Between Love and Illusion:
The Marriage Plot in Nineteenth-Century English Novels

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1. Introduction

“In the days when success in life had depended on marriage, and marriage had depended on money, novelists had had a subject to write about. The great epic sang of war, the novel of marriage.” – Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*

Love and marriage are timeless topics, found in the majority of novels in history, sometimes as minor subplots, sometimes as the main elements of the storyline. With the rise of the novel in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a certain type of plot established itself which literary scholars often refer to as “Marriage Plot“ – a plot centered on love, courtship and marriage. Authors like Samuel Richardson, Jane Austen or the Brontë sisters have become associated with this type of plot, and their novels are still popular today and have been the subjects of many adaptations and imitations.

What is it about Jane Austen's novels that continues to fascinate the reading public even today? One possible explanation would be that they take the reader back to a different time; a time where honour and fidelity still mattered; a time where being married still meant to be together “til death do us part“. With the rise of divorce the importance of marriage declined and so did the importance of the marriage plot. Divorce-rates are rising, along with our expectations of the perfect relationship. In the past a relationship meant staying together through good and bad times, which included making sacrifices for the other. Nowadays, values have changed, one in three marriages results in a divorce and to live “happily ever after“ has become something we only see in Hollywood films and historical novels. Maybe this disenchantment is what the marriage plot draws its strength from. We love to read about what it feels like to be in love, to be courted and to find a “happily ever after“. But more than that, we love to see heroines struggle and doubt and worry, just to find out in the end that the hero has always been in love with them and that everything that kept them apart has only been a misunderstanding. These novels offer a way of escaping reality, a way of experiencing a love story that always follows the same pattern, a love story that is predictable and yet surprising, so close to real life and yet so far from it.

This thesis is about love and high expectations. It is about hope and illusions, about disappointments and developments. But mainly it is about strong and independent heroines in pursuit of their happiness. Some would say that happiness lies in a good marriage, and for nineteenth-century women, marriage certainly was one – if not the only – way to achieve happiness in life. But was that happiness real? And what happens after a successful courtship ending in marriage? The novels that will be analysed in this thesis all follow the same structure: a courtship plot ending in marriage. Usually the happy ending is achieved with the
wedding and the story ends there. However, there are also other novels where the story continues to show married life and its harsh reality. This is where the marriage plot achieves its greatest artistic expression, according to Jeffrey Eugenides.

This thesis is divided into a theoretical and an analysis part. To begin with, it will introduce the cultural background and the development of the marriage plot in English novels. Then, it will focus on four nineteenth-century novels, presenting different versions of the marriage plot: Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), a timeless classic and rolemodel for marriage and courtship plots until nowadays. Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), an epic love story and a *bildungsroman* of a courageous young governess trying to find her place in life. George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1874), where we follow the charismatic heroine Dorothea Brooke into her disappointed married life with Mr Casaubon, who turns out to be incapable of loving his wife. And finally, Henry James' *Portrait of a Lady* (1881), a moving story of a young American in pursuit of her happiness, who gets trapped in the very life she wanted to avoid from the beginning. All of these novels follow the classical scheme: suitors, proposals, misunderstandings, impediments and weddings. *Pride and Prejudice* and *Jane Eyre* end with the wedding between the heroine and her Mr Right, whereas *Middlemarch* and *Portrait of a Lady* continue after the supposed “happy ending“ and show the darker sides of married life. All of these novels have been read and analysed in various forms by various critics and scholars, allowing different interpretations with every reading. This marriage plot-tradition can be set in contrast with the continental *Eheroman*, e.g. *Effie Briest* (1894) or *Madame Bovary* (1856) – tragical stories focusing on adultery and the unsuccessful attempt to escape the meaninglessness of life. While the English tradition offers a more positive outlook at life and its possibilities, continental novelists focus on the bitter notes of despair in an unhappy marriage – both trying to make the reader aware of the importance of the right choice.

So, how does reading about love affect the way we fall in love today? This thought inspired Jeffrey Eugenides to write his novel *The Marriage Plot* (2011) – questioning ideals of relationships in the modern world – which, in turn, inspired me to write this thesis on “The Marriage Plot in Nineteenth-Century English Novels” – exploring why and how these great classics still function today. A possible explanation is given by Hollywood director Ang Lee (Kaufmann, 2007:34):

> If we knew what love is, if we could define it, we’d have finished telling love stories three thousand years ago. But we don’t know it, and that’s why new love stories are being created all the time. We need love, because we need to believe in something.
2. The Development of the Marriage Plot

Since the development of the marriage plot is inextricably linked to the rise of the novel, this chapter will provide an overview of the very first courtship and marriage plot novels and the underlying cultural ideals influencing the authors. Moreover, it will discuss the classical structure of the marriage plot and the various forms it may take, i.e. the courtship plot with its comic ending that removes all the obstacles between the two lovers, the seduction plot as the tragic version that presents the lovers as sexual antagonists, and the wedlock or domestic plot that explores married life in greater detail (cf. Boone, 1987:10). To begin with, it will present a short history of romantic love in literature and the changing meaning attached to it.

3.1 From Courtly Love to the Bourgeois Ideal of Companionate Marriage

The Ancient Greeks and Romans didn’t have novels. According to Ian Watt (1957:135), that was due to the fact that they did not know much about romantic love in our sense. The idea of love between partners as a supreme value in life began with courtly love or *amour courtois* in late eleventh-century Provence. The most radical implication connected with this celebration of passion in the troubadour lyrics was “that the female sex, after centuries of official deprecation as man’s inferior, the cause of his fall, and a lascivious creature of the flesh, was now viewed as worthy of his profound love” (Boone, 1987:34). The lady was idealised and worshipped as an unattainable object of desire, and it was exactly this desiring, rather than consummation, that became the motivating narrative cause for medieval romances. Thus, the stories of Tristan and Isolde or Lancelot and Guinevere are characterized by “an interminable series of separations and partings” (Boone, 1987:39), resulting in an idealisation of unhappy love as the ultimate expression of true feelings. “I fear that it is just the impossibility of possessing me that makes your desire for me so fascinating” (Boone, 1987:39), is what Lotte tells Werther in Goethe’s famous novel. This frustrated desire prolonged and intensified the lovers’ yearning for union – since it was generally assumed that a person without a beloved so-called “second-half” was incomplete and that the union of spirit and flesh was necessary for salvation. However, through marriage, the husband became the head of his wife, who in turn was expected to be faithful and dedicated to her superior. In these courtly romances, it was usually the male subject (i.e. the knight) who was in charge of events, while the lady remained an object of desire waiting offstage as a reward for the knight’s valorous deeds. In this way, love only provided the conventional beginning and ending, while the major part of the story focused on the hero’s adventures instead of the development of the love relationship itself.
Influenced by the ideal of passionate love in courtly romances, continental fiction from the seventeenth century onwards focused on frustrated desire and love-triangles in novels such as Goethe’s *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1774) or Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1856). These novels show the tragedy of unfulfilled desire and the impossibility of ever possessing the beloved other. Because social strictures prevent Werther from being together with Lotte, he chooses the *Liebestod* and commits suicide in order to achieve unity with Lotte in a sinless heaven. Emma Bovary, on the other hand, is looking for the perfect and true love of the medieval romances and is disappointed by the prosaic reality of wedded life. Her desire for an exhilarated passion leaves her frustrated and, in the end, the only cure for her unachievable longing is death. Desire and passion dominate the continental novel, which focuses on adultery and the harsh realities of disillusioned married life. This *Eheroman* – exploring disappointed illusions of passion in wedded life and their temporary fulfillment in extramarital liaisons – is a particularity of continental fiction and does not exist in English literature. Novels like Fontane’s *Effie Briest* (1894) implicitly criticise the dominant societal ideals and moral values of their times, viewing women as their husband’s property and expecting them to be devoted and faithful even if they are unhappy, neglected or mistreated by their husbands.

While continental novelists wrote about adultery and focused on extramarital liaisons, the English novelists were relying on courtship narratives that ended in marriage. Instead of separating passion and marriage like continental authors, they placed their emphasis on lasting emotional commitment in marriage as the ideal end of the English novel. The code of romantic love in marriage only began to develop gradually by accommodating itself to religious, social and psychological reality (cf. Ian Watt, 1957:143). An important factor was the shift from Catholicism to Protestantism, which elevated marriage as a celebration of one’s love for God. Moreover, marriage was deemed necessary in order to complete the otherwise incomplete self. For many women, the marriage plot was a narrative they had to enter in order to have a place in society at all, as patriarchy demanded that they find their greatest happiness in marriage (cf. Dubino, 2004:117). In nearly all of Shakespeare’s comedies the process of courtship is presented as a path to individual self-knowledge, with an emphasis on mutual love and companionship. This quest for identity was dependent on the union with one’s complementary half, by achieving wholeness through marriage. Nevertheless, even if man and woman became one in marriage, this still included a natural (and legal) hierarchy, as described by William Blackstone in his *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765-69): “husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the
woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection, and cover, she performs every thing”. This order and hierarchy governed sexual relations all the way back to Adam and Eve, since only man was created in God’s image. This is expressed by Eve in Milton’s Paradise Lost (1667), who willingly accepts her subjection as the path to true happiness: “God is thy law, thou mine: to know no more is woman’s happiness, knowledge, and her praise.” (4.637-38)

In the eighteenth century, the puritan ideal of “holy matrimony” gradually became secularised into an ideal of “domestic happiness”. This can be linked to the vital importance of the family as moral and religious entity that went along with the rise of the middle class and their values. The “companionate marriage” was a union of friends, where conjugal happiness was based on the husband regarding his wife as his first and dearest friend (cf. Boone, 1987:59), thus reaffirming male superiority. This image of an equal but unequal union was reflected by the fact that women were dependent on marriage, while men could afford to be selective, due to the disproportionate number of women in eighteenth-century England.

Women were expected to be pure, delicate and ladylike, a view that was supported by the then popular conduct books, providing advice on acceptable female behaviour. Along with the ideal of the “companionate marriage” came the development of extended rituals of courtship, since “young lovers must be trained in mutual affection and tested for lifelong compatibility” (Boone, 1987:62). As love and romance became an acceptable reason for marriage, a certain freedom in making a choice of mate was required – a fact that was emphasised by Ian Watt in The Rise of the Novel (1957:138):

The values of courtly love could not be combined with those of marriage until marriage was primarily the result of a free choice by the individuals concerned. This freedom of choice has until recently been the exception rather than the rule in the history of human society, especially as far as women have been concerned. The rise of the novel, then, would seem to be connected with the much greater freedom of women in modern society, a freedom which, especially as regards marriage, was achieved earlier and more completely in England as elsewhere.

Along with the development of women readers of novels, the representation of women in fiction changed. In eighteenth-century fiction the portrayal of women had been dominated by stereotypes, whereas in the nineteenth century women’s emotions and behaviour gradually became a central topic of literary investigation, resulting in a steady evolution of a whole range of depictions of women as fully developed and interesting individual characters. The Brontë sisters particularly contributed to this development:

With the Brontës, we see women writers moving into and authoritatively claiming a different area, the area of passion and desire. Here the achievement is twofold: on the one hand there is the detailed
exploration of the female psyche itself, on the other there is the provision of a set of male characters who are clearly conjured not from outdated myths of male heroism but rather from female fantasy, and who are therefore enduringly fraught with the ambivalence which is latent within the whole notion of the hero from the gothic writers on. (Ford, 1992:34)

To sum up the developments, it can be said that every age has brought an important advancement to the concept of romantic love in marriage: from the elevation of women in the courtly love tradition to the bourgeois ideal of the “companionate marriage”; not to forget the loosening of moral standards regarding premarital sexual encounters during the twentieth century (cf. Boone, 1987:33). The traditional courtship and marriage plot – from Samuel Richardson to Jane Austen – however, is still closely connected to the ideal of romantic love, whereas later writers such as George Eliot or Henry James criticise that ideal by presenting failed and unhappy marriages. The following section will show an overview of the development of the classical marriage plot, from the beginnings with Pre-Richardsonian novels to the depictions of unhappy wedded life in realist novels at the end of the nineteenth century.

3.2 The Novelistic Tradition of Love and Marriage

The concepts of love and marriage are ubiquitous in the novel, emerging at the beginning of eighteenth-century England with fictional prose narratives of tortured love, by authors such as Eliza Haywood or Mary Davis. These amatory novellas usually – in a very melodramatic way – present innocent maidens defending their virtue against vicious male persecutors. The plot of these novellas is activated by the heroine’s struggles against her passion and the very strategies of deferral she has to invent in order to run away from her sexual antagonist (cf. John Richetti, Popular Fiction Before Richardson, 1969). By illustrating the consequences of the alternative, these amatory fictions urged young women to resolve to marry in order to find salvation in “true love”.

The pious elements in the amatory novellas already foreshadow the emergence of respectable love fiction, beginning with Samuel Richardson’s Pamela in 1740. As Katherine Sobba Green notes in The Courtship Novel: 1740-1820 (1991), Pamela retains the “preoccupation with sexual pursuit” of the amatory fiction while following the courtship and marriage plot—a marriageable young woman overcomes obstacles to obtain a felicitous marriage. Samuel Richardson played an important role in establishing this new form of plot that focused on the development of a relationship between individuals, based on the notion of romantic love. He wrote at a time when enormous changes were taking place – in economy, society, culture, and, of course, in regulations of marriage. Thus, he was able to relate to
problems of everyday life in his epistolary novel *Pamela* (1740) by simply presenting a relationship between an aristocrat and a maid servant as a clash of social classes and of middle class morals against sexual instinct. When he wrote his novel, Lord Hardwick’s Marriage Act (1753) had not been released yet, and there was a lot of confusion about what constituted a legal marriage (see Chapter 2.4). Therefore, Richardson tried to produce a model of conduct for the relations between men and women – motivated by the idea that novels had to be more than just simple entertainment and also fulfill the role of moral guidance, following the lead of the then very popular conduct books. Indeed, as Nancy Armstrong argues in * Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1987), many courtship novels strive to represent an ideal of “normal behaviour”, guiding young women to marriage. Thus, while heroines of amatory fictions meet their doom when they give in to their passion, the heroines of courtship novels are rewarded for their virtue – i.e. because Pamela is so resolute, she eventually reforms and marries Squire B.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the marriage plot convention dominated the novels of a society that wanted to believe in the final reward of goodness and in the stability of their way of life, as William H. Magee describes it in his article “Instrument of Growth: The Courtship and Marriage Plot in Jane Austen's Novels“ (1987:198):

The courtship and marriage convention of the novel of manners provided early British novelists with the necessary framework for their art of storytelling. It had two important attractions. It concentrated on the central concern of family status in their patriarchal society, and it created a self-contained world of art with an optimistic ending suited to their concept of human progress.

An important contributor to this development was Jane Austen (1775 – 1815), whose courtship novels focus on a companionate union of loving friends as the ideal goal in life. In her novels, Austen gives women the power to choose (and also to reject unwanted proposals) and to make their own resolutions, thus paving the way for reformations of marriage and female identity. According to Magee (1987:198) her most deliberate achievement was “her gradual enlargement of the courtship and marriage plot into a variable pattern for detailing the growth of successive heroines”. In the six novels from *Northanger Abbey* to *Persuasion*, Jane Austen managed to modify the marriage convention in each novel in order to suit her specific purpose. She demonstrates the growth of her heroines and their increasing importance to their men – without ever radically challenging the power relations that were governing the society of her times. In her novels, Austen creates the illusion of an ordered and complete world, without “questioning the necessity of marriage as the primary ordering desire of society itself“. Thus, her novels provide a sense of closure by ensuring the happiness of the

Nineteenth century novelists, such as the Brontës, Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope or Eliot, who did not follow Austen's neoclassical worldview, increasingly began to struggle with the restrictions of the so-called “matrimonial knot“. A major source of conflict were the limited possibilities for women, i.e. to find an own identity separate from their husbands and to fulfill their desires of personal growth within the limits of what was socially and morally acceptable. Traces of these struggles are visible in Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, as well as in George Eliot's Middlemarch – where, in spite of the heroines’ personal growth, their search for identity is finally fulfilled in love and marriage. Victorian novelists began to rebel against this ideal of presenting marriage as one great “happy ending“, so far from the reality of legal and psychological abuses in English homes that were supposed to be a shelter and a most sacred place of comfort. As Thackeray’s satirical note in Vanity Fair (1847-48) suggests, the representation of the realities of married life was largely avoided by novelist before the second half of the nineteenth century:

As his hero and heroine pass the matrimonial barrier, the novelist generally drops the curtain, as if the drama were over then: the doubts and struggles of life ended: as if, once landed in the marriage country, all were green and pleasant there: and if wife and husband had to do nothing but link each other's arms together, and wander gently downwards towards old age in happy and perfect fruition. (310)

The general idea behind this was that nothing exciting, able to keep the curiosity of the reader would happen after the successful courtship had ended in marriage. Another challenge for the representations of conjugal life was to find a conflict or tragedy that would activate the narrative without undermining the idealised status of marriage and the conventional power relations in society. The first major work of fiction to attempt this look beyond the happy ending was Fielding's Amelia (1751), which examines the trials of wedded life only to provide another happy ending with the husband’s conversion to Christianity, confession about his past affairs to his wife and a final epilogue that accounts for the future happiness of the couple – all in all, an ending that does not question the ideal of marriage. In contrast to that, realist novels increasingly criticise the idealisation of the romantic marriage by exposing the dangers that come along with these false (and often unattainable) expectations. However, divorce was still an unacceptable solution even in an unfortunate marriage – leaving resignation as the only possibility to keep up social beliefs. Even in Henry James’ The Portrait of a Lady, the heroine does not escape with her suitor, but chooses to bear the consequences of her wrong choice of husband, because that is regarded as the right path. The problem in these conventions of love is especially realised in the female bildungsroman, focusing on
independent-minded heroines in search of their identities. Some of these texts – such as Eliot's The Mill on the Floss (1860) or Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth (1905) – end tragically with the death of the heroine, criticising the prevailing social order that subjugates women. Along with increasing legislative reforms regarding marriage and divorce laws as well as the political rights of women, emerged the “New Woman” novel – initiated by a generation of young women who advocated independence and a free union, separated from religious and legal ties. However, even these independent young women could not entirely break free from the marriage convention and were only reproducing a variation of the old theme of permanent emotional commitment and conservative sexual ideologies.

As Joseph Allen Boone aptly comments in his introduction to Tradition Counter Tradition: “The marriage tradition in the novel, it becomes increasingly clear, has exerted a tremendous power over the development of fiction, sometimes infusing its content with the spirit of life, sometimes crippling its very life-giving force under the weight of its restrictive convention.” (1987:17) And it is exactly this convention of a classical structure that the next chapter will explore in more detail.

3.3 The Classical Structure of the Marriage Plot

For more than two centuries the traditional novel has presented its own truth about the proper relations between the sexes, transforming social conventions of love into narrative (cf. Boone, 1987:67). Romantic desire and its fulfillment are among the most obvious creators of tension necessary to develop an interesting plot. Different strategies have to be used in order to attract and keep the reader’s attention – developmental strategies of complication and suspense, postponements and obstruction, steadily moving towards the desired resolution. An important aspect in the novelistic marriage tradition is the perspectival format used by the author. Point of view and, especially the informations shared with the reader or the single characters work to create tensions, suspense and misunderstandings, which in turn add impetus to the narrative.

The question of who truly desires whom (and for what reason), the degree to which lovers understand or miscomprehend each other's intentions, the knowledge available to the reader and subordinate characters but unperceived by one or both romantic leads, the authorial insights imparted to or strategically withheld from the reader - all these variables in the perspectival design made possible a much more intricate, as well as psychologically dense, play of dynamics involving novelist, protagonists, and reader in the narrative process leading to the attainment or withholding of ideal love. (Boone, 1987:73-74)
If everything were simple, there would be no story to tell, and as Shakespeare’s Lysander remarks in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: “the course of true love never did run smooth“ (1.1.132-34). Thus, the narrative structure of the classical marriage plot draws its strength from a standard sequence of events that reflect the reader’s own desire for romantic consummation on the way to achieve a state of equilibrium. These sequences range from the first encounter leading to attraction, followed by complications and détours that work to separate the lovers, to a turning point or moment of discovery that brings about a reversal and resolution of the situation and paves the way for a happy ending. Usually, the moments of crisis are intensified up to the point where a union between the lovers seems almost impossible – and exactly at the climax of crisis, everything is turned around and both the reader and the protagonists are rewarded for their sufferings with the conclusion they had wished for all along. Literary “wholeness“ and coherence are achieved by tying up all threads of the narrative in an epilogue – a summary of future events at the end of the novel that works to assure the reader of the protagonists' living “happily ever after“:

The marriage plot draws inspiration from the *bildungsroman* – a story of maturation following a youth’s initiation to the adult world – which generally includes issues of love and marriage with the protagonist’s search for identity. Often, and especially for women, this quest for identity is concluded by finding one’s complementary half in marriage. Another strategy used for the female version of the *bildungsroman* is the double suitor convention, described by Jean E. Kennard: “the heroine must be weaned from an initially mistaken male object of desire by a second, more responsible wooer, who, as her mentor figure, provides a model of the correct behaviour to which she herself needs to aspire in order to become an autonomous adult“ (*Victims of Convention*, 1973). Following this tradition, a woman derives her identity from her husband, which again worked to reinforce the general belief in the inferiority of women. The most obvious example for this double suitor convention would be Jane Austen’s *Emma*, who finds her mentor figure in her older and more experienced friend Mr Knightley, with whose help she finally realises her own happy ending. Authors often used strategies of repetition, linearity or circularity in order to present the fictional world of the novel as an illusion of reality. In this way, the reader is led to accept the fictional world as natural, and to strive for the marriage ideal presented in this world as the desired and natural goal (not only of the narrative but also in real life relationships).

These structures are included in all the different versions of the marriage plot that exist in the novelistic tradition, varying from the traditional courtship plot with a happy ending in marriage to Kelly Hager’s (*Dickens and the Rise of Divorce*, 2010) radical view of the failed
or anti-marriage plot. In English novels these variations can be grouped into three main themes, namely the themes of courtship, seduction and wedlock.

- **The Courtship Plot:** The most popular and familiar pattern is that of courtship leading to marriage, as presented in *Pamela* or *Pride and Prejudice*. In these novels the lovers are surrounded by obstacles that keep them apart and make a union seem almost impossible. These obstacles include differences in class, personal prejudices, a second love interest or opposition from the family. This almost insurmountable gulf between the lovers is one of the main driving forces of the plot, since it is a special trait of human beings that they always desire most what they cannot have. An example can be found in *Pride and Prejudice*: It is only when Elizabeth Bennet believes that she has lost Mr Darcy forever, that she finally becomes aware of her love for him. In this way, the very obstacles that keep the lovers apart are reversed and become the means of uniting them. The courtship plot is characterised by a structure of frustration and fulfillment – the lovers are kept apart and fulfillment is complicated and postponed, a strategy that creates suspense and keeps the reader interested in the narrative. Finally, at a central threshold moment events are turned around for the positive, the two lovers become one and are rewarded for their sufferings by fulfillment of their desire. The ideal goal of the courtship plot is of course a lasting “companionate union“ between friends based on mutual affection and tested by various trials.

