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Comparative and Contextual Analysis
of Women's Depiction in the Late
Nineteenth Century: *Daisy Miller* and
The House of Mirth

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ABSTRACT

Henry James' *Daisy Miller* and Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* are two well-known literary works whose main protagonists are women: Daisy Miller and Lily Bart; as women, they faced different struggles and challenges in a society that restricted their identity. Both authors' upbringing and their representation of women in the aforementioned novels will be analysed and discussed. The purpose of this project is to conclude the similarities and differences between the women in the works and how each author's upbringing affected the representation of the female characters.

Keywords: Henry James, Edith Wharton, Lily Bart, Daisy Miller, women, feminism, representation, feminine identity, comparative analysis

RESUMEN

Daisy Miller, escrita por Henry James, y *La Casa de la Alegría*, escrita por Edith Wharton, son dos conocidas obras literarias cuyas principales protagonistas son mujeres: Daisy Miller y Lily Bart. Como mujeres, ambas se enfrentan a diferentes conflictos en una sociedad que restringe su identidad. Un análisis de la educación y contexto de los autores se llevará a cabo, así como de la representación de la mujer en sendas novelas. El propósito de este proyecto es concluir las similitudes y diferencias entre las mujeres de las obras, al igual que analizar cómo la crianza de cada autor afectó a su respectiva representación de los personajes femeninos.

Palabras clave: Henry James, Edith Wharton, Lily Bart, Daisy Miller, mujeres, feminismo, representación, identidad femenina, análisis comparativo

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1. Introduction

Henry James and Edith Wharton were two prolific and well-known American writers of the nineteenth century. They both represent the epitome of the realist movement and, inside that movement, they wrote many renowned novels and short stories in which to include the ones that are going to be examined in this project: Henry James' *Daisy Miller* (1879) and Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905).

Henry James was a New Yorker writer. He lived in many places on the American East Coast, including Boston, Cambridge, and New Port, before becoming an expatriate. Once he left America, he moved to Europe, where he lived in several countries such as England, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, and France. His years both in America and in Europe are reflected in his writings as he explored their differences, favouring the European way of living as he felt a profound attraction towards European culture and history compared to the one in the United States. As such, he portrays his characters in a way that they can clearly depict whether they are American (rude, ignorant, uneducated) or European (sophisticated, polished, cultivated). Henry James excels in depicting each place's manners, conventions, and customs. The one enterprise in which he failed – and is going to be explored in this dissertation – is his flawed and limited depiction of women.

Edith Wharton was a prolific American novelist and short story writer born in a prosperous New York family. Wharton had an excellent education and lived in Europe for an extended period. She was advised to write about the world she actually understood. That is why she examined New York society and the constraints under which women lived within the upper-class society. She analysed social norms and how citizens were affected by the importance they gave to wealth and customs. At the same time, she wrote about women's affairs and the struggles they face just because of being born female in a patriarchal context.

In this dissertation, I analyse the role and depiction of women in Henry James' *Daisy Miller* (1879) and Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905). To do so, firstly I am going to explore the social, familiar, and historical context in which Henry James and Edith Wharton lived to adequately comprehend why they portray women that way. Understanding the importance life events and influences have in an author's work is crucial to fathom their intentions and connotations when writing their novels. What is more, taking into consideration their background grants us, as readers, a wider insight into their compositions and characters.

Thereafter, I will perform a comparison between the way in which both authors depict women, taking into consideration the implications their respective upbringings might have had in that process. That is to explore how the context of each of the authors, their acumen, and their values, affected the way they depicted their female characters. Finally, I will conduct a contrastive examination regarding their background, their particular portrayal of women, and the effect said context had on the subsequent depiction of the female characters.

The primary aim of this research paper is to conclude the effects being female or male has on an author's writing when it comes to depicting women through a thorough examination and how their disparate experiences due to their gender affect that matter.

2. Theoretical Framework

As a starting point for this essay, it is necessary to do an examination of the society in which Henry James and Edith Wharton lived. To effectively understand why both writers portrayed women the way they did, it is crucial to explore their backgrounds and environment. Hence, a concise commentary on their familiar and historical context will be carried out prior to the analysis of both works for their appropriate interpretation.

a. Henry James: Life in Context

As Fred Kaplan asserts in the book *Henry James: The Imagination of Genius, a Biography*, Henry James was born on April 15, 1843, in Greenwich, New York. He was the son of a loving woman named Mary R. Walsh, and a gifted and impulsive father, after whom he was named. New York was the city of his childhood, and he witnessed its transformation caused by industrialisation, which he did not readily welcome. The city that once was the epitome of joy and pleasure for him became an element of menace against his values and principles; morals he acquired from his family, especially his father. Consequently, New York came to be one of the most attractive but always fearful cities of his imagination due to everything that the place meant to him.¹

According to Alfred Habegger in his writing *Henry James and the 'Woman Business'*, Henry James remembered with nostalgia being the only of his father's children to accompany him away from home. They created a strong bond that led James to be fascinated by his father's values, which he listened to closely and agreed on them despite he seemed not to understand them. Nonetheless, one department in which the father deeply affected his son's underpinnings was the one involving women and marriage. James' narratives had a great – self-imposed – authority on the subject of women, according to Habegger. In fact, most of James' novels have one thing in common regarding the female gender: all his female characters are doomed to be weaker than men (*Henry James and the 'Woman Business'*, 26).

