Portrayal of women in Maria Edgeworth's novels

Academic year 2008-2009
Word of thanks

I want to thank everybody who helped me write this dissertation. First of all I want to thank my supervisor, Professor Doctor Marysa Demoor for the good guidance that she has given me during the writing of the thesis. Secondly I want to thank the people from the libraries who have helped me look up the books I needed. Finally I want to thank all the people that have helped me with the final editing of my dissertation. They have read my text several times and have indicated the passages they did not understand or the passages that contained spelling and formulation errors.
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0) Short biographical introduction

Maria Edgeworth is an English writer, born on the first of January in 1767 and died on 22 May of 1849. Her life was never easy. Very early in life she lost her biological mother. Afterwards her father remarried several times. During her life Maria Edgeworth saw many deaths and diseases. She had many brothers and sisters, most of whom died before her. This all had an impact on the young girl's mental state. Very often her father and stepmother left the country and she was left in charge of the children. This is the reason why Maria Edgeworth had to grow up very fast, she had to take responsibility for her siblings. After losing her own mother, she now had to act as a mother to all her brothers and sisters. During her lifetime she had a lot of support from her father, not just in domestic affairs, but also when she started writing. Her father supported her, because in those days it was not easy for a woman to start writing: "Very early indeed her father encouraged her to put her imaginings on paper; a remarkable proof of his enlightenment, for those were the days when female authorship was held in slight esteem, [...]"¹ She wrote many novels and children's tales. For approval of the children's tales, she read them out loud to her brothers and sisters. If they liked the story, it was ready for publishing. Most of her other works needed the approval of her father. This influence of her father will be explained further on in this introduction.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth century writing was considered as mostly a male activity. Middle and upper-class women were still considered as the inferior sex who were supposed to stay at home and take care of the children and the household. Never did anyone dare to expect that they could write as well as men. Even reading was considered a male activity. During the eighteenth century, women started to resist this patriarchal culture. They started to write their own story from their own viewpoint. Previously, women had often been portrayed as madwomen by men. Now, women try to portray a new image of themselves. Even when women wrote novels themselves, they never received the same recognition for their works as male writers did. Novels written by women were always considered inferior to those written by men. This was because of the so-called 'critical double standard'. Women writers were supposed to be more emotional and fragile than men, therefore their novels lacked rationality and knowledge. In the next quote Gaye Tuchman states that critics in the eighteenth century saw women's hearts and ideas as different from men's:

Women's hearts – their feelings – were finer and more delicate than those of men.
Conversely, their minds lacked rigour. By insisting on such intrinsic differences between women's and men's minds, the developing ideology made it seem impossible for women to

¹ Zimmern, H., Edgeworth Maria, University of Toronto, London, 1883
write as men did. One may improve a woman's mind – that is, educate her to learn all she is capable of learning – but one cannot transform it into a man's mind.  

The 'critical double standard' is a concept created by Elaine Showalter in *A Literature of Their Own*. More information about this will be given in the first chapter.

In this thesis I will be discussing the life and works of one of Ireland's female writers, namely Maria Edgeworth. I will be doing this in relation to other feminist works and in the bigger context of feminism in literature. Maria Edgeworth is a female writer who has been largely neglected in most literary criticism. I want to show that her works have been important in the development of early female writings. I also want to show that Edgeworth is not like any other female writer. Most female writers try to fight the patriarchy. This does not seem to be the case in Edgeworth's novels. She does not really try to overthrow the patriarchy or prove that women can live without men. Other writers show how badly women are treated by men. Through their stories these women writers want to change the existing order between men and women. They believe that literature has contributed to the unequal position between the sexes. The next quotation explain this:

The aim should not be simply to claim more space in the sun for women within the existing social structures. They want to deconstruct the prevailing status quo completely, so as to transform the existing order of reality.  

Maria Edgeworth does not immediately want to change the existing reality completely. It is her aim to make men understand women and to teach them how to show respect to their female counterparts. Compared to other heroes, Edgeworth's heroes pay more attention to the emotions of the female protagonists. For example, they do not marry women because their parents have arranged it like that, if they marry, they do it out of love. This was something quite unusual in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. It was a time when marriages were still arranged between families in order to gain fortune or land. Edgeworth's heroes do not agree with these practices.

One of the reasons why Maria Edgeworth is so different from contemporary and later female writers can be her family background. As I said at the beginning of this introduction, she lost her mother at a very young age. Like most girls, Maria Edgeworth needed a mother-figure in her life. After her mother's death, there have been a few stepmothers, but of course none of them could really fill her biological mother's place. Because of this, she developed a very good relationship with her father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth. He was a writer as well, though he never became as popular as his daughter. Because her father was a writer, Edgeworth always considered his judgement very important. Everything she wrote, had to be read by him before she would sent it to

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the publisher. Many of her works also have prefaces written by her father, in which he tries to explain why she wrote the novel and in which he tries to justify her reasons for writing. Because of this, many people who did not like or did not trust female writers did want to read Edgeworth. Her father served as a bridge between her writings and potential male readers. When we realise how close the relationship is between Maria Edgeworth and her father, it comes as no surprise that the world came tumbling down around her when he died. She stopped writing for a while, she also had some problems with her health which kept her from reading or writing. A few months later, she resumed her writing activities, but her works would never be the same again. Without her father's influence, her novels changed. I expected her stories to become more feminine after his death. I thought they were going to portray more female heroes, standing up for their own faith. Whether this is really the case will become clear in the following chapters of the dissertation.

The main source from which the idea for this thesis originates is *The Madwoman in the Attic* by Gilbert and Gubar. These two writers try to make a sort of overview of the female writings during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. They explain how women have always been patronized by men and how they consequently never had the place they deserve in cultural history. They formulate it as follows:

> Austen shows how popular romantic fiction contributes to the traditional notion that women have no other legitimate aim but to love men and how this assumption is at the root of "female" narcissism, masochism, and deceit.  

In their work they also explain the anxiety of authorship. This means that women are constantly influenced by their male predecessors. They can never truly create their own novels or poems, they always have to try to avoid the influence of other male writers. In their work, Gubar and Gilbert give Maria Edgeworth a special position in the history of female writing. They say she has no story of her own to tell. They make it seem as if she is merely telling her father's story.

..., Maria Edgeworth's persistent belief that she had no story of her own reflects Catherine Morland's initiation into her fallen female state as a person without a history, without a name of her own, without a story of significance which she could herself author.  

I have divided my thesis in three chapters. In the first chapter I will give a brief discussion on female writing in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. As I already said, the main source to do this will be Gilbert and Gubar. In this part of the thesis I will try to give Maria Edgeworth the place she deserves in the history of literature. To get started I will also give a little overview of the

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Nicky De Boom Portrayal of Women in Maria Edgeworth's novels
origins of feminism, using Literature and Feminism by Pam Morris.

In the second chapter I will talk about Maria Edgeworth's life. Because of her biological mother's early death, Edgeworth has had a very turbulent life. She had a few step-mothers, the last of which was even younger than Maria Edgeworth herself. With this step-mother she had a very good relationship and this was also the woman who wrote a biography about her step-daughter's life. Throughout the chapter I will pay special attention to the various influences on Edgeworth's life and literary career. The most important influence that I will mention is her father. Not only did he influence her works, sometimes he even went as far as to tell her what she should write about. In such cases, he would give her the main framework for a novel and she would write it out. Of course, her father was not the only influence. During the many trips she made to Paris and England, she met a lot of interesting people who all had an impact on her life and work. The most popular person who influenced her, is probably Sir Walter Scott. Edgeworth had received a copy of Waverley from the author himself and was immediately fascinated by the person who wrote this interesting work.

In the third chapter I will discuss a few of Edgeworth's works. I will talk about Castle Rackrent, Ennui, The Absentee, Letters of Julia and Caroline and An Essay on the science of Self-Justification. I chose to discuss these works because they are the most popular and because they serve my purpose. In the novels I will highlight some important passages which have to do with for example, language, national history or ideology.
1) Chapter I: Literature in the eighteenth and nineteenth century

This first chapter will deal with the literature written during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The information given in this chapter is useful to understand the general idea of the thesis. I plan to show that Maria Edgeworth was a special female author in her time. In order to do this, I have to explain the origins of female literature and the writing style of the stereotypical female writer. I have divided this chapter in four different parts. First, I will discuss the superior position that male writers occupy in literary history. Secondly, I will look at the reaction of female writers to this male dominance and at the way they deal with their supposed inferiority. Thirdly, I will talk about the typical literary heroes. While doing the latter, I will pay special attention to the differences between male heroes and female ones. I will close this chapter by saying something about the position that Maria Edgeworth occupies within this history of literature. In that part I will point out some differences between Edgeworth and other female writers in her time. Some of these things will also be repeated in some of the next chapters. The main sources for writing this chapter are *The Madwoman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-century Literary Imagination* by Gilbert and Gubar and *Literature and Feminism* by Pam Morris. These two critical works give us a picture of literature by women in the nineteenth century and they analyse the origins of feminism in general and in literature. Two other important sources are *The female hero in women's literature and poetry* by Susan Lichtman and *Psyche As Hero. Female Heroism and Fictional Form* by Edwards LR. These two works deal with the hero in literature.

1.1: The superior position of male writers

There are many different ways to explain the dominance that men seem to have over women. The explanation that I want to highlight requires a very large leap back in time, all the way back to the creation of men, to the story of Adam and Eve. Of course, we have to distance ourselves from these sort of stories, but at the same time, we have to realise that once upon a time people strongly believed in Christianity and because of this they held the stories that were told in the Bible to be true. If you read Genesis carefully, you will read in one of the stories that God created Adam first. Out of one of his ribs, he created Eve. This immediately establishes the superior position of Adam, he himself is responsible for the creation of Eve. Without men, women would have never existed. This part of Genesis is not the only one to establish men's superiority. At the end, it is Eve who gives in to temptation first and takes a bite of the forbidden apple. Hereby, she reinforces the idea of
women as the weaker sex. This is just one of the many stories that portray a picture of women as inferior subjects. That this idea was still very much alive in the eighteenth and nineteenth century will become clear in the following discussion.

Some people tend to consider the female inferiority as an inborn destiny. On the other hand, there are also men and women who claim that women's inferiority is not inborn but socially determined. This would mean that women are not biologically inferior and that they can stand a chance against male superiority. Personally, I put faith in this second point of view. I do not believe that there are biological rules that put women in inferior positions to men. On the contrary, I strongly believe that women can decide upon their own faith and that they can stand up to men and be equal to them. In the next quotation, I will give you the view of two scientists who believed that gender was a social construction, but still believed that women could not escape the dominance of men.

Both Freud and Lacan insist on gender as social construction, not as inborn destiny. Lacan, even more than Freud, stresses the unstable and provisional nature of all subjective identity. However, his theories seem to release women from biology only to lock them into another form of determinism. Instead of women's lack of a penis making their inferior status inevitable, Lacan theorizes a symbolic order that enacts an equally irresistible subordination of women.  

Though in this quotation, you can tell that both Freud and Lacan did not believe in women as biologically inferior, they still managed to find a way to keep the male dominance in place. Instead of a natural order, they created a symbolical order with women again at the bottom of the hierarchy.

According to Gilbert and Gubar men have for a long time, until the end of the eighteenth century, been considered the dominant gender. Therefore their views and representations were authorized as “the truth”. When male writers wrote something, it was always accepted as the truth, there was never any doubt that something written by a man could be something other or something less than the truth.

In patriarchal Western culture, therefore, the text’s author is father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis.  

This quotation emphasizes the fact that most texts are written by men. They are considered to be the fathers of literature. As the fathers of literature they have the most authority. They are the ones who decide what will be published, therefore, they are the reason why women almost never got published. In those days, men were considered as the only creatures on earth who were capable of writing decent essays, poems and other literary texts. Women writers were supposed to write

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nothing more than futile novels. However, as Gilbert and Gubar argue, by taking a male pseudonym, some women in the nineteenth century, for example George Eliot, were published. Other women needed the support of a man if they wanted to be recognized as an established writer. Such was the case of Maria Edgeworth. Edgeworth's father helped her to find a good publisher, he wrote prefaces to her novels, he explained the purposes of her writings and he defended her against male critics who considered her writings as inferior just because she was a woman.

The dominant view on women might be influenced by the picture that male writers drew of them in their texts. In their stories, male writers tend to portray female characters as weak, mad and inferior:

\[\ldots\], in the severity of her selflessness, as well as in the extremity of her alienation from ordinary fleshly life, this nineteenth-century angel-woman become not just a memento of otherness but actually a memento mori or, as Alexander Welsh has noted, an “Angel of Death”.

This quotation shows how women are always seen as “the other”. They are always defined as other and less than men. Since men are the superior sex, everything that is other is considered as bad and inferior. In many nineteenth century texts, female characters are portrayed as angel-women. They are not considered mortal beings like men but they are portrayed as divine beings who have little or no influence over life on earth. In the next quotation it becomes obvious how the otherness of women is the first step towards the fall of female writers:

The story that Milton, “the first of the masculinists,” most notably tells to women is of course the story of woman’s secondness, her otherness, and how that otherness leads inexorably to her demonic anger, her sin, her fall, and her exclusion from that garden of the gods which is also, for her, the garden of poetry.

Subsequent generations of women continued to see themselves as passive objects without any real importance. As I mentioned above, they were seen as divine beings who could not possibly have anything to say about the events on earth. Everybody thought that women were merely the complement of men. Without their male counterparts they were nothing. This is the reason why in the eighteenth and nineteenth century women had to marry the husband that their family picked out. They married in order to gain land and wealth. Their main occupation was to socialise with other women of the same social status. Never did anyone suspect that women could have a story to tell, that they could have the capacity to write as well as men. Male critics assumed that women were not capable of writing literature because they did not have the same education as men. The next quote portrays Swift's view on female sexuality:

In the mouths of women, vocabulary loses meaning, sentences dissolve, literary messages

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are distorted or destroyed. Thus for Swift female sexuality is consistently equated with degeneration, disease, and death, while female arts are trivial attempts to forestall an inevitable end. 10

Women could write meaningless novels but nothing more. During the eighteenth and nineteenth century, it was very difficult to change this view on female characters and female writers. The narrative point of view in novels was always masculine, therefore the portrayal of women was very negative. The biggest challenge for women was to read differently, they had to learn to read in a different way, to see through their own eyes instead of through the eyes of the male author and male protagonist. This challenge will be described in the next part of this chapter.