- **The Seduction Plot:** While the courtship plot presents the comic and positive aspects of love, the seduction plot focuses on the tragedy of male desire and sexual victimisation. The lovers are presented as sexual antagonists, in the opposing figures of seducer and pure maiden. Women are objectified and become objects of conquest for the male pursuer who only strives to fulfill his desire, while the female tries to escape seduction. Thus, the seduction plot is characterized by a structure of pursuit and division – male power is the driving force of the plot, and breaking the will of the maiden is the desired goal. The descent of the innocent maiden lies at the center of attention in the classic seduction plot, which tells the tragic story of her “fall, abandonment, broken heart and death“ (cf. Boone, 1987:102). Examples for the seduction plot would be Richardson's *Clarissa* (1747-48) or Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891). In *Tess*, the seduction happens quite early in the novel, which leaves the rest of the narrative to present the stages of her fall. Tess tries to escape from her past, but the loss of her virtue always catches up with her and pursues her to the grave. The only way to achieve closure in the seduction plot is by the death or
exile of the fallen woman. In the course of the twentieth century, however, the tragedy of the seduction plot has lost its driving force with the lifting of sexual taboo. Since the loss of virginity before marriage is no longer a stigma, modern fiction had to turn to other forms of sexual combat, such as extramarital liaisons.

- The Wedlock Plot: Novelists have been very cautious to approach the subject of wedded life, “partly because the narrative of wedded life lacks the teleological finality of courtship and seduction plots, and partly because too complete a representation of the married state runs the risk of becoming [...] a deconstruction of its reality“ (Boone, 1987:113-114). In order to avoid the risks of compromising conventional sexual ideology, novelists often chose to focus on issues of adultery or mismatched unions. Popular narrative structures achieve a happy resolution by either letting the reformed husband return to his wife, or die, giving her the possibility to find happiness in a second and better marriage. In Fielding's *Amelia*, the erring husband reforms and is lovingly reunited with his wife, whereas in Eliot's *Middlemarch*, Mr Casaubon dies and Dorothea is free to marry her ideal second half. However, the wedlock plot does not always end happily. Sometimes protagonists find themselves trapped in a disillusioned marriage without the possibility of progress. Nevertheless, even in these tragic endings, unhappiness in marriage is always based on the protagonists’ misjudgments, false expectations or faults of character – and never on the institution of marriage itself. These novels show what happens when it is not “true love” that leads to marriage, but other factors such as financial or economic issues.

2.3.1 Excursus: Counter-Traditions or the Anti-Marriage Plot

“IT sometimes seems, as if marriage is everywhere written against, even as it is everywhere desired or assumed.“ – Kelly Hager, *Dickens or the Rise of Divorce*

In contrast to the celebrated idealisation of romantic love and its everlasting bliss in marriage, many novelists tried to break loose from the constraints of the marriage plot by showing a life beyond the happy ending, realised in a narrative that focused on the failed marriage as an irresolvable conflict between the sexes. These counter traditions challenge the ideal of male superiority by presenting the woman as equal partner in a relationship, and transform the ideal of romantic love into an ongoing battle. Authors, like Emily Brontë in *Wuthering Heights* (1847), struggle with the nature of relationships and the destructing force of love by emphasising “the unbridgeable gap between cause and effect, between marital ideal and outcome, that cannot be univocally resolved“ (Boone, 1987:149). This unresolvedness
becomes part of the meaning and the open ending substitutes the sense of closure necessary in the marriage plot tradition. Kelly Hager (*Dickens and the Rise of Divorce*, 2010:6) refers to the failed-marriage plot as “the story of a marriage that disintegrates into mutual alienation or dissolves in separation or divorce“ and views it as the necessary second half of the courtship plot. The counter tradition in novels such as *Wuthering Heights*, *To the Lighthouse* or *Daniel Deronda* shows the necessity of a way to break free from the restricting ties of convention that e.g. regarded it as unacceptable for a wife to leave her husband. It is closely connected to women’s rights movements that demand the legalisation of divorce and equal rights for women. These important cultural developments would gradually change the meaning of traditional concepts of sexual hierarchy and, at the same time, the function and use of the marriage plot as a narrative device.

### 2.4 Cultural Background: Regulations of Marriage and the Rights of Women

In order to understand the development of and the meaning behind the marriage plot, it is essential to be informed about the cultural background of the times in which these novels have been written – the times of Austen, the Brontës, Eliot and James, from the end of the eighteenth all the way through the nineteenth century. Until the middle of the eighteenth century it had been possible to marry anywhere, provided the ceremony was conducted by an ordained clergyman of the Church of England (cf. UK Parliament, online). This encouraged clandestine and underage marriages, often leading to bigamy and evasion of parental consent. In 1753, however, the situation changed drastically with the introduction of Lord Hardwick's Marriage Act, making it impossible to be legally married without undergoing an Anglican wedding ceremony on consecrated ground during appointed hours. Moreover, a person under the age of 21 could only be married with parental consent. Since disobedience was harshly punished (e.g. clergymen who disobeyed the law were liable for 14 years of transportation), the Act was highly successful in putting a stop to secret marriages. However, some young couples evaded the Marriage Act by eloping across the border to Scotland where the Act did not apply (cf. Lydia and Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice*). In particular the border village of Gretna Green became famous for these runaway weddings. The restriction was removed by the Marriage Act of 1836, which also allowed non-religious civil marriages. This did not improve women’s situation, however.

Traditional English common law applied the principle of Coverture, which meant that a married woman had no legal rights distinct from her husband, a state of affairs that was increasingly criticised by the feminists of the mid-nineteenth century. Upon marriage a woman’s property passed completely to her husband. The justification was that a woman
could have no interest separate from that of her husband, and the law effectively denied women independent action outside the home. For a long time divorce was only possible by way of an expensive private Act of Parliament. This made divorce virtually impossible for wives, granting it only for adultery accompanied with life-threatening cruelty. Between 1700 and 1857 there were 314 such Acts, most of them initiated by men (cf. UK Parliament, online). There were some changes through the second half of the nineteenth century, but not always for the better. Married Women’s Property Acts from 1870 to 1893 granted a married woman the same rights of property as an unmarried one, while the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 reformed divorce law, establishing a Court of Divorce and Matrimonial Causes. It made divorce easier (meaning: affordable) and regarded marriage as a contract rather than a religious sacrament. However, this Act still discriminated women, since husbands could obtain a divorce on the sole ground of their wife’s adultery, whereas wives had to prove cruelty or desertion in addition to their husband’s adultery in order to obtain a divorce. This reflects the double standard of morality at that time: a wife was expected to be faithful to her husband, while affairs on his side were generally tolerated.

These legal enactments only reinforced the supposed physical and intellectual inferiority of women. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century, women were regarded as being inferior to men. In Victorian times they were either idealised as the “angel in the house” or condemned by society as a “femme fatale” or “fallen woman”. Women did not enjoy the same rights as men, especially regarding suffrage and the right to education. Women were also felt to be at the mercy of their biology, which made them unreliable in the polling-booth. Women’s strengths were seen as emotional, sympathetic and domestic rather than logical, rational and worldly. This traditional view was increasingly challenged by feminist writers and – eventually – by the changing roles and developments of women themselves. Already in 1772, Mary Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* – arguing that women ought to be viewed as human beings deserving the same fundamental rights as men and not as ornaments to society or property to be traded in marriage: “My own sex, I hope, will excuse me, if I treat them like rational creatures, instead of flattering their fascinating graces, and viewing them as if they were in a state of perpetual childhood, unable to stand alone.” (Author's introduction to *A Vindication*)

Mary Wollstonecraft’s sarcastic criticism is directed against the stereotypical roles of women in these times. Women were supposed to provide a home for their husband and children – they were restricted to the private sphere, while men occupied the public sphere. Young women of the middle and upper classes did not have many choices regarding their
future, the roles available for women were deliberately bounded by the domestic space and their education was limited to so called “accomplishments”, skills such as playing the pianoforte, sketching, knitting and sewing, which were regarded as essential to marriageable girls. There were very few respectable job opportunities (e.g. that of a governess like Jane Eyre), since professions such as medicine or the law were not open to women. Thus, if unmarried, they would remain dependent upon their relatives, living with or receiving a small income from their fathers, brothers, or other relations who could afford to support them. Women’s limited role became an increasing target of criticism throughout the nineteenth century, since it led to a growing population of disappointed dreamers – young girls striving for a career just to find out that they were restricted to the domestic realm: “So long as marriage is woman’s only alternative it is a fatality for her, not a choice. She is damned if she doesn’t marry, and damned if she does.” (Deeds Ermarth, 1997:195)

Nevertheless, according to (Gilmour, 1993:189), a certain “poetical vision” of marriage was encouraged by the endings of thousands of novels and other writings of the nineteenth century, such as Coventry Patmore's Angel in the House (1854-63) or Ruskin's lecture “Of Queen’s Gardens”. The underlying assumption – characteristic for Victorian times – was that men and women occupy different but complementary spheres, which come together in marriage: “Each has what the other has not: each completes the other, and is completed by the other: they are nothing alike, and the happiness and perfection of both depends on asking and receiving from the other what the other only can give.” (Gilmour, 1993:191) This idealised vision of marriage was far from the harsh reality. High infant mortality rates, the treadmill of the yearly pregnancy as well as the tacit acceptance of prostitution as necessary to fulfill men’s sexual needs outside the “sacred” home were only some of the sorrows women of those times had to live with. A different figure of the times was the emerging independent woman trying to enter male territory and challenging traditional gender roles in her fight for women’s rights.

These were the backgrounds of women readers of the courtship and marriage plot novels – novels that presented strong and independent heroines from different classes and their pursuit of happiness, showing that it is in fact possible for the individual to shape her own fate.
3. The Courtship Plot in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*

“It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.” - Opening Sentence, *Pride and Prejudice*

*Pride and Prejudice* (1813) is a novel about securing a rich man, as well as a novel about morality and learning to know oneself. The famous opening sentence already establishes the context of the novel in an ironic way – namely the economic contradiction between men’s and women’s lives at Jane Austen’s times. While single men had access to good fortunes, single women had no choice but to marry well in order to make a living. Women’s goal was not to accomplish (by means of honest and proper work) but to be accomplished and charming to display in order to find a good husband. This goal is ubiquitous in *Pride and Prejudice*, not only in Mrs Bennet’s anxiety to dispose of her five daughters in marriage, but also by the general excitement caused by the arrival of the militia (“dashing“ young men) in Meryton. The Bennet girls must marry, because the family inheritance has been entailed on a male heir (the pompous Mr Collins), leaving them penniless in case of their father’s death. But they also want to marry only out of genuine affection. This is the peculiarity of Jane Austen’s plots: they are driven by female wants and needs, adjusting the conventional plot to stress the value of female heroines to their men. By means of irony, *Pride and Prejudice* at once “satirizes the business-like marriages of the times and parodies the fantasy romance of the courtship tradition” (cf. Magee, 1987:201). This is what Charles Hinnant refers to in his article on “Jane Austen's Wild Imagination“:

> The novels raise the question of what it means in this domestic world to seek a romantic marriage only to leave it unanswered. Instead they address the apparent solidity and truthfulness-to-experience of the language and habits of courtship acquired through centuries of practice and breaks them down before us, showing them up for the seductive illusions they always were, stratagems intended to divert us from the consequences of the encounter of desire with the real world. (2006:308)

This chapter aims to analyse the novel in terms of the courtship and marriage plot, exploring the driving forces of the plot as well as the debates about marriage raised by various characters in *Pride and Prejudice*. It will present the individual elements of the classical marriage plot that have been used in the novel (i.e. the suitors – the proposals – impediments – happy ending) and the development of the main characters on their journey to overcome pride and prejudice. Finally, it will make a comparison between the different relationships in the story, also taking into account how the other couples contribute to the reader’s view of Darcy and Elizabeth’s union.
4.1 The Unfolding of the Plot

On a first reading, *Pride and Prejudice* seems to have the simplest and most conventional plot among Jane Austen’s novels. The dramatic action of the novel is achieved by Elizabeth Bennet’s change in situation and fortune, the object or goal is getting married with a just distribution of happiness according to merit (cf. Anderson, 1975:368). As William H. Magee (1987:200) describes it: “In a straightforward linear courtship Elizabeth Bennet reverses her initial dislike of Darcy and accepts him and his longstanding love for her.”

But it is not quite as simple as that. Various subplots serve to enrich the story with humorous and tragic elements, the inner world of the protagonist is presented in a complex way and there is a strong focus on moral issues, such as the surmounting of the limitations of human vision. As in every other romantic quest plot, the initial situation of *Pride and Prejudice* is one of imperfection: The Bennets have five young daughters, but no heir – instead their estate is entailed on Mr Bennet’s closest male relative, Mr Collins. Therefore, the Bennet girls have no decent fortune whatsoever and have to marry in order to secure their future. This accounts for Mrs Bennet’s anxiety to find husbands for her girls. Another interesting factor that contributes to the stress of even finding eligible bachelors is that there are ten unmarried young women in an area that seems to be curiously short of single men (cf. Gill and Gregory, 2003:127).

4.1.1 The opening of the story or great expectations

The novel opens with Mrs Bennet announcing the arrival of an unmarried young man with a considerable fortune in the neighbourhood, causing a mood of expectation among the mothers and daughters of Longbourn and Meryton. This excitement and expectation are further enhanced by the arrival of the militia regiment in Meryton shortly after that.

Indeed, as Judith Lowder Newton (1978:68) claims, “the action in almost the entire first volume of the novel consists of very little but women talking or thinking or scheming about men”. So what are the schemes? For Mrs Bennet, the plot is simple and she expects an outcome similar to a Romantic novel. As the narrator states, “the business of her life was to get her daughters married” (Chapter 1) and she tries everything imaginable to achieve her goal, never letting outer factors diminish her hope. When Mr Bingley finally appears in person and asks her daughter Jane to dance with him twice, she already begins to talk about their wedding. Even the arrival of Mr Collins – the very man who could drive them away from their home one day – does not dampen her spirits, once he has declared his intention to marry one of her daughters. For the reader, the mutual attraction of Jane and Mr Bingley as well as Elizabeth's hostility towards Mr Darcy and his unwilling fascination with her provide
promising material for the further development of the plot. Like Mrs Bennet, the reader is invited to suspect and to imagine, to be surprised and disappointed, to hope and to rejoice. As opposed to Mrs Bennet, the reader also knows what Mr Darcy feels, which offers an additional source of excitement and expectation.

As it seems, Mrs Bennet's great expectations are close to being fulfilled: Mr Bingley is obviously in love with Jane, Mr Collins asks Elizabeth to marry him, and Kitty and Lydia are flourishing in the regiment’s company. So many possibilities and yet, everything falls apart. Mr Bingley suddenly leaves Netherfield without an explanation, Elizabeth refuses to marry Mr Collins, who subsequently proposes to Charlotte Lucas, and the militia are departing as well. What Mrs Bennet does not know, however, is that the “unagreeable” Mr Darcy has unwillingly but steadily begun to develop feelings for Elizabeth. The latter, however, is completely unaware of that and prefers to focus her attention on the dashing Mr Wickham.

4.1.2 The impediments
As Gill and Gregory (2003:129) demand, love plots need directions as well as forces that will deflect their trajectories, since the progress of a courtship plot is achieved by overcoming impediments. And Pride and Prejudice has a variety of stumbling blocks to offer. The most obvious ones are the Bennet’s lack of fortune, their unfavourable relations (Mrs Bennet’s brother, Mr Gardiner, is in trade) and the family’s general behaviour in society. All of these considerations lead to Mr Darcy’s struggles in repressing his feelings for Elizabeth and finally to his unromantic and insulting proposal, admitting that he loves her against his will, against his reason and even against his character.

He spoke well; but there were feelings beside those of the heart to be detailed; and he was not more eloquent on the subject of tenderness than of pride. His sense of her inferiority – of its being a degradation – of the family obstacles which had always opposed to inclination, were dwelt on with a warmth which seemed due to the consequence he was wounding, but was very unlikely to recommend his suit. (p. 124)

What he does not expect is that Elizabeth would not even think of marrying him. Her opinion of him has long been fixed, in her eyes he is the man who wounded her pride, who insulted her family, who ruined the future of Mr Wickham and the happiness of her sister. Pride and prejudices keep them apart, and after her refusal it seems like these impediments are insurmountable. At the same time, the Bennets’ lack of fortune also separates Elizabeth and Wickham, who obviously singles her out from all the other women in Meryton but would never consider to marry without money. After Wickham’s and Darcy’s true characters are revealed and Elizabeth begins to develop feelings for Mr Darcy, Wickham’s elopement with
Lydia presents the next obstacle to their happiness. Elizabeth believes that everything is lost, since Darcy would never marry her if it meant becoming Wickham’s brother-in-law. A further obstacle is presented by Lady Catherine de Bourgh, who forbids Elizabeth to marry her nephew.

Also, other characters of the story present impediments, namely Bingley’s sisters, Mr Collins, Mr Wickham and Mr Darcy himself, who separates Bingley and Jane. These hinderers are counteracted by helpers, such as the Gardiners, who support the relationship between Darcy and Elizabeth, or Charlotte Lucas, who tries to make Elizabeth aware of the fact that Jane should not be hiding her feelings for and from Mr Bingley. Jane and Bingley are separated, in spite of their mutual love for each other, because outer circumstances (namely Darcy’s belief that Jane is indifferent towards his friend, and his sister’s wish for him to marry Georgiana Darcy) keep them apart. Their love story is closely connected to Darcy and Elizabeth’s story, and they only achieve their happy ending because Darcy and Elizabeth manage to solve all the misunderstandings that hindered their love.

Thus, it turns out that some of the impediments even assist the happy resolution of the plot, i.e. that good emerges from what looks like an evil. The Gardiners, who are the so-called “socially inferior“ relatives of the Bennets, manage to impress Mr Darcy with their polite manners and become the very means of uniting the couple. Lydia’s elopement presents an occasion for Mr Darcy to act upon his love for Elizabeth and to prove to her how much he has changed. And finally, Lady Catherine’s interference gives Darcy the hope that Elizabeth’s feelings towards him might have changed (cf. Gill and Gregory, 2003:130).

4.1.3 Suitors and proposals

Through the course of the novel, Elizabeth meets four potential suitors – Mr Wickham, Mr Darcy, Mr Collins and Colonel Fitzwilliam – and receives three proposals of marriage.

Mr Wickham is a dashing young officer, who seems to have all the advantages from the very beginning: he is handsome, charming and extremely agreeable. What is more, he chooses Elizabeth above all the other girls who admire him. But there is always something suspicious about him. His openness about the past failings of Mr Darcy, his obvious fortune – hunting and his inclination towards gambling mark him as an unreliable, pretentious and superficial character. Elizabeth, however, does not realise that in the beginning – instead she uses him to justify her dislike of Mr Darcy. Furthermore, she must be flattered by the attentions of a handsome bachelor like him, even though a serious relationship between them seems impossible. As her aunt, Mrs Gardiner, becomes aware of their attraction to each other,
she warns Elizabeth, whose half joking/half serious response serves to show her susceptibility towards his attentions:

At present I am not in love with Mr Wickham; no, I certainly am not. But he is, beyond all comparison, the most agreeable man I ever saw — and if he becomes really attached to me — I believe it will be better that he should not. I see the imprudence of it. — Oh! that abominable Mr Darcy — My father’s opinion of me does me the greatest honour, and I should be miserable to forfeit it. My father, however, is partial to Mr Wickham. In short, my dear aunt, I should be very sorry to be the means of making any of you unhappy; but since we see every day that where there is affection, young people are seldom withheld by immediate want of fortune from entering into engagements with each other, how can I promise to be any wiser than so many of my fellow creatures if I am tempted, or how am I even to know that it would be wisdom to resist? All that I can promise you, therefore, is not to be in a hurry. I will not be in a hurry to believe myself his first object. When I am in company with him, I will not be wishing. In short, I will do my best. (p. 144)

Nevertheless, a triangle between Elizabeth, Darcy and Wickham would have been impossible, for Wickham is never seriously considering to marry her. For him, worldly matters are always more important, and he exchanges Elizabeth for the rich heiress Miss King at the very first instant. Wickham works as an anti-hero in the story, as his role is to make Elizabeth aware of how deceiving first impressions and appearances in general can be. He also shows her the difference between strong physical attraction and love. She feels attracted to Wickham because he is handsome, charming and eloquent — but in fact, she does not know him at all and is mistaken in her harsh judgement of Mr Darcy, the true hero of the story. Thus, Wickham is important to the story in providing a test for Elizabeth’s ability as a student of character, as well as a “staging post on her journey to self knowledge” (cf. Gill and Gregory, 2003:125).

Mr Collins is a cousin of Mr Bennet, and the heir to his fortune. He presents a burlesque version of the courtship tradition; he is a proud, pompous and self-centered man, who asks Elizabeth to marry him only because Lady Catherine has told him to find a wife, and she would be the most convenient choice. That he does not base a marriage on love can be seen by how easily he moves his attentions from Jane to Elizabeth and then to Charlotte. His proposal to Elizabeth cannot be taken seriously and serves only to make her aware of what she does not want. It is one of the comic moments in the novel, but it also shows Mr Collins’ old-fashioned view of women and the subsequent clash of worldviews between him and Elizabeth. Elizabeth needs a man who would take an interest in her for her own sake and not just out of convenience.
My reasons for marrying are, first, that I think it a right thing for every clergyman in easy circumstances (like myself) to set the example of matrimony in his parish; secondly, that I am convinced that it will add very greatly to my happiness; and thirdly – which perhaps I ought to have mentioned earlier, that it is the particular advice and recommendation of the very noble lady whom I have the honour of calling patroness. (p. 70)

Mr Collins’ proposal is a mockery of what a true proposal should be. It is absurd in its haste, pompous style and lack of emotions. What Mr Collins does not mention in his proposal are love or passion, as well as Elizabeth’s happiness. She knows that they could not make each other happy and that is not the destiny she wishes for herself. Elizabeth’s refusal of Mr Collins shows her trust in the workings of romantic providence, since she simply refuses to marry someone she does not love or respect and is not willing to sacrifice herself even to the future security of her family. Although her motives to accept him would be very strong – she is poor and would be homeless if her father dies – she rejects him and Longbourn for herself and the rest of the Bennet family. Elizabeth demands respect for herself, by refusing to be treated as a commodity in the marriage market. However, Mr Collins seems unable to understand her reasons for refusing him and believes that “it is usual with young ladies to reject the addresses of the man whom they secretly mean to accept, when he first applies for their favour” (p.71). In his eyes she cannot be serious in declining such a desirable offer and he asks her to consider that “it is by no means certain that another offer of marriage may ever be made” to her (p.72). In fact, it would not be long before she is asked by and rejects a better man than Mr Collins, i.e. Mr Darcy.