Habegger expanded his study on the doctrines the son inherited from his father in the essay *The Lessons of the Father: Henry James Sr. on Sexual Difference*. Habegger states that Henry James Sr. disparaged the emerging feminist movement and “opposed the entry of women into

¹ Kaplan, Fred. *Henry James: The imagination of genius, a biography*. Open Road Media, 2013.

the learned professions, and insisted with remarkable emphasis that women were intellectually inferior to men.” (*The Lessons of the Father: Henry James Sr. on Sexual Difference*, 9). As maintained by the academic, James Sr. spoke openly about his dissent regarding women’s emancipation in his essays. In those, he claimed that women belonged to the home and were not beings or individuals as such, but a companion for men that could grant them affection and sympathy.

In the same paper, Habegger argues that the legacy of the father was carried by James and that is why he failed to grant his female characters any real motivation beyond marrying or being attached to a man. As such, he contemplated women as some sort of annexe to men as he considered women a vastly different kind of beings compared to the male gender. As a matter of fact, in his early writings, James considered that “everything is calculated with certain male needs in mind, and women's own dissatisfactions or desires or liberties never once enter into the matter” (Habegger, *The Lessons of the Father: Henry James Sr. on Sexual Difference.*, 7). That being the case, the reader only gets to glimpse extraordinarily little of what the female characters’ personalities would be, as James refrained from expanding their individuality.

Another field in which the father shaped the son’s perception was the one related to capitalism. As Habegger concludes, it became clear that “James belonged to the radical wing of utopian socialism.”² Even though James Sr. may have openly uttered his ideals in this regard, Barnum argues that James did so between the lines. According to Elizabeth Barnum, James’ proficiency in the English language allowed him to include critiques and commentaries against the capitalist system in most of his writing. Barnum asserts that words were “his sharpest tool to present a more subtle, and for that reason more profound, critique of both capitalism’s surface activity and its influence on people” (1).

Barnum argues that for James the social interactions and relationships included in his writings are the currency, the same way money and commodities were in American society. As such, he discreetly criticised the commercial nature of every interaction at that time. As attested by William Veeder and Susanne Griffin, James succeeded in recognizing the limitation of New York and, consequently, the limitations of America itself. That distinguished him from the vast majority of Americans, who seemed to be unable to identify society’s hindrances. James

² Habegger, Alfred. *Henry James and the 'Woman Business'*. No. 32. Cambridge University Press, 2004.

imprinted his insight on that matter in his writings and “envisioned himself the man of the future whose freedom of mind could transcend the boundaries of nationality” (James, 1)

An additional area that James seemed to be interested in and is present in his narratives was the exploration of Europe. As William Merrill Decker analyses in *Americans in Europe from Henry James to the Present*, Henry James grew to be a “passionate pilgrim” of the Old World. His fascination with Europe was increased by the resemblance to more sophisticated times, which conveyed the impression of being more cultivated and unpretentious (Decker, 128) compared to his corrupted homeland. What is more, he came to glorify every little aspect of European society and assigned esteemed roles even to those whom society forsook. Decker addresses James’ idealization of Europe as he perceived Europe as the culmination of beauty (Decker, 132).

All aforementioned topics are covered in James’ narratives and play an important role in displaying the critical skills the author possessed.³ Given his ability to disguise his criticism in the narratives, any of James’ works have to be approached from the most profound interest in the content and the context that lies beneath it. (James, 7)

³ James, Henry. *The art of criticism: Henry James on the theory and the practice of fiction*, edited by William Veeder and Sussan Griffin. University of Chicago Press, 1986.

b. Edith Wharton: Life in Context

According to Shari Benstock, Edith Newbold Jones, was born in New York in 1862 into a wealthy family. She and her family belonged to the upper social class of New York. As such, they were expected to behave and fit the imposed social norms. Nonetheless, her mother Lucretia was far from being the perfect wife and housekeeper since, though she “adhered to rules of correct speech and behaviour, she did not adopt the formal English model of house management” (Benstock, 4). Benstock argues that Lucretia was more of an indolent kind of woman and mother, and she would not actively discipline her children. Given that Lucretia was vastly negligent with her children, Benstock states that Edith had to look for another maternal figure which she found in Hannah Doyle, her nursemaid (5). From a young age, Wharton witnessed the juxtaposition of two completely different realities for women which made her question women’s positions and expectations. Doyle was, as stated by Benstock, “the one constant in a childhood world that for all its comforts was sometimes lonely and darkened by illness.” (5)

Lucretia’s demeanour regarding her children was not the only affair that influenced Edith’s concerns that would later be portrayed in her writing. Benstock analyses the striking commotion caused by Lucretia’s alleged extramarital affairs. There were two rumours circulated revolving around Edith’s birth, as Benstock presents it. The first and widely spread version claimed that she was the daughter of her brother’s tutor (7). The second story involved the belief that she was the daughter of Henry Peter Brougham (9), a Scottish man with whom the family coincided in Cannes during the winter holiday (10). Once Edith became aware of this situation, her fiction started to “contain many tales of illegitimacy and secret love affairs, children given away or hidden away to avoid social scandal, and marriages of pretense.” (10).

The flawed relationship between mother and daughter caused Edith to develop a highly emotional refrainment that led to sexual oppression, a department that is explored by Gloria C. Erlich in the book *The Sexual Education of Edith Wharton*. Said sexual oppression entailed a “lifelong process of coming to terms with the role of love and sensuality” (Erlich, ix). Erlich asserts that Wharton explored her misconceptions and deficits in her writing in order to understand new possibilities she was not explained nor had lived. Erlich claims that it was not until her forties that she came to terms with female sexuality. That is why in her early writings

Wharton embraced the cultural fiction of female innocence and she forced those notions on herself. (Erlich, 17).

