LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF VICTORIAN COURTSHIP:

THE PORTRAIT OF A WOMAN

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BACHELOR THESIS

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Introduction

Nowadays, young people have many ways of engaging in romantic relationships. There still are rules for both women and men which describe how to behave towards each other. However, those are not written rules and everybody is free to choose a partner to their own preference. In nineteenth-century Britain, this was quite another story. There were double standards for women and men in the Victorian Age (Vicinus, 48): there were many more ways for men than for women when it came to finding a partner for life. Rules for courtship were for a long time restricted to the power of parents and their wishes in a future husband or wife. This power of parents over their children's marital choices changed during the Victorian Age: children started to decide for themselves what they were looking for in a partner. Money and status were, especially in the upper and middle classes, extremely important in a marriage. This changed into something which is called "companionate marriage"; a marriage in which both partners are equal and companionship is thought more important than the creation of offspring or financial advantages. Love letters already were a common concept in literature and in real life, but it started to become more popular in the middle class as well (Lystra, 12). The act of writing letters is a frequently recurring activity in Victorian novels and poetry.

While reading *The Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James, some features in the behaviour between men and women will strike the reader as odd; different than what we are used to nowadays. *The Portrait of a Lady* especially is a novel in which this comes across clearly. The female protagonist, Isabel Archer, is almost immediately after arrival in England proposed to by a friend of the family and a proper lord, Lord Warburton, even though he only has known her for three days. Her surprise at this proposal may surprise the reader as one would expect her to be less surprised, if one is familiar with eighteenth and nineteenth century

literature. The proposal may strike someone as rather quick, but not one she would be shocked at. She also surprises by turning such a good offer down; Lord Warburton immediately seemed like a great party to marry and she seemed to like him as well. This exact way of thinking about courtship and marriage perfectly sums up why this novel is different from others from its time. Isabel is an unusual protagonist as she is not the usual British young woman most Victorian novels describe. She is an independent American girl, who, dragged along by her aunt, explores the Continent and Britain. Seen from her perspective, the reader gets quite an elaborate view of British social life and courtship in the nineteenth century. She marries a man whom she loves; her choice to marry him is one that she makes completely on her own; even though it does not turn out to be a good marriage, he appears to have married her for her money and it turns out to be a regular Victorian marriage after all. The contrast, however, between her own freedom of choice and the forced marriage of her step daughter Pansy Osmond is a good example of the difference between American and European women and the difference in courtship between the two cultures. The same goes for Oscar Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance*, in which one of the supporting roles is occupied by Hester Worsley; she is an American girl in Britain, who has a perfect position to witness the faults and short-comings of British society. She shows how she thinks about this British society as she explains she thinks British people too materialistic. Both she and Isabel are examples of young women emerging from the new world, who express their criticism of British society as outsiders.

This bachelor thesis will be about the concept of courtship in nineteenth century Britain as it is depicted in two works of Victorian literature, namely *The Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James and *A Woman of No Importance* by Oscar Wilde. The topic will be broken down in several chapters in which I will first focus on courtship in Victorian literature, as a means of putting this thesis and both works of literature into historical perspective. Secondly, I will

give an in-depth analysis of the theme of courtship from a female perspective. All of this will add up to answer the main question and topic of this bachelor thesis. In the last chapter I will try to answer the central question of this thesis: after reading two works of literature with young, female, and American characters; what can be said about literary representations of American and European women in the process of being courted? In my answer I will also distinguish between American and British women, since both seem to think quite differently about courtship and marriage as depicted in both novels. The difference may throw a light on the differences in culture in the upper and middle class of both countries and the role of women in American and British Victorian society.

A large amount of theory has been written about women in the Victorian Age, both from an American and a British point of view. Most of these articles and books were written from a feminist perspective. Another part of the theory takes a more objective view, with a historical approach of the Victorian Age. Most of those theories, both feminist and historical, spend a large amount of space on the role of women during the nineteenth century in both countries. It becomes clear from the literature that the nineteenth century was a turning point for women in both American and British history.

What will make this bachelor thesis relevant for this field of research is that it will add to our knowledge of nineteenth century women, since it will show the way in which two male authors portrayed their female characters in the light of courtship and marriage. In addition, the fact that both authors are renowned in English literature, both being outsiders and insiders themselves; James being an American and Wilde an Irish man, while also being complete insiders, since they lived most of their lives in Britain. It is important to realise, after reading this thesis, that the answer to the question will merely say something about *literary* representations of American and European women in the process of being courted. Literature should never be confused with reality, so the answer to the question of perceived cultural

differences in courtship rituals must be seen as an insight to a literary question, rather than it would be taken too seriously and be mistaken for a historical insight, since this thesis is a literary one, not a historical one.

I described earlier the approach I want to take in coming to an answer to my question in ways of the breaking up in chapters, taking both a historical framework and putting both writers in a historical and literary perspective. It is also important to explain how I will use both works of literature to answer my question. After having shown the general outline of both the history of the Victorian Age and both authors' backgrounds, I will use both works of literature to prove my point: what were the perceived cultural differences in courtship rituals and how did two male authors portray this? The method used will be close reading: I will select the relevant passages and with those passages I will come to a conclusion about courtship and marriage in nineteenth-century Britain. With the help of theory and both novels I will be able to make a strong point on this issue as I am using different angles and different works of literature and theory. While close reading, the most stress will be on the fact that both girls are American; their views of British society and the way in which British men behave towards women can say something about British society and courtship as it is depicted in literature, because both authors have independent views, since they see society from a distance, as they are not part of the society themselves.