1.2: Female writers to the rescue

If we want to sketch a picture of a female literary tradition during the eighteenth and nineteenth century, it is important to know what feminism really means and how it came about. In *Literature and Feminism: an introduction*, Pam Morris gives a good definition of what feminism means to her:

My definition of feminism, which will inform the rest of the book, is that it is a political perception based on two fundamental premises: (1) that gender difference is the foundation of a structural inequality between women and men, by which women suffer systematic social injustice, and (2) that the inequality between the sexes is not the result of biological necessity but it is produced by the cultural construction of gender differences. This perception provides feminism with its double agenda: to understand the social and psychic mechanisms that construct and perpetuate gender inequality and then to change them. 11

This definition clearly shows that it is the task of women to analyse patriarchal society and to try to change it. Morris agrees with the view of Freud and Lacan that gender difference is not biologically determined, but that it is dependent on social factors. This leads to the belief that women can change their destiny.

Gilbert and Gubar claim that women can behave in two different ways. First, there are women who merely accept the dominance of men and who do not try to fight this. Most of the time, they live happily in their inferior position and all they really want to do is please their husbands. These women clearly do not have a story of their own to tell. They live in the shadow. The life that these wives lead, is not worth mentioning in a novel. In contrast to this, there are also women who do not abide by their husband's wishes. These women want to step out of the shadow and lead a life of their own. Gilbert and Gubar portray their life as “a life of female rebellion”12. These women clearly have a story of their own to tell. They are interested in how literature can contribute to the

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inequality between men and women.

They are concerned to discover how literature as a cultural practice may be involved in producing the meanings and values that lock women into inequality, rather than simply reflecting the already existing reality of women's lives in literary texts. In order to change this “already existing reality” they want to tell their own story in their novels. Female writers tried to connect with male writers by portraying women as “angel-women or monster-women”14. In their stories, they showed female characters who were confined in glass coffins, just like women felt themselves to be confined in the society. They did not feel free, they felt the strong obligation to obey their husbands. As soon as they gained some recognition for their writing, they start to change the image of female inferiority in their novels: heroines start to break free from the glass coffins that men had placed them in for generations. Women authors finally begin to fight the patriarchy. By the end of the eighteenth century female literature is a fact. The next quotation presents the feelings surrounding female literature at the beginning of the eighteenth century:

It was still felt that women should normally be private and almost anonymous. But the imagination perpetually seeks ideal figures, women as well as men.15

This quotation shows that people still expect women to remain mostly inside the house. At the same time this quote also explains that women characters can sometimes be considered as 'ideal figures'. In our imagination we all search for perfection, in this aspect there is no difference between men and women. The only difference is that the picture of an ideal woman might be very different from that of an ideal man. The fictional portrayal of the perfect man will probably be a handsome, powerful man with a lot of influence over everyone, including his wife. The fictional portrayal of the perfect woman on the other hand, will in the nineteenth century most likely be a timid, inferior wife, whose only obligations are to make small-talk with women of the same social status and look pretty when they accompany their husbands to parties. While men are very happy with this view of perfection, some women are not. These women try to change this image of the perfect woman by writing a literature of their own.

The first generation of female writers at the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth century had a very difficult time trying to establish their identities as writers. Because of the fact that there was no tradition of female literature, they were afraid of failing at their task. Women had always been told that they could not write because the creator of texts had to be a man. Because of this, they felt insecure. They were not sure whether they were good enough to compete

13 Pam Morris, Literature and Feminism, 8.
14 Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic, 44.
with men. The next citation shows that girls often did not achieve the same educational level as boys, therefore they feared that their knowledge was too limited to write a work of literature.

Altick reports that much less information of any sort was available on the schooling of the women. About 20 percent of the women writers he studied had been given some formal schooling, as opposed to being taught at home, and this figure remained constant throughout the entire century. After 1870, a few women had gone on to some kind of advanced study.  

This quotation clearly states that women almost never had the opportunity to achieve the same advanced education as men. This can be explained by the fact that they were only supposed to serve their husband and children, a good education was not needed. The little literary knowledge that women might have, was deduced from male writings. Women writers had to search for a tradition of their own. While doing this, they had to choose whether they wanted to show that they were nothing more than just a woman or to show that they were as good as men. The next quotation states this:

Thus, as Virginia Woolf observed, the woman writer seemed locked into a disconcerting double bind: she had to choose between admitting she was “only a woman” or protesting that she was “as good as a man”.  

Women struggled with the male dominance. As mentioned before, they did not seem to have a system or tradition of their own. The biggest changes that had to be made for women to become writers were social and educational, not literary. Female writers wanted to change the picture of women, while using the same literary techniques as men. As mentioned women did this by using the same literary character of the madwomen, but with a different background. The next quotation will show how female authors portray themselves:

In their attempts at the escape that the female pen offers from the prison of the male text, women like Aurora Leigh and Mary Elizabeth Coleridge begin, as we shall see, by alternately defining themselves as angel-women or as monster-women.  

In this citation it is obvious that women authors either portray themselves as monster-women or as angel-women. When they portray themselves as monster-women they do not do this for the same reasons as male authors do. Male authors write about madwomen because they mirrored their own fears and anxieties in these women. Female writers on the other hand, tell the story of a madwoman to draw attention to the horrible ways women are treated by their male counterparts. The next citation explains how women wrote fiction with the same literary structure as men but with a different social context.

[...] Austen has successfully balanced her own artistic commitment to an inherited literary

16 Elaine Showalter, A Literature of their Own: British Women Novelists From Brontë to Lessing ( Great Britain: Virago 1978), 41.
17 Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic, 64.
18 Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic, 44.
structure that idealizes feminine submission against her rebellious imaginative sympathies. [...] Austen presents herself as a “mere” interpreter and critic of prior fictions, and thereby quite modestly demonstrates her willingness to inhabit a house of fiction not of her own making. 19

In order to become a good author, many female novelists started by trying to understand men. They tried to look at themselves from a male perspective. This was a very important phase in the emergence of women's literature. Because in order to change the ruling ideologies, they first had to understand them. They had to realize how men saw them before they could change this view on women. Female authors examined the stereotypes that were so often applied to women, later they started parodying them. I already mentioned that many women authors used the picture of the madwoman. The next quotation states that women authors used this stereotypical image to make a parody of male writings and to show the effect that the image had on the lives of female readers:

Not merely parodying stereotypical male images of women as unnatural (but seductive) monsters, Shirley is also describing the effect such images have on women themselves. Because she so consciously experiences herself as monstrous, deviant, excluded, powerless, and angry, Shirley sees through the coercive myths of her culture that imply and even condone inequality and exploitation. 20

The result of female literature is that women finally felt good about their sex. For the first time in history, women realized that they had a story of their own to tell. They wanted to have a chance to show that the life of an upper-class woman is just as important as the life of an upper-class man. An equality between men and women seemed to be achieved. Both man and woman could write, read and work outside the house. Women realized that their lives was of as much importance as the lives of men:

Finding their own emotions, circumstances, frustrations and desires shared, named and shaped into literary form gave (and continues to give) many women, some for the first time, a sense that their own existence was meaningful, that their view of things was valid and intelligent, that their suffering was imposed and unnecessary, and a belief in women's collective strength to resist and remake their own lives. 21

Finally, women came out of the shadows and over the following years, they showed themselves as successful writers. They proved that they could write meaningful texts as well as men. Even though women and men wrote the same kind of fiction (novels) they received different criticisms. Novels written by women writers were automatically considered inferior to those written by men. This is due to the critical double standard. Male and female authors are judged on different grounds. In the next quote Elaine Showalter explains the critical double standard:

Most of the negative criticism tried to justify the assumption that novels by women would

19 Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 144.
21 Pam Morris, *Literature and Feminism*, 60.
be recognizably inferior to those by men. When the Victorians thought of the woman writer, they immediately thought of the female body and its presumed afflictions and liabilities.  

This citation proves that women's writings were constantly seen as inferior because women did not have the same mind and heart as men. Despite all this criticism, women writers felt as if they could change the ideology by their writings. Through their novels, they wanted to change the view of their female readers: “As critics like Simpson uneasily sensed, they were writing not only to develop direct personal power, but also to change the perceptions and aspirations of their female readers.”

This quote explains that critics like Simpson soon realized that female writings had a greater impact than expected. Despite the critical double standard women writers did achieve their purpose, they were capable of changing the mind of their female readers.

1.3: The hero in literature

Dreaming, we are heroes. Waking, we invent them. Conscious, unable to recreate the universe according to the patterns of desire, we require heroes to redeem a fallen world. Seductive figures, bold and daring, heroes promise power to the weak, glamour to the dull, and liberty to the oppressed. Their thoughts and actions cut channels into custom's rock. They cross borders, advance into new territory, inspire revolt. Dreamer's agents, necessary fictions, heroes enact our sleeping visions in the world, in daylight. We dream our heroes. In exchange, our heroes alter us.

These are the first few sentences in Edwards’ s *Psyche as a Hero*. According to him, after ages of male heroes Western cultures are changing and female heroes are starting to emerge. The heroine is a sign of fractures in male society. She wants to show that there is no link between gender and behaviour. Women can be fine heroes, they are not too weak to act as strong individuals. Of course, there are a few considerable differences between heroes and heroines. Heroes are very often involved in a quest, they search for something or somebody and while doing this they are not afraid of taking up a few fights. Heroines, on the other hand, are more concerned with the memory of women. By acting as a hero, they want to focus attention on the history of women. They want to show how bad women have been treated by men over the years. With their stories female authors want to make readers remember how they have been treated my men. They want women to realize that their situation has to change and that they themselves are the only ones that are capable of making this change happen.

There have always been women who wanted to escape authority. During a woman's lifetime there are different forms of authority. First of all, there is the authority of the mother. In the

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22 Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, 76.
eighteenth century, it was still customary for girls to accompany their mothers, wherever they went. Many of the girls did not like this and wanted to break free from the restraint that their mother had over them. A second authority is the father. At that time, girls still engaged in prearranged marriages. The fathers of two different upper-class families decided that their children should be married in order to expand their joined influence in the country. Girls did not have a choice, they merely did what their father wanted them to do. A third and final figure of authority in the lives of women is their husbands. After getting away from the parental authority they end up with a husband who decides for them. The next quotation states that women had to wait for a husband to free them from the parental control:

All the heroines of Austen's fiction very much want to experience the wider world outside their parents' province, each, though, must wait until lucky enough to be asked to accompany a chaperon who frequently only mars the pleasure of the adventure.25

As this quotation says, women had to wait until they found a chaperon to take their first step into the wide world.

In *The Female Hero in Women's Literature and Poetry*, Susan Lichtman explains a few differences between heroes in literature written by men and those heroes in literature written by women. One of these differences is the content of the story and more particularly, the ending. According to Lichtman, in works by male authors heroes often die at the end of the story, for example Oedipus. Heroes in works by female authors on the other hand do not die at the end but accept lifelong endurance. They are left with a situation that can go either way. This way readers can imagine a suitable ending. They get a feeling as if they can choose what the hero decides to do in the end. The next quotation shows this:

Instead of the traditional endings of marriage or death for their women characters, women writers tend to leave their heroes with conditional endings that serve to leave the possibilities open for both character and reader.26

Another fact about female heroines in women's literature that Lichtman draws attention to is that they break conventions. Women were supposed to be inferior, both in social affairs and in educational ones. They were not considered to be smart. They did not have to learn anything about the world because their husbands took care of everything outside the household. In novels, heroines break this conventions and evolve from inexperience to experience. At the beginning of the story, they are portrayed as inexperienced beings but by the end they are described as experienced. During their lifetime, they have to discover everything there was to know about the world outside. Like all

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creatures, women have to learn through experience. Lichtman goes as far as to say that this proves that the hero cycle was essentially female:

The original hero cycle was female in origin. Linked to the common ancient belief of earthly existence as female (Mother Nature, Gaia), the female hero cycle exemplified the growth and maturation of the human being through experience. 27

It is certainly the case that the female hero can not be neglected in the history of literature. The female hero in literature could not always count on positive criticism. Many critics sketched a very negative picture of heroines. The next citation shows Devine and Forsyth's opinions about the heroine:

Familiar terms such as the “demi-monde”, the “fallen” woman and the “sensation” heroine have, at various times, been drawn upon to define and explore specific instances of “mis”-behaviour articulated with considerable frequency in nineteenth-century literature. 28

Maybe this proves that male authors were afraid of the growing influence of female literature. Maybe they realized that women could really write as well as men. We also have to bear in mind that “bad behaviour” at that time did not constitute the same as what we now call bad behaviour.

1.4: Maria Edgeworth's place in this history

This thesis will be about the life and works of Maria Edgeworth. In this dissertation I also want to prove that Edgeworth differs from other female authors at some points. For this reason it is important to know something about the place that Edgeworth occupies in the history of eighteenth and nineteenth female writings. In some aspects, she perfectly fits into the picture of the stereotypical woman author, in other aspects she is the opposite of this stereotype. By stereotypical woman author, I mean the women who wrote novels to overthrow the patriarchy and to escape the male dominance. In this part of the chapter I will discuss the similarities and differences between Edgeworth and other writers. Later on in the thesis, these elements will be mentioned again with examples from her life or from her works.

A similarity between Maria Edgeworth and the other female writers has to do with her life and with the way she reflects on her own life. I already mentioned in an earlier part that most women did not think that they had a story of their own to tell. This is exactly the case with Maria Edgeworth. This next quotation shows that Maria Edgeworth never thought that she herself could have a story of significance to narrate:

[...], Maria Edgeworth's persistent belief that she had no story of her own reflects Catherine Morland's initiation into her fallen female state as a person without a history, without a

name of her own, without a story of significance which she could herself author. Edgeworth merely lived to take care of her father and her siblings, she never anticipated becoming a successful writer. Although we will see in the next chapter that her life was very adventurous, she never considered it worth any attention. She saw herself as nothing more than an extension of her father's life. Everything she did was in function of him. The first novels she wrote, were about subjects that her father had proposed to her. She did not think that any subject that she herself found interesting would be good enough to write a story about. Just like so many other women in her time, she thought of herself as a person without a history, a person without a name.

Her good relationship with her father lies at the basis of another similarity between Maria Edgeworth and other female authors. There were very few women writers at that time and those who wrote and became published nearly always relied on a male member of their family to have their books published. For women the road to literary success was a very long and difficult one. They constantly had to justify what they were writing and they had to make sure that they were not too disrespectful to male writers. Maria Edgeworth had a big benefit at this point. She could always count on the never-ending support of her father. He did more than merely help to get her works published, he was a great support throughout her entire literary career. Maria Edgeworth knew that whatever she would write about, her father would always take her side against other writers and against literary critics. Richard Lovell Edgeworth also showed his support by writing the preface to novels written by his daughter. In that preface he tried to justify some of the things that she wrote. This is most likely the reason why Maria Edgeworth was so soon accepted in literary circles.