By 1883, Wharton had travelled so frequently to Europe that she “had lived a total of eight of her first twenty-one years abroad” (Schriber, 257). She excelled in including her experiences in the Old Continent in her narratives. To do so, she made use of several metaphors and personifications throughout her writings (Schriber, 261). Schriber argues that in her works, she recounted what she lived there. In fact, Wharton’s depiction of her years in Europe conformed a process of self-discovery (262). In other words, European art, architecture, and history offered salvation and a promise of life to Wharton and, consequently, to her characters. (Schriber, 264).

Wharton was born in a period of war, reformism, and revolution. One of the emerging revolutions was the one involving female emancipation. Elizabeth Cady Stanton was an important figure in the first wave of feminism in America. Although she was considered by many as “a dangerous radical, whose words threatened the stability of marriage, the sanctity of religion, and men’s exclusive control over politics.” (Ginzberg. 3), she was one of the first people to request women’s access to higher education and the control of their property, credit, or children (Ginzberg, 5). Likewise, she claimed that women should be the ones to manage their clothes and activities, and men’s supervision should be revoked (Ginzberg. 5). According to Ginzberg, Stanton did not invent feminism but transformed those ideas into words to make them accessible to other women.

Stanton challenged women’s subjugated position as wives mothers and citizens (Ginzberg, 6). She opened the debate for other women, a group of people in which we could include Wharton. As such, feminism and the woman question play an important role in Wharton’s works as she “concentrates upon the aspirations of women and reflects in a variety of situations the deprivations peculiarly theirs” (McDowell, 4). Nonetheless, McDowell argues that contrary to other feminists, Wharton explored female liberation and their search for individuality within the patriarchal society and its constraints. Consequently, her characters never exist apart from men, but she embraced the alliance between them (McDowell, 524)

In compliance with McDowell, Wharton never actively positioned herself as a feminist nor supported any measures that may improve women’s situation (McDowell, 524), unlike Stanton, for instance. Still, she condemned men’s superiority and portrayed so in her writings more

passively and subtly, not so radical. Quoting Margaret McDowell once again, she upholds that “Wharton was as critical as any feminist alive of men in American society and of their privileges. Unlike most writers of her generation, who accepted the notion of male superiority, she created men who had feet of clay.” (526). Wharton used these circumstances as inspiration for her own criticism.

Continuing with the “woman question”, McDowell declares that “Wharton characteristically reveals her feminism by insistently posing questions about women and the roles which society expects them to play” (McDowell, 529). Nonetheless, instead of idealising her female characters, Wharton granted them destructive potential and the ability to manipulate and use their challenging circumstances for their own benefit. She did so in an attempt to portray the hypocrisy and pretense which characterised the relations between the sexes in the nineteenth century and to appropriately represent women at that time. (McDowell, 528)

3. Henry James' *Daisy Miller: A Study* (1879)

In 1879, Henry James published his novel *Daisy Miller*, a title that came with the subtitle *A Study*. As many researchers have already argued, there is a strong need to understand who or what is being studied.⁴ It can be assumed that, as the writer provides the title, he is directly telling the reader that he will carry out a study of his characters and their behaviour, as William Grant indicates. However, James delivered a study of a study: James' study of Winterbourne's study of Daisy (Grant, 17).

On the one hand, Winterbourne is an American by birth who has lived a long time in Geneva and whose "mode of speech suggests the extent to which he has become Europeanized" (Ohmann, 3). During a holiday trip he met Daisy Miller and from that day on their fates were doomed to be linked. Winterbourne developed a special fascination for Daisy's carefree attitude as it made him feel "alive" (Ohmann, 4). However, his righteousness which accorded with that of the American expatriates prevented him from seeing beyond Daisy's "inappropriate" behaviour (Ohmann, 5). It can be said that his rigid values and his undercover classism had averted him from sympathising with Daisy and from treating her right, just because she did not fit into his standards of what is supposed to be a lady.

On the other hand, Daisy is the representation of an American in Europe, according to Tristram P. Coffin, James portrays in Daisy "the subtleties that distinguish the American upper-class girl from her European counterpart" (273). Coffin argues that Daisy's lack of complexity and her transparency opposes Winterbourne's sophistication by which he cannot comprehend her behaviour. The dissimilarities between them can be seen in the way Daisy was willing to rely on her own judgment and behaved according to her determination (Coffin, 273) while Winterbourne relied on what is socially acceptable. Nonetheless, it is necessary to note that what we know of Daisy from the story is not exactly her but "what Winterbourne sees". (Allen, 55). This means that Winterbourne is the conscious subject who depicts Daisy. As for her, she is an object of the story that will be portrayed as suitable as possible for Winterbourne and his narrative.

With that in mind, this analysis will cover how the aftermath of the author's upbringing is represented in his depiction of the different women in this story, especially Daisy.

⁴Grant, William E. "'Daisy Miller': A Study of a Study." *Studies in Short Fiction* 11.1 (1974): 17.

a. Women

Elizabeth E. Allen in *Woman's Place in The Novels of Henry James* states that “if we learn our sense of self through being the subject or ‘I’, who understands and uses signs, and for whom they are being used by others to communicate, then what do we make of the position of women, who learn through existing sign systems that they themselves are signs?” (Allen, 2). In many males’ writings, women do not play an actual role or character but they are some sort of symbol with a particular meaning that is given by the author. In other words, women are not people or beings as such, but a sign that holds whatever meaning the author – or the narrator — wants them to.