Chapter 1 – Courtship in the Victorian Age

The Victorian Age or Victorian Era was the period of Queen Victoria's reign of Britain from 20 June 1837 until her death, on 22 January 1901. The Victorian Age was a wealthy period in Britain's long history, one of great development and also of long lasting peace (also known as the *Pax Britannica).* Men and women moved away from the rural areas and started to live in the cities, which grew rapidly. The population of Britain almost doubled in the Victorian Age, due to big steps in the areas of medicine and health care. It was an era of migration towards Britain's (ex-)colonies, like the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Literature and art abandoned the rationalism of the preceding Georgian period and moved toward romanticism and mysticism. Charles Dickens, Arthur Conan Doyle, the Brontë sisters and Robert Louis Stevenson are just a few of the many famous authors the Victorian Age produced. Although theatre, literature and opera were widely available, it still remained mainly as entertainment for the rich upper classes (*Encyclopædia Britannica Online).*

Martha Vicinus describes the lives of women and the ideals they were expected to live up to in her book *Suffer and Be Still* about women in the nineteenth century. According to her, a Victorian woman's sole purpose was marriage and procreation. This idea of a woman's purpose applies almost entirely to the upper classes, not for the lower classes, in which women were also expected to work. The idea of women and men looking for the ideal partner to spend their lives with is a common theme in eighteenth and nineteenth century literature. The female protagonists of Jane Austen's famous novels are the best known in English literature. They want to find love, a nice house and lovely children. In Victorian literature, this view of courtship remained quite the same. However, as Vicinus points out, there was a beginning of a gradual change from being "the perfect lady" to "the new woman" (Vicinus, 43). The perfect lady was a lady whose entire youth was occupied by preparing herself to

become the best wife she could be. Family was the cornerstone of Victorian society and therefore the life of the perfect lady was dedicated to showing what a great mother she would be. She would learn how to entertain her husband and how to take care of children. After she married, those matters were less important. There were maids and governesses who would take care of the household and of the children. The wife only needed to please her husband and sometimes to take care of her children. Chastity was a value; an ideal. The new woman, as Vicinus describes her, was not the perfect lady anymore. She had an education and fought for her legal and political rights. This was caused by economic and social changes in the late nineteenth century. Women would sort out their business to others, it was not necessary for them to take care of the children anymore. All of this was taking place in the upper classes, but it gradually spread out to the middle classes as well, as people became wealthier and women started to take examples from the women in the upper classes. Women in the working classes grew increasingly independent, since they started to receive more rights. The new woman's purpose was no longer one of marriage and procreation; she had time and money to spend on other things than that. The Victorian upper class woman was still dependent on her husband for money and housing, and she was still expected to give him offspring, so that the family would continue to exist. Apart from that, the new woman had more liberties than she ever had before. Wealthy women started to travel abroad and take up residence elsewhere, she was no longer dependent on her husband; she could go wherever she wanted.

In literature, this becomes clear as female protagonists became bolder, they went abroad, had their own opinions, and were not obliged to listen to their parents anymore when it came to the matter of marriage. They accepted and declined marriage offers, because of this freedom of choice. Courtship changed as women actually needed to be courted: they did not only choose a good husband who would be able to support them, they were also looking for love and comfort in a partner for life.

Courtship among the upper- and middle classes changed in the late nineteenth century due to the revolutions in agriculture and industry (Frost, 58). Children and young adults left their parents behind to go work in the city and thus experienced a new freedom in choosing their future husbands and wives. Most of the middle and lower class people did not meet each other through their parents or church meetings anymore; they met as a result of their increased social life: through mutual friends, relatives and neighbours (Frost, 58). Especially women in the working classes experienced difficulties in finding the right husband. Multiple cases are known in which maids and governesses engaged in (sexual) relationships with their much wealthier and older employers. Because of the differences in class, those women were fired and left alone as soon as their employers got them pregnant (Frost, 72). This illustrates the long way the first feminists had to go: there was still much inequality between the rights of men and women.

The role of women is interesting to look at from different perspectives. The perspective of the widow can be especially interesting, as a woman who has lost her husband could play a dubious role in society. People died young and left both husbands and wives behind with young children and sometimes even businesses to run. For women this did not always mean misery and negativity, they could do well as their husbands could leave them small fortunes. Women who were left widows as their husbands died were quite common in the nineteenth century. "More generally, historians of the family, childhood, and old age have pointed to the frequency with which families were broken by death or desertion and the analogous frequency with which they were reconstituted, generating complex kinship patterns which might intertwine half brothers and sisters, multiple sets of in-laws, and stepchildren aplenty" (King and Shephard, 320). Widows did cause all kinds of trouble for society though. They could be seen as a sexual threat if they were of childbearing age and a welfare burden if not. Therefore, widows were often expected to remarry if they were still of childbearing age.

Women could not live alone, was the general opinion. However, this was a matter of perception, which illustrates again the difficulties women had to face if they did not want to be dependent on a husband.

There exist two main assumptions about the changes in courtship in the nineteenth century. What (nearly) all theorists agree upon is the fact that the changes were due to social and economic development in British and American society. However, the discussion is divided into two groups of theorists. The first group divides the nineteenth century in two halves: The first, starting in the 1750s and ending in the 1850s, saw freer courtships with less parental and communal control. Urban lovers, in particular, were "both more precocious and less awkward" (Gillis, 135) than had been the case before, and marriages had more of a public dimension in the sense that friends and neighbours were brought into the intimacies of ordinary couples as a way of informing and enforcing mutual obligations. The second period, starting in the 1850s, saw a re-ritualization of courtship, an increasingly strong role for families in selecting and approving partners, and the re-establishment of courtship as "an extended rite of passage" (Gillis, 137). The other group of theorists about courtship look at it from a different angle. Women like Joanne Bailey or Suzanne Ginger Frost argue that the change of courtship can be attributed to changing notions in masculinity, fatherhood and the family. For Frost, the lower and working classes of late Victorian England had to balance respectability with economic security. Their courtships were "informal and largely unsupervised" as leaving home earlier and economic independence placed power convincingly in the hands of the young. There were distinctive courtship rites and female members of the family continued to have some control over partner selection. Parents could be "most effective at stopping weddings", but ultimately the lower middle and upper working classes "married for love for much longer than the upper reaches of society" (Frost, 121).

