has run away with Zaid (*Brick Lane*: 489), Nazneen answers that Hasina does things like that because “she isn’t going to give up” (*Brick Lane*: 490), meaning that, despite everything that has happened to her and that she has seen happen to other women in Bangladesh, she does not lose hope that there is a better life for women out there.

As a counterpart to Hasina’s free spirit, there is Nazneen, who strictly believes in fate and, consequently, female obedience. As mentioned earlier, women are dehumanized in Nazneen’s culture: they are compared to divine figures when they do as they are told, and compared to animals when they do not, yet in both circumstances they are not given proper respect nor are their feelings as a human being ever acknowledged. That this dehumanization is not something that only applies to her father, but that it is a belief that is rooted deeply within Bangladeshi society can be seen in the way Chanu describes Nazneen on the phone when he thinks she does not listen:

“She is an unspoilt girl. From the village”. She had got up one night to fetch a glass of water. It was one week since they married. She had gone to bed and he was still up, talking on the telephone as she stood outside the door. “No,” said Chanu. “I would not say so. Not beautiful, but not so ugly either. The face is broad, big forehead. Eyes are a bit too close together. [...] Not tall. Not short. Around five foot two. Hips are a bit narrow but wide enough, I think, to carry children. All things considered, I am satisfied. Perhaps when she gets older she’ll grow a beard on her chin but now she is only eighteen. And a blind uncle is better than no uncle. I waited long enough to get a wife.” [...] “What’s more, she is a good worker. Cleaning and cooking and all that. The only complaint I could make is she can’t put my files in order, because she has no English. I don’t complain though. As I say, a girl from the village: totally unspoilt.” (*Brick Lane*: 22-23)

The description Chanu gives about Nazneen very clearly shows that, to him, she is not an actual human being with feelings, but she is a tool to birth him children, cook his meals, and clean up his mess. Additionally, the way he says that he had “waited long enough to get a wife” and the way he describes her appearance sounds like he went to the market and bought himself a wife for the best deal he could get – which, essentially, he did. All in all, it is dehumanizing and Nazneen, who had secretly hoped that her husband would love her (*Brick Lane*: 23), realizes this, yet scolds herself for being “such a foolish girl” (*ibid.*). Even though her first impression of Chanu was that he was at least 40 years old and had “a face like a frog” (*Brick Lane*: 17), she secretly wishes this marriage had not happened to her (*Brick Lane*: 18), and she directly says several times that she feels alone and trapped in London (“In all her eighteen years, she could scarcely remember a moment that she had spent alone. Until she married. And came to London to sit day after day in this large box with the furniture to dust, and the muffled sound of private lives sealed away above, below and around her”, *Brick Lane*: 24; “She looked and she saw that she was trapped inside this body, inside this room, inside this flat, inside this concrete slab of entombed humanity”, *Brick Lane*: 76), she nevertheless does not want to admit that what has happened to her is wrong – to the contrary, she reminds herself that “she had everything here. All these beautiful things” (*Brick Lane*: 12) and that her father “had made a good marriage for her” (*ibid.*). As Chanu, however, continuously hurts her by not taking her or her worries seriously (*Brick Lane*: 62) and denies her basic rights like leaving the apartment (*Brick Lane*: 45) or learning English (*Brick Lane*: 77), she starts rebelling in the only way she knows:

Nazneen dropped the promotion from her prayers. The next day she chopped two fiery red chillies and placed them, like hand grenades, in Chanu's sandwich. Unwashed socks were paired and put back in his drawer. The razor slipped when she cut his corns. His files got mixed up when she tidied. All her chores, peasants in his princely kingdom, rebelled in turn. Small insurrections, designed to destroy the state from within. (*Brick Lane*: 63)

Nazneen handed him pyjamas. She slung his trousers on a hanger, without folding them properly, and put them in the wardrobe. He did not notice the dirty socks, the crumpled trousers. Her rebellions passed undetected. She was irritated by his lack of interest; she was pleased by her subtlety. (*Brick Lane*: 75)

She leaned against the work surface and ate. "Eat! Eat!" her husband told her at mealtimes. But for him she would not. She showed her self-restraint like this. Her self-denial. She wanted to make it visible. It became a habit, then a pleasure, taking solace in these midnight meals. (*Brick Lane*: 77)

The fact that she thinks of herself as "destroying the state from within" as well as that she is irritated by him not noticing, yet happy about her own subtlety shows her inner conflict and her slowly starting to change: for all her life, she has been taught to obey men and do as she is told; she does not yet dare to openly defy her husband, but she is clearly thinking about it already and starts rebelling on a small scale. Although it does not seem as much, and Chanu does not even notice her rebellion, it is a big thing for her, as she grew up in total obedience to men. Her new sense of letting her dissatisfaction show comes right after she has been out alone in London, found herself a way to a toilet, and spoke English to a stranger for the first time (*Brick Lane*: 59-61). This implies that one's surroundings define a person: as long as she is stuck in either her father's house or her husband's apartment, she is stuck in those old patriarchal structures in which she has no rights and exists only to serve. Once she leaves this microcosm, however, and sees that there is a world in which she is able to exist without a man, she gains confidence – even if this confidence initially only shows itself in little things like not folding socks properly. Her slowly realizing that she is not only a daughter, wife, or mother, but a person in her own right can also be seen in how her views of her sister change. While she, in contrast to the rest of her family, never despises or abandons her sister, she does not like what her sister did: "It worried her that Hasina kicked against fate. No good could come of it" (*Brick Lane*: 22). Once Nazneen gains more confidence in herself, however, this changes, and she not only sees her sister as an independent woman, but she feels some sort of jealousy and wishes she could be more like Hasina: "Whenever she got a letter from Hasina, for the next couple of days she imagined

herself an independent woman too. [...] her letters were full of mistakes and bursting with life” (*Brick Lane*: 93-94).

For Nazneen, gaining confidence and becoming more independent is a steady process. While she rebels in small ways whenever she is angry with Chanu, she nevertheless does not dare to openly disagree with him: when he beats their daughters, she does not interfere (*Brick Lane*: 180-181), and when they run low on money, yet he refuses to allow her to get a job, she accepts it without any further discussion (*Brick Lane*: 184). Only when Chanu takes out a loan from Mrs. Islam and is unable to pay it back, he allows Nazneen to get a sewing job, yet she does not even know how much she earns as he takes all the money and – until he finds a job as a taxi driver and Karim replaces him – functions as a middleman who brings the work to her and then takes it back to the sweatshop once she is done (*Brick Lane*: 206-208). Once Karim replaces Chanu, it is made clear that Nazneen is attracted to him (*Brick Lane*: 210), and they eventually start having an affair – even though Nazneen knows that it is wrong:

He kissed her on the mouth and led her into the bedroom. Get undressed, he said, and get into bed. He left the room. She got changed into her nightdress and lay beneath the sheets. Through the window she looked at a patch of blue sky and a scrap of white cloud. She pulled the covers up to her neck and closed her eyes. What she wanted to do was sleep. It would be impossible to stay awake. She was sick and she needed to sleep. She had a fever and her body was shaking. She turned her face into the pillow and moaned and when he kissed the back of her neck she moaned again. (*Brick Lane*: 288)

He was the first man to see her naked. It made her sick with shame. It made her sick with desire. They committed a crime. It was a crime and the sentence was death. In between the sheets, in between his arms, she took her pleasure desperately, as if the executioner waited behind the door. Beyond death was the eternal fire of hell and from every touch of flesh on flesh she wrought the strength to endure it. Though they began with a gentle embrace, tenderness could not satisfy her, nor could she stand it, and into her recklessness she drew him like a moth to a flame. (*Brick Lane*: 299)

What is interesting is that, while she betrays her husband and has sex outside of her marriage and knows that she should feel horrible about this, she feels desire and desired for the first time, saying that through Karim, her life had “become bloated with meaning” (*ibid.*), and therefore cannot seem to be able to stop. However, what can also be seen is that while she acts in a way that is very untypical for her, as she not only lies to her husband and, in her view, brings shame on herself and her family, she also sins – which is even the more surprising, as she is very religious.

On the other hand, she stays true to her nature, as Karim very clearly does not ask her what she wants but orders her around to do what he wants. By the end of the novel, however, she has gained so much confidence that she 1. decides that she is not going back to Bangladesh with Chanu, and therefore leaves him (*Brick Lane*: 437), and 2. that she does not want to ever marry Karim (*Brick Lane*: 451). Her refusal of his proposal – which was not uttered as a question if she wanted to marry him at all, but which was a simple statement by Karim (*ibid.*) – stems from the fact that she understands that Karim sees her as “a Bengali wife. A Bengali mother. An idea of home. An idea of himself that he found in her” (*Brick Lane*: 454). This, however, is not at all what she wants to be. Inspired by her sister, whose wrinkled letters she associates with a butterfly that “alights from nowhere and, weightless, displaces the world” (*Brick Lane*: 437), she decides that she no longer wants to be only someone’s wife. By realizing that this is exactly what Karim wants and sees in her, she understands that she has created an image of him in her mind that is not real, and he has done the same (*Brick Lane*: 454-455). She is no longer a shy, quiet girl that does as she is told, but she is a grown, confident woman who, despite still learning her place in the world, stands up for herself against Mrs. Islam and her two sons, telling them that she will no longer give them money because she has done the math and knows they are being scammed by Mrs. Islam, and that she is not afraid of them (*Brick Lane*: 443-445). One can therefore clearly see the steady development in Nazneen’s character. She starts off as a very young woman who is sold to a much older man and, because she grew up believing the twisted logic that she must serve in order to be worshipped, does not dare to ever state her opinion or express her wishes. She then, influenced both by following her sister’s life through her letters and, despite her husband’s efforts to keep her away from it, English society, continually gains more and more confidence until she is finally able to put herself and her daughters first and does what is best for them.