As has been alluded to in previous sections, *Daisy Miller* ventures into the dilemma of representing women appropriately or realistically. According to Elizabeth E. Allen, in James’ writings, women play a representational role which prevents them from being people (Allen, 1). That representational function women play can be identified as a sign, something that is written in order to signify something. That restricting depiction causes a notorious deficiency in the character’s identity. This lack of complexity James grants his female characters can be explained as the result of his upbringing.

As has been already examined, James’ father’s doctrines deeply affected his son and caused him to see women as a companion for men, not as people with desires or motivations on their own. In *Daisy Miller*, women’s roles are merely symbolic as they have no goal or, if they had them, they have no option to achieve them. As such, James chose not to elaborate on the characteristics of the female characters, thus the reader just gets a very brief view of what their personalities might be or, in most cases, what the narrator wants the reader to fathom. Due to this avoidance to elaborate on the female characters, they “become(s) limited or defined” (Allen, 3).

Although the main female character is Daisy, there are more women in the story that, resembling Daisy, do not have actual selfhood since they are what they need to embody. In this section, an analysis of the main female characters of the story *Daisy Miller* will be carried out in order to dissect what each woman, as a sign, represents and why.

i. Daisy

As it has been briefly introduced, Daisy's character is strongly restricted due to the intention with which she was written. This means, once again, that Daisy is not defined by herself but she is "what she was accused of being" (Grant, 18). As William Grant states the only role Daisy plays in the narrative is that of the embodiment of an American girl: ignorant, innocent, crude, and impertinent (Grant, 57). She is the personification of what James thought of American society in comparison to the European community. As such, there is a clear contrast in her behaviour – that of a typical American – and Winterbourne – that of a Europeanised American.

Continuing with the idea of Daisy and any other female characters being nothing else than mere symbols, it is important to note that any symbol or sign needs to be understood. In this case, Daisy and what she means and personifies is not comprehended by Winterbourne, which causes the reader to only grasp of her what he does. What is more, it is stated by Elizabeth Allen in *Woman's Place in The Novels of Henry James* that "Daisy is what Winterbourne sees, it is up to him, the conscious subject, to accord Daisy some social place, some function as sign" (55). Therefore, it is assumed that she is categorically subjugated by Winterbourne's subjectivity.

We know nothing of Daisy but what Winterbourne allows us to know. That is problematic since he encounters the issue of interpreting what Daisy (or America) symbolises and has to do so with a narrowed perspective due to his context. That is why he values more what he understands of her rather than what she actually is (Allen, 52). According to Elizabeth Allen: "What women signify, or represent, varies enormously: it may be virtue or depravity, fickleness or endurance." (3). In *Daisy Miller*, Daisy's reading changes over the course of the story. She started by being the innocent, pretty, and unashamed American girl to whom Winterbourne developed a special interest and attraction. Nonetheless, after he exchanged opinions with other characters and was able to see Daisy through other people's eyes, Daisy started to signify depravity, immorality, and unsophistication.

Seeing that evolution, it was clear that Daisy would not have a favourable fate. Her careless demeanour and vivacity that once was fairly considered, transformed into debauchery and lasciviousness. Winterbourne's rejection made Daisy aware that she cannot have both freedom and social acceptance (Barnett, 286). Daisy "would either connive at their own defeat, or their creator would weaken their powers of resistance at the critical moment" (Habegger, 26). As a

result, her reckless behaviour resulted in her death, as she was doomed to succumb to her roguery.

ii. Mrs Costello

What Mrs Costello signifies deeply differs from what Daisy does. Winterbourne's aunt embodies social decorum and respectability (Barnett, 282). She has internalized so profoundly social rules that she is guided by what is socially acceptable. In fact, a great deal of blame for Winterbourne's behaviour and prejudices is placed on her and her strict demeanour. According to Louise K. Barnett in *Jamesian Feminism: Women in Daisy Miller*, her moral righteousness regarding decorum prevents her from being upfront with her opinions (283). That means that she is completely unable to tell her opinions to Daisy directly, instead, she settles with criticising her with other people.

Alike Winterbourne, she has been strongly Europeanized, and that process of pretended sophistication has made her an unreachable woman. Nonetheless, she disguises her inaccessibility with social exclusiveness. Mrs Costello "has internalized the rules of society and devoted herself to oppressing others in its name" (Barnett, 283). At the same time, Barnett argues that her refinement and concerns regarding the fulfilment of social norms cause her a psychosomatic reaction by which she suffers from frequent headaches. That can be interpreted as a response to her frustrations and anxieties, most of which are caused by excessive worry regarding what people do or say.

In this story, Mrs Costello plays a sort of authoritarian role by which she controls the enforcement of decency and etiquette. Nonetheless, Barnett analyses that, as a woman, Mrs Costello had spent a large amount of her time at home (Barnett, 283). I would like to include the possibility of her being detached from the reality of social interactions because of her recruitment at the house. As such, she possessed an unrealistic and strict way to behave and expected others to conform to those standards. Besides, Barnett considers her incapability to be a proper mother due to her predisposition to becoming ill.

As such, Mrs Costello would embody both the personification of social decorum and the hypocrisy of society. She expected everybody to behave according to social norms but she did not truly nor entirely fit into the standards for women as she did not excel as a mother.

iii. Mrs Miller

As for Daisy's mother, just like Mrs Costello, Mrs Miller tries to fit into social norms. Nonetheless, she does not strictly stick to them as her priority is her family and not society. Louise Barnett explores that Mrs Miller's loyalty is to her family and not to people of outside. She rebukes any kind of offence towards family unity, just like she did when Daisy complained about Randolph or when Daisy's life was at risk (Barnett, 284). She does not care about her reputation as much as she cares about her children.