Courtship was not always all nice and lovely, as Elizabeth Hurren and Steve King point out in their elaborate article on courtship in the nineteenth century. They used numerous documented files by coroner's courts of the English Midlands from the eighteenth and nineteenth century. What they found was a variety of cases in which men and women were accused of violence and sometimes even murder after they had been courted or a courtship had just ended. Hurren and King explain that courtship often did not last long in the nineteenth century. Gift-giving and frequent visits to each other's houses and, if that was not possible, excessive letter-writing were common things men used to court their women (Hurren and King, 191). However, there was a negative side to all this happiness as well. As some women could be quite popular, especially if money and status were on her side, there was also jealousy involved. Women could find themselves surrounded by possible suitors who would all try and win her heart. Some women received visits, gifts and letters from multiple men at the same time, which could lead to jealousy and sometimes even violence if one of the gentlemen found out that his lover had been unfaithful. Hurren and King name multiple cases in which men would violate women and sometimes even attempt murder on unfaithful women or their rivals.

In conclusion, courtship has been through some considerable changes in the nineteenth century. Due to an increase in economic and social wealth, people became more independent and, as a result, courtship also changed. People became less dependent on their parents' choice in marriage and courtship became an important way of finding a suitable husband or wife. However, there were still ideals for women to live up to. Family remained the cornerstone of society and women were still financially dependent on men. They were expected to marry for financial benefits and for procreation. There is an ongoing debate among theorists as to where these changes came from. Theorists have also proven with legal

evidence from coroner's reports that nineteenth century courtship could even be dangerous. Jealousy and revenge were recurring motives for violence and murder.

Chapter 2 – *The Portrait of a Lady*

Henry James, author of *The Portrait of a Lady*, was born in New York in 1843. He became a naturalised English citizen in 1915 and spent much of his later life travelling through Europe. "His fundamental theme was the innocence and exuberance of the New World in clash with the corruption and wisdom of the Old World, as illustrated in such works as *Daisy Miller* (1879), *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), *The Bostonians* (1886), and *The Ambassadors* (1903)" (*Encyclopædia Britannica Online*). James lived in Paris for some time, where he first met the Russian novelist Ivan Turgenev. Through Turgenev James was acquainted with Gustave Flaubert's inner circle, where he met with some of the best writers of his time, like Edmond de Goncourt, Emile Zolá, Alphonse Daudet and Guy de Maupassant. Despite the inspiring people he met in France, James experienced life in France as if he were an eternal outsider. His move to London was the result from that feeling. He achieved his international renown with his short story *Daisy Miller* in 1878. After that, he was soon picked up by the important Victorians of his time. He became a regular at Lord Houghton's breakfasts, where he met with people like Alfred Tennyson, William Gladstone and Robert Browning. James became a well-known figure in Anglo-American literary and artistic circles. He gained absolute literary recognition for his publication of *The Portrait of a Lady* in 1881. This work is described by many critics as his masterpiece. It is typical for his work as James's reputation became founded on his studies of "The American girl". *The Portrait of a Lady* is unique in its kind because of its theme of Americans moving to the societies of England and Italy (*Encyclopædia Britannica Online*).

James's *The Portrait of a Lady* tells the story of Isabel Archer, an American girl from Albany who travels along with her aunt to Europe, where they travel together in search of a suitable husband for Isabel. Isabel Archer is aware of her own sovereignty and refuses to be seen purely as a marriageable object. Several men and women have distinctive influence on

Isabel's choices. The English men she meets after arrival are immediately charmed by her appearance and her manners. She is unlike the women they know. Isabel is well-read, since she grew up reading in the library of her grandmother's house. She is mostly unlike English women, because she is more direct in her behaviour; she says what she thinks. The English codes of behaviour differ significantly from what Isabel is used to. She contrasts with the serenity of Gardencourt in the beginning of the novel: everybody is preparing for their afternoon tea when Isabel enters in a whirlwind of chaos. Lord Warburton, a neighbour, remarks that she is his idea of an "interesting woman" (James, 34). Throughout the novel Isabel is courted by three suitors: Caspar Goodwood, Lord Warburton, and Gilbert Osmond, whom she eventually marries. The cultural differences between Isabel and her suitors provide much of the material for the story. James conveys these differences very effectively in the contrast between Isabel and her friend Henrietta, but also in the contrast between her and Madame Merle, who takes her to Italy and introduces her to her future husband, Gilbert Osmond. The character of Madame Merle is unlike the Victorian woman described in chapter one: she knows her languages, is independent and travels a lot. Isabel is immediately charmed by her: Madame Merle is the woman she wants to become, even though Madame Merle is not tied to a husband anymore. Being married is not always a reason to be tied to home though, as Isabel's Europeanised American aunt Mrs Touchett proves: she lives away from her husband for most of the year. The character of Henrietta Stackpole, Isabel's American journalist friend, is the other side of Isabel: she is independent like Madame Merle, but she is much younger and inexperienced. Henrietta clearly represents the provincial, naïve, and simple American young woman of the New World, whereas Madame Merle represents the mature, experienced Europeanised woman of the Old World.