When Elizabeth meets Colonel Fitzwilliam at Rosings, he presents a perfect contrast to her previous suitors. He is “about thirty, not handsome, but in person and address most truly the gentleman“ (p.112) and manages to restore her confidence in herself after her disappointing experiences with the superficial charmer Mr Wickham, and the insensitive and ridiculous Mr Collins. As opposed to Darcy, he has a pleasant manner and gives all his attention to Elizabeth. She enjoys his company, their animated conversations and the fact that he very plainly admires her. Nevertheless, Colonel Fitzwilliam makes it clear that her financial situation would never allow him to consider marrying her, and that he has no intentions at all. As the second son of an earl he cannot marry wherever he likes, as he hints to Elizabeth in Chapter 33: “Our habits of expense make us too dependent, and there are not many in my rank of life who can afford to marry without some attention to money“ (p.120). Money and status are more important to him, which brings him closer to Mr Wickham than to Mr Darcy. Thus, Colonel Fitzwilliam’s role is to draw attention to the greater suitability of Mr Darcy as Elizabeth’s ideal companion (cf. Gill and Gregory, 2003:126).
Since the relationship between Elizabeth and Mr Darcy will be analysed in Chapter 4.2, this section will only refer to Darcy’s two proposals. Although their union can be said to be the main goal of the plot, Elizabeth harshly rejects Darcy’s first proposal (cf. Anderson, 1975:369) by calling him “the last man in the world whom I could ever be prevailed on to marry”.

In an Austen novel [...] causes internal to the protagonists generate the principal conflict, a feature which constitutes one of Austen's major contributions to the novel. In Pride and Prejudice she brings about the frustration of the lovers with the very act — a proposal — which ought to lead to the happy resolution. Despite this striking employment of means, Austen keeps the main line of action wholly intact: neither our desire nor expectation changes. We still ask how, not whether, the lovers will get together. (Anderson, 1975:370)

Elizabeth’s refusal of Darcy is the climax of the first part of the novel, and the central turning point for his character and further development. He comes to her full of self-assurance, thinking that she will be awaiting and hoping for his question. However, Elizabeth has been completely unaware of his inner struggles, since his love was more of a silent and brooding kind. Compared to Mr Collins’ proposal, Darcy’s declaration is full of honest passion, no matter what his considerations have been: “In vain I have struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you.” (p. 123)

The moment, however, is terribly chosen and at her current state of emotions, Elizabeth cannot but refuse his offer vehemently. The proposal and Darcy’s letter of explanation start a process of re-education for the protagonists, and they begin to reconsider their actions. The second half of the novel is dedicated to the overcoming of prejudices and inevitably leads to a happy ending – no matter how impossible it may seem at certain points of the novel:

All parts of Pride and Prejudice are devoted to the intensification of the romantic plot. As it discloses Elizabeth’s and Darcy’s resistance to each other, it simultaneously shows the indelible impression each makes upon the other’s mind and heart. Sharing in their mutual attraction, the reader takes increased pleasure in each step of the action which draws them closer together after first dividing them. The heroine finally discovers that had she been in love, she could “not have been more wretchedly blind”. Austen vivifies the rightness of Darcy and Elizabeth for each other even as she makes them appear most opposed, adding considerably to both the tension and charm of the drama. (Anderson, 1975:373)

When Darcy finally makes his second proposal at the end of the novel, both protagonists have gone through a moral development and have arrived at a point of perfect agreement. He is humbled by her previous rejection and she has discovered his merits and come to feel true
affection for him. This time, his expectations are fulfilled and Elizabeth feels the gratitude and pleasure Darcy had been so sure of receiving the first time he asked her for her hand.

4.1.4 The turning point
The turning point of the story is realized by Lydia’s elopement with Wickham, at the very moment when Elizabeth begins to view Darcy with different eyes and even starts to think about what a relationship between them would be like. This turn of events is the major crisis of the novel, because it leaves the future development of the narrative completely open. At this point everything seems to be lost, and at the same time everything seems to be (im)possible.

Sometimes future possibilities are opened up without the character realizing it. In the crisis of the news of Lydia's elopement, Elizabeth confides in Darcy. His gloomy, silent pacing makes her feel that 'her power was sinking'. Darcy's silent inwardness, in fact, forms one of the novel's most important proleptic moments; it is only when Elizabeth has accepted him at the close of the novel that he reveals what was the actual subject of his meditation [...] His silence at the inn was, therefore, a moment of testing. (Gill and Gregory, 2003:130)

It is a moment of testing in the sense that Darcy has to think about what would be involved in saving Lydia and the Bennet family, as it also meant assisting Wickham. All of this is kept from the reader until the very end of the novel. The reader only knows Elizabeth’s point of view, and, like her, is inclined to think that Darcy has been driven away by these horrible news. Like Elizabeth, we wonder if his feelings for her might still be strong enough to stand by her side in spite of everything that drives them apart. Like Elizabeth, we learn to hope again after Lydia and Mrs Gardiner reveal Mr Darcy’s part in Lydia and Wickham’s wedding. And, like Elizabeth, we impatiently wait for the hero to make his appearance at Longbourn and claim his prize.

4.1.4 The happy ending

*Pride and Prejudice* offers a fairly conventional happy ending. The hero and the heroine finally manage to overcome all the obstacles and their trials are rewarded by finding true love and happiness. Against all oppositions – of class, character or outer influences – Darcy chooses Elizabeth (and not his cousin Anne de Bourgh) and shows that true affection is worth a lot more than rank or financial considerations.

The novel comes closest to popular romantic fiction and indeed is almost a kind of Cinderella story. A man, who is 'as good as a lord' (Chapter 17), according to his prospective mother-in-law, is enchanted against his will and better judgement by the second daughter of an eccentric gentleman whose estate is entailed on the male side. (Gill and Gregory, 2003:137)
Nevertheless, *Pride and Prejudice* is more than a simple Cinderella story, it is a quest plot. By the end of the novel the heroine has achieved real autonomy and self-direction, which frees her to choose Mr. Darcy. Thus, her development is rewarded with love and marriage. But, according to Judith Lowder Newton (1978:82), there is a problem in this ending, for marriage always involves a power relation between unequals. In her opinion the end of the novel witnesses a decline in Elizabeth Bennet, since her reward in the end is marriage, “and marriage demands resignation even as it prompts rejoicing, initiates a new life while it confirms a flickering suspicion that the best is over”. Also Mr Bennet knows that his daughter “could neither be happy nor respectable” unless she “truly esteemed her husband”, unless she “looked up to him as a superior” (p.315). He doesn’t want her to end up like him, in an unhappy marriage with a partner she cannot respect. However, Elizabeth assures him that she truly esteems Mr Darcy and that he is worthy of her love.

A different opinion is presented by William H. Magee, who argues that at the end of the novel Darcy finally regards Elizabeth as his intellectual equal, and thus they are able to enter into a relationship based on mutual respect and esteem. Elizabeth and Darcy’s marriage is not just a conventional happy ending, it is a dynamic growing relationship. Thus, Elizabeth’s quest is completed in the sense of the classical *Heldenreise*. The heroine has been in search of a new life and with Darcy she finds it. We feel that the novel's conclusion is “the happiest, wisest, most reasonable end“ to the story, “a marriage of true minds“ and a perfect conclusion.

> Romantic love remains the unexamined and unaccountable source of power in a novel preoccupied with various forms of social and psychological power and powerlessness. It not only overcomes all obstacles, it brings about a perfect society at the end of the novel. (Mary Poovey in Clark, 1994:49)

### 4.2 The development of the protagonists

Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy represent the classical antagonistic couple. Their mutual dislike seems to make any union impossible, yet we know from the very beginning that they are going to end up together. It is often stated that the 'pride' and 'prejudice' of the title refer to the protagonists – Darcy’s pride and Elizabeth’s prejudice are what separate them and the overcoming of both finally brings them together. Darcy’s unwilling attraction to Elizabeth and her fascinated but clear dislike of him provide fuel for the narrative as they seem inevitably to lead towards a confrontation. The following section will sketch their development and trace the steps the antagonistic couple has to take in order to find a happy ending.
At their very first meeting Darcy insults Elizabeth by calling her “tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me“ (p.7). It is at a ball, where gentlemen are scarce and Elizabeth has been sitting down without a partner for two dances. When Mr Bingley suggests to his friend that he should ask Elizabeth to dance, his pride stops him from asking a young lady who has been “slighted by other men“ (p.7). Unfortunately, the gentlemen's conversation has been overheard by Elizabeth, whose negative opinion of Mr Darcy is immediately settled. Her friend Charlotte Lucas, however, grants him the right to be proud and tries to justify his behaviour.

“His pride,” said Miss Lucas, “does not offend me so 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, everything 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.“ (p.12)

The working title of the novel was “First Impressions“ and that is exactly what the story is all about. Elizabeth’s first impression of Mr Darcy leaves her prejudiced against him. Although everybody at the ball admires Mr Darcy for “his fine, tall person, handsome features, noble mien“ (p.5) and the fact that he has ten thousand pounds a year, his manners eventually turn the tide and decide his character as “the proudest, most disagreeable man in the world“(p.6). What they do not take into consideration, however, is that he might only be bored in a place full of strangers and too shy to do something about it. In fact, he behaves completely differently among his friends and family and Elizabeth only hears praise for him from Mr Bingley, Colonel Fitzwilliam and especially from his housekeeper at Pemberley.

Contrary to his initial statement, Mr Darcy begins to be fascinated by Elizabeth’s liveliness and energy. She challenges and “bewitches“ him and he increasingly seeks her company. Elizabeth, however, is not aware of his feelings and cannot understand his strange behaviour. While she is focused on Wickham’s misfortune and her sister’s misery, Mr Darcy is struggling to suppress his growing love for her. Exactly at that point of the novel where Elizabeth found out that Darcy has been the one who broke up Jane and Bingley, and he repels her utterly, he decides to announce his feelings for her and makes his proposal. After her harsh and honest rejection he realizes how much he must change in order to deserve Elizabeth. This can be seen as the crucial turning point for Mr Darcy. At first he is angry and hurt, but then he begins to see how impossible he has behaved, a realisation that leads to a complete change in his character.
What do I not owe you! You taught me a lesson, hard at first, but most advantageous. By you, I was properly humbled. I came to you without a doubt of my reception. You showed me how insufficient were all my pretensions to please a woman worthy of being pleased. (p.241)

Darcy’s character is greatly improved by his love for Elizabeth. Her liveliness challenges his rational character, and her accusations make him rethink his ideas of the world. However, the narrative does not show the process of his transformation, but only the outcome.

In response to love, Darcy overcomes his prejudices against Elizabeth’s connections, proposes to her, returns to her even after hope seems gone, and eventually brings about the marriage of three of the Bennet daughters. The narrative does not focus on the development or pressures of his passion; even when Elizabeth playfully asks Darcy for an account of his love, her mocking celebration of ‘impertinence’ deflects any explanation he might have given. (Mary Poovey in Clark, 1994:49)

Instead, the focus lies on the heroine and her development throughout the novel. From the very beginning, Elizabeth is proud of her abilities as a “studier of character“ and she believes that she has everything figured out: in her eyes Mr Wickham is handsome, charming, polite and an attentive companion, while Mr Darcy is reserved, proud, disagreeable and only tries to find fault in everybody. In fact, these first impressions turn out to be the exact opposite of their real characters. The rhetorically talented Wickham finally reveals his superficiality and irresponsibility, while Mr Darcy becomes Elizabeth’s perfect emotional and intellectual equal. Elizabeth’s pride in her abilities of perception fuels her prejudices against Mr Darcy.

Everything he does makes her defensive; she expects mockery from him, while he is only trying to get to know her. When Mr Wickham tells the story of how he has been wronged by Mr Darcy, she readily believes him and condemns Darcy. Elizabeth remains blind to Darcy’s qualities until she overcomes her romantic prejudice in favour of Wickham (cf. Vranjes, 2014:197). Thus, her development is not just a modification of values but rather a clarification of vision. Since Elizabeth’s opposition to Darcy was based on her misunderstanding of him, her attachment to him develops after she has overcome the limitations of human vision.

According to Gill and Gregory, Elizabeth falls in love with Darcy because she feels gratitude and because she sees him as crucial to her maturing:

Darcy is there to provoke, intrigue, disgust and astound her, and to be the butt of her disapproval. Then his function is to enlighten, disarm and delight her. In the end, he will fulfil her in a way that no man of lesser brain, looks, taste or moral fibre possibly could. (Gill and Gregory, 2003:145)

Her feelings begin to change after she has read his letter of justification, following her rejection of his proposal. At first she does not want to believe him, but she finally has to admit that it all makes sense. Subsequently, she recognises Wickham’s true character and starts to view Darcy with different eyes. His letter appeals to her reason, she reflects on past events
and overcomes her prejudices. An important aspect of Elizabeth’s development in the novel is her acknowledgement that Darcy’s criticism of her family was sound, and she becomes painfully aware of that fact after some reflection on the course of their acquaintance. The crucial moment in their relationship is their chance meeting at Pemberley. Darcy’s character is completely changed and he surprises Elizabeth with his kindness towards her aunt and uncle as well as his efforts to please and be charming. Finally, Darcy has become the man with whom Elizabeth will find intellectual and emotional fulfillment. Her feelings towards him gradually change, starting with the reception of his letter, moving on with the housekeepers loving description of her master and finally steadying themselves with his complete change of behaviour. Critics such as Walter Scott claim that the opulence of Pemberley had probably won her and Elizabeth herself jokes about materialistic considerations when Jane asks her how she fell in love with Mr Darcy: “It has been coming on so gradually, that I hardly know when it began. But I believe it must date from my first seeing his beautiful grounds at Pemberley.” (p. 244) Nevertheless, I would argue that their relationship is founded on mutual respect growing into love, since both Darcy and Elizabeth learn to regard each other as intellectual equals. It is not a passionate love-at-first-sight, but rather based on reason, respect and admiration of the respective partner.

4.3 The marriage debate

“Single women have a dreadful propensity for being poor. Which is one very strong argument in favour of marriage.“ – Jane Austen

4.3.1 Contrasting Views on Marriage

The question of motives for marriage is raised various times in the novel, often followed by a clash of opinions on the issue of how love should be expressed and what kind of marriage is most desirable. The main debate arises between Charlotte Lucas and Elizabeth, who are advocating completely different positions regarding their futures. While Elizabeth longs for a marriage based on mutual love and respect, Charlotte only wants a comfortable home and rather accepts Mr Collins than risking to be a spinster.

Without thinking highly either of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservation from want. This preservative she had now obtained; and at the age of twenty-seven, without having ever been handsome, she felt all the good luck of it. (p.81)

Charlotte believes that “happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance” and subsequently that her chances of finding happiness with Mr Collins are just as fair as any
other. Ironically Elizabeth judges Charlotte for marrying only for worldly advantage but defends Wickham for the same behaviour with Mary King, suggesting that men have a right to marry for money while women do not. According to Gill and Gregory, Charlotte is living with an idea of human life that makes disappointment impossible – namely no expectations. Jane Bennet, on the other hand, has great expectations in regard to Mr Bingley, and is strongly disappointed. Thus, the novel can be divided into those who base conjugal felicity on love (e.g. Jane and Bingley, Darcy and Elizabeth, the Gardiners) and those who place worldly considerations above everything else (e.g. Wickham, Colonel Fitzwilliam, Charlotte Lucas or Mrs Bennet).

4.3.2 Contrasting Couples

Elizabeth and Darcy’s relationship partly draws its strength from the contrast to the other couples in the novel. These subplots present the darker side and other extremes of courtship, making the protagonists’ almost Cinderella-like lovystorey seem more realistic in comparison. There is Jane and Bingley’s storybook romance, Lydia and Wickham’s irresponsibility and superficiality, Charlotte and Mr Collins’ sham courtship of convenience, Mr and Mrs Bennet’s disappointed reality of young foolishness blinded by beauty and finally the Gardiners as the perfect and harmonious couple, showing what a true partnership should be. All of these relationships evolve around a complex moral problem, addressed by Elizabeth in a question to her aunt Gardiner (p. 100): “What is the difference in matrimony affairs, between the mercenary and the prudent motive? Where does discretion end, and avarice begin?” By the end of the novel and through a comparison of the different relationships the reader as well as the characters learn to recognize these traits and “to distinguish discretion from avarice, sincerity from romantic affectation and truthfulness to one's own nature from acting on the spur of the infatuated or rebellious moment“ (cf. Brophy in Southam, 1976:195).

- **Jane Bennet and Mr Bingley:** In Elizabeth's eyes, Jane and Bingley's relationship is based on “true affection“. They are so idyllic in their romance and in their characters – both are cheerful, friendly and goodnatured, always ready to think only the best of others – that it seems almost too good to be true. At the beginning of the novel, Jane and Bingley meet at the ball in Meryton and immediately feel attracted to each other. They are the classical harmonic couple (love-at-first-sight), kept apart by outer circumstances. The contrast of their romance to that of Elizabeth and Darcy is remarkable, since their love is untouched by either pride or prejudice.
- **Lydia Bennet and Mr Wickham**: Lydia is the first of the Bennet daughters to get married. Although she was irresponsible and foolish in agreeing to elope with Wickham, she is saved by Mr Darcy and rewarded with a marriage to her “dearest Wickham”. Elizabeth observes that Lydia obviously is more in love with Wickham than he is with her, and their relationship soon ends up in indifference towards each other. In contrast to Darcy and Elizabeth they are all superficiality – Wickham had to be bribed into marrying Lydia and she still rejoices and boasts about their love.

- **Charlotte Lucas and Mr Collins**: Charlotte is Elizabeth’s pragmatic counterpart, who accepts the very man Elizabeth refuses. She is all reason, rejects any romantic ideals and contendly walks into a life with a man who is “neither sensible nor agreeable” (p.81) only to obtain a comfortable home. She sees the chance and takes it, scheming to fix Mr Collins’ attention on herself. Their courtship is an entertaining burlesque version of the strategies of romantic love (cf. Gill and Gregory), presenting a contrast to the honest struggles Mr Darcy has to face in his love for Elizabeth.

- **Mr and Mrs Bennet**: Mr and Mrs Bennet are the perfect example of how a marriage should not be, because they simply do not understand each other. Young Mr Bennet was taken in by appearances to an impulsive love-match, oblivious to Mrs Bennet’s obvious limitations and now has to live with the consequences of his inconsiderate choice. Mr Bennet is a cynical man, who tries to find consolation for his unsatisfactory marriage by withdrawing to his study and by engaging in satirical reflections on the folly of the world (cf. Gill and Gregory).

- **The Gardiners**: The Gardiners, Elizabeth's aunt and uncle, serve as a model of how a perfect and harmonious union should be. They are the counterparts to Mr and Mrs Bennet’s obvious mismatch, and in a way, the parents Jane and Elizabeth should have had. Their marriage is based on mutual love and respect – the role model of what Elizabeth and Jane are expecting from their relationships.
4. *Jane Eyre* – Charlotte Brontë's strong-willed heroine and her pursuit of happiness

“I had rather be a thing than an angel.” – *Jane Eyre*, ch. 24

*Jane Eyre* was first published in 1847 and became incredibly popular among readers and critics from the very beginning. In fact, Charlotte Brontë’s unconventional and paradox character continues to fascinate and bewilder readers and scholars until today. In contrast to the previously discussed novel *Pride and Prejudice*, Charlotte Brontë focuses on the passionate inner tumult that women experience whereas Jane Austen only treats the outward decorum. Elizabeth’s wit is contrasted by Jane’s passionate outbursts – while the former frequently jumps into conversation and demonstrates her intellectual power, the latter often listens quietly to other people talking and only speaks her mind when she is moved by violent passions.

Since we follow the heroine from her childhood through marriage and the birth of her own child, the scope of the narrative is comparatively wide, leaving a lot of space for development. *Jane Eyre* is a female *bildungsroman*, focusing not only on the heroine’s way to adulthood and independence but also on her spiritual development. Brontë often alludes to Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678) when talking about the hardships Jane has to endure on her way to salvation. However, and that is what creates one of the great paradoxes in the novel, Jane finds salvation not such much in her religious beliefs as in her love for Mr Rochester. Their unconventional romantic love story lies at the core of the novel, infuses it with life and, in the end, provides Jane with the family and the home that she had always longed for.

*Jane Eyre* addresses the topics of bigamy and morality, the conflict between passion and reason and between personal desire and religious beliefs. It has elements of the gothic intertwined with those of romanticism as well as realism. In its unconventional form, it is a plea for women’s independence that strongly criticises the prevalent ideal of patriarchy. There are no ideal patriarchs in *Jane Eyre* – even Rochester is irrational and domineering, while St John is “a cold, hard man” (p. 332), guided only by reason. Thus, *Jane Eyre* becomes a story of an individual (female)’s progress, who learns to respect and care for herself in order to be able to meet her future husband on equal terms. It is a story of flight from temptation, of Christian salvation and the repression of passion that leads to a final reward in a happy (and equal) marriage.
The following chapter will analyse *Jane Eyre* according to the classical structure and sequences of the marriage plot and – more importantly – the deviations from and revolt against that ideal of marriage. The discussion will include Jane’s development from a rebellious child to an independent woman, the failed wedding between Jane and Rochester and its importance for the further development of the plot, as well as the “Madwoman in the attic” in the form of Rochester’s first wife Bertha Mason, who becomes an involuntary agent for Jane’s hidden passions and fears. Furthermore, the different relationships will be set in contrast to each other and the topic of marriage between different social classes will be examined.

### 4.1 The Unfolding of the Plot

The story of *Jane Eyre* follows the structure of the *bildungsroman* – showing the maturation of its heroine and her personal development towards happiness in the closure of marriage. It is Jane herself, who tells the story as a first-person-narrator, a choice that manages to create an intimate relationship between the reader and narrator. We know what Jane knows and feels, we follow her thoughts and passions, and we hope and fear and feel with her. However, this perspective is also limited, because we do not know what other characters think or feel. It is Jane who mediates the turn of events; it is she who chooses what to tell and what to omit from the story. Since she writes her story only after she has found her happy ending, a very special atmosphere is created, described by Dr. Sally Minogue in her Introduction to the Wordsworth edition of the novel:

> What is revolutionary is Brontë’s exploration of the dynamic between the Jane who looks back on her past life from a position of safety, and the various selves she revisits and reconstructs. The tension between lived and relived experience is thus both tangible and shifting, as both are mediated through the selective recollection of the writing process. We see a life as it unfolds for the subject who is ignorant of what is to come, and in parallel we see the incumbent of that life unfolding it again to herself.
> (Sally Minogue, 1999: ix-x)

The first nine chapters of the novel are dedicated to the ten-year-old Jane and her childhood experiences as an orphan who grows up in a family that does not want her, and her move to Lowood Institution. In chapter 10, Jane tells us that she has finished school and become a teacher herself. Her life has been quiet and disciplined, uniform but not unhappy – largely due to the headmistress Miss Temple, who had become Jane’s substitute mother, teacher and good friend. When Miss Temple gets married and leaves, Jane becomes restless and remembers “that the real world was wide, and that a varied field of hopes and fears, of sensations and excitements, awaited those who had courage to go forth into its expanse, to seek real
knowledge of life amidst perils” (p. 72-73). Thus, even though Jane has learned to repress her passions and to lead a pious Christian life at Lowood, internally she longs for more and she attempts to explore the wider world within her limited possibilities – namely by looking for a position as a governess. In this way the story of Jane Eyre is revolutionary, not only by focusing on a woman’s longing to be more than the “angel in the house”, but also by questioning the patriarchal ideal of society in general. To quote Jane’s own restless plea for equality:

Women are supposed to be very calm generally; but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer: and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confined themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex. (p.95)

Gilbert and Gubar refer to the story as “a passionate drive toward freedom from patriarchal authority” (1979:369-70), while Peter Allan Dale highlights the “conflict between religious belief and the romantic drive for freedom of passion” (1986:110). And it is exactly this passion that leads Jane to exchange her monotonous life at Lowood for the position as governess at Thornfield and an unexpected and dramatic future turn of events. The subsequent love story that develops between the governess and her master lies in the focus of the plot analysis and will be examined thoroughly in the following section.