Consonant to Mrs Costello's headaches, Mrs Miller suffers from dyspepsia. As explored by Louise K. Barnett in *Jamesian Feminism: Women in Daisy Miller*, Mrs Miller's disease is a response to the lack of significant events in her life while also a replacement for it (284). Her disorder is an entertainment for her as she needs some sort of distraction from the apathy in her life. At the same time, her disease is a reason for leisure as she enjoys talking about it. Mostly with her doctor to whom she develops a special bond in which she feels seen and heard, contrary to what she feels in society (Barnett, 284)

Mrs Miller can be considered the personification of women's role as mothers, given that she cares deeply about that union from a genuine concern and not because of what people would say. Contrary to Mrs Costello, she is more concerned about her individuality and that of her family than belonging to the community, as she will never be accepted. Moreover, her transparency in society resembles that of women at that age, who did not have the chance to speak up. That is also why she enjoys being with the doctor, as he actually cares, hears and "worries" about her.

4. Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905)

The House of Mirth is a novel published in 1905 by Edith Wharton in which she explored the reality of many high-class women in New York. Nonetheless, it was severely criticised due to its “implicit morality” and the “flawed character” of the protagonist.⁵ People were sceptical about the accuracy of Wharton’s depiction and that uncertainty “engendered heated discussion among [...] readers” (Lambert, 69). Lambert argues that, while some “praised her for revealing the corruption that idleness and wealth must inevitably produce.” (69), others labelled the book as an attack on wealthy people and Wharton was called a betrayer of her social class (70). As such, it can be said that the book was broadly received by the audience and talked about, whether was it for better or worse.

Despite the criticism and the quarrel that surrounded the novel, what Wharton wanted to express was the flaws and deception of society, and how money can be the main cause of that deceit. Wharton – and consequently Lily – “understood that what America worshipped more than anything else was wealth.” (Wershoven, 164). Hence, *The House of Mirth* explores the downfall and rejection of a woman from society once she loses her money. With no prospects and no husband, an ageing Lily Bart urgently needs better odds and a man who can provide them. That situation could resonate with many marriageable women at that age who faced the struggles of finding a man that could support them. According to Showalter, “marriage as a form of work, a woman's job” (135). To marry was women’s task and best chance to prosper.

Consequently, Wharton challenges the male-dominated social norms, hierarchy, and hypocrisy. She does so not by directly condemning those behaviours but by presenting them as they take place for the reader to fathom the patriarchal constraints in which women lived. According to Amy Kaplan, “In *the House of Mirth*, it is the dealings of the business world which seem private and unspeakable, while the cultural work of women dominates the public scene.” (93). Thus, the author focuses on the women in the narrative and considers women as the main focus of social life, forbearing to elaborate on men’s environment as it has been widely delved into.

The main female characters in the narrative *The House of Mirth* will be examined in this section in order to understand what each of them exemplifies and why.

⁵ Lambert, Deborah G. "The House of Mirth: Readers Respond." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 4.1 (1985): 69-82.

a. Women

Given that she was a member of the affluent classes in New York, Wharton offers a first-hand account of life among them. That is so she can accurately portray the struggles and endeavours women faced during America's Gilded Age. In many of her writings and in *The House of Mirth* in particular, "Wharton protested the treatment of women through her portrayals of women caught in the inescapable bonds of social constructs" (Olin-Ammentorp, 237). Women at that time faced the problematic constraints of the patriarchal society, at the same time that, in a flourishing economic period, they struggle to maintain certain living standards.

As it has been introduced, women had no actual freedom when it came to choosing their objectives and goals in life given that they had to accomplish the expectations society had on them. According to Margaret B McDowell, "Wharton's (women) find that they are not, in themselves, free to choose the course by which they can best fulfil their emotional and intellectual aspirations." (524). That is, for the wealthy society of New York, women's only aspiration was to marry a rich man to uphold their previous quality of life that only money could grant them. In fact, once these female characters, as we see in Lily or even Bertha, attempt to challenge the canonical behaviour they are expected to show "they encounter obstacles which stultify them, and they frequently end by experiencing untold bitterness at the illogical conventions which impede their free development." (McDowell, 524)

Women's impediment is clearly reflected in the marriage matter given that, as has been mentioned, that is their only task. As a result, "the novel becomes the story of a young woman's destruction by a social system that maintains that upper-class women are meant to be ornamental, even while it forces them to prostitute themselves on the marriage market" (Olin-Ammentorp, 238). Women are forced to adhere to social norms and presumptions, even if those lead them to objectify themselves in the process. Women's role in society conforms to three stages: daughters, wives, and mothers. Wharton challenges this idea by granting them ambitions and desires of their own.

In the course of the novel, it can be appreciated how Wharton attempts to make her female characters take male power away from them, but it is soon seen that it is impossible. According to Julie Olin-Ammentorp, "power in the novel is patriarchal, pointing out that men are the makers of money in the novel and, thus, as the novel focuses on the economics of marriage,

the source of all power.” (238). That being the case, women’s power hides behind society: manipulation, extramarital affairs, and the employment of their female appeal in order to achieve their goals.