The nineteenth-century American woman was free-spirited, open-minded and, to a certain extent, independent, according to Henrietta Stackpole. However, she also calls herself

simpler than her English friends. James shows this difference between the young American woman and her new English friends in such a way that the cultural differences become apparent. In conversation with Ralph Touchett, Henrietta explains her difficulties understanding the rules of conversation in England: “If a gentleman conversing with me over there were to speak to me like that I shouldn’t know what to make of it. We take everything more naturally over there, and, after all, we’re a great deal more simple. I admit that; I’m very simple myself” (James, 129). This shows that Henrietta is very much aware of the differences between herself and her interlocutor. This kind of struggle reoccurs several times throughout the novel: Isabel and Henrietta both experience difficulty adjusting to the European standards of conversation and behaviour.

Isabel is courted several times, but refuses two men who seem to be suitable husbands. The fact that she refuses them is unlike the image of the “perfect lady” known from the Victorian Age. Isabel clearly is not ready to marry when she first arrives in England; there still is too much to see and to do. James describes her as a rather simple girl; she simply wants to see something of the world before she settles down and marries. She refuses Caspar Goodwood, a perfectly fine young American man who seems to love her very much and is very wealthy as well. In her refusal she explains why she cannot marry him. She tries not to hurt his feelings, which is very sensible of her, but her immaturity comes to the surface as she grows irritated when he does not take no for an answer. She fails to remain as tender as she was before: “A deep flush overspread his face; she could see her sharpness had at last penetrated” (James, 165). Isabel clearly is not afraid to tell men what she does and does not want. She is not ready to get married and she successfully manages to make this clear to Goodwood. She enjoys the privilege that it is not necessary for her to marry yet. She owns a fair amount of money, she enjoys the protection of her cousin and she still is young enough to wait a little longer.

Since James was American-born, but also had much European experience, he was able to make a complete depiction of American life in Europe and the difficulties that come along with that move. Sandra Zagarell calls James's perspective an "outsider-insider perspective" (24), as he himself is indeed an American who came to Europe. Zagarell focuses on how Isabel and Henrietta are not willing to completely adjust to European values; they are quite persistent to maintain their Americanness: they value their own education and do not wish to alter that too much. They want to learn, but do not want to let go of their American upbringing. In the end, both girls seem to have given up on that individualistic view; they both get married and settle down. Especially Isabel seems to give up on her ideals as she marries Gilbert Osmond.

After she travels to England with her aunt, Mrs. Touchett, "it becomes clear that Isabel has a woefully unstructured imagination, as well as a romantic streak that suits her position as an optimistic, innocent American" (SparkNotes Editors). For James, throughout *The Portrait of a Lady*, America is a place of individualism and naïveté, while Europe is a place of sophistication, convention, and decadence (SparkNotes Editors). After Isabel has spent some time in England, a new guest arrives at Gardencourt, Madame Merle, a Europeanised American widow who is an acquaintance of Mrs Touchett. Soon after Madame Merle arrives, Mr Touchett dies of bad health and leaves Isabel a vast fortune of sixty thousand pounds. This fortune brings Isabel a sudden freedom; she was not before aware of the fact that her lack of money endangers her fortune: without money it will be very hard to find a suitable husband who will be able to take care of her properly. Without a fortune for herself, she will be forced to marry for money. This notion is very bitter in regard of the last part of the novel: Isabel's fortune clearly triggers Madame Merle's interest in Isabel and she urges her to visit her at her house in Florence. Madame Merle particularly wants Isabel to meet with her friend Gilbert Osmond, a respectable widower with a teenage daughter named Pansy. Isabel is immediately

taken with him. It soon becomes clear that Madame Merle tries to push Isabel into marrying Osmond; her reasons for this become clear only later on. Mrs Touchett does not approve of Osmond and she is worried Isabel will fall in love with him. Madame Merle convinces Mrs Touchett not to interfere with the relationship between Isabel and Osmond, because she promises to end the relationship herself. It appears that Madame Merle has tricked Mrs Touchett when Isabel announces her engagement with Osmond. Osmond is short of money and he raises Pansy by himself. It soon becomes clear that Osmond marries Isabel for her money. Isabel is not aware of this; she really believes she is in love with him and she does everything to make him love her back. Isabel's friends and family do not approve of the engagement, but Isabel is determined to marry him. She does feel pressured by Madame Merle though, who seems to have arranged the whole marriage. Isabel soon grows miserable in her marriage as Osmond turns out to be a very unsympathetic man who thinks it very important that other people see he is of high status. He finds delight in the fact that Isabel once rejected a proper lord, since he feels agony for never having become one himself, which is an interesting notion, since Osmond himself is an American and Americans were known to detest the English, undemocratic system of lordships (SparkNotes Editors). Isabel realises Osmond despises her because of her independent mind: in his eyes the ideal woman is a mere object in his collection. This also proves that Osmond was purely interested in Isabel's money; not in Isabel herself. During their time of courtship, Isabel wanted Osmond to like her so badly that she portrayed herself the way he wanted to see her. The moment Osmond realised she is not that woman; he starts to despise her and neglects her. Isabel's misery and Osmond's forcing nature cause Isabel to be distanced from her friends and family. She increasingly distances herself from Madame Merle as she finds out that Madame Merle had an affair with Osmond; it remains unclear if they still are romantically involved. The reader, and later Isabel herself as well, can conclude from this that Madame Merle had an interest in

Isabel's money and her marriage with Osmond as well. The matter actually appears to be more complicated than that later on; when Isabel discovers that Madame Merle was more than a lover: she is Pansy's mother. Isabel stays very determined to keep herself to her wedding vows; even when her cousin Ralph is dying and Osmond is keeping her from going to visit him one last time. Eventually, even Osmond's unsympathetic sister urges her to defy Osmond and go to pay her respects to Ralph. In the end, Isabel defies Osmond by going to England to say goodbye to Ralph. It is that moment in England that Isabel's internal struggle comes to the surface: once she is there she experiences intense trouble going back to her miserable marriage in Rome, especially after Caspar Goodwood kisses her. The reader does not see Isabel's internal struggle, though. The reader only sees how the novel ends with Henrietta telling Goodwood that Isabel has left for Rome. The decision making process is not described and the reader is left with many questions. In any case, it appears that Isabel feels too obliged towards Pansy and that she feels that she should take responsibility for her decisions. She has made a decision and she is determined to live up to that decision, even if that makes her miserable.