While Nazneen and Hasina are introduced as polar opposites, Nazneen being the religious, quiet, and dutiful girl and Hasina being wild and rebellious, they end up not being so different from one another: in the end, both put themselves first and do what they think is best for themselves. While Hasina has been this way since the beginning, the change in Nazneen happens mostly because she, after seeing her mother in her dreams who tells her that the female suffering is God’s

will and they simply have to endure it (*Brick Lane*: 322-323), collapses and lies in a coma for several days (*Brick Lane*: 324). Once she wakes up from her coma, the Qur'an does not calm her down nor brings her satisfaction, but her sister's letters do (*Brick Lane*: 332). After this incident, Nazneen's rebellious side finally shines through to the surface: she tells her husband that she hears what he is saying, but is not obeying him (*Brick Lane*: 341), she yells at him and their daughter Shahana (*Brick Lane*: 349), she enjoys having sex and is no longer disgusted with herself (*Brick Lane*: 343), and she throws Karim out when she has had enough of him (*Brick Lane*: 348). This sudden change in behavior after she could not find comfort in the Qur'an but in Hasina's letters implies that she has shifted her faith and now treats Hasina's letters almost like a scripture, and lives not by the Qur'an, but by her sister's words. As cited earlier, she tells Chanu that Hasina does not give up hope for a better future (*Brick Lane*: 490), and, at the end of the day, this is exactly what Nazneen ends up doing by not going back to Bangladesh with Chanu and by not marrying Karim: because of her younger sister's words and example, combined with the fact that she learns that living in England in a Western society as a woman means that "you can do whatever you like" (*Brick Lane*: 492), she hopes for a brighter future for herself and her daughters in which they are no longer a slave to men. This, consequently, implies that female emancipation can be equated with religion. Having established before that feminism is still very much needed, as the idea that men are better or worth more than women is still rooted within all societies around the globe, in some more than others, it can be said that, in order to live on, feminism must be believed in such as religion needs believers to survive.

4.2.1.2 Stuck Between Cultures

Another big topic the novel depicts is the difficulty of being stuck between cultures, between the 'East' and the 'West'. It is therefore crucial to understand the difference between the West and the East. In his *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said tries to explain it as such:

I have begun with the assumption that the Orient is not an inert fact of nature. It is not merely *there*, just as the Occident itself is not just *there* either. We must take seriously Vico's great observation that men make their own history, that what they can know is what they have made, and extend it to geography: as both geographical and cultural entities – to say nothing of historical entities – such locales, regions, geographical sectors as “Orient” and “Occident” are man-made. Therefore as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West. The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other. (Said [1978] 1979: 4-5)

This means that both people from the East and the West have made up an image of the other that is rooted deep within the respective culture. However, he also notes that:

The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other (Said [1978] 1979: 1)

Therefore, one can imply that the image the East has of the West is that of a colonizer, who is stronger, and the West imagines the East as the colonized, and therefore weaker. According to Elleke Boehmer and as cited in section 2.4.2, this stems from the fact that “any white colonial officer, whatever his origins, was seen as forming part of an *élite*” (Boehmer 2005: 31). Therefore, an image of the ruler and the server between the East and the West is created, a feeling of ‘us’ vs. ‘them’. This imagery can also be found in *Brick Lane*, as Chanu tells Nazneen: “And you see, to a white person, we are all the same: dirty little monkeys all in the same monkey clan” (*Brick Lane*: 28).

According to Frantz Fanon (1961), colonialism also “forces the colonized to constantly ask the question: ‘Who am I in reality?’” (Fanon [1961] 2004: 182). This is a question second-generation immigrants – meaning the children of immigrants, who were born in the ‘new’ country, but grow up with the traditions of their parents’ home-countries – are often faced with: for their parents, they are not Eastern enough, and for their friends, they are not Western enough. In *Brick Lane*, Chanu and Mrs. Azad discuss this over dinner one time, and it shows the different standpoints:

“I’m talking about the clash between Western values and our own. I’m talking about the struggle to assimilate and the need to preserve one’s identity and heritage. I’m talking about children who don’t know what their identity is. I’m talking about the feelings of alienation engendered by a society where racism is prevalent. I’m talking about the terrific struggle to preserve one’s sanity while striving to achieve the best for one’s family. I’m talking –“ “Crap!” Chanu looked at Dr Azad but his friend studied the backs of his hands. “Why do you make it so complicated?” said the doctor’s wife. “Assimilation this, alienation that! Let me tell you a few simple facts. Fact: we live in a Western society. Fact: our children will act more and more like Westerners. Fact: that’s no bad thing. My daughter is free to come and go. Do I wish I had enjoyed myself like her when I was young? Yes!” (*Brick Lane*: 113)

Here, the differences between the male view and the female view become obvious. For Chanu, who was born a man into a patriarchal society, there is a struggle between the Western values and his own values. As he was never disadvantaged in his home country, he does not see his culture as something bad; to the contrary, being faced with both a completely different lifestyle and culture and with actual racism, he consequently begins to see English/Western society as something bad. Mrs. Azad, in contrast, grew up as a woman in a patriarchal society. She, therefore, has faced discrimination and disadvantage based on something she cannot change – her gender – her whole life, and, in contrast to Chanu, sees and appreciates the opportunities Western society offers girls and thinks that the freedom girls have outweighs the bad things. Nevertheless, these are only two standpoints to the clash of cultures the novel addresses; others include seeing Western society as a threat (“But if you mix with all these people, even if they are good people, you have to give up your culture to accept theirs”, *Brick Lane*: 29), imitating Western society (“He would not haggle. He would not ‘abase’ himself, or ‘act like a primitive’”, *Brick Lane*: 91), or radicalization (“Karim had never even been to Bangladesh. [...] Karim was born a foreigner. [...] Karim did not have his place in the world. That was why he defended it”, *Brick Lane*: 448-449). In the end, however, by having Nazneen skate in a sari, the novel suggests that it is possible to combine the East and the West, and that one does not have to give up one culture completely to accept the other.

As explained in section 4.2.1.1, Nazneen experiences being torn between the East and the West to a degree, but, as she grew up in Bangladesh with Bangladeshi customs and traditions and rarely leaves the microcosm of the Bangladeshi community in Brick Lane, London, does not necessarily experience this inner conflict of not knowing who she is and where she belongs. As explained,

once she finds the courage in herself to be self-determined, she finds a way to combine her Bangladeshi origin with her life in England, as she, in the end of the novel, goes ice-skating in a sari (*Brick Lane*: 492). Her daughters, especially Shahana, however, experience what lots of second-generation immigrants feel: being stuck between two cultures. According to Dusi *et al.* (2015), a big problem for children of immigrants is that, at home, they are raised according to their parents' culture, but outside of their home, they are faced with the culture of the country they were born in, and they want to be like their friends, which results in a loss of authenticity, as they cannot really be themselves anywhere:

They are asked to switch their diverse identities, representations of themselves, diverse senses of belonging; to learn and use those that are more functional in different social situations in their native countries or in their parents' countries of origin. (Dusi *et al.* 2015: 564)

This is the struggle Shahana faces: on the one hand, she grows up in this Bangladeshi microcosm in their home in Brick Lane, with traditional parents – a patriarchal father and a submissive mother – and, therefore, a traditional Bangladeshi upbringing; on the other hand, she grows up in London, goes to school there, sees how her friends live and how different it is to her life, and sees herself as a Londoner (*Brick Lane*: 296). She wants to be a regular English girl, and not a Bangladeshi woman who lives to serve a man:

Shahana did not want to listen to Bengali classical music. Her written Bengali was shocking. She wanted to wear jeans. She hated her kameez and spoiled her entire wardrobe by pouring paint on them. If she could choose between baked beans and dal it was no contest. When Bangladesh was mentioned she pulled a face. She did not know and would not learn that Tagore was more than poet and Nobel laureate, and no less than the true father of her nation. Shahana did not care. Shahana did not want to go back home. (*Brick Lane*: 180)

To understand this inner conflict, and why it is even worse for women than it is for men, one has to understand how exactly women are seen in societies that value men much more than women and, consequently, give their sons much more freedom than their daughters. As described in the previous section, the novel paints a picture of how Bangladeshi society views women (which, as quoted earlier, sparked criticism): a woman must be modest, shy, and obedient and not question male authority, she must not enjoy having sex or do it with anyone but her husband or for any means other than having children, which implies that a woman's sexuality is deemed 'unclean' in its very existence. If she does not do as she is told, it is ok

to physically attack and hurt her – all this under the pretext of protecting a woman's 'purity and saintliness'. Beating Shahana has become a "frequent ritual" (*ibid.*) in their household, with Nazneen calling it Chanu's "fatherly duty" (*Brick Lane*: 181), which implies that, though she does not like it, she finds it normal that her husband beats their daughter, and it is usually accompanied by threats:

It was inevitably Shahana who incited his anger and it was Shahana who appeared to suffer least. "Tell the little memsahib that I am going to break every bone in her body." Chanu never addressed his threats directly to his elder daughter. Nazneen was the preferred intermediary or, if a new and particularly lurid threat had been invented, Bibi would be chosen. "I'll dip her head in boiling fat and throw her out of that window. Go and tell the memsahib. Go and tell your sister." (*Brick Lane*: 180)