Hereunder, I will deepen on women’s role, aims, and representation using the example of the three main – or most important – female characters: Lily Bart, Bertha Dorset and Gerty Farish.

i. Lily Bart

Lily Bart is the main character of *the House of Mirth*, nonetheless and despite the title, Lily would not experience that mirth during her adventure to be an active part of the affluent New York society. She is the daughter of a delusional woman who exceeds their financial possibilities and an absent man who tries to earn enough money to pay for his wife and daughter’s amenities. As such, Lily was never taught how to manage money, as her mother never did, nor understand men, as she had barely any contact with her father. That situation shaped her behaviour regarding money in her nubile years, as much as it affected her reaction towards the men that approached her.

Given the economic struggles that the family faced, her mother educated Lily to be the perfect lady: well-dressed, well-behaved, charming, and alluring, in order to find her a husband so she can marry into a wealthy family. According to Elaine Showalter, Lily could not represent “the educated, socially conscious, rebellious New Woman, nor the androgynous artist who finds meaning for her life in solitude and creativity, nor the old woman fiercely clinging to the past whom we so often see as the heroine of the post-Civil War local colorists.” (135). She could not embody a woman challenging social norms, nor a woman absolutely indifferent to said decorum; neither a woman that strictly follows those rules as it is what she knows; Lily personifies the typical woman who needs to be “the Perfect Lady” (Showalter, 135) so she can improve her prospects. She cannot afford to question or ignore the standards but stick to them.

Showalter continues arguing that “Wharton refuses to sentimentalize Lily's position but rather, through associating it with her own limitations as the Perfect Lady Novelist, makes us aware of the cramped possibilities of the lady whose creative roles are defined and controlled by men” (Showalter, 135). That means that Wharton confers Lily with much of her own struggles and

problems. As an affluent woman in New York, Wharton had to face the same situation she depicts in Lily. Wharton, like her character, was raised to be the perfect lady, nonetheless, both women committed mistakes that made them not fit in society or, in the case of Lily, be rejected from it.

The severe hindrances women endured are present in Lily's self-silencing, since women could not freely speak up. Showalter states that "Lily's inability to speak for herself is a muteness that Wharton associated with her own social background, a decorum of self-restraint she had to overcome in order to become a novelist" (Showalter, 136). Wharton was clear about her goal: to be a novelist; however, Lily was not given the chance to have any desire beyond finding a suitable husband that could support her financially. That is so the reader can fathom the subjugating situation in which women lived.

As she was taught, "Lily's search for a suitable husband is an effort to be "spoken for," to be suitably articulated and defined in the social arena" (Showalter, 136). She learned that a great deal of her worth comes from the money she has. As she had none – or the little she had, she lost it – her worth for society relied on the money her future husband had. As she could not speak for herself, she needed to be spoken for. However, once she entered the corrupt and competing environment of the wealthy class, she got involved in a series of complots by which she is pushed away from society.

Once she gets involved with the Dorsets, Lily's life becomes a hazardous situation, as she was being used by Bertha to entertain her husband while she had an affair. Nonetheless, Mr Dorset showed interest in Lily which leads Bertha to accuse her of having an extramarital affair that excluded Lily from society. With no money and no reputation, as people think that she has been romantically involved with a married man, instead of speaking for herself or being spoken for, "she has the opposite fate: she is "spoken of" by men" (Showalter, 136). All her efforts are diminished as she is not part of their society. Instead of being a member, she becomes their scapegoat. Her ambition to marry rich leads her to gullibility and she is tricked and used by those unscrupulous people.

At the end of the book, she killed herself of an overdose of sleeping pills, despite it is not clear whether it was intentional or not. The reprisals of her aspiration cause her misery and her subsequent death. According to Elaine Showalter, Lily "dies with this word of self-definition

on her lips, not the bride of a loving communication, but rather the still unravished bride of quietness” (136). She is a victim of her naivety and steadiness, she just accepts things as they come, even if unfavourable to her. On a separate note, she died as she lived, under patriarchal constraints that refrain her from growing. Consequently, “men can rewrite the story of Lily's life, as they can also enjoy the spectacle of her beauty and suffering.” (Showalter, 136).

ii. Bertha Dorset

Bertha Dorset is one of the antagonists of the story; in fact, she is the opposition to Lily. While Lily's manipulative behaviour is lost throughout the novel and replaced by ingenuousness; Bertha is a calculated and cunning woman whose main motivation is to remain relevant in the social sphere. Bertha is the epitome of lasciviousness, debauchery, and deceit, as she has a history of extramarital affairs which people seem to know and do nothing about. Despite the limiting situation in which women lived at that age, Bertha seemed to have more liberty than most. According to Julie Olin-Ammentorp, “Bertha Dorset and Judy Trenor are hardly subservient to their husbands, despite their economic dependence on them; both of these women seem to have more freedom and power than their spouses.” (238)

Bertha's affair, far from being exclusively a critique towards the profligacy of society, is the representation of a common reality that deals with women's sexual life that was very little explored. That is a matter that Wharton enjoyed writing about as there were rumours in her family of said nature, as covered in previous sections. The uncommon power imbalance present in the Dorset marriage is what prevents George Dorset from divorcing Bertha. Indeed, “rather than accusing Bertha of unfaithfulness and demanding her fidelity or, alternately, divorcing her, George allows Bertha to blackmail him into silence.” (Olin-Ammentorp, 239). That is to say that Bertha's power and relevance even demeaned George's willingness to act against the disrespect he is suffering.