There is a big difference between Maria Edgeworth and other women authors. That difference is that she did not really want to fight patriarchy. She tries to gain her father's respect and blessing with her writings. She tries to write stories that he would like:

Maria Edgeworth could not become an author without turning herself into a literary lady, a creature of her father's imagination who was understandably anxious for and about her father's control. 

This quotation shows that Maria Edgeworth did not have any problem with living under her father's control. After losing her mother at a very young age, Edgeworth became very attached to her father. Maybe this is the reason why she tried to gain his approval for everything she did. She never wrote anything without asking his opinion first.

1.5: The origins and development of Women's Human Rights

29 Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic, 146.
30 Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic, 148.
In this chapter I also want to say something about the general development of women’s human rights. The next quotation explains how Mary Wollstonecraft is often seen as the originator of women’s human rights:

The original contributors to women’s human rights were those who first taught women to read and, thus, to explore the world outside the home and immediate community. The idea of women's human rights is often cited as beginning in 1792 with Mary Wollstonecraft’s book, *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, published in response to promulgation of the natural-rights-of-man theory.

This quotation immediately shows the importance of literacy among women. If they want to achieve equal status to men, they have to be able to read in order to expand their knowledge about the outside world. Knowledge is a very important factor in the development of women’s human rights. “Knowledge is power” is the foundation of political and intellectual development. There are three important factors in the development of women's human rights: education, freedom of movement and respect as individual human beings. As soon as women had achieved these three factors in their lives, they could start demanding human rights.

The struggle for women's human rights began much earlier in 1405 with Christine de Pizan’s book, *Le Livre de la Cite des Dames*. She has written this work to encourage women of all classes to resist being limited by men and to start living their own lives. Throughout her work, de Pizan focusses on four important points. Her first point is that she uses the press to make her ideas public and to describe women's situation. She does not base her conclusions on her own experiences only, she also uses experiences of other women. The next quotation shows de Pizan's second point:

Second, de Pizan directly challenged the confinement of women to the private sphere of home and family. She placed herself in the public sphere and demonstrated that women could provide for themselves economically, as many women, particularly widows, had done before her.

Her second argument points out that women can take care of themselves without the help of their husbands or family. The third argument is that women do not only write to express their ideas, but also to provide economic support for themselves and their relatives. Her fourth and final point is that she understands how history can be used as a political tool to maintain power. She realizes that throughout history, men had always been the heads of the households and how that is not about to change quickly.

By the end of the eighteenth century feminist arguments arose in Britain and America. An important feminist demand was the demand for the vote. Women wanted to have the same political

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rights as men. Until the eighteenth century, women had always been considered as part of a family, they were never considered as individual beings. In the nineteenth century this situation underwent a big change. Women became individuals. Feminists demanded citizenship for women. They hoped that citizenship could change the self-image of women.  

T.H. Marshall, the most influential theorist of citizenship in Britain, has defined citizenship as a ‘status bestowed on those who are full members of a community’, which includes civil, political and social rights and obligations. By formally linking citizenship to membership in a community rather than to the state, as liberal definitions of citizenship do, Marshall’s definition enables us analytically to discuss citizenship as a multi-tier construct, which applies to people’s membership in a variety of collectivities – local, ethnic, national and trans-national.

Women had to think of themselves as individuals and they had to realize that they could contribute to the political discourse together with men. An overview of the history of Britain between 1918 and 1945 on the website by BBC mentions that the year 1918 was a very important year for feminists in Britain, it was the year when, for the first time, a number of women were allowed to vote, by 1927 all women over the age of 21 could vote.

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2) Chapter II: Maria Edgeworth's life and career

This second chapter discusses the life and career of Maria Edgeworth. I have divided this chapter into several parts. In the first part I will make you acquainted with Edgeworth's Irish roots because they have obviously left traces in her work. The second part of the chapter will deal mostly with the major influence of her father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth. In that second part I will also show a few other influences on Edgeworth's works. One of these minor influences will be Sir Walter Scott. I will also take into account the various trips that Maria Edgeworth made and how they also had an influence on her. The third part of the chapter will be dedicated to a short overview of a few of Edgeworth's stylistic characteristics. For example, I will show how Edgeworth uses language to prove her point and how she writes children's tales about adult subjects. The last part of the chapter will contain a short overview of some of her works. Of course, it is impossible to discuss all the works that she has written during her career in just one chapter. Therefore, I will limit myself to her most popular novels. Also I have subdivided her works into her 'early writing', 'the partnership with her father' and 'writing after her father had passed away'. The most important sources in this chapter are biographies by Helen Zimmern, Emily Lawless and Marilyn Butler.

2.1: Her roots

Maria Edgeworth was born on the first of January of 1767 in Oxfordshire in England as the daughter of Anna Maria and Richard Lovell Edgeworth. Her parents' marriage could not be called ideal. Because of Richard's profession, Anna Maria was often left alone and she had to take care of the children without much help from her husband. This was the way it was for most women at that time. In Edgeworth's case her father spent a lot of his time in Ireland while his wife and children were back home in England. Anna felt very neglected and made her feelings clear to her husband but still he invested all his attention in his work. Richard often went to Ireland on business. Acquaintances described Richard as a handsome and smart man who seemed to have a nice family. The description they gave of Anna Maria was less positive, because they said that she appeared to be crying all the time. Maria Edgeworth's mother died in March 1773, after given birth to her third daughter. After the death of her mother, Maria Edgeworth was left in charge of her siblings and she tried to take up the part of the mother.

These experiences all left a great impression on Edgeworth. She saw how her mother was treated by her father. This made her realize that women had to be capable of making a life of their own. She also had a big responsibility in taking care of her brothers and sisters. After her mother passed away, Richard remarried a couple of times. Maria Edgeworth always tried to get along with her step-
mothers and she did everything to make them feel at ease. Richard remarried the first time only a year after his first wife's death. After this marriage they all moved to Ireland because his affairs there were in serious need of constant supervision. This move to Ireland left traces in Maria Edgeworth's novels. I will discuss this in the next chapter. It is very clear that she was torn between her feelings for England and those for Ireland. Edgeworth's first stepmother, Honora, died in 1780. This was the second time that she lost her mother, one with whom she could freely talk. Eight months later, Richard remarried a second time, this time he married the sister of Honora, Elizabeth. He did this at the special request of Honora herself. It was her dying wish that her husband should marry her sister after she herself had passed away. Because of Honora's health, they had been forced to return to England, after her death, they all returned to Ireland. These trips between England and Ireland had an impact on Edgeworth's writings. She was very impressed by the differences between England and Ireland. England was clearly more advanced than Ireland, she mentions this in her novels several times. In 1797, Edgeworth's second stepmother died. Seven months later, Richard remarried a third time, this time with a certain Miss Beaufort. This was the person who was to write a memoir about the life of her stepdaughter, Maria Edgeworth. Frances Anne Beaufort was two years younger than Maria and she was by her side when the latter died on May 22nd of 1849.

During her lifetime, Maria Edgeworth saw a lot of people die. Most of her brothers and sisters, two stepmothers and her father died. All this had an impact on her work. She always had to be strong to comfort other people. All her father's marriages probably also had an impact on her future love life. Maria Edgeworth herself never married and fell in love only once. Maybe she became a bit sceptical after seeing her father's marriages. She seemed afraid of loving anyone other than her father. She never let herself get close to anyone and lived mainly to take care of her siblings.

2.2: Influences on Maria's literature

In the previous part I have already mentioned her father's marriages and their impact on her writings. In her novels she never actually portrayed a marriage, many of the heroes and heroines in her works remained unmarried their entire life. She probably thought that women could function best when they were not attached to men. These marriages were not the only influences on her novels. In this part of the chapter I will discuss the various other influences starting with the biggest influence of them all: her father. I will then proceed by mentioning other persons who influenced her and I will deal with her trips between England, Ireland and other parts of Europe.
2.2.1: Richard Lovell Edgeworth: Maria Edgeworth’s father

Richard Lovell Edgeworth was born on 31 May of 1744. After the death of his first wife, the relationship with his daughter became a very important factor in both their lives. Just like Maria Edgeworth, Richard Edgeworth was a successful English writer. It is because of Richard’s influence that his daughter started writing. As is well-known, it was not common for a woman to write and publish her writings. The next quotation explains how Edgeworth encouraged his daughter to start writing even though that was exceptional in those days, the quote also explains the good bond between Richard Edgeworth and his daughter:

He later encouraged her in her reading, although he disapproved of her reading novels, and set her to translate Mme de Genlis’s Adèle et Théodore (which was recalled before publication in 1783). The removal to Edgeworthstown in June 1782 renewed the bond between father and daughter, leading to a formidable intellectual partnership of which she was the more able and nimble mind. 36

Maria Edgeworth was just twelve years old when, encouraged by her father, she started to write short tales, she probably wrote these to improve her writing skills. She did not only write tales of her own, she also translated texts, for example Mme de Genlis’s Adèle et Théodore. This was recommended by her father. He thought that translating a good text was a good preparation to become a successful writer. He explained that a good writer does not feel too superior to learn something about the writings of other novelists. The next citation proves that Maria Edgeworth wrote everything that her father wanted:

When her father asked her to write a tale for him, he suggested that the result should be ‘about the length of a Spectator’; and the sententious Adissonian essay in the old-fashioned Adissonian style was probably the model they both had in mind. 37

Not only did her father tell her what she should write about, he also advised her as to the length and the style of the text which serves to show that he was his daughter’s main supervisor in the early years of her literary career.

Later on, father and daughter began to write fiction together. They sometimes used both their names as the authors of the books. One of the texts that they wrote together was Practical Education. Edgeworth offered his daughter the raw material for this work and it was up to her to bring the raw material into shape and to add a few anecdotes and stories to make the text more agreeable to read. After a while, when both father and daughter became popular in English literary circles, questions were raised about the authorship of some of the novels. Literary critics had in the meantime discovered that Maria Edgeworth and Richard Edgeworth were two very different people.

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with different styles and they started to be confused by who wrote which parts of the novel.

As soon as Maria Edgeworth and her father became personally known in London, the first signs of suspicion about the authorship of the novels began to appear. Maria Edgeworth was good humoured and amusing, whereas her father was pompous and a bore. The novels were usually entertaining, like her, but sometimes they were heavy, like him. Surely, then she had written the lively parts, and he had inserted the rest? 38

From this quotation it appears that critics considered Maria Edgeworth a better writer than Richard Edgeworth.

Maria Edgeworth had become the superior writer of the two, but she herself did not realize this. She still asked her father for his advice about everything she read and wrote. Her father's opinion was important to her, because she lived under the illusion that her father always knew best, that he was morally superior to her. She never dared to imagine that one day she would be a better novelist than him. It was he who taught her how to put her ideas on paper and how to write in a clear and amusing style. The next citation explains how everybody is influenced by the environment they live in. In Maria Edgeworth's case this influence is important because it leaves traces in her works.

After all, we are all more or less affected by the mental atmosphere in which we live; none of us can wholly get outside the spiritual air that environs us, and see things from different points of view; and Miss Edgeworth could do so less than many because she was less highly endowed with sympathetic imagination. Thus her shortcomings are in her case, more than in that of many others, the fault of her surroundings and education. For, placed immediately under Mr Edgeworth's personal influence, his powers of suasion and plausible presentment, it was not easy to escape, and his daughter never questioned his final wisdom or desired such escape. In a critical reading of her books it is amusing to note how ever and again her father crops forth. 39

That Richard Edgeworth had a lot of confidence in his daughter's writings becomes clear when we keep in mind that he gave her the task to finish his memoirs. Edgeworth asked his daughter to complete his memoirs after he died. Like so many works, he started writing them and Maria finished it in her own way. Richard Edgeworth died on 13th of June 1817. Maria Edgeworth had a very difficult time coping with this loss. The first few months after his death, she was physically ill and needed nursing. Afterwards she still had to finish writing her father's Memoirs, so as to fulfil his dying wish:

On the day before Edgeworth died he dictated to Maria a letter to his publisher in which he stated that he had written 480 pages of autobiography, and that Maria was to add 200 more. He added that he required her to perform this task within a month of his death, but in the margin of the letter we see the addition which Maria must have added silently: 'I never promised.' 40

38 Marilyn Butler, Maria Edgeworth, 271.
39 Helen Zimmern, Edgeworth Maria, 132.
40 Marilyn Butler, Maria Edgeworth, 403.
It took Edgeworth a year to finish the *Memoirs*. This was evidently not an easy task because she was not just hurting mentally, but also physically. In 1820 the book was published by Hunter. Afterwards she left the country because she did not want to hear what critics had to say about the *Memoirs*.

We can conclude this part by saying that Richard Lovell Edgeworth was definitely the biggest influence on his daughter's literary career. If it had not been for him, she might never have started writing herself. Because of his support, she became the great author that we now know. He did not just stimulate her to write, he also convinced critics that Maria Edgeworth's works were worth reading. As already pointed out those were the days when everyone firmly believed that women could not have a story to tell. Because of Richard Edgeworth's recommendations, critics decided to give Maria Edgeworth a chance.

### 2.2.2: Other people who influenced Maria Edgeworth

Richard Lovell Edgeworth was not the only one who had an influence on Maria Edgeworth's writings. The others were mostly acquaintances of Richard Edgeworth or people they met on their trips in the rest of Europe. In the previous part of this chapter I have already mentioned that Maria had a few stepmothers after her biological mother had died. All these stepmothers had an influence on her. Her last stepmother was younger than Edgeworth herself and became more of a good friend than a mother. In his biography of Maria Edgeworth, McCormack mentions that Edgeworth had a lot of respect for her stepmother, even when she was old she still addressed her stepmother as 'Mother': “At the end of the famine, Edgeworth was over eighty though she still addressed her third stepmother, Frances Beaufort (one year her junior), as 'Mother’. 41 Edgeworth loved all her stepmothers and did her very best to make them feel at home in the Edgeworth family.

The influences on Maria Edgeworth did not only come from the inside of the family circle. One of the most significant influences on her writings was that of Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley Novels*. These series are often described as the first historical novels. After its publication, other novels by Scott were published as being “by the author of Waverley”. What most people do not know is that Scott greatly appreciated Maria Edgeworth's work. He even sent her a personal copy of *Waverley*. Before Edgeworth saw this copy she heard her family reading the novel out loud. She immediately decided to write a letter to the author of this great novel. At that time she had no idea who the real author was because it had been published anonymously. In the letter she described how the family felt after reading the novel, how they liked it so much that they did not want to come back to reality.