An important part of the story is the part in which Isabel interferes in her stepdaughter's love life. Pansy has fallen in love with a man named Edward Rosier, a respectable young man, but he unfortunately does not have much money. Therefore, Osmond rejects Rosier as a possible suitor for his daughter. Isabel has grown very fond of Pansy and she desperately wants to help her, but she feels obliged to listen to her husband and therefore she refuses Rosier as well. After some years into her marriage, Lord Warburton shows up again and he shows great interest in Pansy. Osmond immediately is taken with the idea of his daughter marrying a nobleman and he very much approves of Warburton proposing to Pansy. Isabel approves of it at first as well; she likes the way he pays genuine attention to Pansy; it may even make her a little jealous of Pansy. It seems a bit hypocritical of Isabel to try to force

Pansy into marrying Warburton, when thinking of her own marriage with Osmond, in which she feels truly miserable. Isabel herself made the wrong choice in marrying a man who appears to have married her for her money and who has been romantically involved with the woman she trusted. Isabel's American independence and own way of thinking seem to have been changed into the willingness and consent of the European woman. Isabel only listens to her husband now, she feels obliged to obey him and to repeat his ideas, instead of her own. After some time, however, Isabel finds out that Warburton is not in love with Pansy, but he wants to marry her just to be able to be near his true love: Isabel. Even though Isabel does not want to disappoint her husband, her affection for Pansy is bigger than her feeling of pride and she sends Warburton away.

Feminist literary critics often have trouble finding pleasure in reading novels of the past, since most of those novels portray women in a way that is repulsive to feminist readers (Yeazell, 29). Traditional feminist critics have reacted hostilely to *The Portrait of a Lady*'s ending. Isabel's return to her husband is seen by many feminists as a defeat: Isabel gives up and goes back to her husband's egotism and cruelty. Most probably, Osmond will deny her intellect and her freedom. However, this neglects the essence of the novel: it is Isabel's inner freedom she has gained during her travels that is actually important. She will return to Rome, but it will not necessarily be a disaster or a defeat; she has gained the inner freedom she was trying to find when she came to Europe, since she appears to be ready to settle down and keep herself to her wedding vows. The rather open ending of the novel leaves room to wonder about what will happen after she arrives back in Rome with Osmond. Will she continue to accept that she has to live on his terms? Will she continue to accept that he denies her intellectual freedom? Or will Osmond come to terms and start treating her better? Perhaps it will turn out more positively and Isabel will stand up against Osmond and regain her freedom. As Yeazell puts it: "*The Portrait of a Lady* is finally concerned not so much with what will

"really" happen to Isabel when she returns to Rome, but with the internal change which has led to her decision; whatever outward imprisonment she may or may not suffer when she rejoins Osmond, she has gained a measure of inner freedom" (33). The novel can thus be read as Isabel's growth from a young, naïve American girl to a mature and wise woman. *The Portrait of a Lady* is ultimately about a young American woman who is trying not only to find the ideal husband, but also to gain knowledge, to grow as a person, and explore her own qualities and wisdom. Her return to Rome may simply show that Isabel felt her journey was done and that she was ready to take full responsibility for her choices. To modern-day women spiritual liberty would not be enough to get them to return to their abusive husbands: they would immediately get a divorce. Isabel gained her spiritual liberty in her travels; she has learned a great deal about life and courtship during her time in Europe. However, James's time was different from that of today and Isabel seems to agree with her husband that marriage is "the name of something sacred and precious - the observance of a magnificent form"(James, 356).

In the meantime, Henrietta walks in and out of Isabel's life; she leaves Isabel's side when she decides to travel through Europe with Mr Bantling, an acquaintance of Ralph Touchett and her future husband. Throughout the novel it is Henrietta who mostly represents the typical independent American woman: she is a journalist who is trying to find a way to objectively and critically comment on life in Europe, especially in the upper class. She is not afraid to declare her opinion to others, which does not make her liked by everyone. She has the tendency to intimidate people with her directness. Henrietta and Isabel both do not come to Europe to find a husband, not primarily at least. However, at the end of the novel, both are married. The difference between both marriages and the courtship that preceded them is significant. Isabel's choice to marry Osmond is quite her own, but not entirely: Madame Merle's pressure must have played an important role in Isabel's decision. Henrietta has not

been influenced by anyone at all. She immediately took interest in Mr Bantling, but she did not feel the need to marry him right away. Just like Isabel, she wanted to enjoy her travels through Europe before she got married, especially since she is there because of her job as a journalist. Henrietta takes time to get to know Mr Bantling; she drags him along on her travels during which she gets to know him. Unlike Isabel, who marries Osmond on quite a short notice; in the end she finds out that she does not know the man she married at all. Mr Bantling willingly accompanies Henrietta on her travels and it is only later that Henrietta marries him. James makes clear that it is Henrietta's own choice by showing that Henrietta is done with her travels and is ready to settle down. Isabel, on the other hand, is less fortunate. In the beginning of the novel she is free-spirited and independent-minded, but her miserable marriage with Osmond and the period of courtship that precedes it change her into the woman she was afraid to become. Led by Madame Merle, she falls for Osmond without thinking it over too much: she neglects her independent mind by marrying him against all of the protest by her friends and family. A conclusion could be that, in the end, Henrietta makes Isabel's dream come true for herself. After years of travelling and learning about the world and about herself Henrietta finds a suitable husband who is ready to wait and listen to her. Isabel is less lucky in that perspective.