Nonetheless, Bertha's relevance deeply relies on her husband's money and reputation, altogether with her manipulative and premeditated personality, which allows her to trick anyone into doing as she pleases and treat them as she likes. That is why she is entitled to wreck the fragile esteem Lily had left. Lily proves to finally have understood how society works by “knowing that the credibility of gossip hinges on money and power.” (Restuccia, 227). Once

Bertha told people that Lily was having an affair with her husband, Lily was doomed to be discredited. She could do nothing to change people's minds as it was more suitable for them to be on good terms with a person so wealthy and so powerful in society.

Conclusively, Bertha is the depiction of the debauchery and corruption of society and the embodiment of the power money and reputation give people in the hypocritical society of New York.

iii. Gerty Farish

An idealized portrayal of American women unspoiled by money and privilege is provided by Gerty Farish. According to Keiko Arai, "Gerty is a New Woman who gets involved in social work in the public sphere." (64). Gerty embodies the challenging opposition of some women regarding their situation as the inferior genre. She educated herself both academically and about her surroundings. As such, Gerty is socially conscious and is not willing to dwell on social impositions, but she is going to challenge them. That dissent against social norms is what makes her look unmarriageable for some characters, including Lily.

Gerty "finds contentment in a life different from the one she (Lily) pursues" (Arai, 65). Gerty provides another option for girls or women. Consequently, it spoils the conception of life Lily has and desecrates her aspirations, as she is shown that there are more beyond marrying. That means that "Gerty can be seen as a character who is not necessarily politically radical but possibly transcends conventional gender norms." (Arai, 67).

What is more, Gerty is the only opulent person that accepts Lily even after she is rejected by society, proving once again her dissimilarities to the typical affluent women in New York. reaffirming what has been said, Gerty embodies the *New Woman*: educated, empathic, helpful... and grants the novel a wider variety of points of view.

5. Results

Once the lives of both authors have been analysed and both works have been dissected regarding women's roles, a comparative and contrastive analysis will be carried out in this section.

As for their upbringings, there are many similarities: they both were born and raised in the state of New York; they lived in Europe and deeply liked the European way of living better than the one in New York; and they were severely affected by one of their progenitors. Nonetheless, their relationships with their respective parents greatly diverge. As for Henry James, the one relative that most influenced him was his father. In fact, it was a deliberate impact as the father transmitted his doctrines to the son, in an effort for him to perceive the world from the same point of view as he did. As for Edith Wharton, the outcome of her mother's behaviour was not conscious but it was, indeed, consequential. Wharton's mother's demeanour caused struggles in how the author approached social interaction, particularly when they were of romantic or sexual nature, as it emerges in her writings.

On the one hand, James' father's legacy translated into disregard concerning James' female characters. As it has been already examined, James' conception of women was extrapolated to his writings and, as such, he refrained from exploring women's personalities and motivations. Consequently, his women are not completely unfolded as he took the general characteristics and features he and his father abhorred and implanted them into his female characters. Thus, any James' female was limited by "what she was accused of being" (Grant, 18).

On the other hand, Wharton's upbringing's aftermath is reflected in the way she dissects women's aspirations, attractions, and desires. Conversely to James, Wharton, as a woman herself, sympathised with women's situation. Hence, she grants her female character a depth and background James avoids. The messy relationship between their parents along with the alleged extramarital affairs her mother had shaped Wharton's perception of marriage and female sexual liberation. Therefore, those aspects were covered in her works, especially in *The House of Mirth*, as Wharton adapted them to each one of her female characters' demeanours.

What is more, Wharton did not affix to portray women in a fixed and premeditated way, but each one of her female characters has their own aims and ambitions that marked their

personalities, inclinations, and interests. Contrastingly, despite James' women differ from one another, their identities are limited by their mere roles as women, which includes their position as mothers, daughters, or potential wives. Consequently, all the plots that may surround them revolve around their function as women: judging and guiding mothers, lascivious nubile women, etc.

In the same vein, James' insufficient understanding of women translates into insufficient development of them in *Daisy Miller*. Then, reiterating what has been already said, the reader is not given Daisy's background and, hence, her motivations or aspirations are not shown. The only thing the reader grasps about her is what the author wants and embodies in her. To sum up, "Daisy is what Winterbourne sees" (Allen, 55), while Winterbourne would be the personification of James. Regarding *The House of Mirth*, Wharton decided to extend Lily's setting and, accordingly, the reasons that lie underneath her decisions. As such, it can be said that besides giving Lily some profundity, also confers her options between which to decide, those that Daisy did not have.

As for *Daisy Miller*, the plain depiction of Daisy, – and the rest of the female characters as well – can be a purposeful selection by which to confer some moral authority regarding the woman question. That means, as we only see one perception of the women in the story, which is that of Winterbourne and consequently that of James, we only see the reality of the narrative through a blurred glass, given that we see the actuality of women through the eyes of a man. To deepen in that matter, it is a matter of fact that a man cannot so accurately nor sensibly understand women's goals and reasons behind their behaviour and decisions compared to a woman. That is why Wharton excels in presenting the actual reality of women, as she provides a range of possibilities among the female characters. Henry James narrates the story in a way the reader grasps that whatever Daisy is doing is wrong. As for Edith Wharton in *The House of Mirth*, she delivers a more subjective point of view, in which the reader can determine by themselves whether what women are doing is right or wrong since they are given the reasons behind it. Hence, it can be said that while James offers a depiction in which to condemn immoral behaviour without questioning its motivations, Wharton explores why is that they demean the way they do to effectively portray the reality since all the characters, resembling society, are flawed.