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The next quote shows Scott's admiration of Edgeworth and explains how she in a way helped launch the historical novel:

Scott was by far the most important reader of her work. He was prompted by The Absentee to unearth his incomplete manuscript of what became Waverley in 1814. Indirectly, Edgeworth helped to launch the historical novel across Europe, even if her own contribution to the genre was limited to Ormond. 42

These were all the big influences on Edgeworth's writings. There are a few minor influences that I wish to mention here. One of these is Mrs. Latafliere. Maria Edgeworth was placed with her in 1776 at Derby. She always spoke of her with gratitude, affection and admiration. When Edgeworth first arrived at Derby she knew very little for a girl her age. Mrs Latafliere taught Edgeworth how to write. This makes her a very important factor in the life of the future novelist. Another minor influence is Lady Moira, she introduced Edgeworth into a larger world. She realized that Edgeworth was a timid girl and tried to change that a little by telling her the things that happened in her own life. She expanded the world-view of the young Edgeworth. A last influence I want to name is that of the author, Fanny Burney. The next citation explains how Maria Edgeworth was one of the women writers who were influenced by Fanny Burney:

Miss Burney was one of the first female novelists who opened the path for other women writers like Maria Edgeworth.

2.2.3: Ireland's history

Edgeworth considers that a nation's group identity rests on its shared experiences, as these have been passed down in history and story over time: in sharing land, particularly a land with well-defined borders such as an island, and in sharing a language, with all that that implies of popular literature in its many genres, written and oral. Language is problematic, however, for the Irish have two languages, one of which, the Gaelic Irish tongue, is used almost entirely by the Old Irish part of the population, while the other, Hibernian English, is treated by the English as an inferior dialect. Religion, for other nations a cohesive factor, has been and is divisive in Ireland's case. 44

Edgeworth spent parts of her life in Ireland, other parts in England. As a consequence, she felt torn between the two countries. The Irish were generally considered as barbarians, Edgeworth

portrays them like that in some of her novels. In other novels, she tries to convince the readers that the people from Ireland are just as good as those from England, with the only difference that their technology is not as evolved. In some of her novels she makes use of language to differentiate between Ireland and England. In *The Absentee* for example, there is a character called Lady Clonbrony who tries desperately to look and sound English. She imitates the English accent but ends up making a fool of herself. This is an obvious case where Edgeworth proves that there are differences between Ireland and England that cannot be overcome.

This clear distinction that Edgeworth makes between England and Ireland might have something to do with what happened in the year 1798. There was an uprising in Ireland that threatened to ruin the Edgeworth family. This was the time when England overpowered and occupied Ireland. Since the Edgeworths were Englishmen living in Ireland they were the constant target of the many Irish uprisings. The next quote considers Edgeworth's feelings towards the Union between England and Ireland:

Neither Edgeworth nor her father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth, regarded favourably the Act of Union in 1801 that followed in reaction to the uprising and that united the “kingdoms” of Ireland and England, thereby dissolving Ireland's parliament. 

This quote shows that both Maria and Richard Edgeworth had the best intentions with Ireland. They did not want to take over the country, they just wanted to live there and do business. Ever since that moment they were accepted in Ireland. The danger for uprisings against the family subsided. Still, the Anglo-Irish conflict would always keep affecting Edgeworth's novels.

### 2.2.3: The various trips to the continent

During her lifetime, Maria Edgeworth made a lot of trips to the Continent which broadened her horizon. Thus she met a lot of interesting people who provided new material for her novels. The next citation shows that the Edgeworths were always warmly welcomed whenever they set foot on the Continent:

> From the first hour of their arrival [in Paris] they seem to have found themselves eagerly welcomed, and before long were in the full swing of meeting, seeing, and being talked to, by every one of note or distinction who was to be found there at the moment.

This citation shows how well-known the Edgeworths were in Paris. Whenever they put foot on shore, everybody wanted to invite them to dinner in their home, talking to the Edgeworths was considered a privilege. It was on one of her trips to the Continent that Maria Edgeworth met M. Edelcrantz, a charming young man. This was the man she is supposed to have fallen in love with.

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He was the scientific secretary to the King of Sweden and he asked Maria to join him and live with him in Sweden. She refused this, because she could not leave her life in England behind. She felt the obligation to stay with her father and her siblings. This immediately put an end to their newly started love affair. M. Edelcrantz was the only man whom Maria ever truly loved, after him there has never been another love interest. Some of the people that they met in France, came to visit them in 'Edgeworthstown'. It was common courtesy that whenever a friend visited your country, you invited them to your house. On those occasions it was the Edgeworths' turn to show their French guests the interesting places in England and Ireland. They did this with great pleasure. “ England, America and the Continent all sent visitors to Edgeworthstown during the last two or three decades of Miss Edgeworth's life.” 47

Because Edgeworth lost many family members, some people from the Continent, America and England came to offer their support and kept her company during the difficult times. All these visits had an impact on the writings of Maria Edgeworth. In Ormond, she had the hero of the novel make a trip to Paris when he was struggling with his love life. The description she gave in this novel of the people in Paris clearly indicates that she respects them. She portrays them as haughty, loyal and handsome people who spend a lot of care to their public appearance. When Ormond arrives in France, he is immediately accepted as one of them. This indicates that Edgeworth held the inhabitants of France in high respect. She would never in her life forget what they had meant to her, what they had taught her and how they had supported her in difficult times.

2.3: Writing characteristics

In this part of the chapter, I will discuss a few characteristics of Edgeworth's writing abilities. It is not an easy task to indicate characteristics of her writing. I already stated a few times that her writing was strongly influenced by her father. Therefore, the style of her writing might also be influenced by him. Still, critics say that Edgeworth and her father have two very different writing styles. Her style is much more active and lively, while her father's style tends to be more heavy and pessimistic.

One of the most important elements in Edgeworth's oeuvre is the fact that she does not only transgress national and gender boundaries, but that she also transgresses the generational boundary between children and adults. Consequently, it is no coincidence that she has children play an important part in many stories written for grown-up audiences. Many of her works have something to do with the Revolution in Ireland. Many other writers have written about this conflict as well, but

47 Emily Lawless, Maria Edgeworth, 200.
they hardly ever use children as protagonists in their novels or they hardly ever write novels about this theme for young audiences. They do not consider children a good target audience for these heavy, intellectual novels. The revolution is not considered a subject that young people should read about. Edgeworth on the other hand, deems the youth of Ireland a crucial part of the Revolution. As a consequence, she writes children's books that deal with revolutionary subjects. Of course, this might have something to do with the fact that she wrote many of her tales for her siblings, whose opinions she appreciated. This is something that immediately sets her apart from other writers of her time.

Another distinctive feature about her writing is that in her novels she often mentions other texts. Reading as a social activity is very important to her and she incorporates it in her novels as well. Edgeworth thinks that reading is a crucial task if you want to be seen as a member of high society. In the next quotation Marilyn Butler interprets how Edgeworth deals with the act of reading in her novels and what value she attaches to this act of reading:

Edgeworth as a fiction-writer distinguishes her characters, with a new subtlety in relation to their gender, class an nationality, by what they have been reading. In her best, most bookish fiction of upper-class life she introduces a novel kind of subtext that makes reading and conversations on reading an indicator of rationality and moral worth. 48

In her Irish tales especially she pays a lot of attention to the conversations between the characters in her stories. They hardly ever talk about the ordinary things in life, but almost always about high standard occasions in life or about literature. By picturing conversations about literature she opens up a world of shared knowledge. The next citation proves this:

The name of an author or the title of a book opens up other imagined worlds, but also gives us access to the world of books, the reading community, and (by the early 1800s) a specific community, local or national, which may never before have been described as an entity. 49

The conversations in her Irish tales are of special importance because reviewers think that Catholic and Protestant readers both read them from a different point of view. To each of them, the dialogues have a different meaning. This is what makes Edgeworth's writings so interesting and popular. They have the advantage of addressing different readerships in and outside the nation.

Another advantage of having characters in novels refer to their readings is that it gives the words a real-life context. People love to read novels that deal with literature, because books are regarded as a way to acquire wisdom. By 1800, books were read all over the world and had a cosmopolitan readership. Edgeworth herself was quickly translated to French, the reason for this is probably that she wrote about the French and their habits in some of her stories. The next quotation explains that

Edgeworth tried to write cosmopolitan novels in order to attract as many readers as possible:

Edgeworth, then, is not narrowly concerned with inventing either the national novel or the naturalistic novel, though she contributes to both; she participates in a historical process by developing a more stylized, consciously intellectual cosmopolitan novel, an intrinsically comparative and interactive exercise.  

Critics expected Edgeworth's writings to be realistic, with real-life settings and detailed characterizations. In reality, they found that her novels are very different from what they had expected. For example, she has a fondness for romance. On the other hand, she also uses a lot of detail and fact in her novels which could indicate that she writes realist tales. For reviewers, it has been no easy task to decide in which group to place Edgeworth. They were so confused that they even asked her father's aid to help them understand why Maria mixed two very different genres in her works. At first, they blamed her heavy moral writings on Richard Edgeworth because he influenced her too much. Very soon this proved to be a wrong assumption because her father paid more attention to the mechanics of the plot than to the moral quality. Maria Edgeworth herself refused to call her works 'novels'. The next quotation proves that critics did not know whether they would place her works under the heading of 'realism' or under 'romance':

While the pedagogical bent of Edgeworth's fiction ultimately might be traced to French moral tales of the mid-eighteenth century, both her didacticism and her "fondness for facts" also participate within a literary and generic tradition closer to home and more contemporary to herself.  

Because they did not know in which group Edgeworth belonged, they decided to make a new group and call it 'romances of real life'. The works in these group had both elements of romance and realism in them.  

At this point I would also like to mention something about the distinctions Edgeworth makes between the various characters in her novels. She sees a major difference between characters with family papers and those without. The lower class characters can sometimes achieve great things, but only due to the help and recommendation of people from the higher classes. In Edgeworth's time it was important that you could prove your social rank by showing papers. This can explain why she spent so much attention on documentation in her novels:

It follows from Edgeworth's sense that social position depends on the ability to produce the proper documents that those stories and novels most explicitly concerned with class, and more precisely with social mobility – Popular Tales (1813), and Helen (1834) – are also the most congested in documentary terms.  

Some of her novels also narrate the story of a lower class civilian who moves up the social ladder.

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50 Marilyn Butler, “Edgeworth's Ireland”:270.
Like many of her contemporaries, Edgeworth is very concerned with the possession of property. With this, I do not only mean houses and land, but also proper documents to establish rank. In the next chapter I will show how Edgeworth has always been very concerned about the rank of the characters.

In her fiction, she has helped to create and stimulate the so-called 'cultural revolution'. In her novels she introduces a new class of people: men and women who do not just read literature but who actively partake in the process of writing. She raises the belief that people from all the different ranks can produce some sort of literature:

She dramatizes in her fiction the belief – shared with many of her contemporaries – that there is such a thing as a working-class writer, a writer whose literacy is functional, limited, and completely determined by his or her place in the social structure. \(^{53}\)

Many of the lower-class protagonists in her novels are introduced into the world of literature by people from the upper-class. The gratitude of the former is very present in Edgeworth's novels. She often shows how grateful a lower-class civilian is for the help of his superior. The literacy of the lower-class did raise a fear in Edgeworth's mind. She grew fearful that they might try to overturn their superiors:

How better to convey the monstrous, uncontrollable possibilities of working-class literacy than by showing members of that class using their newly acquired skills to attack the papers on which the identities and social status of their betters depended? \(^{54}\)

This citation shows that Edgeworth was afraid of the 'lower-class copyist'. She feared that the working-class would try to sabotage the whole documentation of the upper class. I conclude this part by saying that Maria Edgeworth found it necessary to focus on the writing skills of all classes in the English society.

2.4: Overview of Maria Edgeworth's works

In this part of the chapter I will give a limited overview of some of the things that Edgeworth has written during her career. I will leave out the letters that she has written to her aunts and friends. I will divide this part of the chapter in three sections. First, I will discuss her early works, secondly the works she has written together with her father and thirdly the novels she has written after her father's death.

2.4.1: Early writings

Earlier in this chapter I mentioned that Edgeworth started writing stories from the age of twelve.

Due to her father's encouragement she tried to use her pen for literary purposes. At the age of sixteen she wrote her first tale, *The Mental Thermometer*. This tale offers a good indication of the style and quality of the young writer, but in the end it was not a great success. The tale had a fairly good plot but the ending appeared to be unfinished. It was as if Edgeworth knew what she wanted to write about but she did not know how to end her story.

After this failed attempt at writing Richard Edgeworth encouraged his daughter to try her hand at translating. The first thing she successfully translated was *Adèle et Théodore* by Mme de Genlis. Translations are not often considered true literary accomplishments. Richard Edgeworth however thought that translating another author's works was a very useful occupation for a young girl. This would make her notice and correct the mistakes of others and learn something about literature in general.

After this translation, she wrote a play called *Anticipation, or the Countess*. This was a naturalistic middle-class comedy. Afterwards she wrote a few more tragedies and comedies but all of them underwent the same fate, they were all turned down by the critics. In 1786, she wrote *Double Disguise*, a play that was more enthusiastically received by critics. The next quotation shows Marilyn Butler's description of *Double Disguise*:

> The Double Disguise, although in itself no more than unpretentious family entertainment, marks an important step in Maria Edgeworth's literary development. It is the first example of her consistent practice of turning her literary models into a more natural product, featuring ordinary people going about their common everyday business.

The publication of this play marks the beginning of Edgeworth's life as a writer. For the first time, critics noticed her and gave her credit for what she had written.

After the success that her plays raised, Edgeworth decided to give her storytelling another go. In the mid 1780s this became a success as well. Together with her father she wrote *Practical Education*. This can partly be seen as a work to help parents raise their children and partly as a book that can be read by children. After this joined venture with her father, she decided to write a few children books without his guidance. She collected these in *The Parents' Assistant*. She wrote many tales for children because her siblings liked to read. Every time she wrote a tale, she read it out loud to her brothers and sisters and asked for their opinion. A few years later she added a second part to this collection, called *Early Lessons*. Edgeworth's first novel that received good criticism was *Castle Rackrent*. This novel evolved in an accidental manner over the years. Edgeworth had doubts as to whether or not she would publish the story. She made the right choice and published the story. It was to confirm her as a respected author.

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All the works that I have mentioned before were written before 1800.

2.4.2: Partnership with her father

Two circumstances must never be lost sight of in speaking of Miss Edgeworth's writings; the one, that she did not write from the inner prompting of genius, but rather because it had been suggested by her father; the other, that she wrote throughout with a purpose in view, and by no means only for the sake of affording amusement.  