4.1.1 The development of the love story
The first encounter between Jane and Mr Rochester takes place in chapter 12. Jane is walking through the fields under the rising moon, when Rochester fatefully “rides into the novel in a parodic version of the knight in shining armour” (cf. Minogue, 1999: xv). Jane hears a horse approaching and remembers childhood tales of the ‘Gytrash’, a spirit that materialises in the form of different animals and haunts solitary travellers. When she sees Rochester and his dog, the spell is broken, he passes her and she moves on. However, a few seconds later in a twist of fate, man and horse slip on a sheet of ice and the dog comes back to summon Jane for help. Rochester has sprained his ankle and Jane helps him – he is dependent on her at their very first meeting just like he will be at the end of the novel. Jane describes the stranger as dark and strong, past youth and not very handsome. Afterwards she reflects that the incident was “of no moment, no romance, no interest in a sense; yet it marked with change one single hour
of a monotonous life” (p. 100-101). She does not forget the stranger’s face and continues to think about him as she walks back to Thornfield.

Beginning with this fateful incident under the moonlight, the marriage plot continues to develop with the classical sequences of encounter leading to attraction and complications: Upon her return to the house, Jane finds out that the stranger was no other than Mr Rochester, the master of Thornfield Hall. This Mr Rochester turns out to be a very moody, changeful and abrupt character. Nevertheless, he seems to enjoy Jane’s company and frequently invites her to evening-tea in the drawing room. With the arrival of Mr Rochester, the whole atmosphere changes – suddenly the house is bustling with life and Jane finally has something to look forward to. Mr Rochester has travelled the world, he is intelligent and his manners are frank and inviting. He takes an interest in Jane, challenges her intellect and fills up her thoughts: “So happy, so gratified did I become with this new interest added to life, that I ceased to pine after kindred: my thin crescent-destiny seemed to enlarge; the blanks of existence were filled up my bodily health improved; I gathered flesh and strength” (p. 128). Even though Jane is aware of his faults – he is proud, sardonic and moody – she is fascinated by him and views his presence as “more cheering than the brightest fire” (p. 128).

The characters are continually drawn together, creating tension between them as well as raising the reader’s expectations. A central incident that adds hope and increases the tension between Jane and Rochester takes place in chapter 15, when Jane saves Mr Rochester from a mysterious fire that has been kindled in his bed in the middle of the night. They are alone together in his bedroom and Mr Rochester thanks Jane for saving his life: “‘I knew,’ he continued, ‘you would do me good in some way, at some time; – I saw it in your eyes when I first beheld you: their expression and smile did not’ – (again he stopped) – ‘did not’ (he proceeded hastily) ‘strike delight to my very inmost heart so for nothing” (p. 132). His words, his look, his strange behaviour leave a strong impression on Jane and she begins to hope for what she knows is unreachable: “Sense would resist delirium: judgement would warn passion” (p. 133).

4.1.2 The impediments

Since feelings are intensified by the impossibility of their fulfilment, every good love story needs impediments in order to keep the reader interested in the narrative. And Jane Eyre offers a number of hindrances that keep the protagonists apart – some of them are obvious, some are imagined, others are kept secret and only emerge later in the story. In Jane’s eyes, the most obvious impediment is social class: She is a poor and unconnected orphan, while Mr Rochester is a rich heir. Furthermore, she is only nineteen years old and his dependant, while
he is twenty years her senior and her employer. She may be his intellectual equal, but their different social classes keep them apart, as she remarks that “though rank and wealth sever us widely, I have something in my brain and heart, in my blood and nerves, that assimilates me mentally to him” (p. 153). Just when Jane begins to hope for Mr Rochester’s love, all her hopes are destroyed by the appearance of the beautiful Blanche Ingram whom Mr Rochester apparently intends to marry. Subsequently, Jane tries to be very strict with herself and turns to reason and common sense in order to convince herself that she can be of no importance to Mr Rochester:

> It does no good to any woman to be flattered by her superior, who cannot possibly intend to marry her; and it is madness in all women to let a secret love kindle within them, which, if unreturned and unknown, most devour the life that feeds it; and, if discovered and responded to, must lead, ignis-fatuus-like, into miry wilds whence there is no extrication. (p. 140)

When Mr Rochester brings the whole company to Thornfield, Jane sees that he does not love Miss Ingram. Nevertheless, she thinks that he is going to marry her “because her rank and connections suited him” (p.163) and that is what Jane cannot understand. She observes the situation, watches the pair together and cannot help loving Mr Rochester even if “he had ceased to notice” her (p. 162). However, what Jane does not know at this point – while the reader does – is that Rochester is only trying to tease her by pretending to court Miss Ingram, using jealousy as his “best ally” in order to render her “as madly in love” with him as he was with her (p. 231). This fact adds impetus to the story, because “the reader knows by now that Rochester wants Jane, and the fractures and diversions of the narrative line act in counterpoint to the momentum of their desire for each other – and of the reader’s desire for its fruition” (Minogue, 1999:xvii).

The tension between the protagonists increases, especially as Mr Rochester shows up disguised as a gypsy and questions Jane about her feelings for her master, and as he asks her for help when Mr Mason is attacked at night. After Jane returns from her aunt’s sickbed, the relationship between her and Rochester seems closer then ever: “Never had he called me more frequently to his presence; never been kinder to me when there – and, alas! never had I loved him so well” (p. 217). Yet, he is still preparing for his wedding and frequently alludes to his future bride. However, when it becomes clear whom he really means to be his bride, Jane’s happy ending seems to be within reach. Nevertheless, something does not feel right and to become the future Mrs Rochester seems to be a mere dream for Jane – a suspicion that will be confirmed by the revealing of Thornfield’s mystery, representing the climax of the story as well as the strongest and most insurmountable obstacle between the protagonists. This central
incident will be examined in the next section, together with an explanation on why the wedding between Jane and Rochester cannot yet take place.

4.1.3 The first proposal and the failed wedding

What is remarkable in the protagonists’ relationship is the equality between them: Although it is Rochester who oversteps class boundaries (cf. “Your station is in my heart”, p. 232) by asking Jane to marry him, Jane acts with self-confidence in his presence, criticising him and insisting to be accepted as an individual who can make her own choices (cf. “I had rather be a thing than an angel”, p. 231). When Rochester cruelly teases Jane about having found a new position for her in Ireland, she declares her feelings, overwhelmed by her passions:

‘Do you think I am an automaton? – a machine without feelings? ... Do you think because I am poor, obscure, plain and little, I am soulless and heartless? – You think wrong! – I have as much soul as you, – and full as much heart! And if God had gifted me with some beauty, and much wealth, I should have made it as hard for you to leave me, as it is now for me to leave you. I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh: – it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal – as we are!' (p. 223)

In her passionate outburst, she denies Rochester’s superiority, and he again confirms that notion in his proposal by calling her his “equal” and his “likeness” (p. 224). The proposal scene is especially strong, because it shows Jane’s power over Rochester, her strong will and her urge for independence. Now Rochester is the vulnerable one, declaring his love for Jane and reinforcing the ideal of the “companionate marriage”.

‘I am no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will, which I now exert to leave you.’
Another effort set me at liberty, and I stood erect before him.
‘And your will shall decide your destiny’ he said: ‘I offer you my hand, my heart, and a share of all my possessions.’
‘You play a farce which I merely laugh at.’
‘I ask you to pass through life at my side – to be my second self and best earthly companion.’ (p. 223)

When Jane is finally convinced of his sincerity, they become engaged and Rochester wants to marry her as soon as possible. Yet, their happiness seems somewhat surreal, as Mrs Fairfax reminds Jane that “all is not gold that glitters” and that “gentleman in his station are not accustomed to marry their governesses” (p. 233). And really, the engagement does not culminate in marriage, but in a catastrophe that again deprives Jane of all her hopes. What was supposed to be Jane’s happiest day, ends with the appearance of the insane Mrs Rochester – the “Madwoman in the attic” or the Gothic phantom that haunts the novel –
creating an unbridgeable gap between the two lovers. This obstacle is a sign that the heroine’s journey to personal fulfillment has not been completed yet and that a marriage at this point would not result in the desired state of perfect equilibrium between the protagonists.

According to Dr Sally Minogue (1999:xxi), “the mid-novel relationship with Rochester is flawed, whether Bertha existed or not”. She insists that Jane “has to live out the true meaning of that ‘I care for myself’, before she can meet Rochester again on equal terms”. The relationship is flawed because Rochester is the one in power; he has all the money and is showering Jane with expensive presents, trying to dress her up like one of his former European mistresses. Jane, on the other hand, feels uncomfortable and degraded by his behaviour; she does not want to be a doll or his pet and resists all his attempts of flattery. Thus, Bertha Mason seems to act upon Jane’s unconscious fears, especially by tearing the wedding veil and by preventing her from entering into a relationship that would leave her in a position of inferiority (cf. Gilbert and Gubar, 1979).

4.1.4 Passion vs. reason

After Jane finds out that Rochester is already married, she knows that she has to leave him. Yet, passion and reason are fighting within her, when Rochester asks her to be his mistress and live with him in Europe as his “wife”. Rochester tells her the whole truth about his unfortunate first marriage and how he was tricked into marrying someone he had nothing in common with and could not possibly love. He pleads with her; he urges her, full of anger, tenderness and desperation: “Is it better to drive a fellow-creature to despair than to transgress a mere human law, no man being injured by the breach?” (p. 280). But Jane cannot give in to temptation, not even to save him, no matter how much she would like to and in spite of her love for him. This impossibility of union is a central element of the marriage plot. At this point in the novel, instead of the expected happy ending, the lovers are further apart than ever and the narrative has to take a major turn before they are able to finally be together. The obstacles that separate Jane and Rochester are restricted to a time where divorce was not an option, and where extramarital liaisons were socially unacceptable; they would not have the same effect in a modern novel. As things stand, however, Jane knows that fleeing temptation is the only acceptable option within social and Christian rules, even if her personal desire is to stay with the man she loves. Though it is emotionally painful for her, Jane decides that she must leave Thornfield and runs away in the middle of the night, taking a coach to the other end of the country. Led by God, she sleeps in the woods, almost starves and thinks she is going to die from the exertion, when she is finally saved from her struggles by the kind Rivers family, comprised of two sisters and their brother – who later turn out to be her cousins.
After Jane’s recovery, she begins to work as schoolmistress in the village school at Morton, a post offered by St John Rivers, the local clergyman – and her (yet unknown) cousin. Even though she has her own home now and a relatively secure position, Jane still continues to struggle with her decision, thinking about what might have been:

Meantime, let me ask myself one question – Which is better? – To have surrendered to temptation; listened to passion; made no painful effort – no struggle; – but to have sunk down in the silken snare; fallen asleep on the flowers covering it; wakened by a southern clime, amongst the luxuries of a pleasure villa: to have been now living in France, Mr Rochester’s mistress; delirious with his love half my time – for he would – oh, yes, he would have loved me well for a while. He did love me – no one will ever love me so again. I shall never more know the sweet homage given to beauty, youth, and grace – for never to any one else shall I seem to possess these charms. He was fond and proud of me – it is what no man besides will ever be. – But where am I wandering, and what am I saying, and above all, feeling? Whether is it better, I ask, to be a slave in a fool’s paradise at Marseilles – fevered with delusive bliss one hour – suffocating with the bitterest tears of remorse and shame the next – or to be a village-schoolmistress, free and honest, in a breezy mountain nook in the healthy heart of England?

Yes; I feel now that I was right when I adhered to principle and law, and scorned and crushed the insane promptings of a frenzied moment, God directed me to a correct choice: I thank His providence for the guidance! (p. 318)

Yet, she comes to the conclusion that she has made the right choice by not giving in to her passions and thereby refraining from the temporary bliss of a union with Mr Rochester. According to Mary Poovey, Jane’s suffering is the necessary “first stage in her gradual recovery of kinship, independence, money, and enough mastery to write both her story and Rochester’s” (in Glen 1997:182). She discovers that the Rivers are her cousins and that her uncle John from Madeira has left her a fortune – thus, she not only finds the family she has always longed for but she also gains financial independence.

What is more, her cousin St John asks her to marry him and join him on his missionary journey to India. He does not offer her love, but a relationship governed by reason – showing her the contrast between what she could have found with Mr Rochester and a future life of harsh labour in India. St John is a handsome man, but he is also cold and hard (cf. “Reason, and not feeling, is my guide”, p. 332), suppressing his desire for the beautiful Miss Rosamond Oliver because he believes she would not be a suitable companion for his missionary life. He chooses Jane instead, because she is “formed for labour, not for love” (p. 356), telling her that God and nature intended her to be a missionary’s wife. But Jane does not feel the vocation to sacrifice her life in order to live with a man who only regards her as a “useful tool” (p. 368), in a foreign country where she knows she would not survive long. In fact, she has never ceased to think about Mr Rochester and her desire to find out what has happened to him after
she left is – now that she feels equal to him – stronger than ever:

Perhaps you think I had forgotten Mr Rochester, reader, amidst these changes of place and fortune. Not for a moment. His idea was still with me, because it was not a vapour sunshine could disperse, nor a sand-traced effigy storms could wash away; it was a name graven on a tablet, fated to last as long as the marble it inscribed. (p. 353)

4.1.5 The turning point
There are two major turning points in the narrative of Jane Eyre: the first one is complicating the plot in a negative way, represented by the failed marriage that leads to Jane’s escape from Thornfield and her subsequent journey to self-knowledge and independence; the second one offers the resolution and a turn for the better: it is the almost supernatural “call scene” – Mr Rochester’s desperate and passionate cry “Jane! Jane! Jane” (p. 371) which prevents Jane from yielding to St John’s proposal and leads her back to the man she loves.

Indeed, the call scene produces the last turn in the plot, its resolution, and thus – according to the logic of first-person retrospective form – the achieved voice which generates the entire narration. This brilliant figure – the chiasmic exchange of voices in the call scene – wraps together the voice of Jane’s romantic alter ego, the Protestant ‘inner voice’, and the narrative voice. Jane has heard the voice of her conscience, of God’s will, of her own wish-fulfilment, and of her lover’s need all in one. (Williams in Glen, 1997:241)

After she has mysteriously heard his voice, she longs to find out what has happened to her master and returns to Thornfield; this time as a rich and independent woman, well settled with her newfound relatives. In the meantime, as Jane finds out, Mr Rochester has experienced his own turning point: Thornfield Hall has been burned down by his mad wife, his wife has died and he has lost his eyesight and his right arm while trying to save her. Thus, Jane returns to a completely altered situation of reversed roles and a Mr Rochester who is entirely dependent on her and whom she can finally and unhindered love and marry.

4.1.6 The happy ending
The happy ending of Jane Eyre confirms the ideal of romantic love, showing that the heroine’s journey to self-fulfillment cannot be realised without love and marriage. It reaffirms the patriarchal ideal, but at the same time criticises it by maiming Rochester and thus almost reversing traditional gender roles. Boone describes this somewhat revolutionary ending as an attempt of Charlotte Brontë’s “to create a final union of relative parity, one that will not wholly compromise Jane’s insistent desire for a less stereotypically ‘feminine’ completeness of being”(1987: 97). In fact, Jane loves Rochester better now “when I can really be useful, to you, than I did in your state of proud independence” (p. 394), while he has become humbled
and does not mind being led by her. As Susan Meyer argues, Rochester’s blindness is even liberating for Jane, who never had beauty, because “it takes from him any power of visual evaluation of her” (in Glen, 1997:120). Even the servant Mary observes that “i’ his een she’s fair beautiful, onybody may see that” (p. 398).

Jane and Mr Rochester find their happy ending in a perfect realisation of the “companionate marriage”, even expanding the concept of the complementary halves, as Jane becomes her husband’s vision as well as his right hand – thus not only completing his soul but also his body. Their happy ending is one of perfect bliss and harmony, as Jane assures the reader in the traditional epilogue of the marriage plot convention:

I have now been married ten years. I know what it is to live entirely for and with what I love best on earth. I hold myself supremely blest – blest beyond what language can express; because 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. I know no weariness of my Edward’s society: he knows none of mine, any more than we each do of the pulsation of the heart that beats in our separate bosoms; consequently we are ever together [...] All my confidence is bestowed on him, all his confidence is devoted to me; we are precisely suited in character – perfect concord is the result. (p. 399)

Indeed, a honeymoon that will shine a life long, showing the reader that being faithful and true to oneself is eventually rewarded.

4.2 The development of the protagonists

Beneath the surface of a female bildungsroman, Jane Eyre is a story about the power of unconditional love. Love between social classes, between two completely different and yet harmonious characters, between an “elf” and a “Vulcan” and between a governess and her master that later become a rich heiress and a maimed gentleman. It is a love that develops against all odds, that forgives all faults of character and wrong decisions and that does not look back on the past but instead focuses on the bliss of the moment in each others company: “in his presence I thoroughly lived; and he lived in mine” (p.387).

Before coming to Thornfield Hall, Jane has led a quiet and monotonous existence; then Rochester steps into her life as the prototype of the Byronic hero – dark, mysterious and tormented – and completely overturns it by showing her the joys of life. He is the first benevolent patriarch she meets (and of course the first eligible bachelor), taking notice of her and encouraging her, and she is flourishing in his company. The feelings between them develop largely through mental exchange in their regular evening conversations – both of them neither possess beauty nor charm, but share an equally strong character and a desire for independence. Jane claims her mental equality to Rochester already at the beginning of their
relationship, stating that: “I don’t think, sir, you have the right to command me, merely because you are older than I, or because you have seen more of the world than I have” (p. 117), even though she knows that “wealth, caste and custom” (p. 221) inevitably separate them. For Rochester, however, class difference does not present an obstacle: As he later confesses to Jane, he was searching for his ideal woman all over Europe, “amongst English ladies, French countesses, Italian signoras, and German gräfinnen”, growing more and more desperate in the attempt, until she finally appeared like a fairy from the hills, fascinating and “full of strange contrasts”, “shy and independent” at the same time, not shrinking away from his temper and always meeting him with a pleasant smile (p.277):

After a youth and manhood passed half in unutterable misery and half in dreary solitude, I have for the first time found what I can truly love – I have found you. You are my sympathy – my better self – my good angel. I am bound to you with a strong attachment. I think you good, gifted, lovely: a fervent, a solemn passion is conceived in my heart; it leans to you, draws you to my centre and spring of life, wraps my existence about you, and, kindling in pure, powerful flames, fuses you and me in one. (p. 278)

Mr Rochester is a proud and sardonic character, tormented by his tragic past; thus, the only way he sees to find out how Jane feels about him is by pretending to court another woman and awakening Jane’s jealousy. Jane, on the other hand, has learned to repress her feelings through her strict education at Lowood and does not make any advances towards Mr Rochester – yet, she cannot help loving him:

Most true is it that ‘beauty is in the eye of the gazer.’ My master’s colourless, olive face, square, massive brow, broad and jetty eyebrows, deep eyes, strong features, firm, grim mouth, – all energy, decision, will, – were not beautiful, according to rule; but they were more than beautiful to me; they were full of an interest, an influence that quite mastered me, – that took my feelings from my own power and fettered them in his. I had not intended to love him; the reader knows I had wrought hard to extirpate from my soul the germs of love there detected; and now, at the first renewed view of him, they spontaneously arrived, green and strong! He made me love him without looking at me. (p. 153)

In his selfish striving for gratification, Rochester only thinks of his own good and (unintentionally) hurts Jane in the process by making her think that the man she loves could never be her husband (cf. Jamie Lynn Jensen, 2004:63). When he finally does confess his feelings for her and tries to make use of the classical schemes of courtship (cf. “every privilege, every attention shall be yours that I would accord a peer’s daughter, if about to marry her” – p. 228), he is rejected by Jane, who does not enjoy this game of courting and affectation – it makes her feel like “an ape in a harlequin’s jacket” (p. 228). Neither romantic declarations of feelings nor love songs have an effect on Jane, who refuses to sink into a
“lamb-like-submission and a turtle-dove-sensitivity” like lovers usually do. His attempts of charming her, rather remind her of Hercules and Samson, who both did not act very wisely in love. By keeping him at a distance she also increases his desire for her and balances the power relations by refusing to accept his expensive presents. However, their relationship is far from perfect, because Jane is financially dependent on Rochester, who is trying to form her according to his wishes: “As Mr Rochester’s clothes displace Jane’s so does Jane fear that her desire to love and be the object of love will entirely displace her equally strong wish to maintain her independence” (Homans in Glen, 1997:153). Therefore, Bertha Mason appears in the narrative as Mr Rochester’s wife and prevents them from getting married in this state of imperfection. Before she can give up herself in marriage, Jane has to continue her journey to self-fulfillment and financial independence. She prefers to work as a schoolmistress and be able to care for herself, to living as Rochester’s mistress, entirely dependent on his good will. When she finally returns to Rochester, she makes that decision in full possession of herself and as a completely different person – no longer unconnected or socially inferior to him. She has experienced hardships, learned to care for herself, received another proposal of marriage and seen the possibility of a different way of life – and now deliberately chooses to live with Rochester.