In other respects, the other female characters also have some differences that lie within their similarities. As for Mrs Costello (*Daisy Miller*) and Bertha Dorset (*The House of Mirth*), they are both opulent women who, somehow, lead the social environment of their sphere. Mrs Costello does so by being the authority regarding social decorum, which makes people respect her righteousness, while Mrs Dorset does so by having lots of money and influence, which makes people afraid of being in opposition to her. As for Mrs Miller (*Daisy Miller*) and Gerty Farish (*The House of Mirth*), their meeting point is their disregard concerning social decorum as they care about the protagonist even at their lowest point, despite what people say about that. Nonetheless, their motivations greatly differ from one another: Mrs Miller cares about Daisy because she is her daughter and they have a mother-to-child bond; Gerty worries about Lily because of the friendship they may have, and she appreciates Lily because she believes in the sisterhood between women, given that she embodies the role of a new woman who cares about feminist matters and supports other women.

As a final note, the resolution of both novels is the same: the death of their lead character. Nonetheless, these deaths are given for vastly different reasons. On the one hand, Daisy is murdered by her author and his prejudices. That means that James' conception of women, decorum, and morality, leads him to weaken his heroine so much that she is forced to yield to her debauchery. That is that the only way for James to end that deceit is by killing the one committing it. That is also why she died from a disease and not by herself; there was nothing she could do against it. On the other hand, Wharton builds a strong base in which to construe the development of Lily so we can understand that her downfall and rejection from society led her to feel lonely and miserable; that situation made her feel trapped and with no prospects. Consequently, she turned to alcohol and drugs to cope with her hardships. Whether Lily's overdose was intentional or not may remain a mystery. Nonetheless, her death was in her hands, as she was the one that had the weapon (the drugs). As such, Lily was the one that had the option to die or to live, conversely to Daisy.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this dissertation is to analyse and conclude the differences between women's depictions when it takes place from a man's or a woman's point of view. To do so, I have chosen two contemporary authors whose background was particularly similar but differed in their gender: Henry James and Edith Wharton. That is so it can be examined how they approached the different portrayals of women in their works. In order to perform said comparison, two of their narratives have been selected following specific criteria whereby both works have several meeting points, such as the themes, characters, and setting; but whose depiction of women could be contrasted and proved disparate.

The upbringing each individual overcomes and the experiences each person goes through shape their responses to the world, at the same time that it affects their perception of reality. The dissimilarities between the affairs of a woman and that of a man are very uneven and, as such, their understanding of their surroundings, even if they are the same, will deeply differ from one another. That is a reality nowadays and so it was back in the 19th century when there were more disparities between women's and men's situations. Consequently, if we focus on how the different contexts can affect an individual's perception and subsequent representation of women, whether they are male or female will shape the way they do so.

As for Henry James, in the first section of this paper has been analysed the way in which he was raised and the beliefs he was taught, matters that would consequently affect his perception of society and women. The severe impact his father's doctrines had on him influenced his awareness of society. On another note, the attraction he felt towards Europe affected the way he perceived American society, which made him more critical of any behaviour that resembled him to the United States. As such, in *Daisy Miller*, he grants the female characters (specifically Daisy and her mother) attitudes that are, for him, inherently American: rude, ignorant, and unpolished; so a critique can be made both against the main female character in the novel but also against the American society. As such, James wrote not from mere experience but also from prejudices.

As for Edith Wharton, her upbringing affected her inasmuch as James' affected him. Nonetheless, given that the beliefs and conventions each of them learned were contrastingly different, and so it was their perception of society and gender, as they differed in that as well,

she provides a vastly dissimilar representation of women compared to James. As a woman, she was able to perceive the whole picture of women's situation in America, as she suffered it herself. She could use and, indeed used, those experiences to provide a realistic portrayal of women and their struggles. As such, she was able to explore the sexist behaviour they had to endure in a patriarchal society and the fragility of women's reputations from her first-hand experience.

As has been explored in the previous section *Results*, James and Wharton's similarities and differences have led to resemblance but also discrepancies in their writings. It can be seen that despite the fact they share some common themes: nubile women, American society, European settings, and a wide variety of characters that embody different aspects of society; the way they approach the main topic of the narrative is conflicting. While James' story suggests an examination of the deceitful behaviour some women present and condemn those attitudes; Wharton provides an analysis of the actual reality of women while expanding their individuality, characteristics, aspirations, and the reasons to behave, as some would say, deceitfully.

As such, I conclude that a man like Henry James did not have the sensitivity nor the first-hand experience to portray accurately the concerns and dealings of women. Necessarily, he reflected his grasp of society and women in the story *Daisy Miller*, which did not conform with the experiences females endured. As a result, *Daisy Miller* remains a text that stands out for its moral authority, as it provides some guidelines on how women should and should not behave from a man's point of view, which will be conflictingly restricted. As for *The House of Mirth*, Wharton, as a woman herself, can provide a broad picture of the social sphere in New York and how challenging it was for women to live under those constraints. Moreover, as a woman deeply affected by the scandals that surrounded her family in her childhood, she was an eyewitness to the deceptiveness that hides beneath the glamorous and wealthy society of New York. Those circumstances gave her the insight to accurately portray the different roles women played in society and the indecency some people presented.

After coming to these conclusions, I am confident that the female characters in James' narrative were negatively impacted by the ideals of the period that were ingrained in them, while Wharton's were construed in a way that they could present different options for different women. Conclusively, different backgrounds lead to different outcomes and, when it comes to

speaking about writers, it also leads to different narrative styles, including the way in which they portray women.

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