It is important to keep in mind that almost none of the novels by Maria Edgeworth are really her own. She constantly felt her father's influence. The themes that she discussed in her books were also mostly suggested by him. The way they worked was: Richard Edgeworth would give his daughter a rough sketch and it was up to her to turn his idea into a good novel. This routine went perfectly for a while. This way they wrote for example *Ennui, The Absentee, Patronage, Harrington* and *Ormond*. For some of these novels, Maria Edgeworth went to her father with a topic or an idea and asked his permission to write a novel about it. In the end, she always needed her father's approval before she would put an idea in writing. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, there seemed to be a divergence between Edgeworth and her father. Richard Edgeworth was very occupied with his political career and Maria Edgeworth was busy writing *Belinda*. Her father was not very interested in this novel. Father and daughter seemed to be growing apart. A few years later they collaborated again in the making of *Essay on Irish Bulls*. This was a collection of political essays. In some of her novels, she uses her father's image as a model for some of her characters. An example of this can be found in *Popular Tales*. In one of these tales she portrays a paternalistic magistrate who looks a lot like her father. This clearly shows that Richard Edgeworth is very present in her work. Many other novels were not written together with her father but still show his influence. For example, *Ennui* and *The Absentee*. Some critics claim that the bad parts in these novels were written by her father because Maria Edgeworth never writes such bad fiction. This shows how the partnership between father and daughter changed during the years. In the beginning of the collaboration, Richard Edgeworth was the superior writer: he told his daughter what to write and how to write it, he corrected her mistakes and told her how she could further improve her style. By the end of their partnership, Maria Edgeworth became more popular and more talented. Critics say that she should not pay so much attention to her father’s opinion any more.

2.4.3: Writing without her father

The story of Maria's life in her last three decades leaves unanswered an outstanding question: why in a period of growing self-knowledge and self-fulfilment, in private life the
most effective years of all, she succeeded in publishing so little of importance.  

After Richard's death in 1817, Edgeworth ceased to write for almost a year. She had a very difficult time trying to accept the loss of her beloved father. Added to that, she also had a eye-disease which kept her from reading or writing. Sometimes her stepmother read to her from her favourite novels. The first work she wrote after 1817 was her father's Memoirs. He himself had begun to write this and he had asked his daughter to finish it after he had passed away. At first, this seemed to be an impossible task for Maria Edgeworth. She was in no condition to read her father's handwriting or to think about the happy times they had spent together. Still, she overcame her pain and finished the Memoirs in 1820. After this publication many critics declared that Edgeworth's writing talent had nothing to do with her father's influence or skills. If anything, he influenced her in a bad way. Critics urged her to keep writing novels, because she obviously was much more talented than her father. Edgeworth did not like reading these comments and reacted sharply to them. Because of this campaign by reviewers against her father, Edgeworth did not write much for a few years. Her biography claims:

Maria was writing busily between 1818 and 1825, and not paralysed by grief, as most biographies of her have stated. Just the same, she did not publish a substantial work of fiction for adults between Ormond in 1817 and Helen in 1834. From 1820 until about 1828, the reviewers' campaign against her father was the most important single cause of the break in her career as a novelist.

As the quote states, the only decent work of fiction that she wrote without the presence of her father was Helen in 1834. She devoted five years to the completion of this novel. After this, she wrote one more novel in 1848, called Orlandino. The profits she received from this novel were all donated to the victims of the Irish famine. Critics assume that this was the only reason why she decided to write one more novel. She wanted to help the victims in some way, therefore she made one more attempt to write a work of fiction.

57 Marilyn Butler, Maria Edgeworth, 433.
58 Marilyn Butler, Maria Edgeworth, 413.
3) Chapter III: Maria Edgeworth's works

Discussing every work that Edgeworth has written during her career would be an impossible task to accomplish in this thesis. Therefore, I will limit myself to discussing a selection of her works, based on the popularity of the novels and the use that I can make of them to show her portrayal of women. In this chapter, I will discuss four novels, namely Castle Rackrent, Belinda, Ennui and The Absentee. I will also make use of some letters that Maria Edgeworth wrote to Julia and Caroline and her “essay on the noble science of self-justification”. I will do this in chronological order, starting with the letters to Julia and Caroline and the “essay on the noble science of self-justification”. After this I will discuss the four novels in chronological order, starting with Castle Rackrent and ending with The Absentee. I will try to indicate an evolution in Edgeworth's portrayal of female protagonists throughout these works.

3.1: Letters to Julia and Caroline and an “essay on the noble science of self-justification”

Letters to Literary Ladies is the first published work by Maria Edgeworth. The work was published in 1795. Her father, Richard Edgeworth, had probably encouraged her to get this first work published. To these letters she also added her essay on the noble-science of self-justification in which she advises women as to how they should behave when they are having a discussion with men. She explains to them how they should react to the various arguments their husbands make. This is comparable to what she tries to do in her letters to Julia and Caroline. She has Julia and Caroline give each other advice as to how to treat their husbands.

3.1.1: Maria Edgeworth's letter writing

The fact that Maria Edgeworth's first publication is a fiction of correspondence positions her within the category of traditional female writings. Edgeworth, it seems, started her career in a very conventional way by publishing a series of letters. In an article by Jane Donawerth, we read that most female writers limited themselves to letter writing, while male writers were preaching, practising politics and maintaining the law. There were also female writers who started working on male territory. I will discuss this in more detail in the next part, in which I will analyse Edgeworth's essay appended to her letters. The next passage is from Donawerth's article and states that most women writers knew their place in literary society:

Although their discussions have often been ignored in histories of rhetoric, women did participate in the development of philosophies of rhetoric in the eighteenth century and nineteenth century. Most, like Hannah More, left to men preaching, politics and law (the traditional genres of European rhetoric) and took as their territory conversation and letter
This quote from Donawerth's article confirms that women were more likely to write and publish letters because that was considered as a more domestic form of writing. The real traditional rhetoric was left in the care of the male writers.

Letter writing was considered a domestic form of rhetoric, this becomes very obvious when you read Edgeworth's *Letters to Literary Ladies*. In these letters Edgeworth has her characters discuss the place of women in society and more specifically in the household. The next passage proves that Edgeworth still believes that women belong in the domestic realm:

> It is the sole object of a woman's life, you say, to please. Her amiable defects please more than her noblest virtues, her follies more than her wisdom, her caprice more than her temper, and something, a nameless something, which no art can imitate and no science can teach, more than all.  

To read a passage like this must have been a bad experience for the proto-feminists at the end of the eighteenth century. In these letters Edgeworth still seems fully convinced that women do not have a life of their own, she believes in the domestic function of the woman, as a wife and mother. In a letter from Caroline to Julia, Edgeworth points out the tasks of a married woman, she also emphasizes all the things a woman loses when she gets married:

> You must renounce all the pleasures of the heart and of the imagination; you must give up the idea of cultivating literary taste; you must not expect from your husband equal friendship and confidence, or any of the delicacies of affection – you govern him, he cannot therefore be your equal; you may be a fond mother, but you cannot educate you children, you will neither have the time, nor the power to do it; you must trust them to a governess.

In this passage, Edgeworth makes marriage sound as a horrible event. Edgeworth herself remained unmarried her entire life. Maybe, she really thought of marriage as a state of living in which women had no control over their own actions. Edgeworth is not always this pessimistic about marriage and femininity. In her essay on the noble science of self-justification she has a very different strategy.

### 3.1.2: “Essay on the noble science of self-justification”

Edgeworth did not just limit herself to writing letters, she also wrote essays. This particular essay teaches women how to gain control over discussions with their husbands. In the essay she has three different aims. First of all, she wants to create a satirical parody of the male rhetoric. Secondly, she wants to satirize female manners and thirdly she wants to “critique the traditional British

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61 Maria Edgeworth, *Letters of Julia and Caroline*, 35.
requirement that women be modest, silent, and obedient". She tries to manipulate her readers through her rhetoric. Thus she wants to prove that women can employ rhetoric strategies as professionally as men. In the essay she teaches women a few axioms, the first of which is “That a lady can do no wrong”. Further on, she advises women to be strong, and not to give in too soon, women have to show their husbands that they also have an opinion about certain things. Edgeworth also advises women to search for the weakness in their husbands and make full use of that in discussions. They should also blame everything on their husbands, if the latter considers something a bad habit of the woman, she should immediately argue that he is the first to say that:

Well, I am sure I don't know, but I did not think that was one of my faults! Nobody ever accused me of that before! Nay, I was always remarkable for the contrary; at least before I was acquainted with you – Sir; in my own family – I was always remarkable for the contrary – ask any of them; they must know me best.

The entire essay is filled with advice on how to win an argument. Edgeworth does not merely encourage her female readers to speak their minds, but she strongly advises them to do this in a way that is still feminine. The woman has to convince her husband that she has an opinion of her own but at the same time she has to assure him that he still is the superior reasoner of the two. In her essay Edgeworth describes it as follows:

In vain let the most candid of his sex attempt to reason with you; let him begin with, “Now, my dear, only listen to reason.” - You stop him at once with “No, my dear, you know I don't pretend to reason; I only say that is my opinion.”

In this passage the man still gets the feeling that he is the head of the household but at the same time, the wife took the opportunity to say her mind. This way, the wife “uses the devices of rhetoric and political manoeuvring in order to dominate her domestic space, to similar but different ends from the male rhetorician in his public space”. Now, I will move on to discussing four of Edgeworth's most famous novels or moral tales.

3.2: Castle Rackrent

I will start this discussion of Castle Rackrent by giving a summary of the plot, in this summary I will for example say something about the place and time setting and I will make a few remarks concerning the characters in the novel. Later on I will move on to discussing the narrators in the novel. I will also pay attention to the language that is used in the novel. By the end of the discussion

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62 Jane Donawerth, “Poaching on Men's Philosophies of Rhetoric”: 245.
64 Maria Edgeworth, Letters for literary ladies: 205.
65 Maria Edgeworth, Letters for literary ladies: 235.
I will explain the use of politics in this novel and explain why Maria Edgeworth has decided to write *Castle Rackrent*.

### 3.2.1: Summary

So when Richard Lovell Edgeworth, Maria's father, reported in 1800 that King George “was much pleased with Castle Rackrent – he rubbed his hands and said what – I know something now of my Irish subjects,” the monarch and the British people undoubtedly already knew a great deal more about the Irish than they wanted to remember; the king's apparent pleasure surely derived from Edgeworth's humorous depiction of the Irish people, who had recently appeared in much more horrific narratives.  

Much of Maria Edgeworth's work has Irish themes and, particularly, *Castle Rackrent* and *Essay on Irish Bulls*, written around the tense time of the Act of Union, examine linguistic and cultural differences between Standard and Irish English. *Castle Rackrent* is an ironic guide to Irish estate life tempered with a meta discursive editorial apparatus.

These are the descriptions that two different critics give of *Castle Rackrent*. It immediately becomes obvious that the novel is so rich and multi-layered that it can produce several interpretations. The first critic, Susan B. Egenolf, pays attention to the historical facts in the novel. The second critic, Rebecca Shapiro, focusses more on the language that is used and on the input by the editor in the novel. Different critics will pay attention to different aspects in *Castle Rackrent*. In this thesis, I will try to say something about the various factors in the novel.

The story in *Castle Rackrent* takes place before 1789 in Ireland. The old Irish steward Thady Quirk tells the story of his life, working for the family Rackrent. He talks about the four generations that he saw at the Rackrent estate, each generation had its own flaws. The first generation was Sir Patrick, he failed to run the estate properly because he suffered from a drinking problem. He lived on the Rackrent estate before the arrival of Thady. The second generation on the estate was run by Sir Murtagh. This was the first generation that hired Thady as their steward. Sir Murtagh did not succeed in running the estate over a long time because he accumulated high debts. After his death, his brother Sir Kit inherited the estate and all the properties. When Sir Kit moved into the estate, he brought his Jewish wife with him. She did not fit in on the estate, because she did not understand a word that Thady was saying and she was more used to the life in the city. Sir Kit locked his wife in the estate for seven years until his death in a duel. The next heir was Sir Condy. Shortly after his arrival on the Rackrent estate he decided to marry. He had serious doubts as to whether he would marry Isabella Moneygawl or Judy M'Quirk, who was Thady's grandniece. In the end, he decides to

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marry Isabella and together they squander the last resources of the family Rackrent. In the meantime, Jason Quirk who is Thady's son, acquired more and more power over the estate. Isabella flees the moment the bailiffs arrive and Jason practically owns the entire estate. Sir Condy fakes his own death after the castle is sold. I will come back to this act of faking his death in a little while. When Sir Condy really dies, Isabella comes back to try and recapture the estate, but Jason appears to be the perfect gentleman and the ideal man to run the Rackrent estate. We might conclude that the story does have a happy ending because Thady is not just a steward any more, he is the father of the owner.

3.2.2: Narrators

As already mentioned, Thady Quirk is the main narrator in the story. He talks about his life as a steward on the Rackrent estate during the four generations that have inhabited the castle. According to an article by Susan Glover, there might be some disagreement as to who is the main narrator of the story. She says that most readers agree that the novel is a monologue, told by Thady but that some critics have doubts as to the “reliability” of Thady's narrative. Not everyone believes that Thady is the only and the most reliable narrator. Because he is telling the story of his own life, it is likely that he has changed a few facts to make his own character look better. In addition to that, his narrative does not clearly show which family he is supporting: the Rackrents or the Quirks (his son, Jason). The next quotation proves that Thady's monologue does have a function in the story:

An examination of Thady's discourse reveals a number of linguistic levels at work simultaneously, and not always harmoniously, which combine to create his “voice” in the novel, and which are set in opposition to the multi-layered presence of the Editor's voice. Thady's story functions as an apologia for his and his son's ascendance over the Rackrent family; a lament for the demise of its mythology; a scathing and brilliantly delivered condemnation of the Rackrents' tenure in Ireland; an expression of his pain, though he does not overtly acknowledge it as such, over his son Jason's ascendance over him; and the unwitting textual opposition of his idiolect against that of the Anglocentric Editor.

This quotation proves two things: firstly, it proves that Thady's narrative has several functions in the novel, secondly, it proves that the monologue creates an opposition with the narrative by the editor in *Castle Rackrent*.