From a Western point of view, this is obviously shocking and unacceptable, but it shows once more how, in the example of the novel, Bangladeshi society views women. The difference between Nazneen's reaction to this and that of her daughter is that Nazneen does not know anything else, so to her, this is normal behavior and threatening to kill a woman in the most horrid way because she does not do as she is told by a man is a normal way of discipline. Shahana, however, sees how other girls are treated in England and understands that threatening to dip someone's head in boiling fat or to break every bone in their body, or regularly flogging someone is not normal, and therefore starts detesting both her father and her parents' cultural background. Chanu is convinced that they must go back to Bangladesh, partly because he cannot find a job in England and partly because he wants to keep his daughters away from Western influence, calling it a "rot" that is beginning to show in Shahana: "She is only a child, and already the rot is beginning. That is why we must go" (*Brick Lane*: 182). Nazneen, in contrast, does not want to go back to Bangladesh, even though she does not necessarily feel at home in England and longs to see her sister again, but she understands that England is the only home her daughters know: "But the children would be unhappy. Bibi, perhaps, would recover quickly. Shahana would never forgive her" (*Brick Lane*: 183). Chanu, however, does not appear to care much about his wife's or his daughters' feelings, as the only important opinion to him is his opinion: "*We are going there. I have decided. And when I decide something, it is done*" (*Brick Lane*: 184).

Interestingly, however, the narrator describes Chanu to be sad when he beats the girls ("They took their toll on each member of the family but most of all on

Chanu”, *Brick Lane*: 180), and to be unable to do it properly (“He flogged enthusiastically but without talent”, *Brick Lane*: 181). This bit of dramatic irony implies that, despite his efforts to keep his family and himself away from Western influence, he has been influenced by Western culture as well, as no other Bangladeshi man in the novel appears to feel any remorse or appears to have problems beating a woman. Shahana can see the hypocrisy in her father, that he wants to keep them away from Western influence yet is influenced himself, and it makes her hate him and everything Bangladeshi even more. This can be seen in when Chanu brings home a computer and, when trying it out with Bibi, speaks English, while Shahana complains to her mother that Chanu does not allow the girls to speak English at home (*Brick Lane*: 193). When, instead of comforting Shahana or backing her up, Nazneen starts defending Chanu, some of the hatred Shahana feels transfers from her father to her mother:

Nazneen went back to Bengali. “When I was first married, I wanted to go to college to learn English. But your father said there was no need.” Shahana flicked her mother’s hand away from her hair. When she sighed and her chest rose up against the white brushed cotton of her nightdress, Nazneen saw that breasts were beginning to come. “And he was right. I know enough.” Her hand hovered above her daughter’s shoulder. “But when I was younger I was always worrying about everything.” Shahana turned round. Her eyes, mouth, nose pinched up. “So what? What are you talking about? What do I care? I hate him. I *hate* him.” She jumped up and clenched her arms and teeth. And she kicked her mother’s shins with her little soft feet. (*Brick Lane*: 194)

There are several scenes in which Shahana challenges her mother to be confident, but also makes her think. When she tells Nazneen that she would rather run away than go to Bangladesh and already has a bag ready (*Brick Lane*: 216) and the girls ask their mother whether she wants to go at all, Nazneen’s answer does not satisfy Shahana, so she calls out to Nazneen and demands a proper answer (*Brick Lane*: 217). When they are in the park, Shahana directly asks Nazneen if she ever loved Chanu:

“Are you in love with him?” Shahana looked fierce. Her eyes narrowed. Nazneen went into freefall. She bowed her head. “I mean, have you ever been in love with him? Perhaps before he got so *fat*?” Nazneen reached out to her daughter. She stroked her arm and she would have liked to embrace her, hug her tight against her body. “Your father is a good man. I was lucky in my marriage.” “You mean he doesn’t beat you,” said Shahana. “When you are older, you will understand all these things. About a husband and wife.” Nazneen did not know which one of them was wiser, the mother or the daughter. She did not know if Shahana’s questions were acute or naive, but all the same she felt proud of the girl. (*Brick Lane*: 303)

This scene shows that Shahana, despite her age, has a clear understanding of what is happening between men and women in their community: violence against women is not considered to be a crime, but something natural. Shahana's remarks about marriage show her inner conflict between feeling Bangladeshi and feeling English once more: on the one hand, she equates a "lucky" – not a happy – marriage with a non-violent husband rather than love. On the other hand, it is romantic love she is asking about, which shows the English side in her in which the sole reason for marriage should be love.

As it has been shown, being stuck between two cultures that are as different from one another as the Bangladeshi and the English culture, affects men and women differently. Men, having had the freedom to do as they like since they were born, struggle more, as they are faced with obstacles like racism and discrimination based on things they cannot change – their skin tone, their origin, etc. Women, on the other hand, see those things as well, but the freedom to do what they want, not what is decided for them by men, outweighs the negative aspects. However, as shown in the novel, they still feel a sense of duty towards their home country, their culture, and their traditions, which results in a feeling of confusion and inner conflict; this feeling then turns into hatred against the culture they feel treats them unfairly – in Karim's case, a hatred for the West, and in Shahana's case, a hatred for the East.

However, while the novel suggests that women are more likely to adopt to the new culture because the positive aspects outweigh the negative ones, reality is different for first generation immigrants: According to the European Commission, as of 2022, foreign-born women in the EU are more likely to face poverty or social exclusion than foreign-born men.¹⁰² When focusing on second-generation immigrants, like Karim and Shahana in the novel, however, a different picture emerges. According to Fleischmann *et al.* (2014), second-generation women surpass second-generation men academically and in educational achievements:

¹⁰² For full article, see https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Migrant_integration_statistics_-_at_risk_of_poverty_and_social_exclusion#Analysis_by_age, no author, "Analysis by sex", accessed March 22, 2025.

Overall, our comparative findings across up to nine destination countries and a large number of second-generation groups indicate that the female advantage in education found in majority populations extends to the second generation, regardless of parents' country of origin and despite some significant variation in the magnitude of the gender gap. (Fleischmann *et al.* 2014: 162)

When taking *Brick Lane* into account, one could conclude that second-generation women having surpassed men academically stems from the fact that men, like Karim, develop a hatred for the new country when they are no longer the 'top of the food-chain' simply because of their sex, while women, like Shahana, see the opportunities the new country gives them and therefore work extra hard. While this is obviously a simplification of a broader topic and does not consider all the problems and obstacles of immigrants and their children, Nadim and Midtbøen (2023) do claim that, for women, "social mobility might also be driven by a wish to be liberated from traditional gender norms" (Nadim and Midtbøen 2023: 1398), meaning that they do not wish to be solely a wife and a mother and see "motherhood as a threat to their professional identities" (Nadim and Midtbøen 2023: 1402). While men also work hard, the main difference between second-generation men and women is that women work hard to break free from the traditions of their parents' cultures and actively want to isolate themselves from being reduced to a wife and mother, while men do not necessarily see the 'traditional' family-model as a bad thing and therefore lack the 'extra push' women have to get away from these expectations:

In short, both the women and men in our study share a strong dedication to their work and careers and express an unwillingness to considerably reduce their investments in work to prioritise care responsibilities. However, while the women are concerned about the cultural constraints that accompany motherhood and actively try to shield themselves from traditional gender-complementary expectations, the men do not experience fatherhood (or the eventuality of it) as a threat in the same way. Furthermore, while the women overwhelmingly embrace and expect gender-equal arrangements and oppose the gender-complementary roles they grew up with, the men to some extent rely on (or expect to rely on) gender-complementary arrangements, where their spouses shield them from the most intrusive care responsibilities. (Nadim and Midtbøen 2023: 1403)

As mentioned before, the discussion about second-generation immigrants is a very complex topic that includes aspects of identity crises, disapproval, racism, etc. While for the longest time, the struggles of immigrants and their children has been overlooked for the fact that "they should simply integrate themselves", it has become a broader topic of interest academically, shown exemplary on the cited

works that are quite recent, but also in pop-culture. This can best be seen on the success of the Netflix-series *Never Have I Ever* (2020-2023), written by and loosely based on author Mindy Kaling, whose parents are both from India, which follows an Indian-American girl, Devi, in her High School years while she struggles between her own trauma, her traditional home, and her wish to be a normal American teenage girl.

4.2.2 Facing the Consequences of Society's Expectations on Women

Having focused on the struggles of women from patriarchal societies being stuck between two cultures, this section focuses on the expectations society still has on women on the example of *NW* (2012) by Zadie Smith, both from an immigrant and a non-immigrant point of view, and what these expectations do to women. For this, the focus will lie on Leah for a non-immigrant point of view and on Natalie/Keisha for an immigrant point of view. What will be analyzed is whether the expectations society sets for women and their treatment if women fail to live up to those expectations differs between different cultures and in how far those expectations have changed at all since the 19th century.