Chapter 3 – A Woman of No Importance

Oscar Wilde, the author of *A Woman of No Importance*, was born in Dublin in 1854. He was an Irish poet and dramatist, whose reputation mostly rests on his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), and on his comic dramas *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). He was the object of civil and criminal suits involving homosexuality which ended in his imprisonment (1895–97). Wilde was an intelligent young man, who enjoyed education at Trinity College, Dublin and Magdalen College, Oxford. His intellect was praised at a young age when he was still in college. It was only in the last decade of his life that he gained recognition for his literary work. He was eager for more recognition for his intellect and agreed to go to America and Canada in 1882 to lecture on art and literature. After he came back, he gave lectures on his experiences in America. The publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* gave him the recognition and fame he had been looking for. In the next ten years he published all of his major works. His society dramas provided the fame he was looking for (*Encyclopædia Britannica*).

A Woman of No Importance (1893) is one of Wilde's less celebrated society dramas. Wilde's plays are full of symbolism and second and third layers of meaning; *A Woman of No Importance* is known for its lack of a deeper layer of meaning; it is quite a simple play. There have been scholars who have argued that, even though it is hard to find, there is a deeper layer in the play (Nassaar, 32). However, as shown in this chapter, there is enough to talk about only at the surface at the play. Wilde was known for his extravagance; he was a true socialite and enjoyed the privileges of upper class Europe. This love for extravagance recurs often in his work; rules of society and courtship frequently play important parts in his dramas. *A Woman of No Importance* is no exception to that rule. In many of his works, exposure of a secret sin or indiscretion and consequent disgrace is a central design. The events in *A Woman of No Importance* ultimately lead up to the reveal of a dark secret: the central characters of the

play, Lord Illingworth and Mrs Arbuthnot, appear to have an illegitimate son together. Lord Illingworth is one of the leading characters of the play. He is a typical Wildean dandy; he likes to flirt and has a promising career ahead of him. The news of Lord Illingworth hiring Gerald Arbuthnot as his secretary sets in motion the chain of events that forms the main plot of the play. Gerald is Mrs Arbuthnot's son and she is immediately invited to the party that makes up the play as well; to celebrate her son's good fortune. After Mrs Arbuthnot's arrival, the reader, together with Lord Illingworth, finds out that Gerald is Lord Illingworth's illegitimate son. Lord Illingworth refused to marry Mrs Arbuthnot and offered her financial security instead. This kind of secret is exactly the kind of secret Wilde liked to portray in his work. If life imitated art, as Wilde insisted in his essay "The Decay of Lying" (1889), he was himself approximating the pattern in his reckless pursuit of pleasure. In addition, his close friendship with Lord Alfred Douglas, whom he had met in 1891, infuriated the marquess of Queensberry, Douglas's father. Accused, finally, by the marquess of being a sodomite, Wilde, urged by Douglas, sued for criminal libel. Wilde's case collapsed, however, when the evidence went against him, and he dropped the suit. Urged to flee to France by his friends, Wilde refused, unable to believe that his world was at an end. He was arrested and ordered to stand trial. He was sentenced to two years hard labour in 1895. After he was released, he wrote only one work of any importance, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898) before he died in Paris in 1900 (*Encyclopædia Britannica*).

The story of *A Woman of No Importance* begins with a description of a typical nineteenth-century tea party at the Hunstanton estate. This beginning is typical for nineteenth-century novels and plays. A simple beginning like that leaves room for a story to develop: nothing is going on and then the drama unfolds. Most of Act I is occupied with small talk and gossiping. Lady Caroline patronises an American visitor, Hester Worsley, who shows interest in one of the present men of the company, Gerald Arbuthnot. Lady Caroline thinks he is not

worthy of Hester's beauty and innocence, until Gerald himself enters the stage, announcing Lord Illingworth has offered him a job as his secretary. With this event one of the main themes of the play comes to the surface: money. The characters in the play are all of high society; they are rich and aristocratic people. The events of the play are all somehow connected to the wealth of the characters and the opinions others have towards that. Mrs Arbuthnot contrasts with the rest of the party: she had to live a scandalous life as a single mother because Lord Illingworth refused to marry her. Without a husband to provide for her she had a hard time supplying for herself and for Gerald. This contrast shows the "double standard": the divide between men and women. This is also what Hester despises about the system. Mrs Arbuthnot has had to pay for her mistake: she is in financial trouble and she is shamed by her surroundings because of her illegitimate son. Lord Illingworth, on the other hand, does not experience any negative effects of his decision whatsoever. He leads his life without any consequences for his actions in the past. This double standard for men and women is typical for Victorian society. Women were held accountable for their choices, and men often were not. Wilde criticised this divide in his play; by showing how Lord Illingworth was cruel to Mrs Arbuthnot: he even offered her money to avoid the consequences. Mrs Arbuthnot finds herself forced to take full responsibility.