The editorial voice is very present in *Castle Rackrent*. At the beginning of the story, Thady says that he has given his permission to put his story in writing. This indicates that Thady is not writing this story himself, he is merely telling the story to somebody else who in his turn writes down the story he is being told. This procedure reminds us of the practice of subletting. We speak of

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70 Susan Glover, “Glossing the Unvarnished Tale,”: 300.
subletting when an absentee landowner leaves his estate in the capable hands of a middleman. This middleman sometimes further sublets the land by making use of rent-takers. It is their job to get the rent from the tenants and deliver it to the owner. In relation to Castle Rackrent, we can call Maria Edgeworth the absentee landowner, the editor can be called the middleman and Thady can be compared to the rent-taker. In her article, Susan Glover draws attention to the significant absent voice of the author in this novel. Maria Edgeworth herself does not have a voice in this story. This can be seen as one of the reasons why critics have had doubts about the authorship of Castle Rackrent. This is actually the first novel that Maria Edgeworth has ever written without the guidance of her father. I think this might be the reason why the voice of the author is absent in the story. Considering that this was the first novel she has ever written on her own, she might have been too insecure to express her own opinion. Narrating her story through the voices of Thady and the editor made it all less personal. Richard Edgeworth did write the preface to Castle Rackrent, in which he explained and supported his daughter's opinions and ideas.

The two voices in the novel usually stand in opposition to each other. From the beginning of the novel, the editor does not let Thady narrate his story completely by himself. Thady does not get a chance to tell his story in his own way. The editor is constantly making comments, this is very obvious if you have a look at the many footnotes that crowd this novel. In these footnotes, the editor often explains some of the strange words that Thady uses in his speech. He also clearly considers Thady's language as foreign to the English reader. He feels the need to explicate some of the things Thady says. This gives us the impression that the editor considers Thady as inferior. This relation between the two voices in the novel can be compared to the relationship that existed in those days between the people from England and those from Ireland. The editor represents England, Thady is the representation of Ireland.

The two voices are not always opposed to each other. Throughout the novel, there are also occasions on which the editor expresses sympathy or in some cases even concern for Thady and his story. The next quote proves this:

[...] while the two voices are usually set in opposition, the tension is complicated by occasional resonances of sympathy, even unity. While the Editor is customarily patronizing in his descriptions of Irish customs and vernacular, at time to the point of ridicule, parts of the discourse exhibit genuine concern or a shared pleasure, such as the footnote on middle-men or the glossary not on the raking pot of tea. Occasionally a note is a mixture of both; the long entry on the “Whillaluk” begins respectfully with a quotation from the Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy on funeral lamentation but closes on a sneering note. 71

This quotation makes Susan Glover conclude that the position of the two voices is definitely

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71 Susan Glover, “Glossing the Unvarnished Tale,” : 305.
comparable to the positions of England and Ireland in the Union. In that situation, it is unclear who is the real beneficiary. Compared to Castle Rackrent, it is similarly unclear who is the superior voice in the story, the editor or Thady.

3.2.3: Language

The use of language is a very important aspect in literature. The language a character speaks has an influence on the way the reader thinks about that specific character. For example, if a character in a story speaks a form of dialect, the reader will connect that specific character to the lower classes in the social hierarchy. Maria Edgeworth makes good use of this hierarchy in languages. Thady speaks a language other than Standard English. Thady Quirk is an Irish steward, consequently readers expect him to speak Irish. Edgeworth surprises us all by having him speak a sort of English dialect instead of Irish. The reason she does this might be related to the low status of the Irish language. Writers who wanted to claim a decent position in the literary world had to write in English, because that was the language with the most prestige. The next quotation explains that English and Anglo-Irish writers had a negative idea of the language and culture in Ireland:

Many English and Anglo-Irish portrayed the native Irish language (and its non-standard English) and culture as barbaric – lacking structure, formality, or logic. Irish writers of English descent learned English as a first language and their literature reflects the bias against the native language of Ireland: authors like Jonathan Swift, Thomas Sheridan and his son Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Maria Edgeworth and actors like Charles Macklin mainly focused on English readers and audiences, and the literature in Ireland granted legitimate status was in English. 72 This quotation even mentions Maria Edgeworth as someone who focuses mainly on English readers. This is the best possible explanation as to why Edgeworth did not have Thady speak his native Irish tongue. Still, even though Thady does not speak Irish, most readers do consider his language to be foreign. This can be explained by the fact that Edgeworth portrayed him as an Irish peasant at the beginning of her novel. “[...] cast him as an Irish peasant and his speech become immediately marked as not-English and, therefore, foreign”73. Just casting a character as Irish and having him speak a regional English variant is sufficient to have readers consider his language as foreign.

The language that Thady speaks has to be a regional dialect in order to make the opposition with the editor's voice. The language of the editor is perfect Standard English. In the preface, the footnotes and the glossary the editor constantly uses the correct English language. He never

72 Rebecca Shapiro, “Educating the English,” 73.
73 Rebecca Shapiro, “Educating the English,” 77.
deviates from it and this gives him a feeling of superiority over Thady. So far it would seem as if this novel is a song of praise to the English language. This changes at the end of the novel. At the end it is an Irish man who takes over the power of the estate, Jason M'Quirk. It is an Irish peasant who at the end turns out to be the gentleman. He succeeds in leading the Rackrent estate while four generations of Englishmen before him have failed. We can conclude that with this novel Edgeworth does not want to make a statement before or against Ireland, but that she wants to convince the English to include the Irish culture and language into their own nation.

3.2.4: Portrayal of women

The portrayal of women in *Castle Rackrent* is almost never positive. Women do not seem to have any positive characteristics in this story. During the four generations that have lived on the estate, the wives have never had any real input in the household. They always just followed their husbands and helped them to ruin the estate. In her article Susan Glover says: “Where blame is attributed, it is usually to the Rackrent wives”\(^74\). Most of the women in the story seem to have done something wrong: for example, Sir Murtagh's wife took nearly all the property of the estate with her when she left and Sir Condy's wife was constantly suffering and squandering money. It is the woman on the Rackrent estate who gets blamed for things that the man is equally guilty of.

In his article on the work Daniel Hack makes an interesting reference to the marriages in *Castle Rackrent*: “This anxiety producing pattern of uncanny returns of the not-quite repressed characterizes the interplay of the novel's two major topoi of loss of identity, marriage and death”\(^75\). Hack equates marriage in the novel to a certain loss of identity. By this he means that women lose their own identity after they get married. After the marriage, they merely act out their husband's wishes. The next quotation is a passage from *Castle Rackrent* in which we clearly see that the wife has to do what the husband wants:

> The cook took my lady's part, because she never came down into the kitchen, and was young and innocent in housekeeping, which raised her pity; besides, said she, at her own table, surely, my lady should order and disorder what she pleases; but the cook soon changed her note, for my master made it a principle to have the sausages, and swore at her for a Jew herself, till he drove her fairly out of the kitchen; [...]. \(^76\)

This quotation suggests that even in the kitchen the husband was boss, the woman had no say in anything. In writing *Castle Rackrent*, Edgeworth also uses the portrayal of a madwoman in the attic. The following passages are two instances in the novel on which a woman is locked up in a room by

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\(^{74}\) Susan Glover, “Glossing the Unvarnished Tale,” : 302.


a man. This is clearly a portrayal of women as inferior:

[...] upon which my lady shut herself up in her own room, and my master said she might stay there, with an oath: and to make sure of her, he turned the key in the door; and kept it ever after in his pocket.\(^77\)

But my father was wrong to lock me up, I own; that was the only unkind thing I can charge him with; for if he had not locked me up, I should never have had a serious thought of running away as I did.\(^78\)

This portrayal of women is in line with the fictional creations by some other female novelists. Think for example of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* or Bertha Mason in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*. I think Edgeworth clearly provides an example for these authors to follow when she draws the pictures of female characters being locked up by men and afterwards wanting to run away.

The woman who makes the worst impression in *Castle Rackrent* is Sir Kit's wife. She has considerable difficulty understanding Thady's speech and she does not seem to grasp how things work on the estate. She is obviously used to living in the city and as a result she does not recognize many of the things on the estate. The first time she enters the estate and sees the servants, she is afraid of coming near them because they are part of the working-class. In the next passage Sir Kit and his wife are walking through the estate and Sir Kit's wife proves how uninformed she is of the life on an estate:

'And what is a barrack-room, pray, my dear?' were the first words I ever heard out of my lady's lips. 'No matter, my dear!' said he, and went on talking to me, ashamed like I should witness her ignorance. To be sure, to hear her talk one might have taken her for an innocent, for it was, 'what's this, Sir Kit? And what's that, Sir Kit?' all the way we went. To be sure, Sir Kit had enough to do to answer her. 'And what do you call that, Sir Kit?' said she, 'that, that looks like a pile of black bricks, pray, Sir Kit?' 'My turf stack, my dear,' said my master, and bit his lip.\(^79\)

This passage clearly shows that Sir Kit's wife knows absolutely nothing about the estate. In addition, this passage also shows the submissiveness of the wife towards her husband. Throughout the whole conversation she addresses her husband with 'Sir Kit', while he calls her 'dear', he never utters her full name.

From this, we can conclude that the portrayal of women in *Castle Rackrent* remains negative from beginning till end.

### 3.2.5: Other general comments about the novel

Maria Edgeworth wrote this novel for two purposes: she wanted to educate the English and Irish readers and she wanted to entertain them in order to draw their attention away from all the horrid
stories that had been published about the Irish Revolution. Because she wanted to educate her readers, she does not choose to support one of the two languages. She does not define one language as superior to the other. Throughout the novel she tries to make her readers realize that Irish English is no inferior language, that it is merely a different language that can be easily seen as a variant of Standard English. In her article, Rebecca Shapiro mentions that Barbara Hayley used to call Maria Edgeworth a writer with a “tourist” status. By this she means that Edgeworth is never fully English or fully Irish. She has the possibility to write for and through both languages as if they were her own. Because of this, she does not occupy a clear position to the languages and her conclusions in the novel are ambiguous. She is not negative about the future of Irish, but she is definitely not positive either. In the next quotation, Rebecca Shapiro explains how Edgeworth does not choose between England and Ireland:

The difference between the rhetoric in Castle Rackrent and in Essay on Irish Bulls is that in the former, Edgeworth does not definitively ally herself with either English or Irish and her conclusions about an entrepreneurial future for Ireland are not entirely positive.

The second reason why Edgeworth wrote this novel was to draw readers’ attention away from the other horrid stories that were being told at the time. By the end of the eighteenth century many writers wrote stories about the recent uprisings in England. Maria Edgeworth tries to make people forget these horrors for a while by using a comic narrator. However, Thady's jokes do reveal some hidden fears.

Another important comment that I wish to make concerning Castle Rackrent is that the Irish situation described in the novel does not correspond to the real-life situation at that specific moment in time. In his article Daniel Hack clearly states:

Yet Castle Rackrent seems most anxious about establishing not its beginning but its ending, its historical closure. The “editor” repeatedly reminds the reader that the narrative does not represent the state of affairs in contemporary Ireland. The title page, as noted above, immediately places the tale “before the year 1782”. In the Preface, the editor emphasizes first the “authenticity” and then the antiquatedness of the narrative, asserting its complete containment in the past.

Much of the literature in those days dealt with the recent uprisings in Ireland and England. Readers would easily mistake Castle Rackrent to be similar to those other works. They could assume that the story in the novel takes place during the Irish Revolution. Therefore it is important that the editor frequently reminds the reader that the story takes place before 1782, before any of the problems started.

A last comment about the novel is that it can be called a “provincial tale of locale”. In the article

80 Rebecca Shapiro, “Educating the English,” : 75.
82 Daniel Hack, “Inter-Nationalism,”: 151-152.
by Martha Adams Bohrer this is defined as:

Despite this variety in form and intent, all focus on the conjunction of material conditions, social relations, and moral character within a particular environment. Unlike mid-nineteenth regional novels, they subordinate romantic plot and psychological character development to the representation of functional relations among a local assemblage of specimens.  

The characteristics described in this quotation can all be found in Edgeworth's Castle Rackrent. The relationship between the protagonists and their environment is clearly very important. Here I refer back to the passage I have quoted when I talked about the women in the novel, more specifically the passage where Sir Kit's wife did not recognize a thing on the estate. The relationship between this woman and the environment is obviously more important than the romantic relationship she experiences with her husband. More generally, throughout the entire novel there is hardly ever any real mention of a relationship between people.

3.3: Belinda

The next novel that I will discuss in this chapter is Belinda. The importance of this tale lies in the fact that Edgeworth has proved that women can act out of the ordinary. The protagonist in this story, Belinda, shows that women can have the same intellectual capacities as men. With this tale, Edgeworth tried to change the readers' view on women.

3.3.1: Summary

Literary critic George Saintsbury argued that Jane Austen's naturalistic female characters owed a debt to this society novel's spirited heroine. Belinda was itself in the tradition of society novels by writers such as Frances Sheridan and Frances Burney, who also charted the trials of bright young women in search of a good marriage. Aristocrat Lady Delacour in Belinda has been compared to Miss Milner in Elizabeth Inchbald's A Simple Story (1791).

Belinda is the second published novel by Maria Edgeworth. It is the first one in a series of three novels published by Johnson in London. The novel has been reprinted in 1986 by the Pandora Press. This novel was very special in its time because it portrayed an interracial marriage. This novel is also extraordinary because the subsequent editions all have a slightly different content. In the first two editions in 1801 and 1802 there is a character called Juba who marries Lucy. Juba is a servant of African origin, Lucy is an English farm girl. In those two editions, Belinda marries Mister Vincent. He is a wealthy West-Indian Creole. By the third edition in 1810 a few things have

84 Http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/Belinda_%28Edgeworth_novel%29 [consulted on 13 May].
85 Http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/Belinda_%28Edgeworth_novel%29 [consulted on 13 May].
changed. The character of Juba has been omitted and Belinda does not marry Mister Vincent. These changes might be made under the influence of Richard Edgeworth. Maybe he read the first editions and found the story too controversial. By having the leading character marry a West-Indian Creole the controversy might become too big. Therefore, Belinda merely falls in love with Mister Vincent but does not marry him.

3.3.2: Edgeworth as a timid reformist

In Belinda, Edgeworth tries to reform the idea that readers have of gender. In those days, gender differences were seen as something that derived from natural differences. Edgeworth states that these differences have nothing to do with nature and everything to do with culture and society. Throughout the story she tries to prove her point. This is why Edgeworth herself does not call Belinda a novel, she calls it a moral tale. In this moral tale she wants “to invoke the complexity of human behaviour and the difficulty of determining right action”. Edgeworth wants to show that there is no clear boundary between male and female characteristics. Female characters can display male habits and vice versa. To prove her point, Edgeworth uses the character of the female philosopher. This is a woman who shows signs of a male intellectual understanding. By using this character, Edgeworth refers to Mary Wollstonecraft, she was considered “the most masculine of female thinkers”. I will say more about this female philosopher in the next part, in which I will discuss the portrayal of women.