4.2.2.1 *Fear of Change and Dissatisfaction with One's Life – Leah*

Growing up, Leah has been one of the popular kids in school: "She had not noticed until the break that the state of 'being Leah Hanwell's friend' constituted a sort of passport, lending Keisha a protected form of access in most situation" (*NW*: 194). While everyone around her grew up, however, Leah's development sort of stopped at the age of 18: "Simply; I am eighteen in my mind I am eighteen and if I do nothing if I stand still nothing will change I will be eighteen always" (*NW*: 24). Despite the fact that she is now in her mid-30s, Leah does not want to move forward nor change her life, or basically grow up. This stems from the fact that she is afraid of dying (*NW*: 33), and development and growing up means coming closer to death, whereas "being eighteen always" for her means that "time will stop. I'll never die" (*NW*: 24). While, objectively speaking, this is not healthy and the more she is confronted with death, the more her mental health declines, society does not take her or her needs seriously, but rather confronts her with what is expected of a woman like her in both her work environment and her family life, and therefore pushes her further down a vicious circle.

Her fear of death and her inability to cope with her father's death clearly signal that Leah has unresolved mental problems. This can be seen in the fact that, when she smokes weed, she fantasizes about her father and thinks that she is actually talking to him (NW: 52-54), she experiences a panic attack when she sees the tombstones in the graveyard of a church (NW: 72-73), and she is mourning the death of her dog excessively (NW: 92). Stroebe and Stroebe (2012) claim that, while the bereaved may suffer from, among other things, depression, anxiety disorders, and posttraumatic stress disorders because of their grief, the outbreak of such diseases may often be associated with preexisting mental health issues (Stroebe and Stroebe 2012: 269). Frank Cassino (1958), additionally, claims that the reason for fearing death is the wish for complete alteration:

The energy of the fear is part of the individual's psychic economy. The fear of death, then, is a displacement of any internal conflict. This conflict is not specific and refers to the inability to tolerate any tension, and a wish for complete alteration. The alteration is not in terms of better function of the existing parts, but destruction of old parts with the substitution of a new self. It is a wish to be somebody different (Cassino 1958: 171)

In Leah, the reader can see clearly that this is the case, as she envies her best friend Natalie with her big Victorian house and her husband and children so much that she starts hating her (NW: 61), and she dreams about running away with Shar (NW: 78). However, despite the fact that she clearly wants change in her life, she stands absolutely still and does nothing to change her situation:

Why won't everybody stay still? She has forced a stillness in herself, but it has not stopped the world from continuing on. And then the things that happen only serve to horribly close down the possibilities of all the other things that didn't happen, and so number 37, and so the door opening at the moment that she stands there, her hand full of leaflets, and Shar saying: put those down, take my hand. Shall we run? Are you ready? Shall we run? Leave all this! Let's be outlaws! Sleeping in hedgerows. Following the railway line till it reaches the sea. Waking up with that long black hair in her eyes, in her mouth. Phoning home from fantasy boxes that still take the old two pees. We're fine, don't worry. I want to stay still and to keep moving. I want this life and another. (*ibid.*)

While this is one of the only scenes in which Leah admits to herself that she is stuck in a circle of wanting something, but at the same time wanting the opposite of it, which, ultimately, completely grounds her life to a halt, there are several scenes in the novel that show Leah's conflicting behavior – most of it inflicted by society's expectations towards women.

The most prominent topic in the novel is the one of children. She is married to Michel, and they are trying for a baby:

A thirty-five-year-old woman married to a man she loves has most certainly been warned, should be paying attention, should be listening, and not be at all surprised when her husband says – many days in which the woman is fertile. Only, I think, three. So it's no good to just say, 'Oh, it'll happen when it will happen.' We're not so young. So we have to be a bit more, I mean, military about it, like plan. Objectively speaking, he is correct. (NW: 25)

The way the narrator describes them trying for a baby, that Leah “should not be surprised” that Michel wanted to start a family, combined with the fact that it is said earlier that Leah was, in fact, surprised that their sex life was “heading towards a certain, perfectly obvious destination” (NW: 24), meaning having a baby, already shows that Leah does not want to have children. She even asks herself: “Why must love ‘move forward’?” (*ibid.*). This scene shows that she knows exactly what is expected of a woman like her: a married woman her age should want and have children, and not agreeing with those expectations placed upon women is not acceptable. This is underlined by the fact that her own mother keeps pushing her to finally have a baby: “[...] he loves you. And you love him. You should get on with it. Council's set you up very nicely really, you've a little car, you've both got jobs. It's the next thing” (NW: 45). Leah, however, does not want to “get on with it”. Thus, she secretly takes the contraceptive pill (NW: 93). Since she, however, has to take the pill in secret and sometimes does not get the chance to do so, she ends up pregnant a couple of times, but always has a secret abortion: “That first time, she was two months gone. The second time, two months and three weeks. This is her third” (NW: 60). Her having several abortions clearly shows that her not wanting to have children is not a ‘phase’ she will get over eventually, but that she really does not want to have children. As already explained in subsections 4.1.1.2.1 and 4.1.1.2.2, the number of women who do not want to have children is rising, yet they are often not taken seriously and their ability to make such decisions that fundamentally affect their lives is questioned and undermined. Quite ironically, in section 4.1.1.2.2 it is explained how in *Cometh the Hour*, one of the great fears of men is depicted: being told by a woman he does not want that she is pregnant with his child, and not knowing whether that child is actually his. Having the ‘bad’ character of the story do this very much underlines that this is unacceptable behavior. In NW, however, quite the opposite can be found: here, there is a woman who does not, under any

circumstances, want to have a baby, but cannot communicate that freely because of her husband's and society's expectations towards women. Obviously, they should be able to communicate freely and openly about what they want and what they do not want in their marriage, but Michel's reaction to Leah telling him her honest opinion ("No arguing, says Michel, OK?", *NW*: 94) shows that he is not actually taking her seriously. This implies that Leah's secretiveness is forced upon her by society. López-Ropero (2016) even calls disregarding Michel's wish to become a father a "sort of private feminism" (López-Ropero 2016: 129).

Ironically, however, the expectations towards women are anchored so deeply within society that Leah, despite doing everything possible to not have children, envies her best friend Natalie for her life. This can be seen in the fact that she says she hates Natalie (*NW*: 61) or that she refuses to call her by the name she chose for herself and keeps calling her Keisha (*NW*: 64). The reason for her hatred and her teasing can be found in her deep-founded jealousy of Natalie's life:

Leah watches Natalie stride over to her beautiful kitchen with her beautiful child. Everything behind those French doors is full and meaningful. The gestures, the glances, the conversation that can't be heard. How do you get to be so full? And so full of only meaningful things? Everything else Nat has somehow managed to cast off. She is an adult. (*NW*: 67)

As mentioned earlier, this is another example of wanting something, but not wanting it at the same time. This might stem from the fact that, according to McRobbie (2009), having a well-planned life emerges as a social norm of contemporary femininity (McRobbie 2009: 77). Additionally, Wells (2013) claims that Leah fills the position of an ambitionless under-performer otherwise stereotypically occupied by immigrants and non-white people (Wells 2013: 100). This means that there is a path that society dictates Leah to take, and despite not even wanting to be a devoted wife and mother, not having the things she is supposed to have and therefore not living up to the society's expectations of women like Leah frustrates her and further pushes her down the vicious circle that ultimately leads to her mental breakdown.

Another important expectation towards women that adds to Leah's dissatisfaction and decline of mental health is that, deep down, she feels like she is not how a woman is 'supposed to be like'. As she works for a charity, one would

expect Leah to be an empathetic person. According to Toussaint and Webb (2005), “much research has shown that women are more empathic than men” (Toussaint and Webb 2005: 673). However, against society’s expectations that a woman must be empathetic for the simple fact that she is a woman, this is obviously not the case for every woman. Even though Leah tries to be empathetic, she is not. This can be seen in the fact that she makes fun of her team leader Adina when she says that their job requires empathy: “This work requires empathy and so attracts women, for women are the empathic sex. This is the opinion of Adina George, Team Leader, who speaks, who will not stop speaking. Adina’s mouth opens and closes” (NW: 31). Additionally, she writes “I AM SO FULL OF EMPATHY” in capital letters on a piece of paper at work (NW: 33), which clearly shows that, if she has to constantly remind herself that she should feel something, she does not actually feel it. According to Houser (2017), her lack of empathy can also be seen in how she treats Shar: while she does see the superficial surface, for example that “something is wrong with Shar’s face” (NW: 9) and that “she is slow, maybe, and possibly clumsy; or she is traumatized, or distracted” (NW: 13), she is not able to inhabit the perspective of Shar or understand how she feels, and therefore does not see Shar’s obvious lies (Houser 2017: 128). The relationship between Leah and Shar is further strained when first Leah confronts Shar and Shar ironically asks her if she wants her on her knees (NW: 56), and later, when Leah and Michel are attacked by Shar’s friends, Leah goes down on her knees to beg for mercy herself (NW: 83-84). This change of position is what Jaffe (2000) calls Victorian Sympathy, which was used in Victorian realist novels, and which involves the spectator’s fantasy of occupying the other’s place; this means that, someday, the spectator and the beggar might change places, which is supposed to strengthen the empathy of the spectator for the beggar (Jaffe 2000: 7-8). Leah’s ability to feel empathy, however, does not grow after her experiences with Shar and her friends, but she rather feels a little ashamed of herself and starts thinking of herself as “a deal-maker, a pleader, a tactical liar” (NW: 85), and then they continue to joke about the whole encounter (NW: 87-88) until Leah finds out that her dog died as an aftermath of the assault (NW: 91), which then leads her into a downward spiral of depression and grief. This means that Leah is aware of what is expected of her as both a woman and a charity-worker yet is unable to feel those things. Instead, she buries herself in the next thing she feels, which is the grief for her beloved dog, and nearly drowns in that grief.