Jane’s Bildungsroman, in a way that is probably more characteristic of a hero’s than a heroine’s text, shows us what she learns, shows her at work in the world, shows her, above all, arriving at a choice, albeit a restricted one, of possible vocations at the end […] She longs for broader horizons, pleads for a wider range of activities for women, gives an impassioned defence of the right to feeling to those who are ‘poor, obscure, plain and little’. She suffers, fights back, stands by her principles, vanquishes her enemies, and ends up ‘supremely blest’. (Boumelha, in Glen, 1997:141)

In the end, Jane and Rochester complement each other, both gaining from and growing with their love. Jane gains self-confidence, while Rochester is humbled in the course of their relationship: now he is physically dependent on her, only gradually regaining his autonomy by recovering the sight of one eye. And even if Jane exchanges her independence in order to be an “angel in the house”, as critics often argue, she does so out of her free will and in pursuit of her own happiness, as Sally Minogue states: “Her story still speaks for those ‘millions…in silent revolt against their lot’ (p. 95); if, at its ending, she opts for the refuge of personal happiness, who among us will blame her?” (1999: xxiii)

4.3 The marriage debate
Jane’s story seems to be continuously influenced by marriages: beginning with her mother’s unapproved choice of husband that leads to her inferior social status, to her substitute-mother
Miss Temple’s marriage that motivates Jane to leave Lowood Institution, to her own failed-wedding with Mr Rochester and her subsequent quest for self-fulfillment that is again completed in marriage.

The marriage debate is a central element of the courtship plot, investigating different motives for and ideals of marriage. Everything depends on the right choice of mate, because once the matrimonial knot is tied, the partners are to be happy or miserable forever and ever (cf. Boone, 1987:78). It is especially important to understand who wants whom and for what cause, because there are many different considerations behind the characters’ actions.

4.3.1 Contrasting views on marriage

Some of the characters are motivated by financial or societal reasons, some by religious motives, others by love or desire. Blanche Ingram is considering to marry Mr Rochester simply because he is rich, and suddenly looses interest when he spreads a rumour that his fortune is less than she expected. Jane thinks that Rochester will marry Miss Ingram – if not for love – for her family connections and is disappointed because she “would have thought him a man unlikely to be influenced by motives so commonplace in his choice of a wife” (p.164). When the gypsy asks Jane about her own feelings, she declares that the monotonous scheme of courtship and marriage means nothing to her:

‘What tale do you like best to hear?’
‘Oh, I have not much choice! They generally run on the same theme – courtship; and promise to end in the same catastrophe – marriage.’
‘And do you like that monotonous theme?’
‘Positively, I don’t care about it: it is nothing to me.’ (p.174)

Jane is not like Mr Rochester’s former mistresses. She does not want to be courted, to be showered with presents or called beautiful: “I don’t call you handsome, sir, though I love you most dearly: far too dearly to flatter you. Don’t flatter me” (p. 228). What she is looking for is a relationship between equal partners, based on respect and mutual affection. Thus, the central love story of Jane Eyre is not a traditional tale of courtship, but a tale of passionate love that manages to overcome all obstacles in an unconventional way – abstaining from flattery, courtesies and pretensions. This stands in stark contrast to Mr Rochester’s first marriage that was entirely based on flattery and the illusion of love: his father tricked him into marrying a woman he barely knew, only for financial reasons. Bertha Mason’s family, on the other hand, only wanted Rochester’s family connections and rank in society. Finally, Mr Rochester agreed to marry Bertha, because he was inexperienced and blind and thought he loved her – “tall, dark, and majestic” (p. 269) as she was, displaying her beauty and charms for his
pleasure. The catastrophe that follows shows that marriage only works when it is contracted for the right reasons.

Also St John Rivers does not look for love or desire in marriage, he chooses only with his mind, marking Jane as the right instrument in God’s service: “I claim you – not for my pleasure, but for my Sovereign’s service” (p. 356). Even if he believes that “enough of love would follow upon marriage” (p. 360), Jane cannot yield to such an offer, knowing that “the spirit was quite absent” (p. 358). This leads back to the question of passion against reason: should reason or passion prevail in an individual’s choice of marital partner? St John loves the beautiful Miss Rosamond Oliver, but reason forbids him to marry her, because she would not suit his purpose. He does not love Jane and still proposes to her – solely because he believes her to be the right wife for a missionary. However, true love and compatibility are needed for a functioning relationship – and Jane and Rochester fulfill these requirements, finding their happy ending in the only successful marriage of the novel.

4.3.2 Contrasting partners

In order to understand how the relationship between Jane and Mr Rochester works, it is necessary to analyse their other possible partners, namely: Bertha Mason, Céline Varens and Blanche Ingram, as well as St John Rivers. They all offer different options to the protagonists, a different way of life and different turns for the narrative. Moreover, they all contribute to the final happiness of Jane and Rochester – both in separating and uniting them.

Bertha Mason, Rochester’s first wife, is an extreme example of excessive passion – mad, unpredictable, violent and craving for blood, with bloated features like a demon. Bertha is a Creole from the West Indies, and represents the fear of Otherness as well as Jane’s passionate side. Rochester has married her out of the folly of youth and lives to deeply regret it as his beautiful and exotic bride turns out to be a mad drunkard who makes his life a living hell. In search of a remedy for his agony he travels all over Europe, living with different mistresses from France, Italy and Germany. When he finally finds true love in the form of the quakerish governess Jane Eyre, Bertha stands between them, again destroying his chance of happiness and making him repent for his wrong choice. She haunts Thornfield Hall like a Gothic phantom – “the Madwoman in the attic” – and her appearances work to bring Jane and Rochester together, even if her very existence keeps them apart. When she sets fire to Rochester’s bed, Jane saves him, in a key scene of the novel, igniting the fire of hope for their relationship. In her second appearance she attacks her own brother, again bringing Rochester and Jane together in their joint attempt to conceal the mystery from Rochester’s visitors.

When she visits Jane before her wedding and tears the wedding veil, she scares Jane into
seeking Rochester’s proximity and confiding in him. Then, finally, her existence is revealed, cutting the connection between the two lovers and leaving them further apart than ever. In the end, however, she paves the way for their reunion by setting the house on fire again, killing herself and maiming Rochester in the process – all necessary prerequisites for their reunion as equal partners. Moreover, Bertha also works as a natural counterpart to Jane, because Rochester seeks a woman that is her complete opposite. His experiences with her have left him wary of first impressions, and reformed him from seeking an ideal of beautiful appearance into preferring a beautiful soul.

Céline Varens is one of Rochester’s European mistresses, and mother of his ward Adèle. She is a beautiful French opera-dancer toward whom Rochester once cherished a ‘grande passion’ (p. 123), thinking that she returned his love and admired him for his – what she called – ‘beauté mâle’ (p. 126). However, as he painfully finds out, she has only used him for his money and was betraying him with other men, laughing about his personal defects and his stupidity. She is all appearance, standing in contrast to Jane’s honest declaration that she does not think Mr Rochester a handsome man.

Blanche Ingram – tall, dark and graceful, with her olive complexion and noble features – is Mr Rochester’s supposedly chosen future bride. She is beautiful and well connected, but – in Jane’s eyes – lacks character and compassion. She does not love Mr Rochester, thinking only of her personal monetary gains. She has “Roman features”, is “moulded like a Dian” (p. 150), majestic, sprightly and an accomplished singer. In the course of the evenings, Jane studies her character, implicitly comparing Miss Ingram as a complete opposite to herself:

She was very showy, but she was not genuine: she had a fine person, many brilliant attainments; but her mind was poor, her heart barren by nature: nothing bloomed spontaneously on that soil; no unforced natural fruit delighted by its freshness. She was not good; she was not original: she used to repeat sounding phrases from books: she never offered, nor had, an opinion of her own. She advocated a high tone of sentiment; but she did not know the sensations of sympathy and pity; tenderness and truth were not in her. (p. 162)

However, one has to consider that a jealous and disappointed lover is providing this description of character; and that Mr Rochester is only using Miss Ingram as a means to an end. Even Jane sees that Miss Ingram “could not charm him” (p. 163) and that he would only marry her for her family connections and not for love. By observing her behaviour towards Mr Rochester, Jane becomes aware of the contrast between their relationship and hers with her master. She sees how Blanche “might have succeeded” (p. 163) and how much better she (Jane) would be able to love and delight Mr Rochester.
St John Rivers is Jane’s cousin, her second suitor and the complete opposite to Mr Rochester. He is a handsome and idealistic man, dedicating his life to a higher cause and abdicating from earthly pleasures. He is “a cold, hard, ambitious man”, as he describes himself: “Reason, and not feeling, is my guide; my ambition is unlimited: my desire to rise higher, to do more than others, insatiable” (p. 332). He scorns his weakness for desiring the beautiful Miss Rosamond Oliver, which Jane calls “a love of the senses” (p. 347). He seeks a wife fitted to his vocation as a missionary, not a soulmate. Au contraire, St John is ‘claiming’ Jane as his wife in the name of God – deeply insulting her, by telling her that she is “formed for labour, not love” (p.336). Jane extends this statement by arguing that if she is not formed for love, it would naturally follow that she is not formed for marriage either (cf. p. 368). Moreover, St John does not court her like a lover would, but like “a pastor, recalling his wandering sheep” (p. 370). Her relationship with St John makes Jane remember what it is like to be truly loved, urging her to find out what has become of Mr Rochester. After she has found her true lover again and been reunited with him, St John works as a means of revenge for Jane, who is now in turn teasing Rochester with her second suitor. Answering Rochester’s questions about her bachelor cousin, she describes him as “a handsome man: tall, fair, with blue eyes, and a Grecian profile” (p.391), who is struck by the “rather too overwhelming contrast” between St John, the “graceful Apollo” and himself, the “Vulcan – a real blacksmith, brown, broad-shouldered: and blind and lame into the bargain” (p. 391). However, Jane assures him that these outer appearances do not influence her: she cares only about character, and St John is “cold as an iceberg” (p. 393) and could never make her happy as a husband. In contrast to St John, we are able to understand why Jane loves Rochester, “the old lightning-struck chestnut tree” (p. 393) – in all his irrationality, with all his faults and deficiencies, as a real human being, moved by honest passion.

5. Illusions and Ideals in George Eliot’s Middlemarch

“What loneliness is more lonely than distrust?” – Middlemarch, ch.44

George Eliot’s Middlemarch, first published in 1871-2, is A Story of Provincial Life that connects its leading characters in several intertwined strands of narration. It is a story of “men and women looking for their place in society, men and women trying to shape society, and men and women in love” (cf. Hardy, 1959:115). Eliot explores relationships and marriage as the cornerstones of her novel, criticising romantic ideals and casting an ironic glance on false expectations of society and individuals. According to Jeanie Thomas (1987:394), Middlemarch “offers itself as the history of a community, evolving slowly, reluctantly,
usually unconsciously, and of the various people – women and men alike – whose growth requires that they abdicate youthful romance and accept the limits life imposes”. It is a story about change and how individuals react to it, as well as a story about unrealised opportunities and the search for identity.

Gilbert and Gubar call it “a portrait of female destiny”, referring to Dorothea Brooke’s quest for an epic life that develops into a fairly conventional happy ending after a series of trials and frustrated ambitions. In comparison to the previously analysed novels, *Middlemarch* moves from the traditional courtship plot used by Austen and Brontë, to the wedlock plot – presenting the trials of a mismatched union in a life beyond the classical happy ending. However, it does not end on an overall pessimistic note, as it gives its heroine Dorothea Brooke a second chance for happiness after her first disastrous marriage and her subsequent personal growth. Nevertheless, there are other characters, less fortunate, who remain entrapped by their wrong choices (cf. Rosamond and Lydgate, or the Bulstrodes) and have to learn how to live with them. All these episodes of provincial life lead to questions about the meaning of marriage, the status of women and the validity of individual ambition (cf. Edwards, 2003: 21), which the author treats with incredible delicacy and insight – however, without offering a solution to women’s central problem of how to find personal fulfillment in a true vocation outside of marriage.

In the following chapter, I am going to analyse the courtship and wedlock plot of *Middlemarch*, focusing on its presentation of a life beyond the happy ending, when the lovers begin to realise how they have deluded themselves in the idealisation and fantasies of their married lives. I will juxtapose the different couples and highlight their contrasts and similarities, also mentioning Eliot’s criticism of marriage as “being decided according to custom, by good looks, vanity, and merely canine affection” (p.8). Finally, I will discuss one of the main problems of the novel’s world, namely the false ideals and illusions of society, stressed by Weber (2012:508):

Thus, at its outset, the novel demonstrates that conventional images of femininity, domesticity, and marriage occur not only as habits of thought, but also in explicit narratives offered particularly to young women – as ideal. *Middlemarch’s* contention with such images emphasizes their dangerous potential, in their promise of ideal fulfilment that cannot correspond to the lived experience of relationship. Human life is ongoing and open-ended; one cannot find contentment in an image.
5.1 The Unfolding of the Plot

Middlemarch is presented in a multi-plot narrative, mainly recounting the stories of four couples: the Casaubons, the Lydges, the Bulstrodes and Fred and Mary. In my analysis of the book, I will focus on the story of Dorothea Brooke with Mr Causaubon and Will Ladislaw, in contrast to the relationship between Tertius Lydgate and Rosamond Vincy. These are the stories where the marriage plot appears in its most dramatic form, showing the illusions of first impressions created during the brief periods of courtship and the harsh realities that come to light after the wedding.

The prelude of Middlemarch begins with an allusion to Saint Theresa and her epic life, directly followed by the introduction of Dorothea Brooke and her quest for a meaningful life of devotion to a higher cause in Chapter 1. Dorothea is presented as clever, devoted and full of energy and passionate ideas. Her love of extremes stands in contrast to her sister Celia, who is described as having common sense and worldly wisdom, while being more practical and even-tempered. The sisters are orphans and live with their bachelor uncle, Mr Brooke, an aspiring politician with ever-changing ideas, who would like Dorothea to marry their neighbour, Sir James Chettam. Dorothea – “open, ardent, and not in the least self-admiring” (p. 10) – is completely unaware of his advances towards herself and thinks he is courting her sister. Sir James’ attentions are merely annoying her, as she prefers to listen to the elderly scholar, Mr Casaubon, who is also invited as a guest at her uncle's dinner party. On this occasion, she compares Casaubon to Sir James: “He had the spare form and the pale complexion which became a student; as different as possible from the blooming Englishman of the red-whiskered type represented by Sir James Chettam” (p. 16). In Dorothea’s eyes (and imagination), Mr Casaubon’s supreme attraction lies in his knowledge and the possibility for her to be a useful assistant to his meaningful research, “The Key to all Mythologies”. What she looks for is not the attraction of youth and energy, but a deeper meaning in life, and she projects all her fantasies on Mr Casaubon, whom she compares to Locke and admires as a “living Bossuet” and “a modern Augustine who united the glories of doctor and saint” (p.25). No one else is aware of Dorothea’s fantasies, and Sir James Chettam does not even realise that he might have a competitor: “it never occured to him that a girl to whom he was meditating an offer of marriage could care for a dried bookworm towards fifty, except, indeed, in a religious sort of way, as for a clergyman of some distiction.” (p.22) However, Dorothea is captivated by Casaubon’s vast area of knowledge and by the possibility of a whole new world opening up to her, and begins to imagine a “vision of a possible future for herself to which she looked forward with trembling hope” (p. 27). And really, when Casaubon proposes to her by letter,
she believes that all her dreams of an “epic life” will finally come true – while everyone else around her is shocked by her choice. Mr Brooke would have thought Sir James to be “just the sort of man a woman would like” (p.40), Celia sheds bitter tears, the neighbour Mrs Cadwallader thinks it is “frightful”, and the rejected suitor Sir James calls Casaubon “no better than a mummy”.

At a dinner party preceding their wedding, Dorothea’s marriage plot begins to intersect with the story of Tertius Lydgate, a young surgeon and a newcomer to Middlemarch society. This ambitious young doctor is a “man with a vocation” (cf. Ashton, 1994:xii), who wants to achieve great things in medical research – however, his plans are thwarted by the beautiful and refined Rosamond Vincy, who is bored by Middlemarch society and singles him out as her future husband, spinning a web of romance with Lydgate at its centre. At this very dinner party, Lydgate (as second main character in the novel) is introduced to Miss Dorothea Brooke, whom he immediately judges as not his “style of woman” (p.93):

“She is a good creature— that fine girl— but a little too earnest,” he thought. “It is troublesome to talk to such women. They are always wanting reasons, yet they are too ignorant to understand the merits of any question, and usually fall back on their moral sense to settle things after their own taste.”

Ironically, Dorothea is the one character most similar to him in her aspirations and desires for a meaningful life, and some scholars and critics argue that there would have been a romantic possibility between Lydgate and Dorothea as the real hero and the real heroine of the novel, since they are “so alike in mind and ardour, but – significantly – a woman without a vocation and a man with one” (cf. Hardy, 1959:139). Another thing that connects them is their equally bad choice in marriage, created by false expectations and illusions about the ideal partner.

5.1.1 Great Expectations and Illusions

According to Thomas (1987:405), all of the characters in Middlemarch get the prospects of their own lives confused with romantic or heroic metaphors: Dorothea idealises the married lives of Milton and Hooker, Casaubon wants a secretary and adorer of his work, Rosamond imagines herself a romantic heroine and Lydgate looks for a “decorative figure who can sing and play the piano and provide a soft cushion for her husband to rest on after work” (Ashton, 1994:xiv). Eliot criticises all of these naive expectations by deeply disappointing her characters in them. She depicts Dorothea’s devotion to Casaubon as a part of an inner melodramatic fantasy (cf. Mahawatte, 2008:126), but still attributes her sincere feelings towards her husband, whereas Casaubon is presented as cold-hearted and self-centred. He chooses to marry only because it is the reasonable next step in his career and does not really consider the feelings of his young bride. Everyone else can see the mismatch of their union,
and even Casaubon himself gets wearied by the process of courtship and by playing the role of lover:

For in truth, as the day fixed for his marriage came nearer, Mr. Casaubon did not find his spirits rising; nor did the contemplation of that matrimonial garden scene, where, as all experience showed, the path was to be bordered with flowers, prove persistently more enchanting to him than the accustomed vaults where he walked taper in hand. He did not confess to himself, still less could he have breathed to another, his surprise that though he had won a lovely and noble-hearted girl he had not won delight,—which he had also regarded as an object to be found by search. It is true that he knew all the classical passages implying the contrary; but knowing classical passages, we find, is a mode of motion, which explains why they leave so little extraneous force for their personal application. (p.85)

Casaubon had thought that he would feel passion and be able to enjoy the company of his young bride, but instead he only views courtship as a hindrance to the progress of his great work. Dorothea, on the other hand, in her childlike innocence, only sees the world of possibilities opening up to her and ignores all the well-meant warnings of her friends (Sir James asks if Casaubon has any heart, while Celia is questioning Dorothea’s vision of his “great soul”):

Frustrated by her own lack of experience and education, yet struggling to do something purposeful with her life, Dorothea internalizes the idea of wifely duty, looking to marriage as a way out of ignorance and into a meaningful existence. Marriage to Casaubon appears to Dorothea as an escape from quotidian pettiness to a life of purpose. (Weber, 2012:507)

5.1.2 Married Life beyond the Happy Ending
There is no description of the wedding between Dorothea and Casaubon in the text, and it moves directly from their courtship to their honeymoon in Rome. During their honeymoon, which is supposed to “isolate two people on the ground that they are all the world to each other” (p.201), Dorothea begins to discover the trials of wedded life, and her husband’s general lack of passion in their relationship. Casaubon’s impotence is never explicitly mentioned in the novel, but it is clear that their marriage has not been consummated and that Casaubon will not be able to produce an heir. Because Casaubon is engaged with his books, Dorothea has to spend most of her time alone, and is discovered “sobbing bitterly” out of frustration of her youthful passions and illusions about the perfect life she would have with her husband as a spiritual and intellectual guide. The only one comforting her and challenging her thoughts is Casaubon’s young cousin, Will Ladislaw, who admires Dorothea from the first time he sees her in Rome, and idealises her as a “goddess”, “a poem” or “a work of art”.

However, Dorothea’s relationship to Will is always presented as an innocent friendship on her side and an illusion of a courtly love romance on his (the remote Lady and the faithful
knight). According to Maxwell (1996: 122), his love for Dorothea is “compounded of a
chivalric aestheticism which dooms him to look rather than act”.

The Casaubons are not only far apart in age (the author always stresses Dorothea’s
blooming youth in comparison to the aging and sickly Casaubon) but they are also physically
and emotionally mismatched. Mr Casaubon cannot find any sympathy for his wife and falls
short of becoming her tutor and guide, focusing instead on his selfish interests. When they
return to Lowick, it quickly becomes apparent that his “Key to All Mythologies” is not the
great work Dorothea believed it to be, and that Casaubon’s ideas are a mere labyrinth that
leads nowhere. When he, in turn, becomes aware of his wife’s criticism, it only leads to
further estrangement between the unequal couple. The only rays of hope to escape the
dreariness of this “nightmare of a life in which every energy was arrested by dread” (p.375)
are Dorothea’s encounters with Will Ladislaw. Ladislaw is the man who gratifies her
emotional needs, and she finds comfort in her conversations with him: “a lunette opened in
the walls of her prison, giving her a glimpse of the sunny air” (p.375). As Casaubon becomes
aware of Will’s influence on his wife, he forbids him to come to his house and encourages him
to leave Middlemarch and find a useful occupation in some other part of the world. Eliot
describes his inner struggles:

Poor Mr Casaubon was distrustful of everybody’s feeling towards him, especially as a husband. To let
anyone suppose that he was jealous would be to admit their (suspected) view of his disadvantages: to let
them know that he did not find marriage particularly blissful would imply his conversion to their
(probably) earlier disapproval. (p.376)

However, she does not awaken any false sympathies about this “most horrible of virgin-
sacrifices” (p.360), as Will Ladislaw calls Casaubon’s marriage to Dorothea. But exactly as
Dorothea’s adoration of her husband is about to turn into anger and hate, she realises his
weakness and begins to pity him with her compassionate nature (cf. Wilson and Ridler,
1989:117): “Her marriage cannot possibly revive to become the partnership she had imagined,
but she does find a modus vivendi, losing resentment in pity, when she sees her husband for
the miserable being he is, and changing the function of wife for that of secretary and
sick-nurse”. When Casaubon suffers a stroke and Lydgate tells her that his life is in danger,
Dorothea finds her vocation in caring for husband – however, she cannot commit herself to
fulfilling his last wish in publishing his hopeless and confused study. Paradoxically, this
inability of their relationship to offer any opportunities for real closeness or confirmation of
identity leads to her personal growth and greater maturity through self-recognition and
In contrast to the obviously unnatural pair (the Casaubons), Tertius Lydgate and Rosamond Vincy appear to be the perfect couple. Both are young and blooming, Lydgate is admired for his medical talents and Rosamond for her refined manners and perfect education. Their love is blooming like a fairytale romance, it is full of passion, promises and aspirations – but it ends in the same rough awakening to the ugly truth.

Those words of Lydgate’s were like a sad milestone marking how far he had travelled from his old dreamland, in which Rosamond Vincy appeared to be that perfect piece of womanhood who would reverence her husband’s mind after the fashion of an accomplished mermaid, using her comb and looking-glass and singing her song for the relaxation of his adored wisdom alone. (p.583)

They both have different expectations for their married lives, based on self-interest and the prevalent romantic ideals of society. Rosamond’s world is centred around herself and her feelings for Lydgate are shallow; whereas he thinks himself superior to her and does not consider her point of view on the matter (cf. Edwards, 2003:81):

Lydgate and Rosamond do not speak each other’s moral language; but it is a long time before they understand that fact. Lydgate wants a wife who will support him in his scientific endeavours and provide him with relaxation from them; Rosamond wants security, a comfortable life and social status.