3.3.3: Portrayal of women

I have already mentioned the character of the female philosopher. This character is dealt with in a special way in Belinda because it is divided in two parts: there is Freke, who acts as an untrue female philosopher, Freke, and there is Belinda, who is the true female philosopher. The portrayal of Freke deserves some special attention. Freke's conversations in the tale show many resemblances to things that Wollstonecraft had once said, for example she talks about false shame and she refers to women as slaves. This instantly makes the reader assume that Freke has a sort of male understanding. It is as if she is a man dressed like a woman. She thinks as a male character but looks like a woman. This reversal of gender is something that pops up in the novel a couple of times. On one occasion, Freke tried to seduce Lady Delacour dressed like a man, on another occasion in the novel a man tried to prove that he could act as a woman. He dressed up like a

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woman and tried to make everybody believe that he really was a woman.

Although Freke shows many similarities to Wollstonecraft, there is one striking difference. Freke does not have the same intellectual capacities as Wollstonecraft. Freke is the false female philosopher, she only acts as if she has a male understanding. In the next citation, Deborah Weiss clearly points out that Freke's way of thinking is rather feminine:

> Using Wollstonecraft's own definition – which Edgeworth invites her readers to do through her description of Freke's leisure activities – we can see that Freke is far from exhibiting the inherent intellectual traits the culture frequently termed “masculine.” Rather, beneath the window dressing of her clothes and manners, her understanding is, in period terms, entirely “feminine.”

Wollstonecraft was supposed to have a good male understanding, Freke on the other hand is portrayed as a very irrational character with little intellectual knowledge. She thinks she is smart and knows everything, but in reality she makes many mistakes. Sometimes she makes an entire speech about a subject without really making a point. She just rambles and fails the make a decent statement. Another one of Freke's shortcomings is that she does not see reading as a useful way to spend time. She thinks reading is nothing more than a waste of time, she does not realize that you can learn a lot about the world by reading a book. The next passage shows Freke's view on reading:

> You read I see! I did not know you where a reading girl. So did I once! But I never read now. Books only spoil the originality of genius. Very well for those who can't think for themselves – but when one has made up one's opinion, there is no use in reading.

In this passage Freke considers herself smart enough to face the world. She does not think that any sort of reading could further improve her intellect. She made her mind up and no book is going to change that. This is the most striking proof that she does not nearly have the same intellectual capacity as Wollstonecraft who was known for her rational arguments. In A Vindication of the Rights of Woman Wollstonecraft clearly shows a form of male understanding. She succeeds in convincing other women to join her cause. This is something that Freke in Belinda does not seem capable of. Freke is a character who tries to act as a man and tries to fake a male understanding.

The other character that represents the female philosopher in Belinda is Belinda herself. She represents the true female philosopher in the tale. She is the one who reads books, who can provide logical arguments and who can act as a woman. The next passage comes from Deborah Weis's article and gives a perfect description of Belinda's character in the tale:

> She is neither meek nor obedient. Nor is she innocent, in the sense of not understanding sexual desire. Rather, her virtues are those that the culture took for granted as being primarily within the domain of men. Belinda thinks independently, reacts according to judgement rather than emotion; and she is generous, courageous, and capable of extra-

ordinary acts of self-control. She is a woman who, acting according to principles she has developed through introspection, refuses to participate in the sexual protocols that form the lifeblood of her culture's social structure.  

This passage shows that Belinda is the true female philosopher. This makes Belinda the character in the novel who can change the readers' views on women the most. She shows that women can have all the same virtues as men and have the same male understanding while at the same time still act as a true woman. With this moral tale, Edgeworth has proved to her readers that femaleness is not determined by natural factors but by the reaction of the social environment. Due to social conventions, people expect women to act in a certain fashion. This moral tale proved that those habits can be changed if the woman wants to. A woman is not naturally determined to act in a certain way, she can act how she wants. She can prove to be as smart as men.

3.4: Ennui

The next novel I will discuss is Ennui. The importance of the novel lies in Edgeworth's portrayal of women. This is the first novel in which Edgeworth gives a few important tasks to the female protagonists. Although, this story is written under the influence of her father, the feminist side of Edgeworth is beginning to show. Once again, the novel is also filled with references to the Anglo-Irish history.

3.4.1: Summary

Maria Edgeworth's Ennui, a novel published in 1809 but out of print from 1884 to 1992, has long been regarded as a lesser achievement than Castle Rackrent. Ennui's first-person narrator, the Earl of Glenthorn, is an indolent aristocrat who attracts fewer fans than does Thady Quirk, the devilish trickster who narrates Rackrent.  

[...], for both critics arrive at the same “quality-control” recommendation: chuck everything after Rackrent, they advise. Edgeworth's later novels are, Cahalan writes, “flawed by plots whose didacticism is too obvious, whose romance elements are too predictable, and whose characters are mostly too thing – making these novels fairly overt allegories”.  

When you read these commentaries, you do not have high expectations of the novel. Luckily, there are also critics who have a more positive view on Ennui. In the same article by Blackwell we can read: “Kate Trumpener abruptly began praising Ennui in 1997, calling it a “groundbreaking redaction of seventeenth-century polemics about Ireland”. Clearly, critics have very different opinions concerning this novel.

The story is told by the first-person narrator, Lord Glenthorn who was born in Ireland and resided there until he was two. When he was two his father left his mother and he took his son with him to England. Glenthorn decided to stay in England and become a proper Englishman. He tries to hide his Irish roots and assume all the standards and habits of an upper-class Englishman. Very soon the story evolves to a stage where Glenthorn is reminded of his Irish roots. At the age of twenty-one, he receives his inheritance and gives himself over to gambling, eating and drinking to pass away his boredom. Glenthorn had been a big spender all his life, he used to travel around Europe with a private tutor, learning absolutely nothing. At the age of twenty-five, Glenthorn has wasted most of his money from the inheritance. He decides to drive out on horseback and shoot himself. On his way out, he meets Ellinor, the old Irish nurse who took care of him when he was a baby. She tries to convince the young gentleman that he has to return to Ireland and be a proper lord to his estate. Glenthorn refuses this and tries to get rid of Ellinor. While trying to ride away, he falls off his horse and suffers a severe blow to his head. Afterwards, he pretends to be dead for a while and during his time of faked “death” he realized how much Ellinor cares for him. Another thing that he discovered while he was supposedly dead, was that his servants were not as loyal as he had always thought. When he regains consciousness he decides to leave England and return to Ireland together with Ellinore. In Ireland he discovers that Ellinor is his real mother and that he is not really the Earl of Glenthorn, but that he is merely an Irish peasant. The real Earl of Glenthorn is called Christy. Glenthorn offers him the name of Earl and Christy accepts this. After a while, however, Christy goes back to Ireland and peasanthood and Glenthorn re-assumes his position as the Earl. This story teaches us that people can not pretend to be someone that they are not. Christy cannot pretend to be Earl after living as a peasant for all his life. I will pay no more attention to this switch of babies at birth because it does not contribute to the point I want to make about the portrayal of women.

3.4.2: Anglo-Irish history in Ennui

From the beginning of the story, the reader is immediately confronted with a “clash of cultures”. This “clash of cultures” takes place when Ellinor and Glenthorn meet. By that time Glenthorn is depicted as the rich English landowner, Ellinor on the other hand is portrayed as the poor Irish nurse. In her novels Edgeworth often uses caricatures of English and Irish people. Ennui has a few fine examples of this strategy. Ellinor is clearly a caricature of the stereotypical Irish peasant, Edgeworth shows this both in Ellinor's language and in her behaviour. Ellinor's speech contains words and expressions from the Irish dialect, to emphasize this Edgeworth places these

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foreign expressions in italics. Ellinor's behaviour is also very characteristic of poor uneducated people, for example when Glenthorn refuses to get off his horse to speak to her, she starts kissing the horse. This is something that a rich person of high social status would never think of doing. All this proves that Ellinor is portrayed as a caricature.

In this novel, Edgeworth occupies a positive stand towards the Union. She considers the Union a very positive evolution for both England and Ireland. Still she considers the English superior:

Although Edgeworth perhaps argues for a liberal “middle way” of cooperation between the English and Irish cultures, it is still a cooperation between and English master and an Irish pupil. In fact, it is Mr. McLeod, the Scotsman who is neither English nor Irish, who is presented as the objective, dispassionate educator able to offer judgement.\textsuperscript{95}

In this novel, Edgeworth considers the Irish as uneducated and the English as the people who will educate them. Three characters are representative of three cultures: Glenthorn represents England, Hardcastle represents Ireland and McLeod stands for Scotland. In the story, it is Mr. McLeod who is the most objective and takes the best initiative. He considers education the most important thing to give to the Irish. Glenthorn on the other hand first thinks that it is too late to help the Irish, afterwards he realizes he can improve the living-conditions in Ireland by slowly changing things. Hardcastle has a very negative view of his own people, he considers hard labour to be their only possible pastime. I conclude this part by saying that Edgeworth obviously shows very different points of view on the Anglo-Irish history. On the one hand, Maria Edgeworth considers the inhabitants of England as superior, but she does realise that the people from Ireland can achieve the same status if they get some help.

\textbf{3.4.3: Portrayal of women}

In \textit{Ennui}, the male narrator has a very negative view on women. He does not believe in monogamy, he considers women a piece of property that can be bought. Glenthorn finally does get married, but he does not have a very romantic vision on marriage, he considers it a necessary evil. In the next passage he explains how he feels about his marriage and how he thinks his wife sees the relationship:

Poor young creature! I believe her chief idea of happiness in marriage was the possession of the jewels and paraphernalia of a countess – I am sure it was the only hope she could have, that was likely to be realized, in marrying me. I thought it manly and fashionable to be indifferent, if not contemptuous to my wife: I considered her only as an encumbrance, that I was obliged to take along with my fortune.\textsuperscript{96}

In this passage Glenthorn expresses his belief that his wife has the same expectations of marriage.

\textsuperscript{95} David Waterman, “Masters and Pupils,”
\textsuperscript{96} Maria Edgeworth, \textit{Castle Rackrent, and Ennui}, 151.
He thinks that she only married him for his possessions.

Glenthorn's vision on women changes under the influence of Ellinor. She makes him realize that women can be caring and sweet and she makes him feel tender and grateful. Ellinor occupies an important space in the novel, she is the wet-nurse that acts as the “personification of that misused and ignored country, Ireland”. After his concussion, Ellinor nurses Glenthorn the same way she had when he was a baby. In this aspect, Ireland feeds England, women feed and educate men. This clearly shows that Edgeworth's view on women is changing slightly. In this story, she shows female characters who influence men and men who are willing to listen to women's point of view. This is a very important evolution in Edgeworth's writings.

Although Glenthorn always had a very pessimistic view on love and marriage, he changed completely when he saw Lady Geraldine. In the next passage he describes how he felt when he first laid eyes on her:

 [...] yet as Lady Geraldine entered, I gave one involuntary glance of curiosity. I saw a tall, finely shaped woman, with the commanding air of a woman of rank; she moved well; not with feminine timidity, but with ease, promptitude, and decision. She had fine eyes and a fine complexion, yet no regularity of feature. The only thing that struck me as really extraordinary was her indifference when I was introduced to her.

Glenthorn saw that Lady Geraldine was something special. He fell in love with her and asked her to marry him. However, she refused his proposal. Lady Geraldine was French, her refusal of Glenthorn's proposal might indicate the character's negative view on the ties between France and England. At the same time, the refusal shows the rebellious nature of Lord Geraldine, she is the first female character in Edgeworth's novels that actually has the courage to refuse a man's proposal to marry.

At the end of the story, I came across a very interesting incident of gender-reversal. In the first chapter I have explained how women are sometimes portrayed as “madwomen in the attic”. I have explained how male authors sometimes imprison female characters. Maria Edgeworth has done the same. In the part on Castle Rackrent I have drawn the attention to a passage in which a young girl was locked up by her father. In Ennui, Edgeworth makes an intriguing gender shift. In this story a male character is being locked up. The next passage depicts how poor Joe gets locked up:

Whilst he was busy searching in a drawer, I shut the door and iron-barred windows, out of which no mortal could make his escape. Whilst he was busy searching in a drawer, I shut the door upon him, locked it, and put the key into my pocket. As I left the castle, I said in a jesting tone to some of the servants who met me – 'I have locked Joe Kelly up in the strong room; if he calls to you to let him out never mind him; he will not get out till I come home.

98 Maria Edgeworth, Castle Rackrent, and Ennui, 202.
This role reversal clearly shows the evolution that is taking place in Edgeworth's work. By the time of *Ennui*’s publication, Edgeworth's portrayal of women had already changed a lot. She starts portraying women as people with a mind of their own, who do not always blindly follow their husbands wherever they go. In the character of Glenthorn, Edgeworth proved that there are also men that are weak and in serious need of guidance. Glenthorn is weak because he falls victim to gluttony and spends all his money. When he has wasted all his money, he needs the help of a woman to get him back on his feet and to realize where his true roots lie.

3.5: *The Absentee*

The next novel that I will discuss is *The Absentee*. It is published in 1812 as part of Edgeworth's fashionable tales. This novel expresses the bad conditions of Irish estates under an absentee landlord. It also calls attention to the bad living conditions and the lack of loyalty of the Irish peasantry. In this part I will not focus on the Anglo-Irish history, but mainly on the portrayal of women.

3.5.1: *Summary*

The story in *The Absentee* begins with Lady Clonbrony. Lady Clonbrony is a woman of English origin but she was raised in Ireland. She tries to find her way in English high society. She does this mainly by imitating many of the customs of the other ladies and more importantly by trying to imitate their language. Lady Clonbrony's language is often ridiculed in the story because she tries too hard to get the English pronunciation right. When Lady Clonbrony discovers that she was not invited to one of the most important parties of the year, she decides to organize her own party. This party is organized in different rooms of the house, each room has another sphere, the decorations are very beautiful and all the ladies are impressed. Although Lady Clonbrony made an effort to organize such an amazing party, the other ladies still consider her a foreigner because of her strange language. At this party the reader is introduced to Lord Colambre, Lady Clonbrony's son. He falls madly in love with Grace Nugent, his so-called cousin. Because this love is not allowed, Colambre decides to make a trip to Ireland to visit his father's estates. While he is visiting Ireland, he is a witness to various things. Firstly, he notices that the peasants on the estate are poorly treated by some of the estate agents. For example, some of the latter do not hesitate to ask double rent or put people out of their house because they cannot pay the monthly rent. Secondly, he notices that there

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100 Maria Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent, and Ennui*, 267.
are illegitimate practices going on. For example, when he is driving his coach, a man appears and tries to sell him illegal alcohol. Apparently this is one of the fast growing markets on his estate. Colambre is warmly invited into the house of one of the peasants. The woman of the house wants Colambre to marry her daughter and she also informs him that Grace Nugent is not really his cousin. All this time, the woman does not know who Colamble really is, she merely thinks that he is a traveller. Colambre does a lot of good things for these people and in the end he reveals his true identity. He was forced to identify himself because the estate agent on his father's estate was about to do something illegal and was planning on using Colambre's father's name to make it official. Afterwards Colambre races back to London to stop his father from signing the legal documents. At the end of the novel Colambre helps his father pay off his debts and returns to live in Ireland. They also find out that Grace Nugent is a real heiress.