Taking a closer look at Leah, the reader gets the impression that she feels suppressed: she does not want to have children yet does not feel that she can share this with anyone, not even her husband, because society expects women to want and to have children; the fact that she feels jealous of Natalie, who has all the things she is supposed to want, only contributes to her feeling of frustration. She is not an empathic person yet works in a job that requires empathy and tries to convince everyone, including herself, that she can feel what society wants her to feel and be the woman society expects her to be. That she is feeling suppressed is underlined by the fact that she does not want to leave Willesden, whose description is equally characterized by oppression and discomfort:

Elsewhere in London, offices are open plan/ floor to ceiling glass/ sites of synergy/ wireless/ gleaming. There persists a belief in the importance of a ping-pong table. Here is not there. Here offices are boxy cramped Victorian damp. Five people share them, the carpet is threadbare, the hole-punch will never be found. (NW: 31)

Look, there, on the library carpet between Science Fiction and Local History: a knotted condom filled with sperm. Once this was all farm and field, with country villas nodding at each other along the ridge of this hill. Train stations have replaced them, at half-mile intervals. (NW: 55)

This means that, just as much as Willesden confines Leah, Leah also confines herself to the place she was born. She is unable to see that there is a way of living outside of what others expect of her, and, consequently, also does not see that there might be a life for her outside of Willesden. This confinement between Leah and Willesden – that she does not like the place but is unwilling to change anything about it – can be seen as a metaphor for society and the position of women within it: Although society as a whole wants to move away from ‘traditional’ images of women and demands equal rights for all genders, the path to this is still difficult and women are still classified according to whether or not they do what is expected of them. Thus, one can see a clear similarity to the 19th century. While in contemporary Western society women are no longer openly ostracized for not living according to society’s expectations like they were in the 19th century, the pressure women feel to live up to those expectations is still very much present. As can be seen in Leah’s case, the inability to do so can even lead to mental health problems.

4.2.2.2 Identity Crisis – Natalie

Natalie Blake, Leah's best friend, was born as Keisha Blake to Jamaican parents. The differences between them, Leah being a white girl and – then – Keisha being the daughter of immigrants, become obvious to her quite early on when Leah insults her mother and the parents' reaction is totally different to what Keisha knows from home:

She pointed to the TV, at Hannibal's gleaming white hair, and then at her mother, in reality. "That hair makes you look well old," she said. Keisha tried to imagine saying something of this kind to her own mother. Silently she mourned the loss of the biscuit plate and whatever novelty was contained in those furry brown eggs. She put her feet together ready to stand up and go home. But Mrs Hanwell did not start yelling or hitting. She only touched her bowl of hair and sighed. "It went this colour when I had you." (NW: 176)

She then continues to try to "replicate some of the conditions she had seen at the Hanwells'" (NW: 177). Here, the reader can see similarities to Shahana in *Brick Lane*.

As the daughter of immigrants, she is confronted with a completely different culture when she hangs out with her friend. Exemplary, while her younger brother is still running around naked at 11 (NW: 191), Keisha is refused privacy in the form of a lock on the door (*ibid.*) and is punished by no longer being allowed to see her best friend when her mother finds the dildo Leah gifted her (NW: 193). This implies that, at home, she learned that a woman's sexuality is something dirty, while she sees in her friend that in England, women are allowed to express their sexuality a lot more freely. Therefore, she starts alienating herself from her family and her heritage: "But parental legacy meant little to Keisha Blake; it was her solid sense that she was in no way the creation of her parents and as a result could not seriously believe that anybody else was the creation of theirs" (NW: 183). On the example of Keisha, the reader can clearly see what Nadim and Midtbøen, cited in the previous section, describe: to escape her family and her heritage, she works extra hard to be successful and to become a lawyer ("They were going to be lawyers, the first people in either of their families to become professionals. They thought life was a problem that could be solved by means of professionalization", NW: 205). At university, she starts noticing that the people around her are all white, and, to "keep up" with her

peers and to look more professional, changes her name from Keisha to Natalie (NW: 205-206).

This shows that to – now – Natalie, the image is more important than anything else. She is convinced that, as a woman of color and different heritage, she has no chance of ‘making it’ in England, so she reinvents herself with a new, more common name to basically erase her past and her heritage. However, even that early on in her journey of self-invention, she, deep down, realizes that there is no authenticity left and that she is, in reality, nobody:

“Really good to see you,” said Leah. “You’re the only person I can be all of myself with.” Which comment made Natalie begin to cry, not really at the sentiment but rather out of a fearful knowledge that if reversed the statement would be rendered practically meaningless, Ms Blake having no self to be, not with Leah, or anyone. (NW: 211)

The importance she puts into the image can also be seen in how she describes her future husband, Frank, when she first meets him or when they start dating. She very much concentrates on his appearance and the expensive clothes and jewelry he wears (NW: 207-208; NW: 218). Not once, however, does she speak of having actual feelings for Frank; in contrast, when he offers to give her struggling family money, she feels nothing at all (NW: 230). Her approach to their relationship underlines this notion: to Natalie, it is important what she looks like to the outside and what benefits she gains from doing something or being with someone:

Female individual seeks male individual for loving relationship. And vice versa. Low-status person with intellectual capital but no surplus wealth seeks high-status person of substantial surplus wealth for enjoyment of mutual advantages, including longer life expectancy, better nutrition, fewer working hours and earlier retirement, among other benefits. Human animal in need of food and shelter seeks human animal of opposite gender to provide her with offspring and remain with her until the independent survival of aforementioned offspring is probable. Some genes, seeking their own survival, pursue whatever will most likely result in their replication. (NW: 230-231)

What is interesting about this is that Natalie is described to be a cold, strict, and brutally calculating person. She has a goal in life – to become a successful lawyer and a respectable member of English society and to have a good life and never struggle like her parents did – and does what it takes to achieve this goal. This can also be seen in the narration of her chapter. While Leah’s chapter is somewhat tangled and the reader feels Leah’s confusion and inner turmoil by her stream of

consciousness, Natalie's chapter is presented as a list in which the individual events in her life are worked through chronologically. This, while pretending to show calmness and order in her life, creates an atmosphere of aloofness and coldness around Natalie. This means that, while both Leah and Natalie do things that they should not do, with Leah constantly lying to her husband and Natalie constantly cheating on her husband, Leah is perceived more positively because the narration feels more personal, whereas Natalie is perceived more negatively, as the narration feels distant and cold. Ironically, however, Natalie does what was expected of a good woman in the 19th century: she is looking for a 'good match', a husband that will provide for her and their children, and not necessarily love.

While the novel shows that the experiences of women in a more diverse world are different and that there are different images of womanhood, it also shows that the struggles are essentially the same for all women: society has built up an image of what the perfect woman must be like and puts pressure on women to achieve this goal. However, as the novel shows, women cannot win in this. Leah, obviously, does not want to do as society dictates her: she does not want to have children and she is not, despite her efforts to pretend to be, an empathetic woman. Natalie, on the other hand, does exactly what society expects a modern woman of the 21st century to do: she is married, she has a successful career, and she has children. However, neither is she perceived very positively, as she does those things for the 'wrong reasons', nor is she herself happy at all, but rather drifts towards an identity crisis.

Firstly, despite her efforts to create a new, English 'her' that society will deem respectable and accept, she cannot get rid of her roots: whenever she sees family members, she instantly goes back to her childhood and keeps comparing herself to the Jamaican image of womanhood she grew up with (NW: 247). A meeting with her cousin also shows that she is not taking proper care of herself while she is trying to become more English than Jamaican; this is represented by her hair: "Natalie touched her uneven parting, the dry bun, scraped back, unadorned" (NW: 248). Only very recently has it become a public topic that different races need different things, for example when it comes to hair: Afro hair usually needs a different kind of care than the hair of white people, simply because

of its thickness and texture. However, awareness of this special care has only begun to spread and, consequently, be generally accessible since the 2020s in dominantly white societies. This upcoming awareness and acceptance can exemplarily be seen in *Black Hair in a White World* (2023), edited by Tameka N. Ellington, which is a collection of essays concerned with the cultural history, perception, and increasing acceptance of Black hair in a predominantly white society.¹⁰³ With Natalie, it can clearly be seen that in an effort to erase her past and her cultural heritage, she only ‘hurts’ herself, as the suppression of who she really is leads to dry hair and an itchy scalp. She ultimately thinks that she is re-recognizing her heritage and takes pro bono death row cases in the Caribbean and gives 10% of her income to both her family and charitable institutions (NW: 258) – however, as she clearly equates her family with charitable institutions, it is clear that she has dislocated herself from her family and her origin and only does these things because she thinks it is expected of her and it would make her look good.