When they realise their mistakes, it is already too late and they have to adjust themselves to the terrible reality of a life with a partner, who does not share their interests and will never be able to give them emotional fulfillment. Lydgate has to accept that Rosamond has her own head and does not ask him for advice, while she has to come to terms with the fact that her husband cannot provide her with the carefree and superficial life she had hoped for. This is one of the main contrasts between Dorothea and Rosamond: the latter does not care about her husband’s occupation and tells him she wishes that he weren’t a medical man, whereas the former is looking for a man with a vocation and is deeply disappointed when she finds out that Casaubon can offer her neither emotional nor intellectual fulfillment. What unites them are their incarcerating marriages and their subsequent personal growth. Their stories also offer different solutions to the wrong choice dilemma: While Rosamond has to live with Lydgate and bear him two children, Dorothea is rescued by Casaubon’s death and gets a second chance to find her happy ending.

5.1.3. The Impediments to a Second Chance of a Happy Ending

Before she can finally find her happy ending, however, she has to overcome a series of obstacles, beginning with the discovery of her own feelings for Will, to Casaubon’s codicil, her friend’s opinions, social class and Will’s apparent love for Rosamond Vincy. What keeps them apart also works as incentive for their romance: “Will takes a romantic delight in the
very hopelessness of his love” (cf. Hardy, 1959:114). It is a forbidden love, encouraged by its impossibility and the general opposition against it. While Casaubon is still alive, it is a love only imagined by Will and cherished in his knightly fantasies of the courtly romance. This innocent adoration is blemished by Casaubon’s codicil to his will, which would take away everything from Dorothea if she were to marry Will Ladislaw. This manifest of Casaubon’s jealousy sheds a completely new light on the situation and presents a positive insult to the innocent Dorothea. According to Sir James, who tries to hide the ugly truth from her, “there never was a meaner, more ungentlemanly action than this” (p.484), and it finally confirms his opinion of Casaubon’s having no heart.

Throughout the novel, Casaubon is described in very unflattering terms and almost viewed as a monster to which Dorothea has been sacrificed. Will, on the other hand, is completely different from Casaubon and adores Dorothea as his one ideal and chosen lady. She is the Beatrice to his Dante, whom he knows he will never possess: “What I care more for than I can ever care for anything else is absolutely forbidden to me— I don't mean merely by being out of my reach, but forbidden me, even if it were within my reach, by my own pride and honor— by everything I respect myself for.” (p.633) He thinks himself as not worthy of Dorothea and finally decides to leave Middlemarch as he finds out about the codicil and Casaubon’s mean intentions. Thus, the lovers are in danger of being separated forever by outside forces and misunderstandings.

Again, following the tradition of the marriage plot, many of these obstacles exist only in the characters’ mind: Dorothea, in her childlike innocence, has yet to discover her own feelings for Will and realise that he does in fact only love her and not Rosamond Vincy. Will has to find out that Dorothea does not care about money or social standing and has to overcome his own pride. Finally, both of them have to defy society’s general opinion and find their happiness against all odds. This desire for a happy resolution is already created during Dorothea and Casaubon’s honeymoon, when Will walks in on the crying Dorothea, who has been left alone by her uncaring husband. The subsequent “love triangle” – that at the time being only exists for the reader, Casaubon and Will – is steadily intensified by the narrator by opposing Will and his “sunny brightness“ to Casaubon's “rayless” figure. Bubel (2008:30) addresses the involvement of the reader through this classical narrative technique of the marriage plot:

The reader is pulled into the romantic triangle, desiring along with Will and Dorothea for the fulfillment of their clearly deserved happiness together, though it entail psychological unfaithfulness and the destruction of the marriage between Dorothea and Casaubon. Such desire, in both the lovers and in the reader, is only heightened as the distance is increased between the lovers.
5.1.4 The turning point

The novel consists of various turning points, some of them outward, others as solutions to mainly inner struggles. The major turning point of the novel lies in the resolution of the wedlock-plot: Casaubon’s death, untying the matrimonial knot and freeing Dorothea from her incarcerating and loveless marriage, and giving her a second chance to find a truly happy ending. After this incident, the novel recommences (or continues) with the courtship and marriage plot between Will and Dorothea, letting Casaubon sink into the oblivion he deserves. His legacy is not – as he wished – his “Key to All Mythologies”, but the codicil to his will, which helps Dorothea to realise the true character of her late husband and her feelings for Will Ladislaw:

Knowledge of the codicil causes Dorothea to completely reassess her situation. Thus, Casaubon functions as an “awakener of his wife” (cf. Travis, 1999:371), inciting her personal growth by making her realise the flaws of her child-like fantasies about marriage, caused by inexperience and false ideals. At first, Dorothea delights in her knowledge that Will loves her, even if she knows the obstacles between them are impossible to overcome. However, as she walks in on him comforting Rosamond, she is overcome by jealousy and grief at the realisation that she has deluded herself again. After Rosamond has told her the truth about Will's feelings, it is only money that stands between them. Will is poor, without a real profession and of obscure origins, and Dorothea would loose everything if she married him:

“There is no hope for me,” said Will. “Even if you loved me as well as I love you— even if I were everything to you— I shall most likely always be very poor: on a sober calculation, one can count on nothing but a creeping lot. It is impossible for us ever to belong to each other.” (p.810)

A storm is raging outside as they discuss the impossibility of ever being together, struggling between youthful passion and social propriety. In the end, it is Dorothea who takes the
incentive and rejects her wealth in order to be with Will in a fairytale-like happy ending (p. 811):

“Oh, I cannot bear it—my heart will break,” said Dorothea, starting from her seat, the flood of her young passion bearing down all the obstructions which had kept her silent—the great tears rising and falling in an instant: “I don’t mind about poverty—I hate my wealth.”

In an instant Will was close to her and had his arms round her, but she drew her head back and held his away gently that she might go on speaking, her large tear-filled eyes looking at his very simply, while she said in a sobbing childlike way, “We could live quite well on my own fortune—it is too much—seven hundred a-year—I want so little—no new clothes—and I will learn what everything costs.”

Maxwell (1996:125) states that “her feelings for Will are defined through opposition to her husband’s petty character and actions, the prohibition of her relatives and the threat of Rosamond Vincy”, and Mrs Cadwallader blames Casaubon himself for Dorothea’s decision to marry Will: “He made himself disagreeable [...] and then he dared her to contradict him” (p.817). Be it as it may, in the end, the two lovers manage to get together against all odds—a fact that gave rise to a fair amount of criticism for its conventionality.

5.1.5 Unfulfilled Potential in a Fairly Conventional Happy Ending?

Fernando (1972:49), criticises the novel’s romantic conclusion as being “double-edged” and as standing in contrast to Dorothea's true potential. Instead of becoming “a new Theresa” and living an epic life, she chooses the personal happiness of the “home epic” as a wife and mother. On the one hand, it is disappointing to observe Dorothea’s unsuccessful search for a vocation: As a woman she can only act as a rich benefactress, using her wealth to support the careers of the men in her life, instead of realising her own idealistic energies.

Thomas (1987:401) comments on this limited arena of action for women in the English novel: “Women in fiction are still 'Pamela’s daughters’ and are likely to remain so until they are defined through their contacts with the 'outer’ as well as the 'inner' circle.” She calls Dorothea’s marriage to Will “at once a disappointing compromise and a sort of fulfilment“ (Thomas, 1987:401). Her ambitions are frustrated, and “many who knew her, thought it a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another, and be only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother“ (p. 836). On the other hand, she is able to find satisfaction for her quest for a purpose in life in her marriage to Will—a true marriage of minds and the expected ending of the traditional marriage plot. What she needs is a life filled with emotion and she never repents her decision to give up her fortune for that.

Thus, Dorothea’s marriage to Will is not just a realistic conclusion to the tale of limitations and fulfillment, nor simply the one avenue of rebellion available to Dorothea, but
it also insists on withholding any resolution of the 'indefiniteness of woman's nature' – i.e. how to achieve vocational opportunities and access to power for themselves and other women without sacrificing the attentiveness to others and the disposition to nurture (cf. Thomas, 1987:410).

5.2 The Development of the Protagonists

*Middlemarch* is a story of unfulfilled potential, of high aspirations, rich imagination and harsh realities, encouraging and yet often disappointing its main characters in their delusions. It is a study of provincial life, with all its positive and negative sides, full of possibilities and limitations. And most of all, it is a story about the search for identity and meaning in life. The young heroine, Dorothea Brooke, is compared to “the childish Saint Theresa“ in her unrealistic expectations, and Eliot continually emphasises her inexperience and childlike innocence (cf. Hardy, 1959:50).

Those parts which concern her are a kind of female *Bildungsroman*, or story of the protagonist's education for (and by) life. She is cherished but also viewed ironically by her author as she blindly gropes forward, making mistakes in her sometimes foolish, often egoistical, but also admirably idealistic attempts to find a role. (Ashton, 1994:xvi)

Dorothea’s youthful passion, hunger for knowledge and girlish ignorance lead her to imagine an idealized version of an “epic life“ with poor Mr Causabon, who would never have been able to live up to her expectations.

“I should learn everything then,” she said to herself, still walking quickly along the bridle road through the wood. "It would be my duty to study that I might help him the better in his great works. There would be nothing trivial about our lives. Every- day things with us would mean the greatest things. It would be like marrying Pascal. I should learn to see the truth by the same light as great men have seen it by. And then I should know what to do, when I got older: I should see how it was possible to lead a grand life here— now— in England. I don't feel sure about doing good in any way now: everything seems like going on a mission to a people whose language I don't know;— unless it were building good cottages— there can be no doubt about that. Oh, I hope I should be able to get the people well housed in Lowick! I will draw plenty of plans while I have time.“ (p.29)

However, in all her illusions, she does honestly love Casaubon for his apparently “great soul“ and wisdom and worships him as her guide and superior. Mr Casaubon, on the other hand, chooses to marry because it is what society demands of him. He is wealthy and has achieved a lot in life, except for leaving behind “that copy of himself which seemed so urgently required of a man“ (p.278). Thus, he expects Dorothea to provide him with “family pleasure“ and “be such a helpmate to him as would enable him to dispense with a hired secretary“ (p.279). These expectations perfectly correspond to his unenthusiastic soul and proud self-
preoccupation, that does not take into account what it means for a “blooming young girl“ to marry such a withering, dispassionate and heartless bookworm. His proposal is done by letter in the most pompous way and reads itself like a scientific article, instead of the confession of a passionate lover:

Such, my dear Miss Brooke, is the accurate statement of my feelings; and I rely on your kind indulgence in venturing now to ask you how far your own are of a nature to confirm my happy presentiment. To be accepted by you as your husband and the earthly guardian of your welfare, I should regard as the highest of providential gifts. In return I can at least offer you an affection hitherto unwasted, [...] (p.44)

Compared to the passionate outbursts of Darcy and Rochester, this pompous piece of paper does not present true love but reasonable arguments for a union, described in a dry and well-structured way. Nevertheless, Dorothea’s mind is so full of all her imagined possibilities that she does not see what is quite obvious to everyone else: Casaubon will not be able to make her happy and is like “a dragon carrying her off to his lair“ (p.209). Only after they have been married, she has to find out that the “large vistas and wide fresh air which she had dreamed of finding in her husband’s mind were replaced by ante-rooms and winding passages which seemed to lead nowhither“ (p.195), and that she will never find emotional fulfillment in this dreary union that is draining all the light and energy out of her life. Casaubon himself is also disappointed by his wedded life, since he cannot seem to enjoy his wife’s company. He does not like her independence of mind, and her growing friendship to Will Ladislaw and thinks she pities him because he can produce neither “Key“ nor heir.

It is Will Ladislaw who awakens Dorothea and appeals to her, giving her the very attention that her husband is too weary and self-absorbed to spare. He helps her grow by showing her the joy of life, while her positive influence encourages him to finally decide on taking up a real profession. Following greek mythology, he is Dionysus, who comforts the grieving Ariadne after she has been abandoned by Theseus (cf. Shuttleworth, Rischin). Ladislaw is the Byronic hero of the story – just like Rochester, his countenance is changeable as the weather; like Darcy, he is full of prejudices and his pride stops him from declaring his love for Dorothea. He is even more explicitly Byronic, since he obviously adores only one woman: “I never had a preference for her, any more than I have a preference for breathing. No other woman exists by the side of her“ (p.778), he tells Rosamond.

Paradoxically, Casaubon’s death – with the declaration of jealousy in his codicil and the subsequent implication of Dorothea's infidelity – only enlargens the gulf between Will and Dorothea, while for the first time publicly hinting at the possibility of a union between them. It does awaken Dorothea’s love for Will, but at the same time it renders their relationship
even more impossible: for Will because his pride forbids him to act, and for Dorothea because everyone else is against Will and she does not want to hurt him. Thus, even as they are alone together the tension between them is not resolved; “It had seemed to him as if they were like two creatures slowly turning to marble in each other's presence, while their hearts were conscious and their eyes were yearning” (p.588), is how Will describes it. Both of them think that there is no hope, and only after she has seen Will with Rosamond and is overcome by her passion, is Dorothea strong enough to act. She has learned from her wrong choices and has grown up in the process. With her unconditional love – in an almost unrealistic happy ending – she helps Will to forget his past, accept his situation in life and finally take over responsibility. At the end of the novel, both of them have mastered challenges and gained knowledge and are finally ready to fulfill their quest: Dorothea receives the passion and love she requires, and Will gets the motivation to find his vocation in life. Something that does not change throughout the novel is Dorothea’s positive attitude towards life, a belief of her own that comforts her and gives her hope in her search for identity: “That by desiring what is perfectly good, even when we don’t quite know what it is and cannot do what we would, we are part of the divine power against evil – widening the skirts of light and making the struggle with darkness narrower.” (p.392)

5.3 The Marriage Debate

*Middlemarch* does not simply analyse provincial life, but gives an insight into the marriages of its characters, and how their lives together change over time. The focus lies on four couples: Casaubon and Dorothea, Lydgate and Rosamond, Mr and Mrs Bulstrode and Fred and Mary. Their relationships are build up in comparison to each other, highlighting questions of morality, as well as differences and similarities of human desires. According to Hardy (1959:98), these are all different versions of the same story:

The problems of money is one of the several themes which run through the contrasts and likeness of these marriages. But the important cross-reference is that of moral situation. Each is a marriage of opposites and a moral battlefield where there can be no truce. Rosamond defeats Lydgate, Mrs Bulstrode forgives and loves Bulstrode, Dorothea attempts to love and understand but eventually has to escape Casaubon's 'dead hand', and Mary Garth, with some help from Ibsen's 'helpers and servers' – Farebrother, Caleb Garth, and Featherstone's 'dead hand' – succeeds in rescuing Fred.

By comparing these couples to each other, and pointing out their different worldviews and motives for marriage, Eliot criticises the status quo and tries to educate her readers in the process. “Dorothea’s painful experience is not simply an account of personal disappointment but also a prescient critique of the conventional forms of marriage that fostered Dorothea’s
expectations.“ (Weber, 2012:516) It is society that forms people's opinions on marriage and social propriety, confining women to their role as nurturer and “angel in the house“ – a fact that Dorothea has to realise painfully as she tries to escape from the ties of conventionality and be the author of her own story. Eliot admittedly challenges these ideals, but in the end confirms them again, leaving a bitter taste, in the sense that there is still a long way to go before women will be able to escape the marriage plot as the only chance of fulfillment in life.

5.3.1 Contrasting Views on Marriage
All the characters of Middlemarch have different motives for marrying, based on their ideals and aspirations. These views are juxtaposed to each other, showing cause and effect of marriage decisions, ultimately determining what constitutes the right base for a successful relationship. The one with the most explicitly stated views is Dorothea Brooke, who sees marriage as a “state of higher duties“, bringing guidance into worthy and imperative occupation. She also has the most idealistic reasons for marrying – namely to dedicate herself to a higher cause, instead of enjoying a simple and carefree life with Sir James, the handsome and amiable baronet.

Dorothea, with all her eagerness to know the truths of life, retained very childlike ideas about marriage. She felt sure that she would have accepted the judicious Hooker, if she had been born in time to save him from that wretched mistake he made in matrimony; or John Milton when his blindness had come on; or any of the other great men whose odd habits it would have been glorious piety to endure; but an amiable handsome baronet, who said "Exactly" to her remarks even when she expressed uncertainty, – how could he affect her as a lover? The really delightful marriage must be that where your husband was a sort of father, and could teach you even Hebrew, if you wished it. (p. 9)

Her chosen bridegroom, Mr Casaubon, feels that he is getting old, and wants to marry and have children in order to leave “a copy of his mythological key“ behind, and exchange his loneliness for “domestic delights“. However, being a husband becomes nothing more than an outward requirement for him which he intends to fulfill unimpeachably, but fails terribly. He would need his wife to be an ornament and secretary, not a rebellious and passionate creature that upsets him with her spirited ideas. Sir James, on the other hand, wants a wife who would be able help him out with reason and he is “ready to endure a great deal of predominance, which, after all, a man could always put down when he liked“ (p. 21). Considerations of social standing and prosperity play the most important role for Rosamond Vincy, who is hoping to rise in rank by marrying Lydgate, who in turn seeks a home full of “calmness and freedom“ as he chooses his beautiful and perfectly educated bride. Mary Garth, however, applies reason to her decision and does not agree to marry her handsome and idle childhood
friend, Fred Vincy, before he finds a useful occupation and is able to provide for his future family.

Moreover, the voice of the narrator often comments on and shares critical opinions about marriage, i.a.: “A woman dictates before marriage in order that she may have an appetite for submission afterwards” (p.73). These ironic comments challenge the predominant power relations of the times, but do not overthrow them. Eliot presents marriage as a test for the partners, as something that demands compromise and a maturing process, “because of its pressure for intimacy, its presumed unifying of two selves, and because of its widespread actual existence as a situation of conflict and suffering” (Weber, 2012:500)

5.3.2 Contrasting Couples
In addition to the love-triangle between Dorothea, Casaubon and Will Ladislaw, the multi-plot narrative of Middlemarch presents an overview of different possibilities of lives, and couples who live happily or unhappily ever after:

Marriage, which has been the bourne of so many narratives, is still a great beginning, as it was to Adam and Eve, who kept their honeymoon in Eden, but had their first little one among the thorns and thistles of the wilderness. It is still the beginning of the home epic— the gradual conquest or irremediable loss of that complete union which makes the advancing years a climax, and age the harvest of sweet memories in common.

Some set out, like Crusaders of old, with a glorious equipment of hope and enthusiasm and get broken by the way, wanting patience with each other and the world. (p. 832)

- **Rosamond Vincy** and **Tertius Lydgate**: As mentioned before, their marriage is based on superficial beliefs and shallow ideals. Lydgate intended to become a great medical man and did not want to marry too soon, but when he meets the beautiful Rosamond and falls in love with her promising charms he suddenly finds himself asking for her hand. Rosamond knows that Lydgate has aristocratic relations and thinks that he will be able to offer her social advancement and an exciting life without sorrows. However, their marriage is a failure from the very beginning. Both of them spend money freely until they are ruined, Lydgate buries himself in work in order to distract himself from his great disappointment, and Rosamond begins to flirt with Will Ladislaw, escaping into visions of a dramatic love affair in the style of french literature.

- **The Bulstrodes**: The marriage between Mr Vincy’s sister and Mr Bulstrode becomes interesting when his scandalous past is revealed and he is condemned by the whole Middlemarch society: Mr Bulstrode had come to his fortune by marrying a wealthy old widdow and making her believe that her only daughter had died, thus inheriting all
her money. Mrs Bulstrode is shocked, but after a period of contemplation she decides to support her husband and share his disgrace, proving to be his emotional and moral superior and showing that she honours the bond between them.

- **Celia Brooke and Sir James Chettam:** The love between Dorothea’s sister and her former suitor is only mentioned at the sidelines of the story, as the perfect example of a good and reasonable marriage between two neighbouring estates. Sir James quite easily moves his affections from the older to the younger sister, motivated by the matchmaking talents of Mrs Cadwallader, who assures him that Celia would have been the better choice from the very beginning. They live a quite unspectacular and happy life and Sir James continues to support Dorothea as her brother-in-law.

- **Fred Vincy and Mary Garth:** Fred and Mary are used as an example for a “solid mutual happiness”. They are childhood friends, who fell in love and stick together against all odds. Even though they both declare their feelings for each other, Mary only agrees to become Fred’s wife if he gives up his idle lifestyle and earns his own living. In the meantime, she gets another offer from Vicar Farebrother – a man with a serious profession and more her moral and emotional equal – but chooses a life with Fred instead, whom she has known all her life and who loves her best. Fred’s mother, Mrs Vincy, is against the marriage of her favourite son with this plain girl who is below him in social rank, but in the end she has to accept her son’s decision and rejoices that two of her grandchildren have inherited the good looks of the Vincys.

### 6. Representations and Realities in Henry James’ *The Portrait of a Lady*

“Things are always different than what they might be...If you wait for them to change, you will never do anything.” — *The Portrait of a Lady*, ch.18

Henry James’ novel was first published in 1881 and is often referred to as the female equivalent to *Moby Dick*. Criticism arose because of its ambiguous and open ending that leaves the final fate of the protagonist to the reader’s imagination. This is a deviation from the classical epilogue of the marriage plot tradition, which sums up the protagonists’ lives to assure the reader of how they lived happily ever after. And in fact, Elizabeth Bennet, Jane Eyre and Dorothea Brooke all find bliss in their final marriages. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, however, the heroine Isabel Archer does not find a traditional happy ending. It begins promising, but ends in a marital prison from which there seems to be no escape. Isabel sets out to seek a life of her own, searching for other options than marriage: “I don't want to begin life by marrying. There are other things women can do.”(p.149) Her romantic quest for a role...
in life is realised in an almost fairy-tale-like way. She inherits a lot of money from her rich uncle, enabling her to do whatever she wants, and in the course of her story receives proposals of marriage from three very different men. Encouraged by her rich imagination, she ends up making the wrong choice and wasting her life’s potential, caught in an unhappy marriage. According to Mitchell (1998:40) “the novel's simple irony is that Isabel is granted a fortune in talent and money to hunt out a fine life, only to succumb to a fortune hunter“.