The play consists for a large part of the conversations and flirtations between the various characters that all are of high status. Most of the ladies are depicted as shallow, like Lady Caroline, who contrasts sharply with Mrs Allonby. Mrs Allonby appears to be the female counterpart of Lord Illingworth: she is depicted as a female dandy. It is Mrs Allonby who dares Lord Illingworth to kiss "the Puritan", as everyone mockingly calls Hester. However, the story does not only consist of small talk and gossip: there is a large section in the play in which the party discusses politics and women's rights. Lord Illingworth proves to be quite a shallow and snobbish man in this section. He announces that he will be ambassador

in Vienna and boasts a lot about that. He seems to think that this gives him good reason to comment on women in politics and codes of behaviour. Hester is his counterpart in this conversation; her American ideals contrast sharply with his traditional English ideals. He thinks the English upper class is superior to all the rest of the world. Naturally, this does not go well with Hester's ideas.

The character of Hester Worsley is one of the most important of the play. Her American ideals cause quite some controversy among the party of upper class English people that have gathered on the terrace of Lady Hunstanton's estate. She is constantly called "the Puritan", especially by Lady Allonby and Lord Illingworth. Hester is depicted as a stereotypical American girl; she does not like to conform to the rules, she is not afraid to give her opinion and she likes the idea of the American Dream. According to Hester, people have to work hard for their privileges. When a person works hard he deserves the rights that come with that. Hard work will get you anywhere, according to the American Dream. This idea of hard work earning one rights opposes to the traditional order of British society: the upper class is formed by people who have gained their wealth by birth right. However, this is not the sole theme of the play. The central theme is about Hester and the rest of the ladies to some extent being early feminists. Hester grew up with American ideals: the difference between men and women was not as big there as it was in nineteenth-century Britain. It is the double standard again which angers Hester, and to a less extent, the rest of the ladies in the party.

Right at the beginning of the play, Hester is corrected by Lady Caroline when she is speaking enthusiastically about Gerald Arbuthnot: "It is not customary in England, Miss Worsley, for a young lady to speak with such enthusiasm of any person of the opposite sex. English women conceal their feelings till after they are married. They show them then" (Wilde, 8). This correction by Lady Caroline immediately sets the tone for the attitudes towards Hester throughout the play; she is corrected all the time for her directness and blunt

ways of conversation. It also shows how Lady Caroline unwittingly reveals the hypocrisy of the English in matters of relations between the genders. Hester, in this respect, stands for complete honesty. This is the start-up for the main plot of the play, in which Hester softens her opinion. The rest of the party continually explain to her the rules of behaviour between men and women in England. Hester fiercely opposes to these rules. This especially becomes apparent in Act II, which begins with the women of the party sitting together in the drawing room after dinner. They have a lively conversation in which Lady Allonby complains about how hard it is to find a good husband and in which she explains about "the Ideal Husband". This entire conversation is a typical Wildean one: the ladies chatter on about how hard it is to find a decent man and while they do so, they are mocked for their simple mindedness by Wilde. Wilde's plays were written for the upper class and the audience consisted entirely of the people that are depicted in his plays. By exaggerating their habits, Wilde mocks those habits. This caused hilarity in the theatres, because the events and conversations were recognisable for the audience. During the conversation, Hester sits back in a corner and listens to the entire conversation while the other women present completely forget about her. As soon as they realise that Hester is also present, they try and convince her that she should not believe what has been said. Hester already has formed an opinion though and a short monologue by Hester follows in which she explains exactly what she despises about English society. She explains that American society simply consists of all the good men and all the good women; it is not divided by class or status (Wilde, 28). "We are trying to build up life, Lady Hunstanton, on a better, truer, purer basis than life rests on here" (Wilde, 28) she explains. She seems to be quite taken over by her emotions as she rants on about everything she finds appalling about English society: "You shut out from your society the gentle and the good. You laugh at the simple and the pure. Living, as you all do, on others and by them, you sneer at self-sacrifice, and if you throw bread to the poor, it is merely to keep them quiet for a season" (Wilde, 28).

The ladies present are shocked by Hester's harsh words. Especially Lady Hunstanton is surprised by her guest's negativity: she recalls how successful Hester has been in society; she reminds her how taken Lord Weston (Lady Caroline's brother) was with her in London. The women of the party, however, do agree with her on some points; it is mostly the harshness and directness of Hester's words that shock them.

Another recurring theme in the play is innocence. Wilde contrasts the people in the party with each other. The character of Hester is the best example of this: she is the outsider who critically observes the events that take place. She is still very young, only eighteen, and the other people in the party feel the need to constantly remind her of that. At only eighteen, she has no right to say anything at all about life; she does not have enough experience yet to comment on important matters, such as marriage and money. Hester's youth, but also her foreign identity causes a contrast between the members of the party and herself. As she is an outsider, she is in an ideal position to witness the others' faults and shortcomings more clearly than those who are actually part of the society Hester is commenting on. Hester represents the new woman emerging from the new world and because of that she contrasts with her surroundings as the rest of the party clearly represents the values and habits of the old world. Because she is so young and inexperienced, she is depicted as innocent and naïve.