Secondly, there is the topic of motherhood. In her family, they make it clear that, while she is a successful lawyer and a wife, they do not yet see her as a ‘real’ woman as long as she does not have children, and she herself feels that way, too: “Cheryl gave Carly her bottle. She sat very straight with her third child in her arms. An adult with adult concerns. Natalie crossed her legs like a child and kept her fond memories to herself” (NW: 261). Although both Leah and Natalie feel like others are “willing them to reproduce” (NW: 272), which means that, deep down, they both do not actually want to have children, Natalie feels the pressure from both her family’s culture and from English society, and, as she is so concerned with being accepted and respected, plans to have children regardless of her own wishes: “She had no intention of being made ridiculous by failing to do whatever was expected of her” (NW: 272). Just as she at no point talks about loving her husband, but rather that they are a good team (“At least Natalie Blake and Frank De Angelis weren’t working against each other, or in competition. They were incorporated. An advert for themselves”, NW: 271), she has her children mainly because it is what is expected of her and what makes her look good. However, constantly playing a role to appear as what others think she must be starts pulling on her nerves and Natalie

¹⁰³ For more information on the book, see <https://www.kentstateuniversitypress.com/2022/black-hair-in-a-white-world/>, no author, accessed March 22, 2025.

starts to understand that she lost herself in the progress of being what others expect her to be:

Daughter drag. Sister drag. Mother drag. Wife drag. Court drag. Rich drag. Poor drag. British drag. Jamaican drag. Each required a different wardrobe. But when considering these various attitudes she struggled to think what would be the most authentic, or perhaps the least inauthentic. (NW: 282)

The use of the word 'drag' for every aspect of her life clearly signals that there is no 'real' Natalie/Keisha left and all she does is imitate. 'Drag', or 'drag queen', is defined by the OED as follows:

slang in early use (originally and chiefly among gay men).

Originally: a male entertainer who performs dressed as a woman; a female impersonator. Now usually: a performer (most typically a man) who adopts a flamboyant, exaggerated, or parodic feminine persona, with glamorous or outrageous costumes and make-up. (OED s.v. *drag queen*, n.)

According to this definition, 'drag' ridicules women. Judith Butler, however, takes a different approach to drag in her *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990):

But the relation between the "imitation" and the "original" is, I think, more complicated than that critique generally allows. Moreover, it gives us a clue to the way in which the relationship between primary identification – that is, the original meaning accorded to gender – and subsequent gender experience might be reframed. [...] In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency. (Butler 1990: 137)

If one extends this view to not only gender, but to other aspects in life – as the novel does by combining every aspect of Natalie's being with drag –, one could therefore conclude that all behaviors are imitations of something we think others expect from us. While I would agree that people usually behave in a certain way to appeal to others – for example, one is more likely to behave in a more polite and professional manner at their job than they would with their friends –, there is usually a version of a person in which they are simply and unapologetically themselves. For Natalie, however, she does not feel like there is a version that is just her, and there is not a person in her life she feels like she could be herself around – if she knew who 'she' was. This results not only in her leading a double life – Natalie, the successful lawyer and devoted mother and wife, and Keisha, the girl who regularly meets with strangers to have sex with (NW: 293 ff.) – but also in a complete identity crisis in

which she completely spirals out of control together with Nathan after Frank finds out about her affairs (NW: 303-312). The end of the novel, however, leaves room for speculation about Natalie and her identity:

Through the glass doors they watched the children spinning on the lawn. Leah found the number online. Natalie dialled it. It was Keisha who did the talking. Apart from the fact she drew the phone from her own pocket, the whole process reminded her of nothing so much as those calls the two good friends used to make to boys they liked, back in the day, and always in a slightly hysterical state of mind, two heads pressed together over a handset. "I got something to tell you," said Keisha Blake, disguising her voice with her voice. (NW: 337)

While it is not clear who she is at the end of the novel, Natalie or Keisha, one could interpret it either way: either, her identity crisis has taken the upper hand and she is stuck somewhere between Keisha and Natalie, or she has accepted that she is not perfect and, by this, found a way to combine Keisha and Natalie. Due to the fact that she had to accept defeat for the first time when Frank does not immediately forgive her ("That this was her life now. Two silent enemies shepherding children to their social appointments", NW: 327), which, for her, simultaneously means that she has failed society and is no longer the perfect woman she wants to appear as, I would argue that, by the end, she accepted both who she was in the past and who she is now and no longer wants to please others, but do what she wants to do and be who she is. The fact that "she is disguising her voice with her voice" implies that, even though she is ready to admit that both Natalie's and Keisha's voices are her voices, she does not yet know how to combine her past and her present, but she is willing to try.

NW deals with several topics: class, fear, gender, identity, to name a few. What combines these topics is that society has expectations for everyone: a woman has to be a certain way, as do men, someone's cultural background or origin defines who they are, etc. On the example of Leah and Natalie, it is shown that these expectations are especially harmful for women: society expects them not only to be a certain way, but their bodily autonomy is taken from them because others expect them to have children, even if they do not want to. The novel shows that a woman in a situation like this can hardly win. Leah's story is an exaggerated portrayal of how the pressure society puts on women can affect one's mental health, as she feels like no one has any sort of understanding for her not wanting something that 'every woman wants' and she, therefore, has no one to talk to. Natalie's story makes it

clear that the compulsion to only do things that others expect of you can lead to a loss of self. The novel additionally combines different images of womanhood in a more and more diverse world, but points out that, no matter one's cultural background, a big problem women face is that society wants to dictate women how to live their lives – which will, ultimately, always have negative consequences.

4.2.3 Image(s) of Women in a Globalized World – Conclusion

Both Monica Ali and Zadie Smith acknowledge that, as the world grows more and more diverse, there are several different images of womanhood that clash, as different cultures meet and mingle. In one culture, a woman is supposed to have a successful career, in another she is supposed to be a stay-at-home mother and wife, etc. What all these images of women have in common, however, is that they are always based on what others expect of women, and, if she is not able to live up to those expectations, she is not deemed a 'real woman'. The point of modern feminism, however, is that a woman should be able to do what she wants: if she wants to be a wife and/or mother, that is fine. If she wants neither of those things, that is fine, too. If she wants to dress revealingly, it does not mean she is 'easy', nor does it give anyone the right to touch her without permission. If she wants to cover up, may it be for religious or personal reasons, that is okay. What is not okay is to force women into doing something they do not want to do, simply because of a picture the patriarchy has drawn of women.

Instead of pretending that everything is great for women in Western societies and that women only face obstacles in other parts of the world, Ali and Smith show that women also struggle in modern and Western societies. For this, they take different approaches. In *Brick Lane*, the negative aspects of cultures clashing – especially racism and radicalization – are mentioned, but when it comes to women, it is made clear that the positive aspects, namely having the basic freedom to determine one's own life, outweigh the negative aspects. What *Brick Lane* does not focus on are current problems of women in Western societies, such as the gender pay gap, being held back from certain work positions, etc., for the simple fact that those are problems that women who are not allowed to leave the house without their husband's permission do not have. However, this does not mean that the struggles of feminism in Western society is any less valid; what it means is

that, just as there are different images of womanhood, there are different struggles for feminism; additionally, the fact that women within a society that is deemed absolute freedom for women by others still face struggles and inequalities shows why feminism is still needed. *NW*, on the other hand, focuses both on the immigrant- and the non-immigrant point of view. The point the novel makes is that every society has an image of what a woman is supposed to be like, and that pressuring women into these roles assigned to them has negative consequences.

What is shown is that, despite all the accomplishments of feminism, women are still assigned roles as to how they must behave and what they must do. In many ways, it has become more complicated than it has in the 19th century. To put it simply, in the 19th century, a Western woman was supposed to find a good match, get married, have children, and manage the household. In the 21st century, a woman is still supposed to do those things, but on top of that, she should also have a successful career. Next to that, as the world grows more diverse, more and more women are torn between the aforementioned Western expectations and the expectations from their own cultural background. While the freedom women have gained since the 19th century (being allowed to go to school, choosing the field they want to study and/or work in, being allowed to vote, etc.) shall by no means be minimized, it is important to understand that, from a female perspective, society is still dictating women how to live and what to do, and has therefore not changed as much as it should have since the 19th century.

4.3 Conclusion Chapter 4

Chapter 4 has focused on contemporary literature and the depiction of women and femininity within it. For this, first the changing image of women throughout the 20th century, and then the different images from diverse cultural backgrounds have been analyzed.

For the changing image of women throughout the 20th century, novels by Jeffrey Archer and Ken Follett have been chosen. This has been done deliberately. In 2009, Robert McCrum said about Archer in an article for *The Guardian*:

How could any sentient being willingly plough through Archer's dreadful prose? [...] To open one of his books was to risk being assaulted by a hectic claque of cliché, mixed metaphor, implausibility, solecism and sheer, unadulterated stodginess sufficient to send most readers screaming in breathless delirium to the mature, lucid and urgent pages of Barbara Cartland or Enid Blyton.¹⁰⁴

Scholars and critics seem to have the same opinion, as there is barely any scholarly work about Jeffrey Archer's novels. However, for the purpose of this thesis, I chose to analyze Archer's *Clifton Chronicles* because I thought that due to his immense success in book sales, there must be something in his novels that appeals to the general public. Of course, there are other, more critically and scholarly acclaimed male authors that take on female perspectives in their novels, for example Ian McEwan in *Atonement* (2001), but what I wanted to see was the perspective of someone who appears to write what the public wants to hear to see where society seems to stand when it comes to women and feminism. The same reasoning applies to choosing Ken Follett, with the addition that Follett always aims to write historically accurate novels. What can be seen from this section is that, essentially, both authors support feminism and rate the changing image of women positively, but the female characters remain products of their time and women are still put on pedestals. Additionally, it is neither criticized nor questioned, but rather supported that women should act in a certain way to be considered good. In both Archer and Follett, the modern woman who works, is brave and confident, but may very well also be a devoted wife and mother, is described to be the very image of modern womanhood, and it is implied that this is exactly what all women want. Obviously, this is not true, as the female perspective on the example of Monica Ali and Zadie Smith shows, but it shows how deeply rooted this image is within society – and for that matter, not only within men, but also within women.