*The Portrait of a Lady* is a story about hope and disappointment of a naive idealist who finds herself deluded by the very promise of eternal happiness. It is a novel of ideas, focusing on the heroine’s consciousness and her thwarted search for a vocation in life that ends in her surrender to marriage. Opening with the question of whether or not a woman must marry at all to find happiness, it soon moves to the question of whom Isabel will marry. Thus, it allows the heroine to choose her fate, but her only option seems to lie in marriage (cf. Niemtzow, 2003:392). Moreover, it is a story about the encounter between Americans and Europeans, as two completely different civilizations – from the honest and simple Americans to the cosmopolitan European world of high ambitions, money and class – and what this encounter will do to Isabel, the smart and curious but inexperienced girl that wants to see the world. Finally, it is also a story about the importance of honouring a promise, reflected in Isabel’s seriousness towards her wedding vows, or in her final return to Pansy. As Koch sums it up in his afterword to the novel (Koch, 1987:606):

*The Portrait of a Lady* is a novel about dreams that do not come true. It is a meditation on wishing and hope, on success and failure, on what life will do to an intense, imaginative young woman of the nineteenth century who has *almost* everything and *almost* every reason to suppose that her hopes will be realized.

In this chapter, I will analyse the marriage plot in one of it’s most artistic expressions, focusing on Isabel’s possibilities and her married life with all its disappointments. I will discuss the importance of appearances and the development of the protagonist from the naive American girl to a disillusioned “portrait of a lady“, who sacrifices her freedom to duty, in order to honour her vows and face the consequences of her own choices. Finally, I will juxtapose different views on marriage (and divorce) and compare the relationship between Isabel and Osmond to the other couples in the novel and their ideals of married life.

### 6.1 The Unfolding of the Plot

*The Portrait of a Lady* begins by introducing the reader to old Mr Touchett, his son Ralph and their neighbour, Lord Warburton. The gentlemen are having their afternoon tea and discussing the prospective arrival of Mrs Touchett with her newfound American niece. One of the main
subjects they are talking about is women and marriage: Ralph advises Warburton to find a pretty woman, and his father tells him to “make up to a good one and marry her“ (p.8) because that would make his life much more interesting. However, he warns Warburton not to fall in love with his niece. Then, they speculate whether she is engaged or not, or whether she has come to Europe to look for a husband. Thus, the beginning seems like a reversal of Pride and Prejudice: instead of women scheming about men, it is men scheming about women – a behaviour that will be kept up throughout the novel.

When Isabel Archer finally arrives to Gardencourt, the men are immediately fascinated by this pretty, independent and lively creature, who presents a perfect refreshment for their everyday routine (Mrs Touchett compares her to a summer rain). Isabel, in turn, is interested in everything and obviously very excited to be in England. Her first reaction to Lord Warburton shows her romantic ideas about Europe: “Oh, I hoped there would be a lord; it's just like a novel!“ (p.13). Isabel has lost both her parents, her sisters are married and have their own lives – thus, Mrs Touchett has decided to bring her to Europe under her care and let her experience the old world and its traditions. Isabel is more than ready for an adventure and comes to Europe full of hope: “She had a desire to leave the past behind her and, as she said to herself, to begin afresh.“ (p.29)

6.1.1 The Young American and her rich imagination

The first half of the novel is dedicated to painting a picture of Isabel Archer’s appearance, personality, hopes and ideas and her general attitude towards life. She is described as an engaging young woman, full of ideas, “a clever girl – with a strong will and a high temper“(p.39), “she had an immense curiosity about life and was constantly staring and wondering“ (p.32). A special focus lies on her independence and her love of personal liberty, as well as on her imagination, which is described as “ridiculously active; when the door was not open it jumped out of the window“ (p.29). Isabel’s character is drawn in a very positive way, everyone immediately likes her and she takes a liking to everyone and everything in turn. Her story is almost fairy-tale-like, since she makes the men around her fall in love with her, while the women seek her friendship. Moreover, she has “a fixed determination to regard the world as a place of brightness, of free expansion, of irresistible action“ (p.48) and tells Ralph that she came to Europe in order “to be as happy as possible“ (p.46). She is a naive idealist, who dreams of seeing the world and after she inherits a fortune from Mr Touchett, she has the means to do whatever she wants. All these possibilities make it particularly interesting to anticipate what she finally chooses to do with her life. Like the heroines of the previously discussed novels, Isabel seeks a vocation, a deeper meaning to life – and she is
probably the one with the most opportunities to choose from. She does not need to marry a rich man, she is not dependent on anyone and she has friends (like Ralph and Henrietta Stackpole) to support her in whatever she does. Ralph is an especially interested observer of Isabel’s fate, since he also played a quite active role in it by persuading his father to leave her half of his fortune in order “to put wind in her sails“ (p.183):

She was intelligent and generous; it was a fine free nature; but what was she going to do with herself? This question was irregular, for with most women one had no occasion to ask it. Most women did with themselves nothing at all; they waited, in attitudes more or less gracefully passive, for a man to come that way and furnish them with a destiny. Isabel's originality was that she gave one the expression of having intentions of her own. (p.61)

In fact, Isabel does not plan to marry any time soon. Instead, she believes that a young woman “should begin by getting a general impression of life“ (p.51) and she wants to do so by travelling all over Europe. She thinks that a woman can be happy by herself and that there are other options than marriage, and James makes the reader hope and believe along with her. She sees her friend Henrietta Stackpole as the perfect proof “that a woman might suffice to herself and be happy” and finds encouragement in the company of her friend, who has become so successful as a journalist. However, the realist Henrietta is afraid for her idealistic friend and warns her against her romanticised views on life:

The peril for you is that you live too much in the world of your own dreams. You're not enough in contact with reality—with the toiling, striving, suffering, I may even say sinning, world that surrounds you. You're too fastidious; you've too many graceful illusions. Your newly-acquired thousands will shut you up more and more to the society of a few selfish and heartless people who will be interested in keeping them up. (p.217)

And Henrietta is right about her fears. When Isabel makes a new acquaintance in the graceful and ever pleasing Madame Merle, who subsequently introduces her to her old friend Gilbert Osmond, her fate seems to be sealed.

6.1.2 The Suitors and Possibilities
In the course of the novel, Isabel receives persistent proposals of marriage from three very different men: Lord Warburton, Caspar Goodwood and Gilbert Osmond. Each of them offers her a very different life and different opportunities. How she decides in the end reflects how she views herself and her future home. An English lord, a rich American industrialist and her cynical but brilliant cousin Ralph, all adore her and watch over her throughout the novel – Isabel, however, chooses Osmond, the “sterile dilettante“, who has nothing to offer but taste and appearance. Geismar (in: Buitenhuis, 1968:50) describes her as “a woman who teased,
flirted with and then fled from all her possible lovers; while she took the one man who would never awaken her, and who had to destroy her." It is the personal tragedy of a woman, who planned to be “as happy as possible“, and ends up playing the part of “the most visibly happy woman“ to everyone around her. She, who set out to “drain the cup of experience“, has to find “the infinite vista of a multiplied life to be a dark, narrow alley with a dead wall at the end“ (p.431). The following section will analyse Isabel’s suitors and the possible lives they offer, in order to highlight the possibilities she had opening up before her. All of them represent a certain type, they are similar to each other and yet completely different.

**Caspar Goodwood** is a relic from Isabel's past life in America and “represents all that Isabel has left behind, a life of honesty, of directness, of tangible purpose“ (Bowden, 1956:56). He is described as “a straight young man from Boston“, not handsome in the classic way, with a resolute jaw and charming blue eyes. He is the son of a cotton-mill owner, has studied at Harvard and is a very capable and honest, yet simple man. In the beginning of the novel, Isabel refers to him as “the finest young man she had ever seen“ (p.33), but still she does not accept his offer of marriage at her home in Albany. Caspar, however, does not give up and follows her all the way to England, always supported by Henrietta Stackpole, who tries to persuade Isabel that he would be the only right choice for her. Although Isabel appreciates his qualities, there is a lot she would criticise about him: “his jaw was too square and set and his figure too straight and stiff“, he was “too serious“ and “showed his appetites and designs too simply and artlessly“ – all in all, “she was not in love with him“ (all p.115). He is full of passion, and some critics argue that this overwhelming passion is what scares Isabel and makes her run away from him. Goodwood is urging her and she feels like she has to defend herself by always refusing him. Isabel tells him that she will not be an easy victim and that she wants to find out how to live on her own before accepting any offer of marriage. For Isabel he represents the image of “the strong man in pain“, and although she keeps hurting him, he always returns. Koch argues that “nothing changes Caspar: he loves her, he wants her, he has everything to offer her, and he simply cannot see why he can't have her“ (1987:609). He is “infernally in love“ with her and in his simple way he is always staying close and watching over her, waiting for the right moment to save her. “I shall always think of you. I shall never think of anyone else“ (p.99), he writes her and it turns out to be true in the end.

**Lord Warburton** is the classical romantic hero – he is a noble man and rich landowner with perfect manners, who falls in love with Isabel at first sight. His proposal is the most perfect and most romantic one, confirming the supposition that “the English are the most romantic people in the world“ (p.101). He fulfills all the requirements of courtship in a
relatively short time: inviting her to his house, introducing her to his sisters, telling her how
she has charmed him and finally announcing a visit in the following week – which inspires “a
certain fear” in Isabel, who has read all the novels and fears that she will soon find herself in
one of these proposal scenes. And really, after a period of contemplation, Lord Warburton
decides to brush aside all doubts and act upon his passion. In a perfectly romantic setting – the
park of the Touchett's old English country house – he proposes to her in a tender voice and
“with eyes charged with the light of a passion [...] that burned as steadily as a lamp in a
windless place“ (p.103), telling her that “I care only for you“, “when I'm touched, it's for life“
and finally when she objects that he barely knows her: “If you'll be my wife, then I shall know
you, and when I tell you all the good I think of you you'll not be able to say it's from
ignorance.“(p.103-104) He offers her the whole world, telling her he would let her choose a
place for them to live. In contrast to Osmond, he is a man of position, a man of fortune and a
man of honour. Nevertheless, Isabel escapes the conventional marriage plot by rejecting his
proposal, always trying to live up to her statement of not wanting to begin life by marrying. In
fact, Warburton’s offer is the best one she will get, but her dreams of a full life seem to be
beyond the possibility of fulfillment. In this sense she can be compared to Emma Bovary, the
tragically romantic heroine of Flaubert’s novel. Isabel is well aware of the fact that most
women would have accepted Lord Warburton, but she aspires more than a conventional
marriage to an English nobleman. She explains to him that she does not want to escape her
fate and the “usual chances and dangers“ of life, and by marrying him she would try to do so.
“He was pleasant, he was powerful, he was gallant; there was no better man than he“ (p.294)
and yet, even at the very end of the novel, she is sure that she has made the right choice by
refusing him, since she liked him too much to marry him. It seems like Warburton's offer is
too good and would make life too easy for Isabel – an idea that is later confirmed by the fact
that she marries the very man with the worst offer, who would make life all the more
complicated for her.

**Ralph Touchett** is Isabel’s newfound cousin and intellectual guide for the first part of
the novel. They spend much time together, talking about everything, exploring and
exchanging worldviews. Suffering from tuberculosis, Ralph is restricted to a life of idleness,
and he knows that he will not live long enough to have anything to offer to a wife. He is a
Even though he is in love with Isabel, he does not even think about proposing to her, because
he is of the opinion that cousins should not marry: “I content myself with watching you –with
the deepest interest“ (p.148). He is a cynic and loves animated and witty conversations,
especially with his cousin and her very original friend Henrietta Stackpole. By persuading his father to leave a fortune to Isabel, he plays a decisive role in the sealing of her fate, and he is well aware of his contribution to her ruin. What he wanted was to make her free to choose whatever she wants and to be able to live up to both his and her rich imagination (cf. Koch, 1987:609):

But the imagination can only be gratified with life, and it never even occurs to Ralph that his life might be something Isabel would be willing to share. He is a man of great courage and almost no daring at all. With only a little more daring – that is, at the risk of humiliation – he might have made Isabel both rich and loved, and perhaps won a little love for himself as well. Instead, his decision to protect himself by concealing his love consigns her to the grotesque fate of being used, lied to, and hated for her money.

Ironically, just like his father warned him, she falls victim to a fortune-hunter and Ralph can only watch her throw away her potential – shocked and paralysed. Ralph recognises her delusions about Osmond and attempts to dissuade her from her plans, but only succeeds in opening up a gulf between himself and his idealistic cousin. From that moment on, she has to wear a mask and cannot let him see how she really feels about her marriage. Only on his deathbed, Isabel finally realises that Ralph has been her true soul mate, and he gives her a vision of hope for a better future – a life “based on love, on generosity, on respect for things in themselves and a gift of unselfish appreciation” (cf. Tanner, 1968:157). It has always been Ralph, who “made her feel the good of the world; he made her feel what might have been” (p.440), and after having suffered she finally realises what love really means.

I will refer to Gilbert Osmond only in his quality as a suitor of Isabel, since their married life will be analysed in the next section. He is an American expatriate, around forty years old, with an interesting moustache, suggesting “that he was a gentleman who studied style” (p.229). Madame Merle describes him to Isabel as the exact opposite of Lord Warburton, as a man with “no career, no name, no position, no fortune, no past, no future, no anything” (p.197). This is what makes him so particularly interesting to Isabel; in him and his daughter Pansy she believes that she has found her vocation and the possibility to finally do something good with all her money. She falls in love “with the image of a poor, solitary widower“ and is fascinated by Osmond’s “cultivated presentation of himself, his lonely, studious life in a lovely land, his care for art, beauty and history“ (Blömeke, 1995:12). In fact, Osmond is artistic through and through, and his taste is something he has acquired over the course of the years, as he wants to make his life “a work of art“ (p.311). He chooses to court Isabel (upon Madame Merle’s encouragement) because she is “beautiful, clever, rich, splendid, universally intelligent, and unprecedentedly virtuous“ (p.241), and thus fits perfectly in his collection of beautiful things. When he confesses his love for her at the Hotel de Paris,
he does so “like a man who expected very little from it but who spoke for his own needed
relief“ (p.313), telling her that he has nothing to offer, but that she will still always be the
most important woman for him. He is the only one of her suitors, who does not impose
himself on her, but instead tells her to explore the world and to “get everything out of life“
(p.312) – and his tactic seems to work: she returns and decides to marry him. Ralph, however,
sees through Osmond’s appearance and calls him a “sterile dilettante“ (p.349), who only
wants to be praised by everyone for his wonderful taste. What adds further incentive to
Isabel’s decision is the fact that all her friends are against it, which makes her feel even more
satisfied and honourable for being the only one who is able to see and appreciate Osmond's
merits. As Ralph dramatically realises, she has “invented a fine theory about Gilbert
Osmond“, loving him “not for what he really possessed, but for his very poverties dressed out
as honours“ (p.352). It is Isabel's rich imagination that makes her choose the very man who
would finally turn her into a “portrait of a lady“ in a life where only appearances count.

6.1.3 The Married Life
The story is resumed three years after Isabel and Osmond’s marriage and the first comment
about their married life is made by Madame Merle, stating that Mrs Osmond generally takes
the opposite opinion of her husband. We find a disillusioned Isabel, who acts like she is the
happiest woman in the world, but finally admits – only to Henrietta Stackpole – how miserable
she really is, living together with a husband who has begun to hate her for everything she is.
According to Tanner (1968:146), Isabel wanted a life lived on the ideal level – she rejects the
sexual and the social life and marries Osmond in order to embrace the ideal: “He seems to
offer release from the troubling life of turbulent passions; he seems to offer a life dedicated to
the appreciation of ideal beauty.“ He prefers art to life and wants everyone around him to act
according to his ideals – his daughter is a perfect piece of art and has learned to obey all her
father’s wishes, and also Isabel seems to have changed under Osmond's influence: “The free,
keen girl had become quite another person; what he saw was the fine lady who was supposed
to represent something. What did Isabel represent? Ralph asked himself; and he could only
answer by saying that she represented Gilbert Osmond.“ (p.399)

James presents a penetrating analysis of their marital relationship: the tragedy of a
relationship based on mutual misunderstandings and false motives. In this way, he
deconstructs the ideal of marriage as a path to eternal happiness. The story of Isabel Archer is
a classic example of the tragic wedlock plot; unlike Dorothea Brooke, she is not saved by the
death of her husband, but has to accept the consequences of her own choice: “she had looked,
considered and chosen“ (p.41) and she means to honour her vows, even though it makes her
feel utterly miserable. Osmond has a special “faculty for making everything whither that he
touched, spoiling everything for her that he looked at“ (p.431) and it seems to Isabel that he
takes her way of thinking as a personal offence. The more James reveals about their
relationship, the more the reader becomes aware of the fact that these two partners each live a
life of their own, under the same roof but yet completely separate in minds. Soon after the
initial happiness, they both realise that they have been deceived and that “a gulf had opened
between them over which they looked at each other with eyes that were on either side a
declaration of the deception suffered“ (p.431). Thus, the sacred union of two complementing
halves has turned into a war between the sexes (cf. Boone, 1987, p.143), “an opposition in
which the vital principle of the one was a thing of contempt to the other“ (p.431). It shows
marriage as a constant fight for dominance, a disastrous union of two individuals who have
both been playing a part during the short time of courtship and are greatly deluded as their
living together reveals the true self of their partner and their complete incompatibility:

She knew of no wrong he had done; he was not violent, he was not cruel; she simply believed he hated
her. That was all she accused him of, and the miserable part of it was precisely that it was not a crime,
for against a crime she might have found redress. He had discovered that she was so different, that she
was not what he had believed she would prove to be. He had thought at first he could change her, and
she had done her best to be what he would like. But she was, after all, herself—she couldn't help that;
and now there was no use pretending, wearing a mask or a dress, for he knew her and had made up his
mind. She was not afraid of him; she had no apprehension he would hurt her; for the ill-will he bore her
was not of that sort. [...] She had effaced herself when he first knew her; she had made herself small,
pretending there was less of her than there really was. It was because she had been under the
extraordinary charm that he, on his side, had taken pains to put forth. He was not changed; he had not
disguised himself, during the year of his courtship, any more than she. But she had seen only half his
nature then, as one saw the disk of the moon when it was partly masked by the shadow of the earth. She
saw the full moon now—she saw the whole man. She had kept still, as it were, so that he should have a
free field, and yet in spite of this she had mistaken a part for the whole. (p.432-433)

It is a wonderful study of the process of estrangement between partners – a terror without
violence, dread without any real confrontation – as James provides his readers with a deep
insight into Isabel’s thoughts and feelings and how she begins to realise the true extend of her
misjudgement. She lives with her perfectly polite husband, society adores her and she has all
the liberty to come and go as she wishes. Isabel’s independent spirit, her ideas and free
thinking, however, are increasingly supressed by her husband: “There were certain things they
must do, a certain posture they must take, certain people they must know and not know“
(p.438), all in all Osmond is trying to shut her up in his “rigid system“ and to make her mind
his own. In fact, he wants her to be just another of the art objects in his collection, with
“nothing of her own but her pretty appearance“ (p.435). This feeling of repression makes Isabel dread the future that lies before her in “the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation“ (p.436). What she has to be now is a wife-on-Osmond’s-terms, instead of acting as the heroine of her own story. Blömeke (1995:22) refers to this inner conflict Isabel has to face in her marriage:

_The Portrait of a Lady_ is James’s first fully exposed case of human manipulation, his first investigation of what it means to be a consumer of persons, and of what it means to be a person consumed. Acting has enforced a conflict in Isabel's life. Trapped in conventions in her marriage she has to act out official emotions that tend to obstruct the expression of a more enlivened, personal and creative feeling.

Especially when Osmond and Madame Merle ask her to use her influence on Lord Warburton to make him propose to Pansy Osmond, Isabel finds herself in a moral dilemma. She does not want to defy her husband, but she also does not know how far her obligation as a wife goes. She struggles with her own judgement and does not yet understand Osmond and Madame Merle’s hidden motives (cf. Blömeke, 1995:26).

6.1.4 The Turning Point

In the midst of Isabel’s dilemma – her wish to see Ralph before he dies and Osmond forbidding her to do so – the Countess Gemini reveals Osmond’s secret and opens Isabel’s eyes to the ugly truth. She tells her everything about Madame Merle and Osmond’s love affair, that Madame Merle is Pansy’s mother and has arranged Isabel’s marriage. This is the central turning point of the story for Isabel: She finally realises how much she has been deceived and that Osmond has really married her for her money; Madame Merle had chosen for her and her friends had been right all along. It marks an important change in Isabel’s conscience, not only by finally pushing her to defy her husband’s wishes and travel to England immediately, but also because it makes her see that Osmond’s supposed superiority is only appearance: “She found herself confronted in this manner with the conviction that the man in the world whom she had supposed to be the least sordid had married her, like a vulgar adventurer, for her money“ (p.530). In this moment of revelation, Isabel finds her strenght in the conviction that all her folly and repentance belong to the past now. As she meets Madame Merle for the last time, she is able to look down on her and enjoy her knowledge as a triumph. The times of deception are over and Isabel sees clearly now.

Now that she was in the secret, now that she knew something that so much concerned her and the eclipse of which had made life resemble an attempt to play whist with an imperfect pack of cards, the truth of things, their mutual relations, their meaning, and for the most part their horror, rose before her with a kind of architectural vastness. She remembered a thousand trifles; they started to life with the
spontaneity of a shiver. She had thought them trifles at the time; now she saw that they had been weighted with lead. (p.572)

6.1.5 Freedom vs. Duty: A Discussion of the Ending

_The Portrait of a Lady_ does not provide the reader the expected relief of tension in a happy ending – instead, it leaves the fate of the heroine relatively open to speculation. There is no epilogue, no confirmation of what Isabel’s life will look like, nothing to assure us that she will find her happy ending one day, but also nothing to convince us of the opposite. Since it is a novel of failure and disappointment, the ending seems almost inevitable and only reflects Isabel’s touted freedom to choose. Isabel is confronted with Caspar Goodwood for one last time, who is desperately trying to save her, providing help in a “rushing torrent” (p.603) of passionate love. As he kisses her “like white lightning” (p.603), Isabel runs away and finally knows where to turn: on the “very straight path” (p.604) back to Rome to fulfill her duty as a wife and stepmother. She refuses Goodwood’s offer of escape and decides to accept her moral responsibility, to return to Osmond and endure her life with him.