3.5.2: Portrayal of women

In the beginning of the novel the portrayal of women is still negative. We see Lady Clonbrony desperately trying to conform herself to the English high standards. She gives the impression as if that is the only thing in her life that actually matters to her. Trying to imitate English ladies and spoiling her husband's money are her only occupations. In the next passage a few ladies are talking about Lady Clonbrony's speech:

“Yes, and you cawnt conceive the peens she teekes to talk of the teebles and cheers, and to thank Q, and with so much teeste to speak pure English,” said Mrs. Dareville.
“Pure cockney, you mean,” said Lady Langdale.
“But does lady Clonbrony expect to pass for English?” said the duchess.
“O yes! Because she is not quite Irish bred and born – only bred, not born,” said Mrs. Dareville.
“And she could not be five minutes in your grace's company before she would tell you that she was Henglish, born in Hoxfordshire.”

In this passage the other ladies are making fun of Lady Clonbrony's language. She obviously tries too hard to fit into the English upper-class society. The image of Lady Clonbrony in The Absentee might be called a caricature. By having her speak this forced language she makes Lady Clonbrony look a bit ridiculous.

Further on in the novel Lady Clonbrony makes a very sexist remark about women. She says that women should not think about political affairs. They should not have a preference for a particular country. Their sole occupation is to be friends with people from other countries. The next passage shows the comment:

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“Nonsense, child! - I hate to hear people, women especially, and young ladies particularly, talk of being friends to this country or that country. What can they know about countries? Better think of being friends of themselves, and friends to their friends.”  102

Before this passage Miss Nugent tried to give her opinion about England and Ireland. Lady Clonbrony is obviously not happy with this remark and explains to her what her true place is in society.

Not all the characters have such negative ideas about women. The protagonist Colambre has respect for women. He respects his mother because he knows that when his parents married, his mother had the largest fortune. In the beginning of the tale, Lady Clonbrony herself says that she has brought some fortune into their marriage. Afterwards it becomes clear that Lord Clonbrony handles the money affairs because “ladies of a certain rank seldom do” 103. Colambre’s respect for women becomes obvious in the next passage:

Our hero was not a man to make a proposal because Mrs. Broadhurst expected it, or to marry because the world said he was going to be married. He steadily said, that, from the first moment the subject had been mentioned, he had explained himself distinctly; that the young lady's friends could not, therefore, be under any doubts as to his intentions; [...] he felt his conscience at ease – entirely so, as he was convinced that the young lady herself, for whose merit, talents, independence, and generosity of character he professed high respect, esteem, and admiration, had no doubts either of the extent or the nature of his regard. 104

This passage shows that Colambre holds Miss Broadhurst in high respect. He does not want to marry her because he is forced to. He only wants to marry a woman if he loves her and if she loves him back. He does not believe in fixed marriages. Miss Broadhurst herself was also very sceptical of the marriage that her mother arranged between herself and Colambre. She told her mother that she “dreaded to be made an object of bargain and sale” 105. Miss Broadhurst is the only female character in the novel who is not afraid to stand up to men and to say what is on her mind.

All this proves that in The Absentee Maria Edgeworth writes in favour of the women’s cause. In this tale she is sceptical about the arranged marriages. At the same time this is the first tale in which the male protagonist actually shows some respect for women.

102 Maria Edgeworth, The Absentee, 73.
103 Maria Edgeworth, The Absentee, 16.
104 Maria Edgeworth, The Absentee, 69.
105 Maria Edgeworth, The Absentee, 44.
4) Conclusion

In this thesis I have tried to sketch a picture of Maria Edgeworth's life and works. I chose this subject for my thesis after reading *The Madwoman in the Attic* by Gilbert and Gubar. While I was reading this work, I noticed that Maria Edgeworth did not get the appreciation that she deserves. Gilbert and Gubar mentioned Edgeworth a few times, but I think she deserves much more attention. Therefore, I wanted to write this thesis to focus the readers' attention on Edgeworth's work. Also, I found Edgeworth's background very special: she has both Irish and English roots. In this thesis it has been my intention to explain how this background was made visible in her novels and tales.

The first chapter dealt with the general background of literature in the eighteenth and nineteenth century England. I started the chapter by saying something about the male authors and about their views on women and the portrayal of women in their works. I indicated that the male superiority had been a reality for a very long time. Gilbert and Gubar agreed that men were considered the dominant gender throughout most of the eighteenth century. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, the authors called men the only creatures that could know and speak the truth. Until the nineteenth century this difference between male and female authors was felt. In the next quotation Elaine Showalter explains how women writers were women first, artists second:

> To their contemporaries, nineteenth-century women writers were women first, artists second. A woman novelist, unless she disguised herself with a male pseudonym, had to expect critics to focus on her femininity and rank her with the other women writers of her day, no matter how diverse their subjects or styles. The knowledge that their individual achievement would be subsumed under a relatively unfavourable group stereotype acted as a constant irritant to feminine novelists. 106

This was the reason why writers like George Eliot in the nineteenth century took a male pseudonym. Although Edgeworth lived a century earlier, she had no need to take a pseudonym because she had the constant support of her father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth. In the first chapter I also discussed the dominant view on women and how this view was influenced by the portrayal of women in male literature. Women characters were often portrayed as "the other", therefore many readers started to see women in real-life as "other" as well. Even worse, women began to view themselves as other and thought that they had no story of their own to tell.

In the second part of the first chapter I described the women writers who came to the rescue. Starting at the end of the eighteenth century, more and more women began writing and telling their own story. Once again I used Gilbert and Gubar to indicate that there are two sorts of women: the sort that accepts the dominance of men and the sort that decides to stand up to their husbands and

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106 Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of their Own*, 73.
other people who consider them inferior. These women wanted to change the view that most people have on women. They want to show that they can write stories as well and that their lives are as important as those of men. The first generation of women who tried to write and be published had a very difficult task ahead of them. Women had no tradition that they could follow, they had to start their own tradition. Showalter says that women writers did have a reading public but they did not have a common heritage. The next quote shows the opening lines of Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own*:

> English women writers have never suffered from the lack of a reading audience, nor have they wanted for attention from scholars or critics. Yet we have never been sure what unites them as women, or, indeed, whether they share a common heritage connected to their womanhood at all. 107

Added to this lack of common heritage is the problems of girls' education. Few girls received the same education as men. Due to this lack of education, women writers were subjected to the critical double standard. Even when male and female writers wrote novels on the same topics, men would receive more positive criticism. Gaye Tuchman explains this phenomenon in *Edging Women Out*.

In order to get recognition for their literary contributions, women started by imitating men. John Stuart Mill had a very negative opinion about this imitation:

> […] John Stuart Mill argued that women would have a hard struggle to overcome the influence of male literary tradition, and to create an original, primary and independent art. “If women lived in a different country from men,” Mill thought, “and had never read any of their writings, they would have a literature of their own.” Instead, he reasoned, they would always be imitators and never innovators. 108

The positive aspect about imitating men is that after a while, women writers could start to change the ruling ideologies concerning women.

The third part of the chapter tells something about the hero in literature. It describes how after years of male heroes in western cultures, female heroes are finally emerging. In *Psyche as a hero*, Edwards explains that there is no link between gender and behaviour. Therefore, she concludes that women can be good heroes as well, it is no male privilege. In this part of the chapter I also draw the readers attention to a few differences between male and female heroes. I do this by referring to a few passages in Susan Lichtman's *The Female Hero in Women's Literature and Poetry*.

The fourth part of this chapter deals with Edgeworth's position between other female writers in eighteenth and nineteenth century England. The most important thing to remember from this is her father's influence. Later on in the thesis, this influence proved to be very important when reading and criticizing stories written by Maria Edgeworth.

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107 Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of their Own*, 3.
108 Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of their Own*, 3.
I also added a fifth part to this chapter, which might serve as a short introduction to the origins and development of Women's Human Rights. I added this part because literacy proved to be a crucial part in developing women's rights. In order to achieve equal rights as men, it was important for women to learn to read and write. They had to have the same knowledge of the world because knowledge is power.

In the second chapter of my thesis I have given an overview of Edgeworth's life and works. I have divided this chapter in four different parts. First, I have explained her roots, secondly I showed the multiple influences on her life and on her works, thirdly I have described her most important writing characteristics and to conclude the chapter I have given an overview of Edgeworth's most important works.

The most important thing to remember from the first part of the chapter is her mixed roots. Maria Edgeworth feels both English and Irish. She was born in England in 1767 but during her lifetime she went to Ireland on various occasions. Her father owed a few estates in Ireland, therefore they were sometimes obligated to visit their Irish peasants and make sure things were going smoothly. Maria Edgeworth was torn between her sentiments for England and those for Ireland. This becomes very obvious in some of her novels and tales. She finds it impossible to choose between the English and the Irish. Consequently, in many of her novels she tries to reconcile England with Ireland. She sometimes portrays the Irish as a race of people in serious need of education. This education can be offered by their English neighbours. Another important aspect that readers have to remember in this part of the thesis is that Edgeworth lost her mother at a very young age and was soon left in charge of her siblings. Very early in life, Maria Edgeworth received a big responsibility.

The second part of the second chapter deals with the multiple influences on Edgeworth's works. The most important influence comes from her father. He is actually the reason why Edgeworth started writing in the first place. He encouraged her to put her ideas into writing and he convinced the publisher to give her a chance. Maria Edgeworth never really got out of her father's influence. He kept interfering with her novels, even at a time when Maria Edgeworth was considered a better writer than him. In this part I have also mentioned a few other minor influences: stepmothers, other writers and her trips to Europe. I also drew the readers' attention to the Irish history. The Irish Rebellion and the Union obviously influenced Edgeworth.

The third part of the chapter is a description of her writing characteristics, style and themes. One of the things that I have mentioned in this part is the fact that she writes stories for both children and adults. She writes children's tales because children are the future. Another important writing
characteristic is her realistic novel-setting and detailed characterizations.

The last part of the chapter is an account of Edgeworth's works. I have divided this part in her early writings, writings written in partnership with her father and the works that she has written on her own without aid from her father.

I consider the third chapter the most important part of my dissertation, it gives information about several of Edgeworth's novels, letters and an essay, and it shows how Edgeworth's portrayal of women changed throughout her literary career. I discussed the works in chronological order starting with the letters and ending with The Absentee. For each of the works I provided a summary of the story and a portrayal of women in the novel. Whenever necessary I added some other information, such as historical references in the story or a note on the language used by the characters.

The first part deals with the letters to Julia and Caroline and the “essay on the noble science of self-justification”. The most important thing to remember here is how Julia and Caroline saw themselves. At the beginning of her career, Edgeworth still follows the acceptable, traditional genres of female writing. She wrote letters because that was considered as a female way of writing. In those letters, Julia and Caroline are talking about life as a married woman. They believe that a woman has to give up everything to please her husband, for example she has to give up her imagination and her own opinions. This shows that Edgeworth, in this case, drew a picture of women as submissive. The “essay on the noble science of self-justification” that Edgeworth attached to these letters also largely conforms to the traditional ideas on womanhood. Although she encourages women to be loyal to their husbands she also gives them advice on how to utter their own opinions without insulting their husbands.

The second part deals with Castle Rackrent. The portrayal of women in this story remains negative from the beginning to the end. The women in the story help their husbands to ruin the estate by spending all the money. The worst female character in the novel is Sir Kit's wife. She appears to be afraid of the servants and does not understand a thing of what is happening on the estate.

The third part deals with Belinda. In this story Edgeworth uses the figure of a female philosopher to change the readers' view on women. In the novel, Belinda appears to be a woman with a male understanding. Like men, she reads books and is capable of making logical arguments. The story also deals with a character called Freke. She is the false side of the female philosopher. She seems to have a male understanding but in reality she does not know much. She thinks reading books is a waste of time because she already knows everything there is to know. We can conclude that this novel has two different portrayals of women: Belinda as the smart woman and Freke as the naïve
woman. This can be seen as an evolution in Edgeworth's literature, because at least she portrays one female character that is capable of standing up to men.

The fourth part deals with *Ennui*. This story marks a very important change in Edgeworth's portrayal of women. For the first time, she writes about a strong female character, Ellinor. Ellinor is an Irish nurse who saves the protagonist in the story, Glenthorn. Ellinor can be seen as the embodiment of Ireland itself. The message in the story is that England can learn something by listening and accepting Ireland. Similarly, Edgeworth wants to show that men can be saved by women. This is an important role reversal because Edgeworth gives Ellinor the role of hero in the story by having her rescue Glenthorn when he wants to kill himself. By the time this novel was published, Edgeworth's portrayal of women had obviously undergone a serious and radical evolution.

The fifth and final part deals with *The Absentee*. This novel starts to portray women as independent human beings. In this tale the author is sceptical about arranged marriages. At the same time this is the first tale in which the male protagonist actually shows respect for women.

This last chapter clearly proves the point I wanted to make in this thesis. Maria Edgeworth's portrayal of women changed in the course of her career. In the beginning of her career she was very strongly influenced by her father, therefore her portrayal of women was more pessimistic. As her career evolved, so did her portrayal of women. At the end of her career, the influence of her father faded and her portrayal of women became more optimistic. Throughout her career, Maria Edgeworth had learned how to be a strong woman. She had always felt responsible for her family and this had thought her that women were capable of doing a man's job. At the end of her life, she believed that some day men and women would become equals.
5) Bibliography

Chapter I

Books


Articles


Chapter II

Biographies


Articles


Website


Chapter III

Maria Edgeworth's works


**Essays about Castle Rackrent**


**Essay and websites about Belinda**


**Essay about Edgeworth's “essay on the noble science of self-justification”**


**Essays about Ennui**

Beesemyer, Irene A. “Romantic Masculinity in Edgeworth's *Ennui* and Scott's Marmion: In Itself a Border Story.”