When talking about different images of women clashing in a more and more globalized world, however, it is not necessarily shown how great life for women is and how far feminism has come, but the focus rather lies on the problems of women in the 21st century. In order to do justice to the growing diversity in Western society, I chose Monica Ali and Zadie Smith, who both have one parent from a different cultural background and are therefore qualified to talk about the struggles of

¹⁰⁴ For the whole article, see <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2009/dec/07/jeffrey-archer, Robert McCrum>, accessed March 22, 2025.

immigrant women. What this section has shown is that the problems and struggles are growing: not all women are the same, and neither are their struggles – which can also be seen in the differences between ‘critical’ female literature and ‘bestselling’ female literature (like the *Bridgerton* romances) analyzed in this thesis: the *Bridgerton* novels do suggest feminism, but emancipation and independence always stays within the norms of the Regency period as to not ruin the characters’ reputation. Emancipation in ‘critical’ literature goes a lot deeper: in *Brick Lane*, for example, it is shown on a woman who was originally caught in a patriarchal society, and *NW* focuses on the influence of the social classes on gender roles. *Wide Sargasso Sea* shows the female fight against patriarchal and colonial structures, and *Possession* the emotional and intellectual struggles of women in a male-dominated field. This means that emancipation and women’s rights are a topic in all sorts of (contemporary) literature, but the effects and functions are weighted differently. This does not invalidate one or give more importance to the other, but it shows that just because one woman is currently content and happy with her situation does not mean that the next woman is the same. The basic problem is that societies all around the world have created an image of what a woman must be like in their respective culture, and a woman that does not live up to those expectations is not considered to be good enough – which can also be seen in how Archer and Follett describe and deal with their female characters. In some cultures, they are still ostracized and/or killed, in others they are just frowned upon, but either way, their ability to determine their own life and to make decisions for themselves is invalidated. This can be seen in the necessity to create a word that describes the fact that a man does not trust a woman to have a clue about a subject (‘mansplaining’), in the fact that it is still considered to be ‘romantic’ if a man does not give up even though the woman told him repeatedly that she wants him to leave her alone, or in the fact that a woman’s bodily autonomy is questioned and/or taken away in many countries when it comes to pregnancies and abortions. This all shows that, despite the many accomplishments of feminism, society still has a long way to go to achieve equality between all genders.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Brief Summary of the Thesis

The aim of this doctoral thesis was to find out in how the position and role of women in contemporary literature has changed in comparison to the 19th century. In a first step to answer this question, the initial situation for women in the 19th century has been analyzed. As the 19th century has already been almost fully covered in scholarly work, this thesis has used a mixture of well-known and well-analyzed authors, like Jane Austen or the Brontë sisters, and – at least by a broader public – lesser studied authors, like Marie Corelli or Coventry Patmore, to illustrate what the situation was like for women in the 19th century and how they were depicted in literature. The main goal was to introduce the classification into Angels and Fallen Women, and to explain the threat the New Women, the first feminists, represented to society. Although it was not the main goal to add something new to the chosen literature of the 19th century, I tried to add new aspects, such as the fact that physiognomy played a role in the creation of the Angel in the House or in the analysis of Olive Schreiner not as a colonial writer, but as a woman-writer. In a second step, I analyzed literature written by now-contemporary authors, but set in the 19th century. Again, a mix of well-known and lesser-known literature as well as different genres was used to cover different forms of literary criticism, such as women's writing, cultural studies, or media studies, as well as to cover not only parts, but the whole of the 19th century, in which a great many changes regarding the situation of women happened. For this reason, both Regency Romances, which recreate the Regency Era, and neo-Victorian literature, which recreates the Victorian Era, have been analyzed to see what now-contemporary authors make of the 19th century. Lastly, contemporary literature set in contemporary times has been analyzed. The importance of the last chapter was to see how the image of women has changed in the last 100 years and how it is changing still, as well as to see what bestselling authors make of it and how diversity in a more and more globalized world affects feminism and if the different images of women coming together can be combined in any way.

5.2 Answering the Research Questions

In the introduction, four research questions this thesis aims to answer have been introduced:

1. How do bestselling authors portray women in contrast to more politically motivated and/or critical authors?
2. How realistic are these portrayals of women?
3. Is the classification of women of the 19th century still used?
4. What differentiates male, female, and diverse/queer characters and, respectively, male and female authors?

The answers to these questions according to the findings of this thesis will be given in the following in the same order as the questions have been raised.

5.2.1 Research Question 1

One can see a clear distinction between bestselling authors like Marie Corelli or Jeffrey Archer and authors that are more politically motivated and/or more critical of society and do not only write what society wants to hear in both periods. However, the point of view of bestselling authors has fundamentally changed, and, consequently, 19th century novels that were critical and were not necessarily a success in their own time are much better perceived these days. For example, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, in which she criticizes the fact that women are expected to marry for social status rather than love, was not perceived very positively in her own time, yet is considered a classic in the 21st century. Marie Corelli, in contrast, is not very well known to a broader public outside of the academic world anymore, even though she was the most successful English writer of her time.

On the example of Marie Corelli, it has been explained what bestselling authors of the 19th century wrote like. Even though she was an unmarried and successfully working woman, she criticized the New Woman movement and, in accordance to the spirit of her time, wrote *My Wonderful Wife* as a way to make fun of the feminists, who she, as well as society as a whole, claimed would bring an end to civilization because they do not want nor are able to have or take care of children.

In her version of the movement, the first feminists are only few, and they are not taken seriously by men. This means that, at the end of the day, Corelli's image of the New Women is presented as some form of amusement: they are presented to be something like actresses in a comedy, but they are not an actual threat to society because of how ridiculous they allegedly were. This view on women has definitely changed for bestselling authors, which is an indication that society has accepted feminism and a majority now supports gender equality – in recent years even the equalization of all genders, not just female and male. However, as can be seen in Jeffrey Archer and Ken Follett, even though they support feminism, bestselling (male) authors of the 21st century still classify women into Angels and not-Angels – not by using those terms anymore, but by keeping the idea alive that a woman must be, act, and look a certain way to be considered good by society. In these novels, the modern woman has a career and a family, is brave, attractive, and is, at the end of the day, morally superior. Fundamentally, she is just a little bit better than everyone else.

Authors who are more critical of the situation of women, such as Monica Ali or Zadie Smith, in contrast, do not share this positive outlook on women and their situation. While they do acknowledge that there are very positive aspects about the position of women in Western societies, especially in comparison to other, more patriarchal societies, they also point out the shortcomings of society, the inequality between the genders, and why feminism is not 'finished', but still very much needed. They also acknowledge that, considering the fact that societies grow more and more diverse, different images of women and womanhood come together, and try to find a common denominator.

All in all, what can be seen is that – naturally – bestselling authors in all the centuries covered in this thesis want to appeal to the general public. They therefore write what the public wants to hear, claiming that everything is fine the way it is. Although this was to be expected, I was surprised to find that the classification of women is still very much used in these novels and that it is considered to be completely normal to put women on pedestals and to tell them what they must be and look like. As long as thinking of women in 'categories' – for example to differentiate between 'good girls' and 'bad girls' based on things that are often not

even put into consideration for men – is still so present in pop culture, it will remain an unconscious part of society – and not only in men, but also in women. However, what can also be seen is that critical authors write a lot more critically than they would have in the 19th century, simply because it is more acceptable, and are therefore more present and have more influence on showing the problems there still are.

5.2.2 Research Question 2

I found that both portrayals of women, those by bestselling authors and by more critical authors, are realistic in their own way. Critical authors show the problems and the struggles women still have to face, from being torn between two cultures and being told what they can and cannot do with their own lives to being treated unfairly. As the many statistics and polls that have been quoted show, there is still an unconscious bias against women both in the labor market and in private life. It is, as the studies mentioned in section 4.1.3 have shown, still deeply rooted within the thinking of lots of people that women are less efficient than men, cannot lead as well as men, and are generally more fit for social jobs and taking care of the house and the family than men. Additionally, there are still efforts to protect men over women. This can still be seen in criminal contexts in which women are advised to ‘stay home’ or ‘dress moderately’ so as not to be seen to incite their own violation. As explained in the Introduction, this is, essentially, a form of victim-blaming, which is still rife also in present-day pop culture, for example the music industry: Female singers like Shakira, Taylor Swift, or Miley Cyrus receive great backlash for writing songs about their former boyfriends who cheated on them, while male singers like Ed Sheeran, Bad Bunny, or Bruno Mars do the same but barely receive any backlash.¹⁰⁵

On the other hand, the portrayal of women bestselling authors show in their novels and romances are also true – not because everything is fine and the modern woman feels no pressure and wants exactly what those authors describe her to want, but because this is how society wants to see women: it is easy and comfortable to accept social norms that have always been there as a given, but it is uncomfortable

¹⁰⁵ For more insight on this, see <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/01/18/opinions/shakira-bzrp-music-session-53-beltran-quan-kiu-ctrp/index.html>, Ximena N. Beltran Quan Kiu, accessed March 22, 2025.

to accept that there is no real social justice. This cannot only be seen in the aforementioned statistics and polls, but also in the portrayal of women from critical authors, who call society out on those problems and struggles.