Critics and readers alike are trying to understand why she returns to an obviously dead marriage, and the explanations provided are manifold: first of all, she returns because she made a promise to Pansy, since she is the only one who can help her and protect her from Osmond. Moreover, she regards marriage as indissoluble, and honours her vows in front of God and the world: “certain obligations were involved in the very fact of marriage and were quite independent of the quantity of enjoyment extracted from it“ (p.593). She is also too proud to publicly admit her failure, as she tells Henrietta Stackpole: “I can’t publish my mistake. I don’t think that’s decent. I’d much rather die.” (p.497). It does not fit into her perception of herself as a lady, it does not seem right to leave her husband and – just like Osmond – Isabel cares about appearances. Her views of marriage are quite traditional and she sees it as her duty to sacrifice her freedom to her husband’s wishes: “marriage meant that a woman should cleave to the man with whom, uttering tremendous vows, she had stood at the altar“ (p.551), or “Marriage meant that in such a case as this, when one had to choose, one chose as a matter of course for one’s husband“ (p.551). Montgomery (in: Buitenhuis, 1968:63) argues that Isabel romantically exaggerates her duty, “moving from one romantic extreme to the other, from vague freedom to blind duty“ and putting more emphasis on her wedding vows than her conscience can possibly explain. And finally, according to Mitchell (1998:97) her decision reflects her “fear of the annihilating sexuality aroused by Caspar Goodwood’s kiss“. As Ralph Touchett has told her in the beginning “you want to see, but not to feel!” (p.150) – and just like Osmond feels too little, Goodwood apparently feels too much.
Mitchell (1998:90) addresses the central problem of the open ending: “The end leaves us with precisely the same question we had at the beginning: What will she do? Unlike most novels, the concluding chapter only compounds problems raised by the work of art itself – problems that spill over the last scene into what we call life itself.” Is Isabel bowing to convention or is she simply acting upon her moral integrity? Is she choosing a life of the mind over a life full of passion? Is she only returning because of Pansy or is her choice a tribute to the honour of this “thing” called marriage? Even after James’ thorough deconstruction of the married life, it is difficult to understand her decision. According to Montgomery (in: Buitenhuis, 1968:64) “Isabel commits a spiritual suicide as Emma Bovary commits physical suicide” and “the conclusion seems a romantically conceived unhappy ending, an almost heroic renunciation“. Boone (1987:128) refers to her decision as a “martyrlike assumption of responsibility for her deadlocked marriage“, but he also sees it as her only option. Mackenzie (in: Buitenhuis, 1968:96), however, insists on the triumph of innocence, stating that “she will have lost almost all chance of any obvious happiness, yet she will have the hidden pleasure of her righteousness“. In Tony Tanner’s opinion (1968:158), Isabel takes on a heroic role and finds her natural strength in that, achieving an internal freedom, “liberated from her twisted vision and her confused values“ and able to “see through false appearances“:

She chose her room in the house of life and she must return to it. She must return to the chill and ruins of Rome: for the self cannot back out of a mistaken course but only push through and move beyond. But she takes back with her a new vision, a deeper understanding, a capacity for modest uneagoistical contemplation which all promise a richer future – a future in which she will come to a true realisation of what her real self is [...] She returns to Italy, to the ‘ruins‘ she herself was partly responsible for. But she will not, we feel, ever again be subordinate to the deceptions and calculations of a worldling like Osmond. Even if she does not break out of the house and kick over the traces, and even if she never again indulges in any more passions, her future will be quite other. For her way of looking has changed.

Thus, the open ending plays an important part in the final meaning of Isabel’s story, because it “contributes to the fantasy we spin around this portrait: that the lady is greater than any story told about her“ (Mitchell, 1998:92). Also James was aware of this fact and anticipates an answer to his critics (Matthiessen and Murdock, 1947:18):

“The obvious criticism of course will be that it is not finished – that I have not seen the heroine to the end of her situation – that I have left her en l’air.– This is both true and false. The whole of anything is never told...“

6.2 Development of the Protagonist

The Portrait of a Lady follows its heroine on her development from innocence to experience, from a naive young girl to an adult, from unworldliness to knowledge (cf. Koch, 1987:608). It
is a bildungsroman, showing the protagonist’s initiation in the adult world and the trials and errors she has to face on her way. It is the story of a young girl, trying to find a future for herself outside of the conventions of her times. It is about progressive thinking, imagination and dreams, turning into frustration at the reality of limited possibilities of choice. Isabel begins her story as a young and idealistic American girl full of romantic visions of her future in Europe, who expects more from life than just being the heroine of a courtship novel. She is lively and full of ideas, and marriage is not her first one when she thinks about an occupation in life. Unlike the heroines of the previously discussed novels, she is completely free to choose whatever she wants – a fact that makes her final decision to marry a complete nobody all the more frustrating. Tension is build up from the very beginning of her European adventure, as the question moves from “what will Isabel do with her life?” to “whom will she finally choose to marry?”. She rejects her first suitor, Caspar Goodwood, just like she leaves her American past behind and moves towards Europe. Then, she enters the classical courtship plot as she meets Lord Warburton – “just like a novel“ (p.13) – but refuses him as well because she is very fond of her liberty and wants to see what the real world has to offer. After refusing a lord, everything seems possible and readers and friends in her fictional world alike are watching, curious about what she will do next. James raises the bar by providing Isabel with the means to do whatever she wants, letting her meet interesting people and travel all over Europe. However, the most interesting person she meets – her travel companion and sophisticated friend Madame Merle – also turns out to be the agent of her demise. In Madame Merle, Isabel finds her counterpart and antagonist, led by hidden motives and absolutely ruthless in the pursuit of her aims. According to Koch (1987:622) this interplay is a central element of the novel, emphasising Isabel’s innocence as opposed to Madame Merle’s unscrupulous deception:

What makes the novel come alive is Isabel’s mute and mysterious encounter with the complex evil of Madame Merle, the false fairy godmother of the book, the deceiving incarnation of wishes come true, and she transforms Isabel from a mere creamy cloud of possibility into a character snared in failure.

After her travels, Isabel realises that life is vacant without some private duty and that in order to find herself she has to give herself first. Her vulnerability and innocence are abused by Madame Merle, who becomes the matchmaker of Isabel’s fatal union with Gilbert Osmond, an apparently noble collector of art. In an anti-climax she decides to marry him – with the least promising offer out of all her suitors – against the better judgement of her friends. In her romanticised vision of the world, Isabel sees so much more in Osmond than he really is and imagines her life as a great contributor to a poor widower’s and his daughter’s happiness, who
in turn would provide her with the vocation she so desperately needs. When she finds herself entrapped by the very conventions she has tried to flee from, she realises how she has been betrayed, and love and happiness suddenly become darkness, dumbness and suffocation. Being married changes Isabel, it makes her see the world in a different light and through experience she is able to find her true self. By realising what being married really means, she is finally initiated in the adult world – a world where one has to accept the consequences of one’s actions and where marriage turns out to be an eternal war for domination over the other.

“Life is not like a novel”, seems to be the message, and James seems to criticise his predecessors for making the world believe the opposite, breaking with the very conventions of the marriage plot. To Lord Warburton’s offer of marriage, Isabel replies that they barely know each other, but when Mr Osmond asks her she does not seem to be concerned about that. He is the supposedly Byronic hero, the noble outsider, and no one but Isabel is able to recognize his merit. Thus, it becomes a critique of the romanticised and inexperienced view of the world, by showing what such beliefs might lead to. However, James leaves Isabel’s story with an open end, suggesting that the last word has not been spoken yet and that the decision of her fate is still in her own hands. The Isabel, who is forcing herself into an artificial representation of a lady in the middle of the story, has grown up and rediscovered the strength and self-determination she had at the very beginning of the novel. She has realised her mistakes and returns to Rome to protect her innocent step-daughter Pansy from the evil forces that surround her. She accepts responsibility as an autonomous being, and by moving from her idealistic dreams to a recognition of the harsh reality of life, she also achieves a growth of consciousness and is able to be her own hero.

*The Portrait of a Lady* is not a classical love story, since it does not focus on a couple but is centred mainly on Isabel’s fate and her reaction to her changing circumstances. Tanner (1968:151) calls Isabel’s romantic quest for a role in life the “journey of the developing but all-too-often erring self“, which moves from realistic romance to ironic melodrama, showing Isabel as strong and helpless at the same time (cf. Mackenzie, in: Buitenhuis, 1968:93). Goodwood is trying to play the hero and rescue Isabel from “the deadliest of fiends“ (p.601) but she decides to take her fate into her own hands. Thus, it is a move away from the classical concept of romance, where the heroine waits passively for the hero to save her. Isabel has never been the classical heroine: she rejects the self-proclaimed heroes from the very beginning and marries the only man who is no hero at all. She refuses to act the part one expects from a girl of her age, and she is too naïve and idealistic to suspect that the world might not live up to her great expectations. Isabel Archer is a stronger Emma Bovary, who
courageously turns her back on her suitors and would-be heroes, and affronts her destiny – this time, however, with her eyes open and fully aware of the consequences.

6.3 The Marriage Debate

James raises the question of what a woman can do with her life, but ironically the only answer he provides is marriage. Even Henrietta Stackpole, the liberal career woman, bows to convention in the end and decides to marry her travel companion Mr Bantling. This is shocking to Isabel, who always thought her friend as a perfect example that a woman can suffice to herself and be happy. However, Henrietta is the only one in the novel with an actually successful relationship. It is exactly this contrast between different views on marriage and the different – more or less successful – relationships described in the novel, that makes Isabel’s story all the more interesting. There is not a single ideal partnership that could serve as a rolemodel to Isabel on her quest for a meaningful life. Thus, she has to find her own way in the maze of mercenary economic, social and political motives. In this section, I will contrast the different views on marriage and divorce presented in the novel, and finish with a discussion of the other couples that have come into contact with Isabel.

6.3.1 Contrasting views on marriage

In a world where only rank and possessions seem to matter, most marriages are centred on money and are the means by which people seek to advance themselves in society. Madame Merle, Gilbert Osmond and the Countess Gemini are all trying to make a fortunate marriage and all of them fail terribly – Madame Merle ends up as an intriguer void of emotion, Osmond has to discover that his perfect “portrait of a lady” has a mind of her own and the Countess tries to distract herself in immoral liaisons with various men. James presents us with a world that is very limited for a single woman, as Caspar Goodwood tells Isabel: “An unmarried woman – a girl of your age isn’t independent. There are all sorts of things she can’t do. She’s hampered at every step.“ (p.161) What he thinks he is offering her is independence through marriage, but she in turn believes that she can only find it on her own terms.

James’ novel is one of the later examples of the marriage plot tradition, which not only shows the heroine’s struggle with her limited possibilities as a woman, but also addresses the question of divorce. There are those characters who believe in the sacredness of the wedding vow and those who do not. Isabel and Osmond both have the traditional opinion of marriage, she refers to him as her “appointed and inscribed master“ and he emphatically declares that he sees them as “indissolubly united“ (p.548):
You are nearer to me than any human creature, and I'm nearer to you. It may be a disagreeable proximity; it's one, at any rate, of our own deliberate making [...] I think we should accept the consequences of our actions, and what I value most in life is the honour of a thing!

Henrietta Stackpole, however, advises Isabel to leave her husband “before the worst comes“ (p.511) and the latter is shocked by her friend’s inconsiderate opinion. Neither divorce nor adultery are options for Isabel, and contemplates on the very decline of the meaning of marriage in society: “Did all women have lovers? Did they all lie and even the best have their price? Were there only three or four that didn’t deceive their husbands?“ (p.439)

6.3.2 Contrasting couples
The other couples in The Portrait of a Lady, all represent twisted versions of unsuccessful relationships.

- **The Countess Gemini**, Gilbert Osmond’s sister, has married a third-rate Italian nobleman who is an impoverished gambler. He has married her for her money, and she accepted him for his title – subsequently they lead completely separate lives from each other and the Countess’ various adulterous affairs are common knowledge. She lives in the tradition of the Continental novels, that focus on extramarital liaisons and serves to demonstrate the other option one has to endure an unhappy marriage.

- **Mr and Mrs Touchett** live completely separated lives as well. While he stays in England, she has a house in Florence and frequently returns to America. Once a year she spends a month with her husband, always finding new reasons why her system of married life is the right one. James explains her opinion at the very beginning of the novel, as an example for avoiding argument in marriage: “It had become clear, at an early stage of their community, that they should never desire the same thing at the same moment, and this appearance had prompted her to rescue disagreement from the vulgar realm of accident.“ (p.18)

- Then, there is the story of **Madame Merle** and Gilbert Osmond’s extramarital affair, resulting in the birth of Pansy. Even after their partners died, they never married, since both of them always had bigger ambitions (Madame Merle had hoped to marry Cesar and Osmond simply did not care enough for her). In the course of the novel, he reduces her to a tool, using her to further his aims but giving her nothing in return. Their apparent closeness works to further the gap between Isabel and Osmond and shows that he had already contributed to the downfall of another strong and independent woman. In the end, Madame Merle accuses him of having made her into
the vile creature she is now: “You've not only dried up my tears; you've dried up my
soul“ (p.532)

- The unsuccessful but true love is represented by Pansy and Ned Rosier. They are in
love with each other, but their relationship is doomed to fail, since Rosier is simply not
rich enough to fulfill Osmond’s expectations for his daughter. Pansy would never defy
her father’s wishes, but she swears that she will never love anyone else. Their love is
another source of conflict between Osmond and Isabel, because the former only thinks
about rank and fortune, while the latter is torn between her obligation towards her
husband and her own conscience.

- Finally, Henrietta and Mr Bantling represent the only relationship based on true
esteem of the other – they have known each other for years and know exactly what
they are doing. Isabel is disappointed to find out that even Henrietta is susceptible to
“common passions“ and ends up enter into the only companionate marriage of the
novel.

7. The Marriage Plot Nowadays

"Are the great love stories of the nineteenth century dead? Or can there be a new story,
written for today and alive to the realities of feminism, sexual freedom, prenups and divorce?"
- Jeffrey Eugenides

What happened to such a successful storyline as the marriage plot in modern times? Did it
change to adapt to our modern society, is it still existing in the same way as before, or has it
disappeared altogether? According to Boone (1987:134) “traces of the love-plot format, along
with its themes and ideological values, have continued to inhabit (and inhibit) the genre to the
present day“. He argues that even though the context and terms of bonding have changed over
time, the rules of sexual hierarchy have stayed the same, because women continue to be
desired “item[s] of commerce in the bargains struck of heterosexual coupling“ (1987:135). In
particular, the tragic wedlock plot shows the continuity of the traditional narrative structure –
nowadays focusing on themes of alienation, division, and unhappiness in a meaningless
universe (cf. Boone, 1987:136). Of course, the form had to be updated to reflect our current
realities, as Waldmann stresses in her article for the New York Times, asking (and later
answering) a central question in the marriage plot debate that results from the comparison
between the classics and contemporary novels:

Are older novels about love more powerful because their protagonists contended with social repression,
instead of merely struggling with their lovers and with themselves – with their conflicting desires and
changing moods? Have the liberation of women and liberalization of divorce law really deprived the novel of its high stakes?

This is exactly what the aged literature professor argues in Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Marriage Plot* (2011). But is it really true? Is the happily-ever-after no longer believable, and do love and marriage no longer work as main storylines in a novel? “What would it matter whom Emma married if she could file for separation later?”, asks the professor in Eugenides’ novel, and “How would Isabel Archer's marriage to Gilbert Osmond have been affected by the existence of a prenup?” (2011:27) Also Sobba Green (1991:161) does not see the courtship novels in line with contemporary feminist positions, even though she admits that they were quite progressive and revolutionary for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women readers.

Nowadays we distrust the “domestic bliss” as the main goal in life and regard a fairy-tale-like happy ending as naive and far from reality. Now that premarital sex has lost its stigma, the dramatic period of courtship has been shortened, and with the rise of divorce, marriage has lost much of its finality. These developments are reflected in contemporary novels, sometimes in a comic, sometimes in a tragic way. Jeffrey Eugenides writes about these contemporary relationships in his novel *The Marriage Plot*, juxtaposing the old classics with a modern love story of a young couple that has to fight mental disorder, conflicting ambitions and the search for identity in an uncertain world. Its ending is a wonderful homage to the marriage plot tradition and the feminist cause, moving beyond the necessity of a happy ending in marriage:

> From the books you read for your thesis, and for your article – the Austen and the James and everything – was there any novel where the heroine gets married to the wrong guy and then realizes it, and then the other suitor shows up, some guy who's always been in love with her, and then they get together, but finally the second suitor realizes that the last thing the woman needs is to get married again, that she's got more important things to do with her life? (2011:512)

Is it true that women do not want to get married anymore, but do more important things with their lives? Novelist draw their inspiration from the *zeitgeist* of their times, and nowadays the happily-ever-after seems to come with an expiration date and has to include much more than just “true love” in order to be successful. As Boone (1987:136) quotes Fiedler: “The rejection of the sentimental happy ending of marriage involves the acceptance of the sentimental happy beginning of innocent and inconsequential sex.” Is this what our modern age of serial relationships and consensual divorce has led to? Have the freedoms of contemporary life drained it from the need of romance? Waldmann says no, and I agree with her argument: “As long as marriage and love and relationships have high stakes for us emotionally, they have the potential to offer rich subject material for novelists, no matter how flimsy or comparatively uninteresting contemporary relationships seem on their surface.” In her opinion, novels
depend mainly on the psychological and internal drama of their protagonists – and novelists can work with that now just as well as then.

Nevertheless, it seems like the marriage plot has been degraded from serious novel to the field of romance stories, read by desperate housewives and hopeless romantics. The plot has to offer more than just courtship ending in marriage in order to be considered serious literature – often involving terminal illness, issues of homo- or transsexuality, racism, crime or abuse. Bestselling authors of romance fiction, such as Nicolas Sparks or Cecilia Ahern, show the variety of possible storylines – from the admirable Noah who reads their own love story everyday to his wife, suffering from Alzheimer’s disease in *The Notebook* (1996), to the letter and text messaging romance between two childhood friends who end up living in different parts of the world but never loose contact in *Where Rainbows End* (2004). Modern technology has had a particular impact on the way courtship and romance are presented in novels – for example in Austrian author Daniel Glattauer’s novel *Gut Gegen Nordwind* (2006), that presents a young woman stuck in an unhappy marriage who finds emotional fulfillment in an email romance with a stranger, showing traces of the wedlock as well as the courtship plot in a story that is being told only by the protagonists’ email correspondence.

If we take a look at lists of bestselling works of fiction nowadays, the trend obviously moved towards fantasy, thriller and crime novels. *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings*, or *The Da Vinci Code* are among the topsellers of our times. It seems as if themes of love and marriage have been driven to the margins of the plots of contemporary novels. We know that Harry Potter fell in love and married at the end of the series, but relationships are not the driving force of the plot. The same applies to *Lord of the Rings* and *The Da Vinci Code*, there are romances, but they are not central to the story. There are some exceptions, however, with novels such as *Fifty Shades of Grey*, *Bridget Jones* or *Twilight* that show modernised versions of the classical marriage plot, sometimes with supernatural or fantasy elements. They include all the central elements of the courtship narrative: love triangles, a Byronic hero with a mysterious past, passion and repression, the search for identity, obstacles and turning points and finally a happy ending.

Otherwise, the marriage plot can be found in historical novels, non-western fiction and Hollywood’s (and of course Bollywood’s!) romantic comedies. The success of Diana Gabaldon’s *Outlander*-series – about a twenty-first-century English woman travelling back in time to nineteenth-century Scotland and falling in love with a young Scotsman – shows that the classical marriage plot still appeals to the reader today. But, the fact that the story is set in the past seems to confirm the argument that the marriage plot needs the context of pre-divorce
times, where honour and fidelity still mattered, to be successfull and believable. A contemporary genre that uses the marriage plot format is the rom com, Hollywood’s romantic comedy, which will be described shortly in the following section, in order to illustrate how the classical narrative form has been transferred into our modern times.

8.1 Excursus: Hollywood's Romantic Comedy

Classical Hollywood movies are based on the “hero's journey" (Heldenreise), featuring a protagonist on his quest and development to a better life. The romantic comedy also follows the same pattern, but in a slightly altered form. A general definition of the romantic comedy would be as a film in which the development of love between the two main characters is the primary narrative thread. It is characterised by a dual focused narrative, i.e. by the dual points of view of the two protagonists. In general, the development of a relationship is a dynamic process, requiring the characters to overcome various obstacles, lying in the outside world or within themselves. There are couples that have to settle differences between themselves, and others that seem to be made for each other from the beginning. A popular device is the antagonistic couple – moving from initial dislike to a happy ending, as opposed to the harmonic couple, which is parted by outer circumstances. Another popular device is the love triangle, with another character as potential rival (but usually only as the wrong man/woman just like Jane Austen did in her novels). All of these narrative techniques can be found in the novels discussed in this thesis, showing that while the context has changed, the essentials have stayed the same.

The basic model of love stories is retraceable to the roman and greek poets Plautus and Menander, and follows the same narrative patterns up until today. Recurring subjects are, for example, forbidden love, adultery, class differences, family feuds or personal guilt. One of the most successful and constant models of romantic fiction – from Jane Eyre to Pretty Woman – is the Cinderella plot, which is used for the various adaptations of classics as well as for contemporary love stories. All in all, it seems like the courtship and marriage plot has survived (with almost all its original traits) in Hollywood’s quest plot, always inspired by the great classics of Austen, Brontë, Eliot and James. Roger Ebert explains the popularity of the classics in his article for the Chicago Sun-Times:

The reason we’re so fascinated by the adaptations of James, Austen, Forster and the others is that their characters think marriage, fidelity, chastity and honesty are important. In modern movies, the characters have no values at all.
8. Conclusion

“There's no happiness in love, except at the end of an English novel.”
- Anthony Trollope, Barchester Towers

Love and marriage are timeless topics and the great novels of the nineteenth century have survived so far, despite – or maybe even because of – all the changes that came along with the twentieth and twenty-first century. In a time of grand gestures and ever striving-to-surpass-themselves expressions of love as opposed to its ephemerality, it seems like people are trying to rediscover the values of past times. Women may have been liberated sexually and in their freedom to marry, divorce and remarry or to find personal fulfillment in their careers, but one thing has not changed, in literature as well as in reality: the search for a purpose and meaning in life. Nineteenth-century-women may have been restricted to marriage in their choice for an occupation, whereas nowadays there are so many (almost too many) other options in a single woman’s life. But has feminism exterminated the marriage plot? I would say no. And the endless adaptations and republications of the classics confirm my opinion. Times may have changed, but people continue to be fascinated by the novels of Austen, Brontë, Eliot and James. These clever analyses of human motives, fortunes and misfortunes are still accurate today even if the context has changed. Novels, movies and television series are borrowing from the great classics and the number of sales speaks for the public’s appreciation of this tactic. They have a high identification potential and lead to the so-called “me too effect” in their presentation of the romantic dilemma that most single women in search for the right balance between their dreams of self-fulfillment, romance and family can identify with. Moreover, what these stories offer is a welcome trip to the land of nostalgia in the midst of contemporary problems such as couple therapy, double burden and career ups and downs.

Elizabeth Bennet, Jane Eyre, Dorothea Brooke and Isabel Archer are representatives of all the young women striving for personal fulfillment and a meaningful life – then as well as now. And as long as people continue to face life and love with all its challenges, joys and desperations, novelists will have material they can write about. As Cicero said already two thousand years ago: “dum spiro spero, dum spero amo, dum amo vivo – while I breathe, I hope; while I hope, I love; while I love, I live“. And it is exactly this hope and love that fuel a story with life and help the marriage plot to function even in a twenty-first-century-context. To quote Carrie Bradshaw, the iconic protagonist of Sex and the City in search for true love in the urban jungle of New York city: “Being single used to mean that nobody wanted you. Now it means you’re pretty sexy and you’re taking your time deciding how you want your life to be and who you want to spend it with.“
9. Bibliography