The third theme in the play is courtship. Lord Illingworth is a flirt and he explicitly says that he can court any woman he likes. As a result of this utterance, he bets Mrs Allonby that he can kiss Hester within a week. Lord Illingworth contrasts with his son Gerald Arbuthnot in this respect. Gerald is a gentle young man, who courts Hester in a much subtler way. Hester declares that she likes him at the beginning of the play. Lord Illingworth does not so much court Hester as he just wants to prove that he can kiss her. Even though Hester strongly opposes to English society, she does share the values and ideas as to how men should behave towards women. As Lady Caroline puts it: "The Ideal Man! Oh, the Ideal Man should

talk to us as if we were goddesses, and treat us as if we were children. He should refuse all our serious requests, and gratify every one of our whims. He should encourage us to have caprices, and forbid us to have missions. He should always say much more than he means, and always mean much more than he says" (Wilde, 25). In the heated conversation between her and the rest of the ladies as earlier described, it also becomes clear that Hester and the rest of the women of the party agree on how they want to be treated by men. Lord Illingworth also contrasts with this view as he refused to marry Mrs Arbuthnot; he even offered her money to get out of it. In the end, Lord Illingworth wants his illegitimate son to come with him to work for him. Clearly, this is so important to him that he wants to marry Mrs Arbuthnot. She refuses him because she is too proud; he has treated her so badly before. This reflects the afore-mentioned conversation the ladies have about finding a husband: the women in the play are all looking for a man whom they can trust. They are looking for a man who will treat them well and who will take care of them. The problem is, of course, that they state that they will only show their affection after they have been courted. This shows the hypocrisy of what the women are saying, and again, they are mocked by Wilde, which must have caused hilarity for the audience. *A Woman of No Importance* is ultimately about how Wilde contrasted its characters with each other to show the hypocrisy of the English nineteenth-century upper class. By putting Hester in an outsider role, the audience see themselves through the eyes of a foreigner and are confronted with their own faults and shortcomings in a mocking way.

Hester is depicted as a very honest person, but it soon appears that she is not only honest, she is also very judgmental. She opposes English hypocrisy by proposing a Puritan alternative: in case of sexual misbehaviour both men and women should be punished equally, so in this case it should not only have been Mrs Arbuthnot who had to pay for the mistake she made, but Lord Illingworth should have taken responsibility as well. Towards the end of the play, she seems to have revised her views, and is at least willing to forgive Mrs Arbuthnot and

marry her son, Gerald. This seems to be the solution the play (Wilde?) supports: no double standard the English suggest nor the judgementalism that condemns all human weakness like the way Americans see it, but forgiveness of human frailties in all sexes.

Conclusion

After reading two works of literature with young, female, American characters; what can be said about literary representations of American and European women in the process of being courted? That is the central question of this bachelor thesis. After doing research on the Victorian Age and the role of courtship in those years, there was an in-depth analysis of two works of literature from that time, namely: Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) and Oscar Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance* (1893). Both works share an American female character who is courted by European characters. Therefore, both works proved to be suitable subjects of analysis in order to answer the main question of this thesis.

The nineteenth-century European upper class appeared to be mostly about rules and codes of behaviour towards each other. Money and power were two things people strove for. This proved to be central themes of both works of literature as well. The American characters in both works struggled with the European codes of behaviour since they grew up with quite different rules and ideals in America. The contrast between the old and the new world also came increasingly to the surface in Europe during the Victorian age. The lady of the new world was well-educated, announced her opinion and was independent-minded. This contrasted with the idea of a lady in the old world, where the perfect lady was obedient, her sole purpose was to marry well and bear children for her husband. The changes in society in Britain and the rest of Europe become apparent in both works of literature as the American characters clash with their European counterparts. The American young girls who play significant parts in both works are depicted as independent and free of mind, but also as naïve.

In *The Portrait of a Lady* the characters of Isabel Archer and Henrietta Stackpole represent the American new women. They both travel to Europe to learn and see something of the world, but they end up getting married to European men. For Isabel, the protagonist of the

novel, this journey does not end well. She marries the "wrong" man and it appears that he married her solely for her money. Henrietta is better off as she gets to know her husband very well during her travels with him. Henry James criticises European upper class society in his novel as he shows how an innocent American girl can end up quite miserable as soon as she inherits a fair amount of money. Victorian European society was focussed on money and power as Isabel's story shows. Keeping up appearances is incredibly important to the upper class people; Osmond and Madame Merle show this by trying to lure Isabel into a marriage with Osmond, so that they can profit from Isabel's fortune, while they have not been innocent themselves at all: they appear to have been involved in an affair and even have an illegitimate child, Pansy.

Hester Worsley is the character of focus in *A Woman of No Importance* by Oscar Wilde. She is not the protagonist, but in terms of courtship she is the most important character, since she is an outsider to the group of characters in the play, which makes her ideal to witness the faults and shortcomings of English society. Hester is courted by Gerald Arbuthnot in a very decent way, but the bad side of English courtship is represented by the character of Lord Illingworth, who tries to kiss Hester without her consent. The women in the play are constantly talking about what they are looking for in a man, and it appears that Hester and the English women have quite the same view of what he should do to gain their approval. The problem is, however, that the English women are too indirect to show their feelings towards a man as long as he has not courted them yet. The American woman is much more direct and she will speak her mind more clearly than an English woman would do.

All in all, after analysing both works of literature, the conclusion is that nineteenth-century American women were perceived as different from English women in terms of independence and freedom of mind. Their direct ways of behaviour and conversation were quite different from that of English women. With their new ideals and ideas, they were the

first women of the new world, which was full of new ideas and new wealth. Isabel Archer was courted many times throughout the novel, but in the end still falls for a man who marries her for her money. Hester Worsley experiences both sides of English manners: the typical flirtatious dandy who tries to steal a kiss (Lord Illingworth) and the typically well-mannered gentleman Gerald Arbuthnot, for whom she eventually falls. Wilde portrays Hester as a judgmental puritan; quite alike the character of Henrietta Stackpole. In the end it might be Henrietta who is best off in comparison to the other two American ladies; she marries a man she can trust without cutting down on her independence and American ideals. Henrietta is able to hold on to her puritan views and, at the same time, marry happily. In that respect, Hester is less fortunate: she marries a suitable husband, but in the end she is forced to revise her views.

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