5.2.3 Research Question 3

To put it bluntly: yes, the classification of women of the 19th century is, essentially, still used. The terms Angel in the House and Fallen Woman are no longer current, but the idea, as explained earlier, is still very much present. Both male and female, as well as bestselling and critical authors agree that women are still classified according to their behavior, and women are still measured by whether they fulfill the expectations that society places on them. The difference is that, in the male perspective, this is not really an issue, which implies that those who find no issue in classifying women are not even aware of it and what it can do to women. From the female perspective, however, it is very much a problem that women are still put into categories based on what others expect of them, and something that needs to be fought. Getting rid of this classification and accepting that women, just like men, should be free to choose the way they want to live, and that, as long as it does not affect anyone other than this person, it is no one's business whether a woman has children or not, is married or not, etc., can be seen as a major challenge for feminism in the 21st century.

5.2.4 Research Question 4

To understand what differentiates male, female, and diverse/queer characters, one also needs to differentiate between the male, the female, and the diverse/queer perspective. Having only slightly focused on queer literature in the Digression, and for the reasons mentioned there, the focus of answering this question will therefore lie more on the differentiation between male, female, and diverse (in the sense of culturally diverse).

In the male perspective, a man needs a woman to support, help, and assist him in any way she can. This can be seen throughout the centuries: Coventry Patmore's Angel must be morally inoffensive and do as she is told, so that the man can go about his business without having to worry. This can also be found in Saki's *When William Came*, in which the female characters are described to be the backbone of society, keeping it all together while the men mourn the loss of their

country. This can partly be found in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, in which Charles slowly turns into the melancholic Sarah the reader is originally introduced to because he cannot be with her. This can very clearly be seen in the *Clifton-Chronicles*, in which Harry Clifton owes everything, his life, education, and freedom, to his mother and his wife, and in the *Century-Trilogy*, in which the positive male characters also owe a great deal to their mothers and wives.

In the female perspective, however, the predominant notion is that men do not understand, and therefore underestimate, women. This can be seen in *Jane Eyre*, in which Rochester does not understand why Jane will not stay with him after she found out he was married, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in which the Rochester-avatar literally drives his wife insane because he does not understand her, and in *Fingersmith*, in which Gentleman thinks he can easily manipulate Sue and Maud because they are only girls. It can be seen in *Brick Lane*, in which Chanu does not see it coming that his wife and daughters will not return to Bangladesh with him but rather stay in London, and it can be seen in *NW*, in which Michel has no idea that his wife from the bottom of her heart does not want to have children. Even in works of fiction (in every sense of the word) that suggest that the best results, may it be in the professional or private life, can only be achieved if there is gender equality and everyone works together as a unity, namely the *Bridgerton* romances and *Possession*, there is always this notion of men underestimating women and then being surprised about them doing something great. On the example of *Brick Lane* and *NW*, the same can be said about culturally diverse characters: they are expected to behave a certain way, and crossing the boundaries set for them is met with great surprise.

Generally, what can be said is that even in regard of essentially the same topic, the focus of criticism varies between male and female writers: The male writers of my corpus tend to be focused on social grievances in general, as they, for example, decry narrowmindedness or hypocrisy; thus, because feminism is a topic society is concerned with, they write about it as well. The female authors in my corpus, by contrast, appear much less concerned with social problems in general, but seem more specifically interested in the problems of women and how society deals or has dealt with them. This means that the male writers in my corpus tend to

look at the ‘bigger picture’, calling out the different problems of society, and therefore tend to overlook the internal struggles and problems of women. The female writers in my corpus, on the other hand, tend to point out exactly where the problems lie concerning the treatment of women, and either offer solutions or show the consequences should society continue to treat women unfairly.

5.3 Outlook

As it has been mentioned several times, it shall under no circumstances be denied that feminism has not come a long way since the 19th century. Due to the braveness of the early feminists, women in Western societies have, by law, the same rights as men. Additionally, more and more is done every year to secure actual gender equality. However, what has been shown to have come out in working with my corpus is that while individuals will say that they are in favor of gender equality and support feminism, in the mind of society as a whole, women are still the ‘lesser’ humans. Women are still taken less seriously, they are held to different standards than men, and they are still told what they must and must not do with their lives or their own bodies. A very recent example of how women are put down on a public stage is how American footballer Harrison Butker, then 28 years old, a kicker for the Kansas City Chiefs and a self-confessed Roman Catholic, delivered a 20-minute address at a graduation ceremony at Benedictine College on May 11, 2024, in which he, among other things, told the women graduating that their accomplishments did not really matter because “the majority of you are most excited about your marriage and the children you will bring into this world”.¹⁰⁶ While Butker did receive backlash for these remarks, the fact that he felt comfortable enough to go on stage and say those things, knowing that people would take videos for the world to see, shows how women as such and more particularly feminism may still not be taken seriously, even in the year 2024. At no time, however, the present thesis aimed at putting blame on each and every man, nor to brand them altogether as misogynist, nor to insult them in any other way – yet to spread awareness of how deep-rooted certain images of women still are within society.

¹⁰⁶ For full article, see <https://apnews.com/article/kansas-city-chiefs-harrison-butker-e00f6ee45955c99ef1e809ec447239e0>, no author, accessed March 22, 2025.

What has been shown is that, while great things have been achieved in the striving for gender equality, there is still a long way to go. As long as there are still images of what a woman – and for that respect, though it is not the topic of this thesis, a man – must be like, and not only men, but women tear other women down for not fulfilling those expectations, feminism is still needed. The fundamental principle – in line with Immanuel Kant's ethics, especially his categorical imperative – should be that, as long as a person's actions do not hurt others and have no influence on other people's lives, everyone, despite being a man, woman, or non-binary person, should be able to do what makes them happy.

A positive notion that can be seen in pop-culture, be it literature, movies, TV-series, or music, is that more and more stress is being laid on female empowerment and strong female characters. Very prominently, this is done in Young Adult fantasy novels/movies or Young Adult dystopian novels/movies that take place in the future, as in those cases authors can create their own universe and, therefore, invent the rules of their respective universe freely. Exemplary and famous for this would be the *Hunger Games* novels (2008-2010) and their prequel, *A Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* (2020), by Suzanne Collins or the *Divergent* series (2011-2013) by Veronica Roth, as well as their respective film adaptations. In those Young Adult novels and movies, there are not only strong female characters who defy the ruling class and take on roles that have been reserved for men for hundreds of years by becoming the savior of their respective world, but the rules of those universes are often combined with criticism of our real, contemporary society. Another good and recent example of this is the upcoming German novelist Marina K. Wolf, who, in her debut fantasy novel *Riannu: Das verborgene Volk* (2023) points out that gender should not play a role, and a civilization that holds back half of its members for no other reason than their gender is set to fail:

Seine Schwester schnaubte. „Hör endlich auf, wie ein Duiade zu denken. Wenn bei denen auch mal eine Frau ein Geschäft leiten würde oder Männer die Windeln ihrer Kinder wechseln, dann wäre diese ganze Gesellschaft vielleicht nicht so unterentwickelt.“ Zolan musste grinsen. „Du glaubst doch nicht im Ernst, dass man Fortschritt daran messen kann, wer wem die Windeln wechselt?“ Sie zuckte mit den Schultern. „Du weißt, was ich meine. Irshari vergeuden keine Talente, egal ob

sie bei einem Mann oder einer Frau liegen.“¹⁰⁷ (*Riannu: Das verborgene Volk*: 283)

In Wolf's fantasy novel, the differences social equality makes can clearly be seen: on the one side, there is the non-magical world, the "Duaide". This side of the fictional world is portrayed as a patriarchal, medieval society that is afraid of progress, change, and, above all, magic. On the other side, there is the magical world, the "Irshari". They are portrayed to be modern, open, and fair to all despite their gender and/or sexual orientation and are therefore further developed than the Duaide. However, the Irshari had to go into hiding because, even though they were the indigenous people of Riannu, the fantasy world, they are persecuted and slaughtered by the Duaide. This can be seen as an analogy to contemporary society: on the one hand, there is the possibility of progress (as quoted above, "no talents are wasted"), but on the other hand, there is the fear of change and the resulting hatred of the people who want to promote said change – in the 19th century and, to a degree and especially in patriarchal societies, still in the 21st century, this was and is the conflict between traditional – patriarchal – values of society and feminism.

While Young Adult fiction is not necessarily an important part of the scholarly world, I would claim that, if we take into account that literature functions as a mirror of society, children's and teenagers' literature is therefore essential to society. Looking back in time, literature for children has always been a tool to bring across a certain message. In the 19th century during the time of colonization, for example, George Alfred Henty wrote novels for English schoolboys in which the heroes would go abroad to the colonies to seek fortune, meet savages, and experience adventures, but would always come back to England in the end to live the rest of their days in quiet prosperity (Clark 1985: 47) in order to encourage young boys to be brave and, by being brave, preserve the empire, demonstrate their superiority, and secure their own future (Clark 1985: 50). Of course, telling children that it is okay to brutally subjugate others and telling children that one's gender should not matter are not the same thing, but this shows that society has developed and is trying to do better. To have highly successful novels and movies tell

¹⁰⁷ "His sister snorted. 'Stop thinking like a Duaide already. If they had a woman running a store or men changing their children's diapers, maybe this whole society wouldn't be so underdeveloped.' Zolan had to grin. 'You don't seriously believe that progress can be measured by who changes whose diapers?' She shrugged her shoulders. 'You know what I mean. Irshari don't waste talents, whether they lie with a man or a woman.'" – translation by K. Pohlmann.

5. Conclusion

teenagers that women are not 'lesser men' and can be just as brave and strong as men is, therefore, a positive development and gives hope for a fairer future between the genders.

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